

*Bloom's
Shakespeare Through the Ages*



*The Merchant
of Venice*

*Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom*

Volume Editor: Neil Heims

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THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

Volume Editor

Neil Heims

Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: The Merchant of Venice

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SERIES INTRODUCTION



Shakespeare Through the Ages presents not the most current of Shakespeare criticism, but the best of Shakespeare criticism, from the seventeenth century to today. In the process, each volume also charts the flow over time of critical discussion of a particular play. Other useful and fascinating collections of historical Shakespearean criticism exist, but no collection that we know of contains such a range of commentary on each of Shakespeare's greatest plays and at the same time emphasizes the greatest critics in our literary tradition: from John Dryden in the seventeenth century, to Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, to William Hazlitt and Samuel Coleridge in the nineteenth century, to A. C. Bradley and William Empson in the twentieth century, to the most perceptive critics of our own day. This canon of Shakespearean criticism emphasizes aesthetic rather than political or social analysis.

Some of the pieces included here are full-length essays; others are excerpts designed to present a key point. Much (but not all) of the earliest criticism consists only of brief mentions of specific plays. In addition to the classics of criticism, some pieces of mainly historical importance have been included, often to provide background for important reactions from future critics.

These volumes are intended for students, particularly those just beginning their explorations of Shakespeare. We have therefore also included basic materials designed to provide a solid grounding in each play: a biography of Shakespeare, a synopsis of the play, a list of characters, and an explication of key passages. In addition, each selection of the criticism of a particular century begins with an introductory essay discussing the general nature of that century's commentary and the particular issues and controversies addressed by critics presented in the volume.

Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time," but much Shakespeare criticism is decidedly for its own age, of lasting importance only to the scholar who wrote it. Students today read the criticism most readily available to them, which means essays printed in recent books and journals, especially those journals made available on the Internet. Older criticism is too often buried in out-of-print books on forgotten shelves of libraries or in defunct periodicals. Therefore, many

students, particularly younger students, have no way of knowing that some of the most profound criticism of Shakespeare's plays was written decades or centuries ago. We hope this series remedies that problem, and more importantly, we hope it infuses students with the enthusiasm of the critics in these volumes for the beauty and power of Shakespeare's plays.

INTRODUCTION BY HAROLD BLOOM



1

Every autumn, for many years now, I teach *The Merchant of Venice* to a seminar of Yale undergraduates. This tends to be, for many among them, and for me, a difficult experience. In 2007, as I write, it is 62 years since the entrance of Allied troops into the Nazi death camps. Shakespeare's equivocal romantic comedy scarcely can be viewed now as it was up to the era of 1933 to 1945, the dozen years of the culmination of European Christian persecution of the Jews that Hitler raised into a horror far surpassing the Spanish Inquisition.

I go into class each autumn resolving to be more or less dispassionate, but Shakespeare invariably scatters my assumed disinterestedness, and I depart two hours later unhappy with the greatest mind, poet-dramatist, and spirit ever to have existed. *The Merchant of Venice* has done real harm, and I half expect I may yet pick up my morning newspaper to discover that the president of Iran is sponsoring his own production, as a sequel to his conference that "proved" the Holocaust to have been a myth.

I am arguing that *The Merchant of Venice* pragmatically is an anti-Semitic play, though Shakespeare does not seem personally to have been an anti-Semite. Yet nearly any assertion about Shylock, whether made by Gentile or Jew, is difficult to sustain. My late acquaintance and one-time mentor, the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye, once told me that *The Merchant of Venice* could only be comprehended as a Christian comedy. Since Frye was a Methodist minister (United Church of Canada) I declined any rejoinder, though I was tempted to tell him we did not know whether Shakespeare personally was Protestant or Catholic, Hermetist or skeptic, agnostic or nihilist, but *as dramatist* was none of the above. If *The Merchant of Venice* is a Christian comedy, then so much the worse for Christianity. Frye was humane and liberal, and free of the anti-Semitic virus that T.S. Eliot never ceased to manifest. And yet Frye's Low Church fervor disabled his own reading of Shakespeare, almost as seriously as Eliot's High Church bias twisted his more objectionable interpretations.

Since I myself am palpably a Jewish literary critic, however heterodox, I have learned to be wary of my own distaste for some aspects of *The Merchant of Venice*. Though I am charmed by my old friend and former student, Kenneth Gross, when he proposes that Shylock *is* Shakespeare (in his recent book of that title) I am not persuaded. Indeed there exists a profound and disturbing affinity between the dramatist and his tragicomic villain, but I do not find that Shylock, like Falstaff and Hamlet, breaks out of the play and becomes independent of his creator. There is a sublime excess in Shylock as in Falstaff and Hamlet, but the Jew lacks both the Falstaffian immanence and the Hamletian negative transcendence. Each of them is a cosmos, rather like the persona "Walt Whitman." Shylock, and this distresses me, is *the* Jew, a people and not a universe. That is why historically he has been so harmful. I cannot agree with Kenneth Gross's conclusion, which is almost too complex to summarize, but includes the notion that the play could be interpreted as a critique of Christian anti-Semitism. That is contrary alas to the sad and ongoing history of the dilemma of being Jewish in a Christian society rather than a secular one.

2

As an aged idolator of Shakespeare (I will be 77 in two weeks) I tend privately to play a kind of fantasy baseball, in which I move Shakespearean protagonists from the context of their own play into another. When I was young, I read a newspaper piece by Orson Welles in which he visualized Hamlet as reaching England, staying there, and eventually aging into Sir John Falstaff. In that spirit I have seen Falstaff (my alter ego) shrugging off his rejection by Prince Hal and wandering into *As You Like It*. There he abides still, sitting on one end of a log while Rosalind sits on the other, while the two grand wits each attempt to win a verbal combat in which neither can hope to be victorious.

In that mode, I have moved poor Malvolio from *Twelfth Night* to *Love's Labour's Lost*, where he referees the rhetorical war between Berowne and the dark Rosaline. But where can I move Shylock, before Venice breaks him? Where but in *The Merchant of Venice* can we locate Shakespeare's solitary Jew? The admirable Kenneth Gross, who loves Shylock, would agree with me (I think) that the context of anti-Semitic and money-mad Venice alone imbues the formidable Jew with breath and being.

Since that is so, the play is Portia's and Bassanio's romantic comedy but Antonio's and Shylock's descent together into the abyss. The late A.D. Nuttall, in his posthumous and profound *Shakespeare the Thinker* (2007) calls *The Merchant of Venice* at once the dramatist's most Marxist play (since economics rules all, in Venice) and the most Christian. I revered Tony Nuttall, but as a Jew I rather grimly agree with him that this is a wholly Christian drama. And

yet I wonder if the endlessly ironic Shakespeare was inwardly Christian at all. Shylock may not be Shakespeare, but Shakespeare necessarily is as much Shylock as he is Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth—and who you will. Yet Gross does demonstrate a troubling and profound affinity between Shylock and his creator, different not in degree than with Falstaff, Hamlet, *et al.*, but rather in kind.

Shakespeare himself was a considerable usurer, as legal records show. If you did not repay him at exactly the date specified, he filed suit. Gross clearly is getting at something that bothers many readers of Shakespeare. Why is the Bard so cruel to Shylock? The forced conversion (which I can be pardoned for finding obscene) is Shakespeare's own gratuitous invention, and not part of the pound-of-flesh tradition. I always like to guess which role Shakespeare himself played in each of his dramas, and in *The Merchant of Venice* I suggest he acted the merchant himself, the good Antonio, with his (repressed?) homoerotic passion for Bassanio. Shakespeare's audience doubtless liked and admired Antonio, but our audiences do not. A good Christian who proves his piety by kicking and spitting at Jews, is (shall we say?) now a touch out of fashion. There is also an unsettling erotic masochism manifested by Antonio, who wishes to prove his love for Bassanio by being butchered for his friend's sake.

3

So daimonic is Shakespeare's genius that *The Merchant of Venice* is both one play and two: call them *Portia* and *Shylock*. As an English name, "Shylock" is an Old Saxon word meaning "white-haired." It is *not* a Hebrew name, and I am not persuaded by those who find in it an echo or variant of the biblical "Shiloh," which became the "Selah" of the English Bible. There were a smattering of converted Iberian Jews in Shakespeare's London, but whether he knew any of them is uncertain. It is absurd when Shakespeare has Shylock and Tubal agree to meet at the synagogue for a business discussion. Rather more important is that Leviticus expressly forbids Shylock's proposed butchery of Antonio. Shakespeare would have shrugged that off as just another seacoast of Bohemia. Mischief is one thing, murder another. What was the world's best writer, ever, thinking of in this outrageous turn?

I have no clear answer to give, since endless meditation upon Shylock has left me bewildered as to Shakespeare's stance (if any) toward his own play. You could argue that poor Malvolio, in *Twelfth Night*, is also given outrageous treatment by Shakespeare, but the point there is that all of us share in Malvolio's erotic and social delusions. Shylock remains unique, since even Shakespeare cannot help us sustain a history that culminated in the Nazi death camps, unless we happen to be Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, or the current the president of Iran.

The critical history of Shylock's reception, as chronicled in this volume, is a vexed one, as might be expected. Dr. Samuel Johnson and W.H. Auden both were devout Christians, but their remarks upon the play seem to come from different planets. We wonder why Johnson says nothing at all about Shylock, while Auden attempts to save whatever good name Christianity could hope to sustain in this play's context.

The novelist Philip Roth made what I judge to be some of the most memorable comments upon Shakespeare's villain in the novel, *Operation Shylock* (1993). I recall conversations with Roth in which we agreed that Shakespeare had done lasting human harm by his creation of Shylock, who has stimulated anti-Semites these last four centuries. Was, is, Shakespeare morally culpable? Roth subtly intimated both yes and no. I choose to be less subtle in this matter. *The Merchant of Venice* is a masterpiece, and Shylock remains vital and vitalizing, a great imagining. And yet his image has done great harm in the world. Here, at least, Shakespeare himself did not pay the price of his own greatness.

BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE was born in Stratford-on-Avon in April 1564 into a family of some prominence. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover and merchant of leather goods who earned enough to marry Mary Arden, the daughter of his father's landlord, in 1557. John Shakespeare was a prominent citizen in Stratford, and at one point, he served as an alderman and bailiff.

Shakespeare presumably attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have received an education in Latin, but he did not go on to either Oxford or Cambridge universities. Little is recorded about Shakespeare's early life; indeed, the first record of his life after his christening is of his marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582 in the church at Temple Grafton, near Stratford. He would have been required to obtain a special license from the bishop as security that there was no impediment to the marriage. Peter Alexander states in his book *Shakespeare's Life and Art* that marriage at this time in England required neither a church nor a priest or, for that matter, even a document—only a declaration of the contracting parties in the presence of witnesses. Thus, it was customary, though not mandatory, to follow the marriage with a church ceremony.

Little is known about William and Anne Shakespeare's marriage. Their first child, Susanna, was born in May 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. Later on, Susanna married Dr. John Hall, but the younger daughter, Judith, remained unmarried. When Hamnet died in Stratford in 1596, the boy was only 11 years old.

We have no record of Shakespeare's activities for the seven years after the birth of his twins, but by 1592 he was in London working as an actor. He was also apparently well known as a playwright, for reference is made of him by his contemporary Robert Greene in *A Groatsworth of Wit*, as "an upstart crow."

Several companies of actors were in London at this time. Shakespeare may have had connection with one or more of them before 1592, but we have no record that tells us definitely. However, we do know of his long association with the most famous and successful troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. (When James I came to the throne in 1603, after Elizabeth's death, the troupe's name

changed to the King's Men.) In 1599 the Lord Chamberlain's Men provided the financial backing for the construction of their own theater, the Globe.

The Globe was begun by a carpenter named James Burbage and finished by his two sons, Cuthbert and Robert. To escape the jurisdiction of the Corporation of London, which was composed of conservative Puritans who opposed the theater's "licentiousness," James Burbage built the Globe just outside London, in the Liberty of Holywell, beside Finsbury Fields. This also meant that the Globe was safer from the threats that lurked in London's crowded streets, like plague and other diseases, as well as rioting mobs. When James Burbage died in 1597, his sons completed the Globe's construction. Shakespeare played a vital role, financially and otherwise, in the construction of the theater, which was finally occupied sometime before May 16, 1599.

Shakespeare not only acted with the Globe's company of actors; he was also a shareholder and eventually became the troupe's most important playwright. The company included London's most famous actors, who inspired the creation of some of Shakespeare's best-known characters, such as Hamlet and Lear, as well as his clowns and fools.

In his early years, however, Shakespeare did not confine himself to the theater. He also composed some mythological-erotic poetry, such as *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both of which were dedicated to the earl of Southampton. Shakespeare was successful enough that in 1597 he was able to purchase his own home in Stratford, which he called New Place. He could even call himself a gentleman, for his father had been granted a coat of arms.

By 1598 Shakespeare had written some of his most famous works, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*, as well as his historical plays *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, and *King John*. Somewhere around the turn of the century, Shakespeare wrote his romantic comedies *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, as well as *Henry V*, the last of his history plays in the Prince Hal series. During the next 10 years he wrote his great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

At this time, the theater was burgeoning in London; the public took an avid interest in drama, the audiences were large, the plays demonstrated an enormous range of subjects, and playwrights competed for approval. By 1613, however, the rising tide of Puritanism had changed the theater. With the desertion of the theaters by the middle classes, the acting companies were compelled to depend more on the aristocracy, which also meant that they now had to cater to a more sophisticated audience.

Perhaps this change in London's artistic atmosphere contributed to Shakespeare's reasons for leaving London after 1612. His retirement from the theater is sometimes thought to be evidence that his artistic skills were waning. During this time, however, he wrote *The Tempest* and *Henry VIII*. He also

wrote the “tragicomedies,” *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter’s Tale*. These were thought to be inspired by Shakespeare’s personal problems and have sometimes been considered proof of his greatly diminished abilities.

However, so far as biographical facts indicate, the circumstances of his life at this time do not imply any personal problems. He was in good health and financially secure, and he enjoyed an excellent reputation. Indeed, although he was settled in Stratford at this time, he made frequent visits to London, enjoying and participating in events at the royal court, directing rehearsals, and attending to other business matters.

In addition to his brilliant and enormous contributions to the theater, Shakespeare remained a poetic genius throughout the years, publishing a renowned and critically acclaimed sonnet cycle in 1609 (most of the sonnets were written many years earlier). Shakespeare’s contribution to this popular poetic genre are all the more amazing in his break with contemporary notions of subject matter. Shakespeare idealized the beauty of man as an object of praise and devotion (rather than the Petrarchan tradition of the idealized, unattainable woman). In the same spirit of breaking with tradition, Shakespeare also treated themes previously considered off limits—the dark, sexual side of a woman as opposed to the Petrarchan ideal of a chaste and remote love object. He also expanded the sonnet’s emotional range, including such emotions as delight, pride, shame, disgust, sadness, and fear.

When Shakespeare died in 1616, no collected edition of his works had ever been published, although some of his plays had been printed in separate unauthorized editions. (Some of these were taken from his manuscripts, some from the actors’ prompt books, and others were reconstructed from memory by actors or spectators.) In 1623 two members of the King’s Men, John Hemings and Henry Condell, published a collection of all the plays they considered to be authentic, the First Folio.

Included in the First Folio is a poem by Shakespeare’s contemporary Ben Jonson, an outstanding playwright and critic in his own right. Jonson paid tribute to Shakespeare’s genius, proclaiming his superiority to what previously had been held as the models for literary excellence—the Greek and Latin writers. “Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. / He was not of an age, but for all time!”

Jonson was the first to state what has been said so many times since. Having captured what is permanent and universal to all human beings at all times, Shakespeare’s genius continues to inspire us—and the critical debate about his works never ceases.

SUMMARY OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*



Act I

In the first lines of *The Merchant of Venice*, even before he binds himself to Shylock for Bassanio's sake, Antonio is already troubled. "In sooth," he complains,

I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.

(I, i, 1–7)

He is sad, weary, does not recognize himself, and does not know why. Salerio and Solanio, two of the young Venetian gallants who gather around him, attempting to cheer and comfort him, suggest that the cause of his melancholy is not obscure. His great wealth is in transport on the high sea: His ships are at risk from storm, piracy, and shipwreck. But Antonio rejects their explanation. His merchandise is not all on one ship but on many; the ships are not all traveling together; not all of his fortune is tied up in this year's commerce. He is not bothered by external circumstance, he says. His trouble's source is within.

Antonio may not know why he is melancholy, but his conversation with Bassanio makes the cause clear. When they meet, Bassanio does not introduce the subject of going to Belmont to seek Portia in marriage. Antonio, however, does:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
That you to-day promised to tell me of?

(I, i, 119–121)

Such a question, of course, is a setup, allowing Bassanio to narrate essential expository material. Bassanio has squandered money he has borrowed from Antonio through living lavishly. Unable to pay that money back, he wants to borrow another 3,000 ducats so that he can equip himself to sail in style to Belmont to woo Portia, heiress to a great fortune. But this question also reveals to the audience what is hidden from Antonio. It is apparent that he has had a previous conversation with Bassanio, before his confession of malaise, during which Bassanio told him of his desire to woo a “lady.” If the cause of his (Antonio’s) low spirit is not anxiety about losing his merchandise to the “roaring waters,” “enrobed,” like a seductive woman “with [his] silks,” might it be anxiety about losing Bassanio to a wife?

With lavish declarations of love Antonio agrees to lend Bassanio the money, promising, “My purse, my person, my extremest means, / Lie all unlock’d to your occasions.” He continues:

You know me well, and herein spend but time
 To wind about my love with circumstance;
 And out of doubt you do me now more wrong
 In making question of my uttermost
 Than if you had made waste of all I have.

No doubt Antonio means what he says, but since, by his own admission, he has “much ado to know myself,” it is fair to suggest that he may not clearly know the motive of his generosity: the wish to secure Bassanio to himself by making himself essential to him. He can keep his hold fast even in an enterprise, the courtship of a wife, which threatens to loosen that hold, if he can be essential to that enterprise. Considering the bond, moreover, to which he will commit himself for Bassanio, the words “Than if you had made waste of all I have” are decidedly ominous. Antonio does not, however, have 3,000 ducats—his ventures are at sea. He instructs Bassanio, therefore, to ask around the Rialto and find a moneylender from whom he can, using Antonio’s credit, raise the sum. Thus, in the attempt to bind Bassanio to himself, Antonio will bind himself to Shylock, and Portia, to protect her marriage bond with Bassanio, will need to find the ways to undo both those other bonds.

Scene 2 moves from Venice to Belmont and introduces Portia, whose first words echo Antonio’s first words. “By my troth, Nerissa,” she says, “my little body is aware of this great world.” There is something she and Antonio share, something they have in common, something that makes them alike—the desire to possess Bassanio. Although Antonio is at a loss to know the cause of his sadness, it is not difficult for Portia—with the help of Nerissa, a wiser companion than Solanio and Salerio—to discover the source of her malaise and, by extension, to give a hint at the source of Antonio’s. “If your miseries were in the same abundance,” Nerissa says, almost chiding her mistress for her

melancholy, “as your good fortunes are,” then there would be cause to complain. But Nerissa’s second thought is deeper: Perhaps Portia is “sick” because she has “too much.” Unlike Antonio, who rejects his friends’ suggestion, Portia confirms Nerissa’s observation. She has a wealth of young energy which she cannot venture, as much as she wishes to, but which still churns within her: “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth to skip o’er the meshes.” She is overripe with desire and wishes to give herself in marriage. This pulsing desire is not to be satisfied according to her own will, however, but according to the conditions established in her dead father’s will.

Before he died, Portia’s father had stipulated a test for her suitors. To win her, the successful suitor must choose the one of three caskets that contains her portrait. One casket represents gold, one silver, and one lead. Unsuccessful suitors must quit Belmont and live out their days unmarried. From all over the world suitors come, but none Portia desires. She quickens only when shrewd Nerissa reminds her of Bassanio, who visited Belmont once when her father was still alive.

Scene 3 introduces Shylock and the host of difficulties attendant upon his being a Jew, a moneylender, and, in the eyes of everyone else in the play, the villain of the piece. He is drawn according to a stereotype and he represents that stereotype. But Shakespeare provides him with an interiority which, although it does not allow him to transcend the stereotype, presents him as an actual man *alive* within it, not merely a type who can sink beneath it. Still, he is more of a stereotype than Othello, who does not stand for all Moors, not even to the other characters in *Othello*. Othello represents Othello, a man tormented by the fact of his blackness. Shylock, in contrast, represents a type. Despite how subtly his character is drawn, and despite the fact that another Jew, Tubal, appears briefly, as if to ensure that Shylock is one among many rather than a representative of all, Shylock still represents Jews and Jewishness. (His daughter, Jessica, is presented as an anomaly, the exception that proves the rule.) Like Fagin in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, Shylock can be used to confirm anti-Semitic conceptions of Jews. Nevertheless, Shylock is not presented as motivelessly malignant, nor Antonio as quite saintly in his Christianity. Shylock is made the motive for Antonio’s outbreaks of nastiness, and Antonio’s ungenerous ill-treatment of Shylock is presented as the cause of Shylock’s desire for revenge. As powerful an imagined character as Shylock is, the play is not necessarily about him or about the nature of Jews. He is arguably a plot device in a larger scheme. *The Merchant of Venice* is about how Portia secures her husband’s faith—not his religious faith but his matrimonial faith—which she raises to the level of religious devotion.

That Shylock becomes an actual threat to Antonio rather than a mere annoyance is the result of the bond Antonio agrees to for Bassanio’s sake, in order to finance his trip to Belmont to woo Portia. Paradoxically, being endangered

by Shylock, Antonio becomes a source of threat to Portia. After Bassanio has won her, and after she has overcome Shylock's hold on Antonio, Portia will have to lessen the strength of Antonio's hold on Bassanio in order to have complete marital possession of him. Antonio's hold is strengthened by his having risked himself as a sacrifice for Bassanio.

When Shylock is introduced, he first speaks in fragments rather than in full sentences. "Three thousand ducats," he says, repeating what Bassanio has just said and considering the matter. Unlike Antonio and Portia, who were introduced in the midst of introspection, Shylock is introduced with no interior, but rather in the pursuit of his function. Unlike Antonio, who is giving when asked, Shylock is grasping. But Shylock is not trying to overwhelm Bassanio with a show of love, as Antonio is. Shylock is merely doing business. Whereas Antonio and Portia meditate on the quality of experience, Shylock quantifies experience. How much for how long, and what guarantee? Antonio is sad, but Shylock is angry. He begins tight-lipped, but his eloquence and force of speech soon burst out. He is a coiled spring. Hate, not love, is his energy. A desire to punish rather than to possess determines him.

After Shylock has indicated he must talk with Antonio before he lends money to Bassanio, Shylock will not consent when invited to dine with Antonio and Bassanio. Declining the invitation may seem spiteful and ungracious, but Shylock is clear about his reasons. His pique is understandable. The dietary code he is bound to follow is contemned, yet he is still invited to eat—a gesture that shows Christian scorn for Jewish law and for individual persons. It is also a business invitation to dine with a man who has scorned him. That Shylock is not softened by Bassanio's easygoing manner is not surprising, nor to be held against him. How could he be? He is being used when needed by people who despise him.

That Shylock is a moneylender is not intrinsic to his being a Jew. The rules of society allowed him, as a Jew, no other course. Because of the prejudice of that society, his person and his function have become one. Antonio detests him as man, Jew, and moneylender without making distinction. Antonio condemns the fact that Shylock takes interest, that he makes money on money. Shylock's hatred of Christians is a reaction to their mistreatment of him, the result of the considerable and repeated abuse he suffers for being a Jew and for offering a service which Christians have relegated to him and of which they readily avail themselves. When Shylock reminds Antonio of how badly he has treated him in his speech beginning at Act I, scene 3, line 103, Antonio does not deny it. In fact, he asserts he will continue to treat Shylock with contempt.

Against this background of mutual animosity and anger, generated by Antonio, Shylock agrees to lend the 3,000 ducats to Bassanio without interest, but the forfeit, should Antonio be unable to repay the loan in three months, will be a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock relishes the possibility of revenge.

A horrified Bassanio objects, withdrawing his request, telling Antonio not to agree to that condition: “You shall not seal to such a bond for me! / I’ll rather dwell in my necessity.” But Antonio does not heed him, confident the ships carrying his wealth will have safely returned to Venice by the time the bond is due. He seems almost amused by the bargain, as if taking it more as a joke than a possibility. Such poor judgment on the part of an otherwise successful merchant—and lack of suspicion regarding a person he holds in such contempt—is telling: It suggests the force of passion weakening reason and Antonio’s wish to be irreplaceable. By binding himself so to Shylock, he is binding Bassanio to himself with the strongest possible bond, the bond established by offering to sacrifice himself for him. Portia will understand how powerful that is and how threatening to her position in her marriage.

Act II

Act II opens with Portia facing unwanted suitors in Belmont—first among them the Prince of Morocco, who chooses the golden casket and finds within it a death’s head rather than a portrait of Portia. Her second suitor, the Prince of Aragon, chooses the silver casket and is rewarded with the picture of “a blinking idiot.”

Meanwhile, Bassanio is preparing to leave Venice for Belmont. Gratiano has begged to accompany him. In addition, Lorenzo, another friend of Bassanio’s, sets out, ultimately for Belmont, with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. On the night that Bassanio and Gratiano set sail for Belmont, Lorenzo elopes with Jessica, and Jessica takes with her a substantial portion of her father’s wealth in ducats and jewelry.

Act III

Shylock is distraught at the loss of his daughter and his ducats, but the Venetians, like Salerio and Solanio, who describe Shylock’s distress, find it grotesque and hilarious. Antonio, too, suffers a blow when the news comes that his argosies have been wrecked at sea. That puts him in Shylock’s power, for when the bond falls due, he is unable to repay it, and Shylock is determined to exercise the right forfeit bestows upon him.

Once in Belmont, Bassanio chooses the leaden casket and finds within the portrait of Portia. As a kind of clue, each casket bears an inscription on the outside. The gold casket suggests it offers “what many men desire”—but the pursuit of gold ends in death. The silver casket offers the seeker “as much as he deserve”—but a man who goes by appearances, who sees a silver surface but not the true depth, is shown to be the image of a fool. The leaden casket offers nothing: “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” The one whom this description truly fits is not Bassanio, but Antonio, who gives and risks everything he has—his wealth, his flesh, and, even, by aiding him

in his wooing, Bassanio himself, whom he must lose to a wife should Bassanio succeed. Bassanio, in contrast, risks little. It is not *his* wealth he hazards, but Antonio's. Shylock, of course, is the antithesis of the man invoked by the leaden casket: He hazards nothing in his dealings and always has his eye on getting. For him, giving is but venturing, an investment. Ironically, this is the model that Bassanio is following in his venture to Belmont, as he makes clear in his petition for Antonio's aid beginning at Act I, scene 1, line 140. Bassanio speaks of shooting a second arrow and watching its flight in the hope of helping him find a previously lost one so he may bring them both back. By arrows, he means Antonio's loans to him.

After Bassanio has chosen correctly, Portia "commits" herself to him "to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king." She explains:

Myself and what is mine to you and yours
 Is now converted: but now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord.

While this may be so formally, Portia actually never relinquishes control. She is, after all, the daughter of a father who extended his control even from the grave. Portia ends up mastering every situation and everyone in the play. As the sign that she gives herself to him, Portia gives Bassanio a ring, which signifies not only possession but also the condition upon which possession depends. "When you part from, lose, or give away" the ring, she tells him, "Let it presage the ruin of your love." Despite her gift of herself and of all that is hers, she demands to control the attitude with which the recipient views the gift. If Bassanio parts with the ring, he breaks faith with the way she is to be valued, and she will no longer be his. The condition for obtaining her, after all, was to "give and hazard all" you have.

But a part of Bassanio is reserved for Antonio, as Portia learns immediately following his triumphant choice of casket. Salerio comes from Venice, bringing with him Lorenzo and Jessica and a letter from Antonio. The latter, as Portia discerns from the increasingly pained and distressed expression on Bassanio's face as he reads it, concerns and affects him deeply. Saying she is a part of him, Portia insists he tell her what ill news he has received. In his report that the bond is forfeit, all Antonio's ships have floundered, and that Antonio must render to Shylock a pound of his flesh, Bassanio confesses his debt, describing Antonio as a "dear friend." After hearing everything, Portia asks, "Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?" To which Bassanio responds,

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
 The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit

In doing courtesies, and one in whom
 The ancient Roman honor more appears
 Than any that draws breath in Italy.

Her response is swift and generous, but also shrewd and self-protective. She tells him that immediately after their marriage service is performed, and before they consummate their union, he will go to Venice with money enough, many times more than the original sum, and rescue Antonio, for she says that Bassanio “never shall . . . lie by Portia’s side / With an unquiet soul.” An unquiet soul is one that does not rest entirely in her. The nature of the disquiet that will haunt Bassanio is hinted at in Antonio’s letter, which begins, “Sweet Bassanio,” and concludes: “it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure: if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” To the end Antonio portrays himself as a pathetic sacrifice for Bassanio. It is a strategy, whether consciously deliberate or not, to bind the youth to him as strongly as his contract binds him to Shylock. “Pray God Bassanio come,” Antonio says as he is being led to jail after Shylock has refused to hear his plea for leniency, “To see me pay my debt, and then I care not.”

Bassanio departs for Venice with Gratiano, leaving Portia and Nerissa, whom Gratiano has married, in Belmont. It is not, however, Portia’s intention to remain behind. She leaves her home in Belmont to the care of Lorenzo and Jessica, sends to a great lawyer in Padua an account of Shylock’s legal case against Antonio, and, armed with his opinion regarding its merit, travels to Venice. Portia and Nerissa arrive disguised as young men: Portia as a lawyer, Nerissa as his clerk.

Act IV

In court, Shylock is obdurate in his expression of hatred for Antonio and in his refusal, at the request of the Duke of Venice, who is presiding over the court, to show him mercy and not only withdraw his action against Antonio, but also, in recognition of his losses, forgive a part of the debt itself. Shylock insists that he has justice, the law, on his side and is therefore within his rights to pursue his remedy. According to the law, then, the court rules that Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh and there is no more to be done. Antonio accepts the judgment with the self-effacement of a martyr, a self-effacement which seems sure to arouse pity in others:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
 Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
 Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me
 You cannot better be employ’d, Bassanio,
 Than to live still and write mine epitaph.

It seems quite clear from his last words that Antonio is playing for Bassanio's pity and a very special place in his heart when he recommends that there can be no better thing for him to do than devote himself to treasuring his memory. It is not something Portia would appreciate.

Just at the point when Antonio's martyrdom is going to be sealed, turning him into a sort of ideal for Bassanio, worthy of devoted and loving commemoration, Portia and Nerissa enter the court in the guise of Balthasar, a young lawyer recommended by the great lawyer of Padua, and his clerk. Portia reviews the case, assents that Shylock has justice on his side, and when, after her encouragement, he still refuses to grant mercy to Antonio, she affirms his right to Antonio's flesh. As Shylock is sharpening his knife to cut into the flesh, Portia stops him, informing him and the court that whereas the bond allows for his taking a pound of flesh, no allowance is made for blood or for any amount of flesh over a pound. Moreover, Portia cites other Venetian laws which make it criminal for a stranger (a non-Venetian)—which, being a Jew, Shylock is—to conspire to take the life of a Venetian, which is what it appears Shylock has done. Shylock tries to save himself, offering simply to take the money he is owed, but it is too late. As he desired justice, his opponents announce, so he will get justice. The law provides for his execution and the seizure of his estate, but to show him the Christian mercy he refused to exercise, he will be allowed to live. In addition, half his estate will go to Antonio; the other half, upon his death, will go to Lorenzo, his daughter's Christian husband; and he (Shylock) will become a convert to Christianity. He agrees to everything, says he does not feel well, and is allowed to go home. That is the last that is seen or heard of him.

This ought to be the end of the play. Bassanio is married. So are Gratiano and Lorenzo. Antonio is rescued, and Shylock, who has been more than once characterized as a dog, has been defanged. But it is not the end, for there is Portia's disguise as the lawyer to resolve. And it might have been quickly resolved by having her pull off her lawyer's headgear and letting her own hair tumble down. Instead, there is one more trick *The Merchant of Venice* must play after the previous ones about the pound of flesh and the three caskets.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Bassanio and Antonio offer to give the young lawyer the 3,000 ducats they did not have to return to Shylock. But Portia refuses it with pieties about being well paid by being well satisfied at having done good work. Still, Bassanio presses her to permit them to give her something, so Portia says she will wear his gloves. When he removes them and she sees his ring—the one she gave him when he chose the lead casket and she told him that parting with it was the same as parting from her—she asks for it. When he explains that it is impossible for him to give the ring and tries to explain why, she will have none of it and remarks that he has made of her a beggar by encouraging her to ask for something and then treated her like a beggar by refusing to give to her when she did ask. She leaves miffed at his refusal to part with the ring.

That might have ended it, with Bassanio proving his devotion to Portia above all. But, tellingly, it is Antonio, once Portia disguised as Balthasar has gone, who says, “let him have the ring. / Let his deservings and my love withal, / Be valued against your wife’s commandment.” He is setting himself above Portia, encouraging Bassanio to allow his imperative to trump hers—and Bassanio shows greater obedience to Antonio’s imperative than to Portia’s.

Bassanio sends Gratiano after the lawyer to give the ring to him. Portia accepts the ring; meanwhile, Nerissa plots to get the ring she gave Gratiano away from him, too. They anticipate their husbands’ clumsy and comic responses when they cannot show the rings with which they had promised never to part.

Act V

A. W. Schlegel described Act V of *The Merchant of Venice* as “a musical afterlude in the piece itself,” which Shakespeare “added,” as if it were not really integral to the play, because he “was unwilling to dismiss his audience with the gloomy impressions which Antonio’s acquittal, effected with so much difficulty, and contrary to all expectation, and the condemnation of Shylock, were calculated to leave behind them.” Schlegel summarizes the action of the last act as follows:

The scene opens with the playful prattling of two lovers in a summer evening; it is followed by soft music, and a rapturous eulogy on this powerful disposer of the human mind and the world; the principal characters then make their appearance, and after a simulated quarrel, which is gracefully maintained, the whole ends with the most exhilarating mirth.

This interpretation is, arguably, off the mark in many respects and therefore very useful as a guide for a closer reading.

The “playful prattling of two lovers” is not quite what Schlegel makes it out to be. With sweet language and courtly constructions, as if they were celebrating true unions, always repeating the introductory phrase, “In such a night,” Lorenzo and Jessica describe the plights of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, and Jason and Medea. These are not sweet examples of sweet love which young lovers might happily celebrate as models for their love. The stories of Troilus and Cressida and Dido and Aeneas are stories of betrayal and abandonment. The story of Medea and Jason is one of betrayal, rage, and murder. Only in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe are the lovers true to each other, but that story ends with a tragic and confused double suicide. Beneath the polish and glister, something troubling is evident. The idea of betrayal in love has been suggestively introduced. Regarding the effect of music in this “musical afterlude,” Jessica says, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music.” Music can be disturbing as well as soothing. The “simulated quarrel . . . so gracefully

maintained,” which follows upon Portia’s discovery that Bassanio gave his ring, at Antonio’s behest, to the lawyer, is in fact not simulated. Portia is absolutely earnest when she tells Bassanio, “I will ne’er come in your bed / Until I see the ring.” And all his excuses, explanations, and apologies do not move her. Only when Antonio intervenes, implicitly recognizing Portia’s right to Bassanio over his, Antonio’s, does Portia relent. The power of Antonio’s hold on Bassanio and of Bassanio’s attachment to Antonio, as well as Portia’s awareness of their tie, had been emphasized only some 35 lines before the trouble over the rings begins. Introducing Antonio to Portia, Bassanio says, “this is Antonio, / To whom I am so infinitely bound.” Portia emphasizes that she understands the force of his words, repeating the word “bound” twice: “You should in all sense be much bound to him. / For, as I hear, he was much bound for you.” There is something wry in her tone, too, suggesting she finds something awry in their attachment. When Antonio finally intervenes in the argument over the ring—in order to take responsibility for Bassanio’s parting with it and for his encouraging Bassanio to betray a sacred, ceremonial vow—he says:

I once did lend my body for his wealth;
Which, but for him that had your husband’s ring,
Had quite miscarried: I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

He is promising to honor Bassanio’s bond to Portia over any other obligation Bassanio might have. And “advisedly,” although it means “deliberately,” also carries the suggestion of “by my advice.” This oath by Antonio to withdraw his claim on Bassanio constitutes the final stage in a succession of events that began with Bassanio’s selection of the right casket. Portia gives Antonio the ring and tells him to give it to Bassanio, “And bid him keep it better than the other one.” Antonio thus becomes a part, the last part, of the ceremony joining Portia and Bassanio. When he gives Portia’s ring to Bassanio, he gives Bassanio to Portia. “Swear to keep this ring,” he instructs Bassanio. After he has made this surrender, Portia informs Antonio that, contrary to what they had heard earlier, “three of your argosies / Are richly come to harbor suddenly.” With this news, she releases Bassanio from any further debt to Antonio and she indebts Antonio to her, for when he reads “for certain that my ships / Are safely” anchored, he says to her, “Sweet lady, you have given me my life and living!” The problem of Antonio’s sadness has been solved; additionally, the cause of Portia’s weariness—first her father’s intervention and then Antonio’s influence—has been removed. Antonio is restored to his community freed of an enervating desire and Portia is married in a marriage of her own definition.

KEY PASSAGES IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*



Act I, i, 1–7

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.

Antonio is speaking, complaining that he is sad but does not know why. The effect of the sadness is weariness, which implies a loss of desire to live. When he says, “What stuff’tis made of, whereof it is born, / I am to learn,” there is the suggestion that one of the things a reader may expect to discover later in the play is the cause of his malaise. Line seven offers a warning, however, that Antonio is a man who does not entirely know himself. Consequently, his actions in the play are the actions of a man who lacks some degree of self-awareness.

Salerio and Solanio suggest he is preoccupied with his merchandise, which is being transported at sea, and with the fear of shipwreck, which might scatter his wealth over the waves, but he demurs and explains that he is not worried about these things, for his goods are not all concentrated in one ship.

Act I, i, 119–121

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
That you to-day promised to tell me of?

These are Antonio’s first words in the play to Bassanio, spoken after all their friends have gone. They suggest that the two had talked earlier in the day,

previous to Antonio's opening remarks regarding his mystifying sadness. By his question now, it is clear that Bassanio had told him of a woman whose love he wished to win. Although there is no direct, causal relationship between that earlier conversation and Antonio's sadness, there is an implicit connection—one that will be strengthened by the events of the play, which will show the magnitude of Antonio's love for Bassanio and of his desire to be predominant in his affections.



Act I, i, 122–134

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
 How much I have disabled mine estate,
 By something showing a more swelling port
 Than my faint means would grant continuance:
 Nor do I now make moan to be abridged
 From such a noble rate; but my chief care
 Is to come fairly off from the great debts
 Wherein my time something too prodigal
 Hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio,
 I owe the most, in money and in love,
 And from your love I have a warranty
 To unburden all my plots and purposes
 How to get clear of all the debts I owe.

In this passage, Bassanio reveals that he is in debt and that most of his debt is to Antonio. While he says he is not troubled by having to curtail his sumptuous style of living and that his chief care is to pay Antonio back, his actual purpose in the speech is to borrow more money from Antonio and to continue living a gilded life. His speech shows that in their friendship, Antonio is the giver and Bassanio the taker—a model that will be repeated in Bassanio's relationship with Portia. It may also suggest to the reader that while Shylock profits from lending money, Bassanio lives by borrowing it.



Act I, i, 177–182

Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
 Neither have I money nor commodity
 To raise a present sum: therefore go forth;
 Try what my credit can in Venice do.

That shall be racked, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.

What Antonio says in this passage seems to contradict his earlier remarks: “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted, / Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate / Upon the fortune of this present year” (I, i, 42–44).

Perhaps he does not have ready cash and his “whole estate” comprises primarily merchandise. In any case, it is clear that Antonio seeks to assume the role of a man nobly sacrificed for his friend. “Racked” suggests being stretched by torture on the rack, an old instrument of torture. Antonio seems to be outwardly embracing what he is internally regretting—Bassanio’s quest for Portia.

Act I, ii, 1–2

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world.

An implicit although unidentified connection is hinted at between Portia and Antonio by the similarity of their opening words. Both are suffering from a comparable weariness, although for differing yet related causes. Each one is oppressed by a type of frustrated desire.

Act I, ii, 3–8

You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean.

In her response Nerissa initially teases Portia regarding her good fortune, pointing out that she would actually feel as distressed as she claims if her miseries could equal her good fortune—but since they do not, Portia cannot really complain of something weighing her down. But then Nerissa turns it another way and realizes that considering the plenitude of Portia’s wealth, such overabundance is like overripeness. Portia is too full, sick with too much, as one might be sick with not enough. Nerissa’s advocacy of a golden mean, a middle ground between opposing conditions, suggests a lens through which readers may look at the central controversies between justice and mercy, between giving and taking, that give rise to the polarized debates later in the play.

Act I, iii, 9–12

Shylock: Antonio is a good man.

Bassanio: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

Shylock: Oh, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.

Shylock uses the word “good” in a material sense: Antonio is a good risk because of his net worth. Bassanio uses it in a moral sense, regarding his virtuousness and the quality of his character. This difference may be seen as fundamental to the distinction between justice, which seems to be quantitative and balances the value of one thing against another, and mercy, which seems to be qualitative and regards something with its own inherent value, which must be honored.



Act I, iii, 103–167

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
 In the Rialto you have rated me
 About my moneys and my usances:
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
 And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
 And all for use of that which is mine own.
 Well then, it now appears you need my help:
 Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
 ‘Shylock, we would have moneys:’ you say so;
 You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
 And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
 Over your threshold: moneys is your suit
 What should I say to you? Should I not say
 ‘Hath a dog money? is it possible
 A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’ Or
 Shall I bend low and in a bondman’s key,
 With bated breath and whispering humbleness, Say this;
 ‘Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last;
 You spurn’d me such a day; another time
 You call’d me dog; and for these courtesies
 I’ll lend you thus much moneys?’

This is one of Shylock’s bravura speeches, and if what he says is true, it casts him in a better light and Antonio in a worse light than the general attitude

shown to each of them by the others in the play. Antonio's response, "I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too," indicates that what Shylock has said is in fact true, and that Shylock understands clearly the spirit that directs Antonio's actions. At this point, the only way an audience can favor Antonio over Shylock is by subscribing to the same belief that the Jew is a noxious species of subhumanity. This is clearly not the position of the play itself.

Antonio himself has a hand in shaping the consequences of his forfeiture, not just by his past behavior but because of his present negotiations. "If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not / As to thy friends," he declares, "But lend it rather to thine enemy, / Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face / Exact the penalty."

Ambiguity is introduced in Shylock's response. It is not clear how honest and how conniving Shylock is at this moment—probably some combination of both elements. The flux of circumstance rather than the fixity of his character will determine which becomes dominant:

Why, look you, how you storm!
 I would be friends with you and have your love,
 Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,
 Supply your present wants and take no doit
 Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me:
 This is kind I offer.

Bassanio exclaims, "This were kindness." Shylock then suggests the forfeit of the pound of flesh. As grim as this is, and although it is more likely the issue of malice and not merriment, it is not a *fait accompli* but a proposition bound to chance:

This kindness will I show.
 Go with me to a notary, seal me there
 Your single bond; and, in a merry sport,
 If you repay me not on such a day,
 In such a place, such sum or sums as are
 Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit
 Be nominated for an equal pound
 Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
 In what part of your body pleaseth me.

Antonio is "Content, i' faith." He answers, "I'll seal to such a bond / And say there is much kindness in the Jew." But Bassanio objects, "You shall not seal to such a bond for me: / I'll rather dwell in my necessity." Even he sees the risk involved.

Antonio, however, is blindly overconfident, an imprudence that could not have been habitual for him to become the merchant prince he is. What dulls his reason, it is quite possible, is his compulsion to prove the extent of his devotion to Bassanio—even to the outer limits of self-sacrifice:

Why, fear not, man; I will not forfeit it:
 Within these two months, that's a month before
 This bond expires, I do expect return
 Of thrice three times the value of this bond.

Shylock's response seems fraught with ambiguity, and there is a sense of a hidden agenda:

O father Abram, what these Christians are,
 Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
 The thoughts of others! Pray you, tell me this;
 If he should break his day, what should I gain
 By the exaction of the forfeiture?
 A pound of man's flesh taken from a man
 Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
 As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats. I say,
 To buy his favour, I extend this friendship:
 If he will take it, so; if not, adieu;
 And, for my love, I pray you wrong me not.

Bassanio catches the subtext, but Antonio is too lost in his dream of sacrifice for Bassanio to see it. The irony is that Shylock is motivated not only by gain, but also by the possibility of revenge for the wrongs Antonio has done him. Antonio's honest contempt for Shylock, along with his overestimation of Bassanio, prevents him from understanding the depth of resentment possible for Shylock to feel.



Act II, ii, 1–32

Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me saying to me 'Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot,' or 'good Gobbo,' or good Launcelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away. My conscience says 'No; take heed,' honest Launcelot; take heed, honest Gobbo, or, as aforesaid, 'honest Launcelot Gobbo; do not run; scorn running with thy heels.' Well, the most courageous fiend bids me pack: 'Via!' says the fiend; 'away!' says the fiend; 'for the heavens, rouse up a brave mind,' says the fiend, 'and run.' Well, my conscience, hanging about the neck of my heart, says very

wisely to me 'My honest friend Launcelot, being an honest man's son,' or rather an honest woman's son; for, indeed, my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste; well, my conscience says 'Launcelot, budge not.' 'Budge,' says the fiend. 'Budge not,' says my conscience. 'Conscience,' say I, 'you counsel well;' 'Fiend,' say I, 'you counsel well:' to be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who, God bless the mark, is a kind of devil; and, to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend, who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnal; and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel: I will run, fiend; my heels are at your command; I will run.

With Launcelot Gobbo's character Shakespeare presents a parody compressed into a soliloquy of the old morality plays with a vice and a virtue, a good and a bad angel at each ear—as if by making fun of a morality play, Shakespeare is saying *The Merchant of Venice* is not a cut-and-dried morality play. He is not trying to teach doctrinal truth—though perhaps another kind of truth, not doctrine in its directness, but human in its complexity.

There is a secondary irony, impossible to say whether intentional or not: Gobbo's conflict comically prefigures the confusion over how much virtue and how much fault each side bears in the conflict between the Christians and Shylock.

Act II, vi, 5–19

Salerio: O, ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly
To seal love's bonds new-made, than they are wont
To keep obliged faith unforfeited!
Gratiano: That ever holds: who riseth from a feast
With that keen appetite that he sits down?
Where is the horse that doth untread again
His tedious measures with the unbated fire
That he did pace them first? All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd.
How like a younker or a prodigal
The scarfed bark puts from her native bay,
Hugg'd and embraced by the strumpet wind!
How like the prodigal doth she return,
With over-weather'd ribs and ragged sails,
Lean, rent and beggar'd by the strumpet wind!

In what seems to be the kind of idle, courtly conversation the young men of Venice enjoy practicing in order to show off their wits, Salerio and Gratiano, while waiting for Lorenzo before his elopement with Jessica, exchange truisms. The passage begins with Salerio's response to Gratiano's surprise that Lorenzo, a lover who should "outrun the clock," is late.

Gratiano observes that "All things that are, / Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed." Despite himself, Gratiano is prescient about the gallants of Venice who are now in hot pursuit of their ladies. Twice in four lines, moreover, the word "prodigal" appears. "Prodigal," tellingly, is the word Bassanio used to describe himself to Antonio at his first request for money (I, i, 129).



Act II, viii, 12–26

Solanio: I never heard a passion so confused,
 So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
 As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
 Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
 Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
 A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
 Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
 And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
 Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;
 She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.'

Salerio: Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
 Crying, his stones, his daughter, and his ducats.

Solanio: Let good Antonio look he keep his day,
 Or he shall pay for this.

Salerio and Solanio recount Shylock's discovery of Jessica's elopement, narrating and imitating his desperation and keening in the street. The audience is presented the scene of Shylock's discovery, grief, and rage indirectly, filtered through the gay perspective of mocking antagonists as they laugh at his distress while recounting it. Were the scene to be Shylock's, a direct confrontation of the events, it would bring the audience inside the character of Shylock, but the play insists he be seen as an outsider.

Solanio then utters something both ominous and mitigating: He connects Shylock's future vindictiveness to this betrayal. It is clear, moreover, from lines

9 and 10, just before this passage, that Antonio was aware of it, if not directly instrumental in its execution, for Salerio reports: “Antonio certified the Duke / They [Jessica and Lorenzo] were not with Bassanio in his ship.”



Act II, viii, 35–49

A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.
 I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:
 Bassanio told him he would make some speed
 Of his return: he answer'd, 'Do not so;
 Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio
 But stay the very riping of the time;
 And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,
 Let it not enter in your mind of love:
 Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts
 To courtship and such fair ostents of love
 As shall conveniently become you there:
 And even there, his eye being big with tears,
 Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
 And with affection wondrous sensible
 He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.

After a scornful description of Shylock's loss of his beloved daughter and a part of his wealth, Salerio describes with tender pathos how Antonio parted with Bassanio—a similar loss, really, of a beloved and of a portion of his wealth. Notice the repeated self-sacrificial tone and attitude that Antonio assumes.



Act III, i, 50–69

To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.
 He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If

we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

In this passage Shylock responds to Salerio's question, after it has been learned that Antonio's ships have foundered, of what good a pound of Antonio's flesh would serve him. While Shylock's response can be seen as ultimately expressing a malignant desire, the desire for revenge, it also contains within it a powerful cry from the heart against the contempt with which Antonio has regarded him. In addition, even if Shylock intends his final observation about Christian practice as malicious, it is nevertheless an apposite and applicable criticism—and hardly is there a more fitting place for it to be spoken than on an Elizabethan stage, where revenge tragedies involving none but Christians were popular entertainments.

Act III, ii, 4–18

There's something tells me, but it is not love,
 I would not lose you; and you know yourself,
 Hate counsels not in such a quality.
 But lest you should not understand me well,—
 And yet a maiden hath no tongue but thought,—
 I would detain you here some month or two
 Before you venture for me. I could teach you
 How to choose right, but I am then forsworn;
 So will I never be: so may you miss me;
 But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin,
 That I had been forsworn. Beshrew your eyes,
 They have o'erlook'd me and divided me;
 One half of me is yours, the other half yours,
 Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,
 And so all yours.

Portia's "Freudian" slip of the tongue and her assertion of her love through denial of her love subtly offer an interpretive model for critics of the play, as they reveal that there are meanings hidden beneath surface meanings.

Act III, ii, 63–71

Tell me where is fancy bred,
 Or in the heart, or in the head?
 How begot, how nourished?
 Reply, reply.
 It is engend'ed in the eyes,
 With gazing fed; and fancy dies
 In the cradle where it lies.
 Let us all ring fancy's knell
 I'll begin it,—Ding, dong, bell.

This is the song that is sung as Bassanio stands in front of the caskets in Belmont, considering his three choices. It seems more than coincidental that the first three lines all rhyme with one another, and also rhyme with the word “lead.” So do the words “engend’red” and “fed.” It is open to interpretation whether this is a hint Portia is offering, as she said earlier at line 10 that she “could teach” Bassanio “How to choose right,” without being “forsworn.”

The second tercet is of the same melancholy philosophy as Gratiano’s speech regarding love’s diminution. It forecasts the need Portia will have to ensure Bassanio’s fervor after he has won her.

**Act III, ii, 163–173**

Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
 Commits itself to yours to be directed,
 As from her lord, her governor, her king.
 Myself and what is mine to you and yours
 Is now converted: but now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o’er myself: and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord: I give them with this ring;
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love.

This is part of a speech Portia delivers to Bassanio, giving herself to him after he has chosen the right casket. Her words seem to place herself beneath her husband—she is a “gentle spirit,” she “commits” herself to him, and she compares him to a “lord,” “governor,” and “king.” Yet her sentiments are not entirely true, and the rest of *The Merchant of Venice* will show Portia not only

to be independent of her husband, but also to be the ruling party in their relationship. She concludes this speech by giving Bassanio the ring, which will dominate the last episode of the play and which, though ostensibly a sign of her submission to him, actually signifies his bond to her.



Act III, ii, 315–322

Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure: if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.

This is the letter from Antonio, which Salerio delivers to Belmont and gives to Bassanio right after he has successfully won Portia. Bassanio reads it aloud at the end of scene 2, after Salerio has given this news, after Bassanio has told Portia of his own debts to Antonio, after he has also made it clear how strongly bound to Antonio he is, and after Portia has told him she will give him money enough to redeem the bond. In response to her question, “Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?” he describes Antonio as “the dearest friend to me, the kindest man, / The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies.” (The “weary” Antonio is seen as “unwearied” in giving.) Hearing all this, Portia is moved to come to his aid not only to free Antonio of his debt, but also to remove Bassanio’s debt to him, which his death would compound. She says “never shall you lie by Portia’s side / With unquiet soul.”

After all that has just occurred, the reading aloud of the letter from Antonio is either for the sake of repetition or because it contains something more than its news. Significantly, it reveals the tone of a martyr calling out for pity, “if I might but see you at my death.” It also shows the pathos and passivity, which yet veils a demand, in the beseeching line, “if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” Come to me not because I want you to, Antonio is saying, but because you want to—in other words, make my desire your desire.



Act III, iii, 35–36

Pray God, Bassanio come
To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!

Expecting to die, Antonio cares only that Bassanio be there to see it, to see Antonio pay Bassanio's debt. His death will then indebt Bassanio to him forever. The unaccountable sadness with which he began the play has been grafted to a concrete event and now made it bittersweet.



Act III, v, 78–82

Why, if two gods should play some heavenly match
 And on the wager lay two earthly women,
 And Portia one, there must be something else
 Pawn'd with the other, for the poor rude world
 Hath not her fellow.

Jessica invokes an image of being weighed on a scale in order to suggest Portia's worth. At the same time, the image of scales prefigures the scales of justice and the scales that must weigh the pound of flesh in the trial scene of Act IV.



Act IV, i, 3–6

I am sorry for thee: thou art come to answer
 A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
 Uncapable of pity, void and empty
 From any dram of mercy.

The Duke's introductory remarks, at the beginning of the trial over which he presides, show him both to be firmly on Antonio's side and to be highly prejudiced against Shylock. He also introduces the concept of mercy, which, the tenor of his comments reveal, is something he expects Shylock to show, but which the Christians in their treatment of him are unwilling to exercise.



Act IV, i, 14

Go one, and call the Jew into the court.

This line, spoken by the Duke, again reveals the state of mind of the court. Throughout the scene, with particular exceptions at lines 17, 174, 175, and 235, Shylock is referred to as simply "the Jew" or addressed as "Jew," rather than by his proper name, thereby diminishing the sense of him as a person. When his

name is used by the Duke or Portia, it is as a means of identifying him, as when Portia asks at line 175, “Is your name Shylock?”—but she continues to call him “Jew” thereafter.

It is also noteworthy that although Shylock is the plaintiff in the case, he is treated like the defendant. The court is assembled without him and he is brought in afterward.

Act IV, i, 34

We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

In his opening summation of the case, the Duke sets Antonio forth in a hal-
lowed light, and implicitly compares Shylock to “stubborn Turks and Tartars
never trained / To offices of tender courtesy.” He then tells him how he is
expected to behave.

Act IV, i, 44–58

What if my house be troubled with a rat
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answer'd yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others, when the bagpipe sings i' the nose,
Cannot contain their urine: for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now, for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be render'd,
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a woollen bagpipe; but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended.

In discussing his response to Antonio, Shylock is actually mirroring Antonio's
response and the response of the rest of the Christians to him. He, Shylock, is
the one who is treated like a rat that must be poisoned, like the offensive pig,
cat, or bagpipe. He is returning to them what they have delivered to him. But
they are asking him to be kind to them without ever having been kind to him
in either the past or the present.

In the image of the man whose response to the grating stimulus is to urinate upon himself inadvertently, Shylock reveals the painful psychology of his response to their mistreatment. He realizes his harshness shames him, but sees it as a consequence of their effect on him and not the result of his own desire.

When the Duke chides Shylock later at line 63, saying, “This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, / To excuse the current of thy cruelty,” actually it is. The current of Antonio’s cruelty to him has never been a matter of concern for public damning. It cannot but anger Shylock, and the present opposition seems like one more expression of the imbalance he is continuously subject to. Shakespeare is not—despite the language of law and morality in this scene, or in the whole play—preaching a moral sermon, but rather exploring the interplay of human psychologies.



Act IV, i, 70–83

I pray you, think you question with the Jew:
 You may as well go stand upon the beach
 And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
 You may as well use question with the wolf
 Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
 You may as well forbid the mountain pines
 To wag their high tops and to make no noise,
 When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
 You may as well do anything most hard,
 As seek to soften that—than which what’s harder?—
 His Jewish heart: therefore, I do beseech you,
 Make no more offers, use no farther means,
 But with all brief and plain conveniency
 Let me have judgment and the Jew his will.

Antonio, although in softer language, shows the same contempt for Shylock that Shylock shows for him. He not only calls him “the Jew,” but also brands him with an overriding fault inherent in his very identity, comparing Shylock to a wolf and referring to his “Jewish heart,” of which there is nothing “harder.”



Act IV, i, 90–98

You have among you many a purchased slave,
 Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,

You use in abject and in slavish parts,
 Because you bought them: shall I say to you,
 Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
 Why sweat they under burthens? let their beds
 Be made as soft as yours and let their palates
 Be season'd with such viands? You will answer
 'The slaves are ours.'

Dr. Johnson cited this passage, spoken by Shylock, in order to agree with Shylock's condemnation of the Christian practice of slavery. Shylock's logic is clear: You wish to prevent me from acting exactly as you act; you may do so because you are Christians; and I may not, according to you, because I am a Jew.

Act IV, i, 114–118

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
 Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
 Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me
 You cannot better be employ'd, Bassanio,
 Than to live still and write mine epitaph.

Throughout the play, the image that adheres to Antonio is that of some sort of lamb, while Shylock is associated with rats and wolves. In this speech, Antonio once again works on securing Bassanio's affections by arousing his pity, leaving him the task of becoming Antonio's sepulcher. It is just at this dangerous moment, which threatens the integrity of her marriage, that Portia enters the court.

Act IV, i, 183–201

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown;
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That, in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

Portia's speech has often been lifted out of its context and treated like a sentimental homily embroidered on a sampler. But in its context, it emphasizes the ironic and even cruel fact that the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* do not practice what they preach. In addition, Portia is attempting to impose Christian ideology on a non-Christian. The effect, reasonably, is to enrage Shylock rather than mollify him.

Act IV, i, 262–288

Portia: You, merchant, have you any thing to say?

Antonio: But little: I am arm'd and well prepared.
 Give me your hand, Bassanio: fare you well!
 Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you;
 For herein Fortune shows herself more kind
 Than is her custom: it is still her use
 To let the wretched man outlive his wealth,
 To view with hollow eye and wrinkled brow
 An age of poverty; from which lingering penance
 Of such misery doth she cut me off.
 Commend me to your honorable wife:
 Tell her the process of Antonio's end;
 Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
 And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
 Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
 Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
 And he repents not that he pays your debt;
 For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
 I'll pay it presently with all my heart.

Bassanio: Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life:
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

Portia: Your wife would give you little thanks for that,
If she were by, to hear you make the offer.

In the midst of the drama of the bond—and connected to it—is another drama, the drama of the Antonio/Bassanio/Portia triangle. In this passage, each of the players in this dramatic triangle expresses his or her particular role, exemplifying the dramatic tension that runs through the play like an undercurrent and comes to the surface at the end of this scene.

Antonio continues to work upon Bassanio with expressions of his own pathos. When he instructs Bassanio to “Commend me to your honorable wife,” “Say how I loved you,” and “bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love,” he actually implies a competition between himself and Portia regarding whom Bassanio ought to consider his truer love.

In the lines immediately following, Antonio reminds Bassanio that he will pay his debt “presently with all my heart,” once again referring to the sacrifice he is making and to Bassanio’s debt to him for his death.

Bassanio’s response is all that Antonio could desire, for he places Antonio above Portia and declares he would sacrifice her for him. Portia, hearing this while disguised as the lawyer, objects as the lawyer for herself. Just as she has come to the trial to dissolve the bond subjecting Antonio to Shylock, her proceedings from here on are designed to dissolve the bond subjecting Bassanio to Antonio.



Act IV, i, 448–50

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring:
Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued against your wife’s commandment.

In these lines, after Bassanio has refused to part with the ring and the lawyer (Portia in disguise) has exited, Antonio, knowing the significance of the ring, instructs Bassanio to give the lawyer Portia’s ring. He expressly sets up

Bassanio's love for himself against Bassanio's love for Portia, hoping to see the scales tip in his favor.



Act V, i, 1–22

Lorenzo: The moon shines bright: in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night.

Jessica: In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself
And ran dismayed away.

Lorenzo: In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea banks and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.

Jessica: In such a night
Medea gather'd the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Aeson.

Lorenzo: In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
As far as Belmont.

Jessica: In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith
And ne'er a true one.

Lorenzo: In such a night
Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
Slander her love, and he forgave it her.

What appears to be a pastoral interlude, in which two lovers celebrate their own love with allusions to classical lovers, is not what it seems. Lorenzo and Jessica are quarreling with each other using an undoubtedly elegant means to frame their sallies. Each of the cases they mention is of betrayal, except for the one (Pyramus and Thisbe) that refers to a confused double suicide. In the last example, Jessica calls Lorenzo untrue.



Act V, i, 249–256

Bassanio: Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
I never more will break an oath with thee.

Antonio: I once did lend my body for his wealth;
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,
Had quite miscarried: I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

Portia: Then you shall be his surety. Give him this
And bid him keep it better than the other.

Antonio: Here, Lord Bassanio; swear to keep this ring.

This passage signals Portia's victory over Antonio. By forcing the competition between them for Bassanio to come to a head through the matter of the ring, Portia maneuvers the situation in such a way that Antonio pledges himself to Portia's possession of Bassanio over his own. By giving Bassanio the ring, he gives Bassanio to Portia.



LIST OF CHARACTERS IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*



Antonio is the Venetian merchant of the title. He borrows money from Shylock in order to help Bassanio, a young friend whom he holds dear, in his quest to court Portia. He pledges a pound of his own flesh to Shylock should he be unable to repay the loan.

Bassanio is a young Venetian nobleman who borrows money from Antonio in order to travel to Belmont to seek his fortune by marrying Portia.

Shylock is a Jewish moneylender in Venice, embittered by the contemptuous way he is treated—especially by Antonio—for being a Jew and for giving out money at interest. When Antonio needs 3,000 ducats to help Bassanio, Shylock lends it without interest but with the stipulation that if Antonio cannot pay it back, Shylock may take a pound of flesh from his body.

Portia is an heiress who lives in Belmont. She is in love with Bassanio, but her dead father stipulated in his will that she may only marry the man who selects the correct casket of the three he has left with her: one representing gold, one silver, and one lead.

Nerissa is Portia's maid. She is in love with Gratiano.

Salerio and **Solanio** are a pair of Venetian youths and friends of Antonio and Bassanio.

Gratiano is Bassanio's friend, a lively and unpolished man. He travels to Belmont with Bassanio and falls in love with Nerissa.

Lorenzo is in love with Jessica, Shylock's daughter, and elopes with her. After Shylock loses his case, the Duke confers his wealth on Lorenzo.

Jessica is Shylock's daughter. She is in love with Lorenzo, elopes with him, and takes a substantial part of her father's wealth with them, which they quickly squander.

Tubal is a Jewish moneylender in Venice and a friend and business associate of Shylock.

Launcelot Gobbo is a clown. He is Shylock's servant but leaves his service to enter Bassanio's.

Old Gobbo is Launcelot Gobbo's blind father.

Duke of Venice presides at Antonio's trial after he fails to pay back Shylock's loan and is required to surrender a pound of his flesh to him.

Balthasar and **Stephano** are Portia's serving men in Belmont.

Prince of Morocco and the **Prince of Arragon** are unsuccessful suitors of Portia.

CRITICISM
THROUGH THE AGES



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



The Merchant of Venice was first published in 1600 after having been entered in the Stationers' Register two years earlier. In 1598 Frances Meres, an English churchman who kept a commonplace book, a sort of diary, notes that he saw *The Merchant of Venice* performed, so the play could not have been written after that date. There is no solid evidence, however, to determine a date before which it could not have been written. Scholars generally fix the earlier limit at 1596 because of what is thought to be an allusion in the text by the words "my wealthy Andrew dock'd in sand" (I, i, 27) to the Spanish ship *San Andrés*, which the English captured in Cadiz in 1596. In 1594 Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who was Queen Elizabeth's physician, was convicted of plotting to poison her and was hanged. Scholars today are nearly positive that Lopez was, in fact, innocent. But at the time, he was the center of a strong animosity toward Jews. Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, first performed in 1588, was revived then quite successfully and again in 1596. It is possible that public reaction to the Lopez case prompted the composition of *The Merchant of Venice*, as it seems to have prompted the revival of *The Jew of Malta*.

When *The Merchant of Venice* was first entered in the Stationers' Register, on July 22, 1598, it was not to register an actual printing of the play but only to secure printing rights to the play for Shakespeare's company, then called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The entry refers to "a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce, Prouided, that yt bee not prynted by the said James Robertes or anye other whatsoever without lycence first had from the Right honorable the lord Chamberlen." In 1600 Roberts did print the book for a publisher named Thomas Heyes. The title page reads as follows:

The most excellent Historie of The Merchant of Venice. With the extreame crueltie of *Shylocke* the Iewe towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iust pound of his flesh: and the obtaining of *Portia* by the choise of three chests. *As it has beene diuers times acted by the Lord Chamberlaine his Seruants.* Written by William Shakespeare.
AT LONDON, Printed by I.R. [James Roberts] for Thomas Heyes,

and are to be sold in Paules Church-yard, at the signe of the Greene Dragon. 1600.

That edition, the First Quarto, is the authoritative text of *The Merchant of Venice*. A second quarto was published in 1619, and falsely dated 1600, but like the 1623 Folio text, it is based on the First Quarto with several minor changes. The First Quarto is thought to have been printed from Shakespeare's own draft of the play. Two other quarto editions were published in the seventeenth century, one in 1637 and one in 1652. *The Merchant of Venice* was also reprinted in 1663, in the Third Folio, and in 1685, in the Fourth Folio.

There are several underlying sources for *The Merchant of Venice*. The principal one is a story found in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (*The Duncce*), a collection of tales, like Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The play hews quite closely to Fiorentino's story, in which Giannetto, a young merchant, lives in Venice with his father's best friend. Twice he has ventured, with money his godfather has given him, to Belmonte to woo a Lady there. Both times, she drugs and robs him before he can make love to her. Both times he tells his godfather that he has been robbed at sea. In order to make a third attempt at winning the Lady, he asks the older man to lend him 10,000 ducats. Not having them, the godfather borrows the money from a Jew to give to Giannetto. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, he agrees that if he does not pay back the loan, he will forfeit a pound of his flesh. Giannetto arrives in Belmonte, learns from one of the Lady's maids not to drink the drugged wine offered to him, and subsequently wins the Lady. When the Lady learns that the moneylender has not been paid back and will take a pound of flesh from Giannetto's godfather, she gives him 100,000 ducats to take back to Venice and, like Portia, follows him there. Disguised as a lawyer, she shows that the Jew must take only flesh and no blood. The Jew leaves the court without his money, the Lady takes Giannetto's ring, and she later teases him about its loss and then reveals her trick.

The figure of a cruel Jew who takes a pound of flesh from a hapless debtor appeared in a popular old ballad, "The Ballad of Gernutus." Such a moneylender, but this time a Christian, also appeared in Anthony Munday's prose romance *Zelauto*, in 1580. The practice of taking the actual flesh of a creditor may date back at least as far as republican Rome. In the Roman Twelve Tables of the Law, it is written regarding debtors that "On the third market-day, creditors shall cut [the debtor] into pieces. If they cut more or less than their due, it shall be with impunity." Some interpreters have taken "cut into pieces" as figurative language referring to property, but others argue that it was meant literally.

The story of the three caskets is not found in *Il Pecorone*, but it is a common topos, with which Shakespeare was probably familiar through a story in a popular collection of moralized tales called the *Gesta Romanorum*. The choice among three caskets also appears in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in the first


story of the tenth day in the *Decameron*, and in several other works. Although it has an entirely different plot from *The Merchant of Venice*, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* features a cruel yet shrewdly charming Jewish moneylender as the central character.

The Merchant of Venice was probably quite popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. It was performed before King James in 1605. From then until the closing of the theaters in 1642, there is no record of its staging. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, *The Merchant of Venice* did not regain its foothold on the stage in either its original form or in an adaptation until the next century, nor was it yet the time when Shakespeare's plays were the matter for critical and scholarly activity. What has come, with the passage of time and the violence of history, to be considered the focus of interest in the play—namely, the way in which Jews are regarded, through the portrait of Shylock, the moneylender—did not have the centrality then which it does now. At the time, such a Jew was a stock character with a disruptive social function—one which Shakespeare attempted to transform into a complex person. But it is unlikely that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were any more troubled by Shylock's fate than they were, say, by Don John's in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Malvolio's in *Twelfth Night*, Iago's in *Othello*, or Cloten's in *Cymbeline*.

1664—Thomas Jordan. On the stage appearance of Shylock

A ballad based on *The Merchant of Venice* was said to have been written by the actor and producer Thomas Jordan (1612–1685). The passage below describes Shylock.

His beard was red; his face was made
Not much unlike a witches;
His habit was a Jewish gown,
That would defend all weather;
His chin turned up, his nose hung down,
And both ends met together.



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



From 1701 until 1741, the only version of *The Merchant of Venice* mounted in London was an adaptation of Shakespeare's play by George Granville, Lord Lansdowne. Called *The Jew of Venice*, it was a hodgepodge: Pieces of Shakespeare's play were rearranged, parts were cut, and new matter was added. Shylock was presented as a comic stereotype of Judas Iscariot, with hooked nose and red beard. The work is interesting in that it highlights the attitudes of the age.

It was not until 1741 that *The Merchant of Venice* as Shakespeare wrote it returned to the London stage, at the urging of the actor Charles Macklin. Macklin was intent on playing Shakespeare's Shylock, not Granville's version. Macklin sought to find the depth of the character by studying the Jews he observed in London's business center, stock exchange, and coffee houses, and by studying texts such as Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*. He kept a record of his preparation in which he noted, "Jews, their history. An instance of human uncertainty, from the Creation to the Flood—in Egypt leaving it—robbing their masters, mutiny . . . wilderness—murder of the Innocents . . . Go through history . . . act the great characters" (Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*, 95). Macklin's performance is described vividly by a theatergoer named Georg Christoph Lichtenberg.

Macklin is to be credited not only with bringing *The Merchant of Venice* back to the stage after an absence of more than 100 years, but also with recognizing the power of Shylock as a character who, like Romeo, Falstaff, Hamlet, and Cleopatra, rises out of his play to assume an independent imaginary existence. In the mist of a comic production, he portrayed a malignant and determined Shylock and proved to be an enormous success. King George II went to Drury Lane to see him perform, and the performance kept him, for nights, from sleeping (Gross 96).

Once Macklin brought *The Merchant of Venice* back to the London stage, it remained there, with many other actors taking the part—but as long as he lived, Shylock remained his. In performance, *The Merchant of Venice* offers opportunities for songs and dances, entertainments that were often added to the play. The fifth

act, in which Shylock does not appear, was sometimes cut, centering the play even more on his character. That Shylock was presented as a malignant figure because he was a Jew was not particularly disturbing to eighteenth-century audiences, although Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a German visitor to London, noted in 1775, “It cannot be denied that the sight of this Jew is enough to awaken at once, in the best-regulated mind, all the prejudices of childhood against the race to which he belongs” (Gross 99).

Throughout the century, criticism of the play was relatively sparse. The early editor and biographer Nicholas Rowe and his contemporary Charles Gildon both commented on the play, as did the great critic Samuel Johnson, who pointed out the hypocrisy of the slaveholding Venetians objecting to Shylock’s abuse of Antonio. Johnson wrote: “I see not how Venetians or Englishmen, while they practise the purchase and sale of slaves, can much enforce or demand the law of *doing to others as we would that they should do to us.*” Rowe foreshadowed future critics in noting that the play in many ways seemed more of a tragedy than a lighthearted comedy.

The Merchant of Venice was first performed in the United States in 1752, in Williamsburg, Virginia, by a company led by William Hallam. It was performed in Philadelphia in 1766, in New York City in 1768, and by the 1790s established itself as a regular attraction on the American stage.

1701—George Granville, Baron Lansdowne, from *The Jew of Venice*

George Granville, the Baron Lansdowne (1667–1735), was an English author and politician. The scene below is from Granville’s *The Jew of Venice*, a very loose adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* and the only version of *Merchant* that appeared on stage until the middle of the century.

[Act II, Scene ii.]

Antonio’s House.

SCENE *opens, and discovers* Bassanio, Antonio, Shylock, *and others, sitting as at an Entertainment. Musick playing. During the Musick* Gratiano *enters, and takes his Place.*

Antonio: This to immortal Friendship; fill it up
Be thou to me, and I to my *Bassanio*,
Like *Venice* and her *Adriatick* Bride,
For ever link’d in Love.

Bassanio: Thou joynst us well: And rightly hast compar'd.
Like *Venice* on a Rock my Friendship stands,
Constant and fix'd. But 'tis a barren Spot,
Whilst like the liberal *Adriatick* thou
With Plenty bath'st my Shoars.
My Fortunes are the Bounty of my Friend.

Antonio: My Friend's the noblest Bounty of my Fortune.
Sound every Instrument of Musick there
To our immortal Friendship.
[All drink. Loud Musick.]

Bassanio: Let Love be next-what else should
Follow Friendship?
To Love, and to Love's Queen, my charming *Portia*,
Fill till the rosy Brim reflects her Lips
Then kiss the Symbol round.
Oh, in this Lottery of Love where Chance,
Not Choice, presides, Give, give, ye Powers, the Lot,
Where she her self would place it. Crown her wish,
Tho' Ruine and Perdition catch *Bassanio*.
Let me be wretched, but let her be blest.
[Drink and Musick again.]

Gratiano: Mine's a short Health. Here's to the Sex in general!
To Woman, be she black, or brown, or fair,
Plump, slender, tall, or middle-statur'd
Let it be Woman, and 'tis all I ask.
[Drink again. Musick as before.]

Shylock: I have a Mistress, that outshines 'em all
Commanding yours-and yours, tho' the whole Sex.
O may her Charms encrease and multiply:
My Money is my Mistress! Here's to
Interest upon Interest.
[Drinks.]

Antonio: Let Birds and Beasts of Prey howl to such Vows,
All generous Notes be hushed. Pledge thy self, Jew:
None here will stir the Glass-
[All Rise.]

Nor shall the Musick sound: O *Bassanio!*
 There sits a Heaviness upon my Heart
 Which Wine cannot remove: I know not
 But Musick ever makes me thus.

Bassanio: The Reason is, your Spirits are attentive.
 For do but note, a wild and wanton Herd
 Or Race of skittish and unhandled Colts
 Fetching mad Bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
 If they but hear by Chance some Trumpet sound
 Or any Aire of Musick touch their Ears
 You strait perceive 'em make a mutual stand,
 Their savage Eyes turn'd to attentive Gaze
 By the soft Power of Musick. Therefore the Poet
 Did feign That *Orpheus* melted Stones and Rocks;
 For what so hard, so stubborn, or so fierce,
 But Musick for the Time will change its Nature.
 The Man who has not Musick in his Soul,
 Or is not touch'd with Concord of sweet Sounds,
 Is fit for Treasons, Stratagems and Spoils,
 The Motions of his Mind are dull as Night,
 And his Affections dark as *Erebus*;
 Let no such Man be trusted.—Mark the Musick.
 [The Masque of Peleus & Thetis is then performed.]



1709—Nicholas Rowe. “Life of the Author,”
 from *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*

The Works of Mr. William Shakespear, by Nicholas Rowe (1674–1718), is said to mark the beginning of the modern Shakespeare text. Rowe also wrote a short account of Shakespeare’s life, as well as *The Tragedy of Jane Shore; Written in Imitation of Shakespear’s Style*.

To these [characters from Shakespeare’s plays whom I have called “Master-Pieces of ill Nature”] I might add, that incomparable Character of *Shylock* the *Jew*, in *The Merchant of Venice*; but tho’ we have seen that Play Receiv’d and Acted as a Comedy, and the Part of the *Jew* perform’d by an Excellent Comedian, yet I cannot but think it was design’d Tragically by the Author. There appears in it such a deadly Spirit of Revenge, such a savage Fierceness

and Fellness, and such a bloody designation of Cruelty and Mischief, as cannot agree either with the Stile or Characters of Comedy. The Play it self, take it all together, seems to me to be one of the most finish'd of any of *Shakespear's*. The Tale indeed, in that Part relating to the Caskets, and the extravagant and unusual kind of Bond given by *Antonio*, is a little too much remov'd from the Rules of Probability: But taking the Fact for granted, we must allow it to be very beautifully written. There is something in the Friendship of *Antonio* to *Bassanio* very Great, Generous and Tender. The whole fourth Act, supposing, as I said, the Fact to be probable, is extremely Fine. But there are two Passages that deserve a particular Notice. The first is, what *Portia* says in praise of Mercy, and the other on the Power of Musick.



1710—Charles Gildon,
from “Remarks on the Plays of Shakespear”

Charles Gildon (1665–1724)—translator, biographer, essayist, playwright, and poet—wrote a series of notes and essays to accompany Rowe’s edition of Shakespeare, providing the first extensive commentaries of the plays. He counted among his literary enemies Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.

The Ignorance that Shakespear had of the Greek Drama threw him on such odd Stories, as the Novels and Romances of his time cou’d afford, and which were so far from being natural, that they wanted that Probability and Verisimilitude, which is absolutely necessary to all the Representations of the Stage. The Plot [of *The Merchant of Venice*] is of that Number. But the Errors of the Fable and the Conduct are too visible to need Discovery.

The Character of the Jew is very well distinguish’d by Avarice, Malice, implacable Revenge &c. But the Incidents that necessarily shew these Qualitys are so very Romantic, so vastly out of Nature, that our Reason, our Understanding is every where shock’d; which abates extremely of the Pleasure the Pen of Shakespear might give us. This is visible in his Speech to the Doge [IV. i.], for all the while that Distinction of Character, which is beautiful and otherwise pleases you, the Incredibility of such a Discourse to such a Prince and before such a Court of Judicature, has so little of Nature in it, that it is impossible to escape the Censure of a Man of common Sense.

The Character of *Portia* is not every where very well kept, that is, the Manners are not always agreeable or convenient to her Sex and Quality; particularly [in

her description of what she will be like as a man, at III. iv. 60-78] where she scarce preserves her Modesty in the Expression.

The Scene betwixt Shylock and Tubal is artfully managed; and the Temper of the Jew excellently discover'd in its various Turns upon the different News, of which Tubal gives him an Account.

This Play, as well as most of the rest, gives Instances, that Shakespear was perfectly acquainted with the fabulous Stories of the old Poets, which is to me a Confirmation, that he was well acquainted with the Authors of the Latin Antiquity, whence only he cou'd learn them.

Tho' there are a great many Beauties in what our modern Gentlemen call the Writing in this Play, yet it is almost every where calm, and touches not the Soul, there are no sinewy Passions, which ought every where to shine in a serious Dramatic Performance, such as most of this is.



1765—Samuel Johnson. *The Merchant of Venice* (notes), from *The Plays of William Shakespear*

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) is thought by many to be the greatest critic in the English language. He was a poet, critic, prose writer, lexicographer, editor, and celebrated raconteur. His edition of the works of Shakespeare contained some of his famous thoughts on the plays. The following comments are taken from annotations he supplied to his text of *The Merchant of Venice*.

... The story is itself so wildly incredible, and the changes of the scene so frequent and capricious, that the probability of action does not deserve much care. ...

... [Shylock's argument, beginning IV, i, 90, for his right to dispose of his property—a pound of Antonio's flesh—as he chooses, because the Venetians themselves dispose of their human property, their slaves, as they choose] seems conclusive. I see not how Venetians or Englishmen, while they practise the purchase and sale of slaves, can much enforce or demand the law of *doing to others as we would that they should do to us*.

... General Observation. Of *The Merchant Of Venice* the stile is even and easy, with few peculiarities of diction, or anomalies of construction. The comick part raises laughter, and the serious fixes expectation. The probability of either one or the other story cannot

be maintained. The union of two actions in one event is in this drama eminently happy . . .



1775—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg,
from *Letters from England*

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799) was a German experimental physicist and writer of satires and aphorisms. He described his visits to England in letters and diary entries. The following was quoted in John Gross's *Shylock* (97) and is also available in volumes such as *Lichtenberg's Visits to England*.

Shylock is not one of your petty cheats, who can spend an hour talking about the excellence of a cheap watch-chain. He is slow, calm in his impenetrable cunning, and when he has the law on his side unflinching, to the very limit of malice.

Picture to yourself a rather stout man with a coarse sallow face, a nose by no means lacking in any one of the three dimensions, a long double chin; as for his mouth, Nature's knife seems to have slipped when she carved it and slit him open on one side all the way up to the ear. He wears a long black gown, long wide trousers, and a red three-cornered hat. . . .

The first words he utters when he comes on are spoken slowly and deliberately: 'Three thousand ducats.' The two th sounds and the two s sounds, especially the s after the t, which Macklin lisps voluptuously, as though he were savouring the ducats and all that they can buy—these sounds make an impression which nothing can efface. Three such words, spoken in this way at the very outset, reveal his entire character.

In the scene in which he first misses his daughter, he appears hatless, with his hair all flying or standing on end, as though it had been lifted up by a breeze from the gallows. Both hands are clenched, his gestures are quick and convulsive. It is fearful to see such uncontrolled emotion being shown by a man who up to now has been a calm and determined villain. . . .



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



To trace the history of criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* it is helpful to examine the ways in which Shylock was conceived by actors and received by audiences and critics. From Macklin's portrayal of him throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century until Edmund Kean's performance in the role in 1814, Shylock was conceived, as William Hazlitt described him, as:

a decrepit old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy, inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge.

Such a Shylock, although far more dangerous than the earlier comic villain, does not alter the dramatic balance of *The Merchant of Venice* or add ambiguity to the dramatic conflict between the apparently festive but merciful life-affirming Christians and the apparently letter-bound, exacting, dour, materialistic and vengeful Jew. But other actors had different ideas.

Kean, from all reports, brought a depth of humanity to Shylock, portraying him as tormented as well as tormenting. W. J. Fox (1786–1864), a prominent critic and social reformer of the time, caught the way he imbued his Shylock with humanity:

At the exclamation, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" he [Edmund Kean] started back, as with a revulsion of paternal feeling from the horrible image his avarice had conjured up, and borrowing a negative from the next injury ("no news of them?") gasped an agonizing "No, no, no" (Gross 110).

Philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes (1817–1878), in *Actors and the Art of Acting*, described Kean as bringing "passionate recrimination and wild justice of argument" to Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech that "has never been seen on our stage" (Gross 113).

To reconceptualize Shylock like this demands a rethinking of the other characters in *The Merchant of Venice* as well, and this is exactly what the great critic William Hazlitt did after seeing Kean's performance. Hazlitt's landmark study *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* contained an important discussion of *The Merchant of Venice*. Hazlitt's strength, throughout his extensive writings on Shakespeare, lies in his sensitivity to the complexity of Shakespeare's characters. In Hazlitt's criticism, as well as in Shakespeare's plays, the characters become maps of human possibility and figures to whom readers can specifically connect. A visit to the theater is a visit with a group of fictional yet actual people.

When William Charles Macready—playing Shylock himself—presented *The Merchant of Venice* in 1841 at the Drury Lane Theater in London, the principle guiding his philosophy of production was the unity of performance. In the past, plays had often been seen as vehicles for star actors, who played their parts as if they were performing arias, independent of the other actors. Many of the others in the cast not only might be considerably inferior to them as actors, but could also slip out of character while waiting on stage for their turn to speak. By emphasizing the ensemble, Macready shifted the focus away from Shylock and, at the same time, reinterpreted Shylock's character by highlighting his environment and providing motivating factors in his emotions and actions. Thus Macready's Shylock was a more fully human character rather than a mere stereotype. In the *Theatrical Journal*, an anonymous critic described Macready's production, writing that "though the actor of Shylock might still tower over the rest, as by the writer's intention it was fit he should, there were matters to preclude the absorption of interest in him. There was the gay Christian world as well as the dark Jewish" (Gross 118).

George Henry Lewes found this Shylock stripped of both its malignancy and of any touches of tenderness. What Macready's interpretation was moving toward, it is possible to see almost two centuries afterward, is the debate which dominated much twentieth-century discussion of the play: that of the right balance between opposites, mercy and justice, Venice and Belmont, Christian prejudice and Jewish response, Antonio and Shylock. Some of this critical evolution can be seen in the responses printed here. Note Charles Knight's claim that Shylock's "judges" are far from magnanimous or merciful, and instead behave as "the strong are accustomed to deal with the weak." Note also H. N. Hudson's declaration that "Shylock's character is *essentially tragic*" rather than comic. On the other hand, G. H. Radford calls Shylock not at all realistic, let alone tragic, but a "villain," whose character is merely (though brilliantly) "determined by the requirements of the plot."

The last great nineteenth-century interpreter of Shylock was the English actor Henry Irving. His reinterpretation of Shylock filled the character with

dignity and was seen as a call to religious toleration: "I look upon Shylock as the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used." Irving was intent on dramatically representing an inner life for Shylock that would show the heart of the man his adversaries consider heartless. Near the end of the century, the Danish critic Georg Brandes wrote, "It is none the less astounding how much right in wrong, how much humanity in inhumanity, Shakespeare has succeeded in imparting to Shylock."

Despite the profound pull of Shylock on the era's criticism, writers made contributions to our understanding of other characters in the play as well. The German critic A. W. Schlegel, for example, was moved by what he perceived as a noble melancholy in Antonio. Setting much of the tone of nineteenth-century criticism, Schlegel focused on characters as moral entities to be esteemed or condemned, as if they were people to whom the writer was in actual relation or models to help us fashion our behavior. Anna Jameson, in her study of Shakespeare's women, writes with a similar emotional and moral attitude about Portia, whom she defends against what she sees as a slight by Schlegel. Jameson's work, neglected for many years, began to earn new regard in the twentieth century, both because she was one of the rare female critics of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century and because of her concentration on Shakespeare's female characters.

In light of later history, it is noteworthy that so much notable nineteenth-century criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* was written by German philologists like Hermann Ulrici, Georg Gottfried Gervinus, and Friedrich Kreyssig, who often extrapolated from Shylock's character to discuss Shylock as a portrayal of what Ulrici called the "Jewish national character." See also the comment of the great French writer Victor Hugo on this subject. But the most affecting of the nineteenth-century German critics to turn attention to Shakespeare was Heinrich Heine, particularly because of his own ambivalence toward being Jewish. Heine always seems to have maintained a double identity. Like other nineteenth-century German and Austrian Jews, such as the musicians Felix Mendelssohn and Gustav Mahler, Heine converted to Christianity, more for reasons of social acceptability than theological belief. Heine, it seems likely from his criticism, saw aspects of himself in Shylock. Perhaps more significant is that Heine, as a critic, saw beyond characterization and considered the *The Merchant of Venice* a play of ideas. "Shakespeare's genius," Heine recognized, "rises above the mean quarrels of two parties entertaining opposite beliefs, and his play does not actually represent either Jews or Christians but oppressors and oppressed." He considers Antonio not as Antonio presents himself or as his friends regard him, but as he acts. "We find," Heine observed, "that Antonio and his friends are by no means apostles of that divine gospel which commands men to love their enemies."

**1809—August Wilhelm Schlegel. “Criticisms
on Shakspeare’s Comedies,” from *Lectures
on Dramatic Art and Literature***

August Wilhelm Schlegel was a scholar, critic, poet, and professor at the University of Bonn. He translated a number of Shakespeare’s plays into the German language and was one of the most influential disseminators of the ideas of the German Romantic movement.

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakspeare’s most perfect works: popular to an extraordinary degree, and calculated to produce the most powerful effect on the stage, and at the same time a wonder of ingenuity and art for the reflecting critic. Shylock, the Jew, is one of the inimitable masterpieces of characterization which are to be found only in Shakspeare. It is easy for both poet and player to exhibit a caricature of national sentiments, modes of speaking, and gestures. Shylock, however, is everything but a common Jew: he possesses a strongly-marked and original individuality, and yet we perceive a light touch of Judaism in everything he says or does. We almost fancy we can hear a light whisper of the Jewish accent even in the written words, such as we sometimes still find in the higher classes, notwithstanding their social refinement. In tranquil moments, all that is foreign to the European blood and Christian sentiments is less perceptible, but in passion the national stamp comes out more strongly marked. All these inimitable niceties the finished art of a great actor can alone properly express. Shylock is a man of information, in his own way, even a thinker, only he has not discovered the region where human feelings dwell; his morality is founded on the disbelief in goodness and magnanimity. The desire to avenge the wrongs and indignities heaped upon his nation is, after avarice, his strongest spring of action. His hate is naturally directed chiefly against those Christians who are actuated by truly Christian sentiments: a disinterested love of our neighbor seems to him the most unrelenting persecution of the Jews. The letter of the law is his idol; he refuses to lend an ear to the voice of mercy, which, from the mouth of Portia, speaks to him with heavenly eloquence: he insists on rigid and inflexible justice, and at last it recoils on his own head: Thus he becomes a symbol of the general history of his unfortunate nation. The melancholy and self-sacrificing magnanimity of Antonio is affectingly sublime. Like a princely merchant, he is surrounded with a whole train of noble friends. The contrast which this forms to the selfish cruelty of the usurer Shylock was necessary to redeem the honour of human nature. The danger which almost to the close of the fourth act, hangs over Antonio, and which the imagination is almost afraid to approach, would fill the mind with too painful anxiety, if the poet did not also

provide for its recreation and diversion. This is effected in an especial manner by the scenes at Portia's country-seat, which transport the spectator into quite another world. And yet they are closely connected with the main business by the chain of cause and effect: Bassanio's preparations for his courtship are the cause of Antonio's subscribing the dangerous bond; and Portia again, by the counsel and advice of her uncle, a famous lawyer, effects the safety of her lover's friend. But the relations of the dramatic composition are the while admirably observed in yet another respect. The trial between Shylock and Antonio is indeed recorded as being a real event, still, for all that, it must ever remain an unheard-of and singular case. Shakespeare has therefore associated it with a love intrigue not less extraordinary: the one consequently is rendered natural and probable by means of the other. A rich, beautiful and clever heiress, who can only be won by the solving the riddle—the locked caskets—the foreign princes, who come to try the venture—all this powerfully excites the imagination with the splendour of an olden tale of marvels. The two scenes in which, first the Prince of Morocco, in the language of Eastern hyperbole, and then the self-conceited Prince of Aragon, make their choice among the caskets, serve merely to raise our curiosity, and give employment to our wits; but on the third, where the two lovers stand trembling before the inevitable choice, which in one moment must unite or separate them for ever, Shakspeare has lavished all the charms of feeling—all the magic of poesy. We share in the rapture of Portia and Bassanio at the fortunate choice: we easily conceive why they are so fond of each other, for they are both most deserving of love. The judgment scene, with which the fourth act is occupied, is in itself a perfect drama, concentrating in itself the interest of the whole. The knot is now untied, and according to the common ideas of theatrical satisfaction, the curtain ought to drop. But the poet was unwilling to dismiss his audience with the gloomy impressions which Antonio's acquittal, effected with so much difficulty, and contrary to all expectation, and the condemnation of Shylock, were calculated to leave behind them; he has therefore added the fifth act by way of a musical afterlude in the piece itself. The episode of Jessica, the fugitive daughter of the Jew, in whom Shakspeare has contrived to throw a veil of sweetness over the national features, and the artifice by which Portia and her companion are enabled to rally their newly-married husbands, supply him with the necessary materials. The scene opens with the playful prattling of two lovers in a summer evening; it is followed by soft music, and a rapturous eulogy on this powerful disposer of the human mind and the world; the principal characters then make their appearance, and after a simulated quarrel, which is gracefully maintained, the whole end with the most exhilarating mirth.



1817—William Hazlitt. “*The Merchant of Venice*,”
from *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*

William Hazlitt (1778–1830) was an English essayist and one of the finest Shakespeare critics of the nineteenth century. He also examined the work of poets, dramatists, essayists, and novelists of his own and earlier times. His essays appeared in such volumes as *English Poets*, *English Comic Writers*, and *A View of the English Stage*.

This is a play that in spite of the change of manners and of prejudices still holds undisputed possession of the stage. Shakespear’s malignant has outlived Mr. Cumberland’s benevolent Jew. In proportion as Shylock has ceased to be a popular bugbear, ‘baited with the rabble’s curse’, he becomes a half favourite with the philosophical part of the audience, who are disposed to think that Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries. Shylock is a *good hater*; ‘a man no less sinned against than sinning’. If he carries his revenge too far, yet he has strong grounds for ‘the lodged hate he bears Anthonio’, which he explains with equal force of eloquence and reason. He seems the depository of the vengeance of his race; and though the long habit of brooding over daily insults and injuries has crusted over his temper with inveterate misanthropy, and hardened him against the contempt of mankind, this adds but little to the triumphant pretensions of his enemies. There is a strong, quick, and deep sense of justice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment. The constant apprehension of being burnt alive, plundered, banished, reviled, and trampled on, might be supposed to sour the most forbearing nature, and to take something from that ‘milk of human kindness’, with which his persecutors contemplated his indignities. The desire of revenge is almost inseparable from the sense of wrong; and we can hardly help sympathising with the proud spirit, hid beneath his ‘Jewish gaberdine’, stung to madness by repeated undeserved provocations, and labouring to throw off the load of obloquy and oppression heaped upon him and all his tribe by one desperate act of ‘lawful’ revenge, till the ferociousness of the means by which he is to execute his purpose, and the pertinacity with which he adheres to it, turn us against him; but even at last, when disappointed of the sanguinary revenge with which he had glutted his hopes, and exposed to beggary and contempt by the letter of the law on which he had insisted with so little remorse, we pity him, and think him hardly dealt with by his judges. In all his answers and retorts upon his adversaries, he has the best not only of the argument but of the question, reasoning on their own principles and practice. They are so far from allowing of any measure of equal dealing, of common justice or humanity between themselves and the Jew, that even when they come to ask a favour of him, and Shylock reminds them

that 'on such a day they spit upon him, another spurned him, another called him dog, and for these courtesies request he'll lend them so much monies'—Anthonio, his old enemy, instead of any acknowledgment of the shrewdness and justice of his remonstrance, which would have been preposterous in a respectable Catholic merchant in those times, threatens him with a repetition of the same treatment—

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

After this, the appeal to the Jew's mercy, as if there were any common principle of right and wrong between them, is the rankest hypocrisy, or the blindest prejudice; and the Jew's answer to one of Anthonio's friends, who asks him what his pound of forfeit flesh is good for, is irresistible:

To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgrac'd me, and hinder'd me of half a million, laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes; hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer that a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? why revenge. The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

[III, i, 50-69]

The whole of the trial scene, both before and after the entrance of Portia, is a masterpiece of dramatic skill. The legal acuteness, the passionate declamations, the sound maxims of jurisprudence, the wit and irony interspersed in it, the fluctuations of hope and fear in the different persons, and the completeness and suddenness of the catastrophe, cannot be surpassed. Shylock, who is his own counsel, defends himself well, and is triumphant on all the general topics that are urged against him, and only fails through a legal flaw. Take the following as an instance:

Shylock: What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?
 You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
 Which, like your asses, and your dogs, and mules,
 You use in abject and in slavish parts,
 Because you bought them:—shall I say to you,
 Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
 Why sweat they under burdens? let their beds
 Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
 Be season'd with such viands? You will answer,
 The slaves are ours:—so do I answer you:
 The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,
 Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it;
 If you deny me, fie upon your law!
 There is no force in the decrees of Venice:
 I stand for judgment: answer; shall I have it?
 [IV, i, 89–103]

The keenness of his revenge awakes all his faculties; and he beats back all opposition to his purpose, whether grave or gay, whether of wit or argument, with an equal degree of earnestness and self-possession. His character is displayed as distinctly in other less prominent parts of the play, and we may collect from a few sentences the history of his life—his descent and origin, his thrift and domestic economy, his affection for his daughter, whom he loves next to his wealth, his courtship and his first present to Leah, his wife! 'I would not have parted with it' (the ring which he first gave her) 'for a wilderness of monkeys!' What a fine Hebraism is implied in this expression!

Portia is not a very great favourite with us, neither are we in love with her maid, Nerissa. Portia has a certain degree of affectation and pedantry about her, which is very unusual in Shakespear's women, but which perhaps was a proper qualification for the office of a 'civil doctor', which she undertakes and executes so successfully. The speech about Mercy is very well; but there are a thousand finer ones in Shakespear. We do not admire the scene of the caskets; and object entirely to the Black Prince, Morocchius. We should like Jessica better if she had not deceived and robbed her father, and Lorenzo, if he had not married a Jewess, though he thinks he has a right to wrong a Jew. The dialogue between this newly married couple by moonlight, beginning 'On such a night', etc., is a collection of classical elegancies. Launcelot, the Jew's man, is an honest fellow. The dilemma in which he describes himself placed between his 'conscience and the fiend', the one of which advises him to run away from his master's service and the other to stay in it, is exquisitely humorous.

Gratiano is a very admirable subordinate character, He is the jester of the piece: yet one speech of his, in his own defence, contains a whole volume of wisdom,

Antonio: I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage, where every one must play his part;
And mine a sad one.

Gratiano: Let me play the fool:
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come;
And let my liver rather heat with wine,
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
Why should a man, whose blood is warm within,
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
Sleep when he wakes? and creep into the jaundice
By being peevish? I tell thee what, Antonio—
I love thee, and it is my love that speaks;—
There are a sort of men, whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond:
And do a wilful stillness entertain,
With purpose to be drest in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit;
As who should say, 'I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!'
O, my Antonio, I do know of these,
That therefore only are reputed wise,
For saying nothing; who, I am very sure,
If they should speak, would almost damn those ears,
Which hearing them, would call their brothers fools.
I'll tell thee more of this another time;
But fish not, with this melancholy bait,
For this fool's gudgeon, this opinion.

[I, i, 77–102]

Gratiano's speech on the philosophy of love, and the effect of habit in taking off the force of passion, is as full of spirit and good sense. The graceful winding up of this play in the fifth act, after the tragic business is dispatched, is one of the happiest instances of Shakespear's knowledge of the principles of the drama. We do not mean the pretended quarrel between Portia and Nerissa and their husbands about the rings, which is amusing enough, but the conversation just before and after the return of Portia to her own house, beginning 'How sweet

the moonlight sleeps upon this bank', and ending 'Peace! how the moon sleeps with Endymion, and would not be awaked'. There is a number of beautiful thoughts crowded into that short space, and linked together by the most natural transitions.

When we first went to see Mr. Kean in Shylock we expected to see, what we had been used to see, a decrepit old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy, inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge. We were disappointed, because we had taken our idea from other actors, not from the play. There is no proof there that Shylock is old, but a single line, 'Bassanio and old Shylock, both stand forth,'—which does not imply that he is infirm with age—and the circumstance that he has a daughter marriageable, which does not imply that he is old at all. It would be too much to say that his body should be made crooked and deformed to answer to his mind, which is bowed down and warped with prejudices and passion. That he has but one idea, is not true; he has more ideas than any other person in the piece: and if he is intense and inveterate in the pursuit of his purpose, he shows the utmost elasticity, vigour, and presence of mind, in the means of attaining it. But so rooted was our habitual impression of the part from seeing it caricatured in the representation, that it was only from a careful perusal of the play itself that we saw our error. The stage is not in general the best place to study our author's characters in. It is too often filled with traditional common-place conceptions of the part, handed down from sire to son, and suited to the taste of *the great vulgar and the small*—'Tis an unweeded garden: things rank and gross do merely gender in it! If a man of genius comes once in an age to clear away the rubbish, to make it fruitful and wholesome, they cry, 'Tis a bad school: it may be like nature, it may be like Shakespeare, but it is not like us.' Admirable critics!



1833—Anna Jameson. "Portia," from *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, & Historical*

Anna Murphy Brownell Jameson (1794–1860), born in Dublin, is best remembered for her character studies of Shakespeare's heroines.

It is singular that hitherto no critical justice has been done to the character of Portia; it is yet more wonderful that one of the finest writers on the eternal subject of Shakspeare and his perfections should accuse Portia of pedantry and affectation, and confess she is not a great favorite of his. . . . Schlegel, who

has given several pages to a rapturous eulogy on the *Merchant of Venice*, simply designates Portia as a “rich, beautiful, clever heiress.” Whether the fault lie in the writer or translator, I do protest against the word clever. Portia clever! What an epithet to apply to this heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom, beauty, and gentleness! Now, would it not be well if this common and comprehensive word were more accurately defined, or at least more accurately used? It signifies properly, not so much the possession of high powers as dexterity in the adaptation of certain faculties (not necessarily of a high order) to a certain end or aim—not always the worthiest. It implies something commonplace, inasmuch as it speaks the presence of the active and perceptive, with a deficiency of the feeling and reflective powers; and, applied to a woman, does it not almost invariably suggest the idea of something we should distrust or shrink from, if not allied to a higher nature? . . . If Portia had been created as a mere instrument to bring about a dramatic catastrophe—if she had merely detected the flaw in Antonio’s bond and used it as a means to baffle the Jew, she might have been pronounced a clever woman. But what Portia does is forgotten in what she is. The rare and harmonious blending of energy, reflection, and feeling, in her fine character, makes the epithet clever sound like a discord as applied to her, and places her infinitely beyond the slight praise of [William] Richardson [in an essay published in 1788, “On Shakespeare’s Imitation of Female Characters”] and Schlegel, neither of whom appears to have fully comprehended her.

These and other critics have been apparently so dazzled and engrossed by the amazing character of Shylock, that Portia has received less than justice at their hands; while the fact is, that Shylock is not a finer or more finished character in his way than Portia is in hers. These two splendid figures are worthy of each other—worthy of being placed together within the same rich framework of enchanting poetry and glorious and graceful forms. She hangs beside the terrible, inexorable Jew, the brilliant lights of her character set off by the shadowy power of his, like a magnificent beauty-breathing Titian by the side of a gorgeous Rembrandt. Portia is endued with her own share of those delightful qualities which Shakspeare has lavished on many of his female characters; but besides the dignity, the sweetness, and tenderness which should distinguish her sex generally, she is individualised by qualities peculiar to herself; by her high mental powers, her enthusiasm of temperament, her decision of purpose, and her buoyancy of spirit. These are innate; she has other distinguishing qualities more external, and which are the result of the circumstances in which she is placed. Thus she is the heiress of a princely name and countless wealth; a train of obedient pleasures have ever waited round her; and from infancy she has breathed an atmosphere redolent of perfume and blandishment. Accordingly there is a commanding grace, a highbred, airy elegance, a spirit of magnificence, in all that she does and says, as one to whom splendor had been familiar from her very birth. She treads as though her footsteps had been among marble palaces, beneath roofs of fretted

gold, o'er cedar floors and pavements of jasper and porphyry; amid gardens full of statues, and flowers, and fountains, and haunting music. She is full of penetrative wisdom, and genuine tenderness, and lively wit; but as she has never known want, or grief, or fear, or disappointment, her wisdom is without a touch of the sombre or the sad; her affections are all mixed up with faith, hope, and joy; and her wit has not a particle of malevolence or causticity.

The sudden plan which she forms for the release of her husband's friend, her disguise, and her deportment as the young and learned doctor, would appear forced and improbable in any other woman, but in Portia are the simple and natural result of her character. The quickness with which she perceives the legal advantage which may be taken of the circumstances; the spirit of adventure with which she engages in the masquerading, and the decision, firmness, and intelligence with which she executes her generous purpose, are all in perfect keeping, and nothing appears forced—nothing as introduced merely for theatrical effect.

But all the finest parts of Portia's character are brought to bear in the trial scene. There she shines forth all her divine self. Her intellectual powers, her elevated sense of religion, her high, honorable principles, her best feelings as a woman, are all displayed. She maintains at first a calm self-command, as one sure of carrying her point in the end; yet the painful, heart-thrilling uncertainty in which she keeps the whole court, until suspense verges upon agony, is not contrived for effect merely; it is necessary and inevitable. She has two objects in view—to deliver her husband's friend, and to maintain her husband's honor by the discharge of his just debt, though paid out of her own wealth ten times over. It is evident that she would rather owe the safety of Antonio to anything rather than the legal quibble with which her cousin Bellario has armed her, and which she reserves as a last resource. Thus all the speeches addressed to Shylock in the first instance are either direct or indirect experiments on his temper and feelings. She must be understood, from the beginning to the end, as examining with intense anxiety the effect of her own words on his mind and countenance; as watching for that relenting spirit which she hopes to awaken either by reason or persuasion. She begins by an appeal to his mercy, in that matchless piece of eloquence which, with an irresistible and solemn pathos, falls upon the heart like "gentle dew from heaven" [*Henry VIII*, IV, ii, 133]:—but in vain; for that blessed dew drops not more fruitless and unfelt on the parched sand of the desert, than do these heavenly words upon the ear of Shylock. She next attacks his avarice—"Shylock, there's thrice thy money offer'd thee" [IV, i, 226]. Then she appeals in the same breath, both to his avarice and his pity—"Be merciful! / Take thrice thy money. Bid me tear the bond" [IV, i, 232–233]. All that she says afterwards—her strong expressions, which are calculated to strike a shuddering horror through the nerves; the reflections she interposes, her delays and circumlocution to give time for any latent feeling of commiseration

to display itself; all, all are premeditated, and tend in the same manner to the object she has in view. Thus—

You must prepare your bosom for his knife. . . . Therefore lay bare your bosom!

[IV, i, 245, 252]

These two speeches, though addressed apparently to Antonio, are spoken at Shylock, and are evidently intended to penetrate his bosom. In the same spirit she asks for the balance to weigh the pound of flesh; and entreats of Shylock to have a surgeon ready. . . .

So unwilling is her sanguine and generous spirit to resign all hope, or to believe that humanity is absolutely extinct in the bosom of the Jew, that she calls on Antonio, as a last resource, to speak for himself. His gentle yet manly resignation—the deep pathos of his farewell, and the affectionate allusion to herself in his last address to Bassanio . . . are well calculated to swell that emotion which through the whole scene must have been laboring suppressed within her heart.

At length the crisis arrives, for patience and womanhood can endure no longer; and when Shylock, carrying his savage bent “to the last hour of act” [IV, i, 19] springs on his victim—“A sentence! come, prepare!” [IV, i, 304], then the smothered scorn, indignation, and disgust burst forth with an impetuosity which interferes with the judicial solemnity she had at first affected; particularly in the speech—

Therefore, prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood; nor cut thou less, nor more,
But just the pound of flesh: if thou tak'st more
Or less than a just pound,—be it but so much
As makes it light, or heavy, in the substance,
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple; nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,—
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

[IV, i, 323–331]

But she afterwards recovers her propriety, and triumphs with a cooler scorn and a more self-possessed exultation.

It is clear that, to feel the full force and dramatic beauty of this marvellous scene, we must go along with Portia as well as with Shylock; we must understand her concealed purpose, keep in mind her noble motives, and pursue in our fancy the under-current of feeling working in her mind throughout. The terror and the

power of Shylock's character—his deadly and inexorable malice—would be too oppressive; the pain and pity too intolerable, and the horror of the possible issue too over-whelming, but for the intellectual relief afforded by this double source of interest and contemplation.

. . . Portia's strength of intellect takes a natural tinge from the flush and bloom of her young and prosperous existence, and from her fervid imagination. In the casket scene, she fears indeed the issue of the trial, on which more than her life is hazarded; but while she trembles, her hope is stronger than her fear. While Bassanio is contemplating the caskets, she suffers herself to dwell for one moment on the possibility of disappointment and misery. . . . Then immediately follows that revulsion of feeling so beautifully characteristic of the hopeful, trusting, mounting spirit of this noble creature—"But he may win!" [III, ii, 47]. . . .

Her subsequent surrender of herself in heart and soul, of her maiden freedom, and her vast possessions, can never be read without deep emotion; for not only all the tenderness and delicacy of a devoted woman are here blended with all the dignity which becomes the princely heiress of Belmont, but the serious, measured self-possession of her address to her lover when all suspense is over, and all concealment superfluous, is most beautifully consistent with the character. It is, in truth, an awful moment, that in which a gifted woman first discovers that, besides talents and powers, she has also passions and affections; when she first begins to suspect their vast importance in the sum of her existence; when she first confesses that her happiness is no longer in her own keeping, but is surrendered for ever and for ever into the dominion of another! The possession of uncommon powers of mind are so far from affording relief or resource in the first intoxicating surprise—I had almost said terror—of such a revolution, that they render it more intense. The sources of thought multiply beyond calculation the sources of feeling; and mingled, they rush together, a torrent deep as strong. Because Portia is endued with that enlarged comprehension which looks before and after, she does not feel the less, but the more: because from the height of her commanding intellect she can contemplate the force, the tendency, the consequences of her own sentiments—because she is fully sensible of her own situation and the value of all she concedes—the concession is not made with less entireness and devotion of heart, less confidence in the truth and worth of her lover, than when Juliet, in a similar moment, but without any such intrusive reflections—any check but the instinctive delicacy of her sex, flings herself and her fortunes at the feet of her lover. . . .

In Portia's confession . . . there is . . . a consciousness and a tender seriousness, approaching to solemnity. . . .

We must also remark that the sweetness, the solicitude, the subdued fondness which she afterwards displays relative to the letter, are as true to the softness of her sex as the generous self-denial with which she urges the departure of Bassanio (having first given him a husband's right over herself and all her countless wealth) is consistent with a reflecting mind, and a spirit at once tender, reasonable, and magnanimous.

Her reflections on the friendship between her husband and Antonio are as full of deep meaning as of tenderness. . . .

And in the description of her various suitors, in the first scene with Nerissa, what infinite power, wit, and vivacity! She half checks herself as she is about to give the reins to her sportive humor: "In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker" [I, ii, 57]. But if it carries her away, it is so perfectly good-natured, so temperately bright, so lady-like, it is ever without offence. . . . Portia, with all her airy brilliance, is supremely soft and dignified; everything she says or does displays her capability for profound thought and feeling as well as her lively and romantic disposition. . . .

In the last act, Shylock and his machinations being dismissed from our thoughts, and the rest of the dramatis personae assembled together at Belmont, all our interest and all our attention are riveted on Portia, and the conclusion leaves the most delightful impression on the fancy. The playful equivocation of the rings, the sportive tricks she puts on her husband, and her thorough enjoyment of the jest, which she checks just as it is proceeding beyond the bounds of propriety, show how little she was displeased by the sacrifice of her gift, and are all consistent with her bright and buoyant spirit. In conclusion, when Portia invites her company to enter her palace to refresh themselves after their travels, and talk over "these events at full" [V, i, 297], the imagination, unwilling to lose sight of the brilliant group, follows them in gay procession from the lovely moonlight garden to marble halls and princely revels, to splendor and festive mirth, to love and happiness!

It is observable that something of the intellectual brilliance of Portia is reflected on the other female characters of *The Merchant of Venice*, so as to preserve in the midst of contrast a certain harmony and keeping. Thus Jessica, though properly kept subordinate, is certainly—

A most beautiful Pagan—a most sweet Jew.

[II, iii, 11]

. . . Nerissa is a good specimen of a common genus of characters: she is a clever, confidential waiting-woman, who has caught a little of her lady's elegance and romance; she affects to be lively and sententious, falls in love, and makes her favor conditional on the fortune of the caskets, and, in short, mimics her mistress with good emphasis and discretion. Nerissa and the gay, talkative

Gratiano are as well matched as the incomparable Portia and her magnificent and captivating lover.



1838—Heinrich Heine, from *Heine on Shakespeare: A Translation of His Notes on Shakespeare Heroines*

Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) was a German lyric poet, essayist, and social and literary commentator. Many of his lyrics were set to music by great German composers such as Schubert, Beethoven, and Schumann.

When I saw [*The Merchant of Venice*] acted at Drury Lane a beautiful pale Englishwoman standing beside me burst into tears at the end of the fourth act, crying out several times, “the poor man is wronged.”

On account of these tears I must place *The Merchant of Venice* among Shakespeare’s tragedies although he intended it as a comedy surrounding it by merry masks satyrs and cupids. Possibly Shakespeare thought it would please the public were he to represent a greedy were-wolf, a dread mythical creature thirsting for blood, thereby losing his daughter and his ducats, besides exciting general ridicule. But the poet’s genius, the world spirit which reigns in him, always supersedes his individual will. Thus it came to pass that notwithstanding the obvious caricature which Shylock presents, Shakespeare has justified in him an unfortunate race whom Providence for some secret cause has burdened with the hatred of the low and highborn populace, and who has not always consented to return love for hate.

But what do I say? Shakespeare’s genius rises above the mean quarrels of two parties entertaining opposite beliefs, and his play does not actually represent either Jews or Christians but oppressors and oppressed. We also hear the madly painful shouts of joy whenever the latter are able to pay back with interest the injuries inflicted on them by their proud torturers. There is not the slightest trace of religious differences in this play, and in Shylock, Shakespeare represents a character whose nature it is to hate his enemy. In a similar manner we find that Antonio and his friends are by no means apostles of that divine gospel which commands men to love their enemies. Shylock replies to the man wishing to borrow money of him;

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me

About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug;
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe:
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog;
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own. . . .
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath, and whispering humbleness,
Say this, —'Fair Sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurned me such a day; another time,
You called me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

[I, iii, 106–113, 123–129]

And Antonio answers;

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

[I, iii, 130–31]

Have we here an example of Christian love! Christianity would have been satirised had Shakespeare typified it by Shylock's enemies, men who hardly deserved to loosen his shoe-latchets. The bankrupt Antonio is a weak spirited mortal without energy, without power to hate, and therefore without power to love, a dull worm whose flesh was really not good for much else than to serve as "bait for fish" [IV, i, 53]. Besides this he certainly does not return the fleeced Jew his three thousand ducats. Neither does Bassanio, who according to an English critic is a regular fortune-hunter, return him his money; this man borrows money for the purpose of setting himself up in grand style to marry a wealthy wife and to obtain a rich dowry. . . .

As to Lorenzo, he is an accomplice in a most infamous robbery by which according to Prussian law he would be condemned to fifteen years' penal servitude after being branded and put in the pillory, although he had a liking for the beauties of nature for moonlight scenes and music as well as for jewels and ducats. The other noble Venetians, Antonio's friends, also seem to regard money with favor and they have naught but words, coined air for their poor friend in the midst of his misfortunes. . . . It would surely have been comparatively easy for those good friends who appeared to surround the regal merchant in crowds, to collect three thousand ducats in order to save a human life, and such a life! But these things are always rather inconvenient and so the dear good friends do nothing—nothing whatever—because they are only so-called friends, or, if you

will, semi or three-quarter friends. They greatly pity the excellent merchant who formerly entertained them so well, but they do this in a calm manner and revile Shylock to their heart's content heaping bitter words on him. This also they can do without incurring any risks, and they then probably all imagine that they have done their duty. Much as we are bound to hate Shylock we can understand even him for somewhat despising these people, which he has every right to do.

Indeed with the exception of Portia, the character of Shylock is the most worthy in the play. He loves money and makes no secret of his passion crying it out on the open market place. . . . But something he prizes more than money, namely the easing of his wounded spirit, the just vengeance for inexpressible injuries, and though they offer him ten times the amount of the borrowed sum he refuses it.

Yes indeed though Shylock loves his money there are things he prizes infinitely more, among other things his daughter; "Jessica, my child" [II, v, 15]. Though he curses her in overwhelming and passionate anger, longing to see her dead at his feet with the jewels in her ears and the ducats in her coffin, he loves her nevertheless more than all his jewels and his ducats. Thrust out of public life and Christian society into the narrow limits of household joys, the poor Jew found himself entirely dependant on family ties, and these assume in him pathetically tender proportions. He would not have given away the turquoise ring once given him by his wife Lea for a "forest of monkeys" [III, i, 123]. When in the court of justice Bassanio addresses the following words to Antonio:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
 Which is as dear to me as life itself;
 But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
 Are not with me esteemed above thy life:
 I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil, to deliver you.
 [IV, i, 282–287]

And when Gratiano adds:

I have a wife whom I protest I love:
 I would she were in heaven, so she could
 Entreat some power to change this currish Jew.
 [IV, i, 290–292]

Then Shylock begins to tremble for the fate of his daughter who has married among people who can sacrifice their wives to their friends, and he says to himself in an aside and not aloud:

These be the Christian husbands! I have a daughter
Would any of the stock of Barabbas
Had been her husband rather than a Christian!
[IV, i, 295–297]

This passage, these silent words, are beautiful Jessica's death warrant. It was no loveless father whom she deserted, robbed and betrayed. . . . Oh disgraceful betrayal! She even makes common cause with Shylock's enemies, and when at Belmont they slander him, Jessica does not look down, the colour does not leave her cheeks and she utters base words concerning her father. . . . Oh abominable outrage! She has no soul, only the mind of an adventuress. She found the strict honourable home of the embittered Jew tedious, until it seemed to her a hell. The merry sound of drums and fifes had too great attractions for her frivolous mind! Did Shakespeare mean to depict a Jewess? No indeed, he only describes a daughter of Eve, one of those beautiful birds who finding themselves fledged, flutter away from the parental nest to the beloved mate. Desdemona followed the Moor, Imogene followed Posthumus in like manner! It is the custom of women. We perceive in Jessica a certain timid shame which she cannot overcome when she has to dress in boy's clothes. Perhaps in this we may recognise the mysterious shyness peculiar to her race owing to which quality its daughters possess a special charm!

If we consider Shylock in the usual way, as a type of that stern, serious, inartistic Judaea, Portia appears on the other hand as a type of those after-blossoms of Greek intellect which in the sixteenth century spread their beautiful scent from Italy over the world, and which we now love and revere under the name of the Renaissance. Portia also represents bright happiness as contrasted with gloomy misfortune, which we see typified in Shylock. All her thoughts are blooming, rosy, and pure; her speech is penetrated with warm happiness and her similes, which she generally borrows from mythology, are full of beauty. In Shylock's thoughts and words, borrowed only from old testament metaphors, we get a dismal, pungent and ugly contrast. His wit is spasmodic and pungent, he borrows his metaphors from loathsome objects and his very words are compressed discords, shrill and hissing. Men resemble their homes. We perceive how this servant of Jehovah will not suffer either an image of God, or of man made in God's image, to enter his "honorable house"; he even shuts out every sound from the hearing thereof, namely from the windows, so that sounds of heathen mummery shall not gain entrance there . . . in the beautiful palace at Belmont, on the other hand, we find a luxurious and ideal country home surrounded by light and music. Adorned suitors wander about joyfully among pictures, marble statues and high laurels, dreaming of love's mysteries,

whilst Signora Portia reigns over them in all her glory, resplendent as a goddess, “golden hair adorning her temples” [I, i, 169–170].

By force of contrast the two chief figures in the play become so individualised that we positively believe them to be actual human beings, instead of a poet’s fantastic creations. To us they appear still more life-like than ordinary mortals, as neither time nor death can alter them and their hearts are quickened by immortal pulsations, by divine poetry.



1839—Hermann Ulrici. “*The Merchant of Venice*,” from *Shakspeare’s Dramatic Art*

Hermann Ulrici (1806–1884) was a German scholar, professor of philosophy at the University of Halle, and author of works on Greek poetry and Shakespeare. He wrote books that severely criticized Hegel’s ideas and later explored the relationship of philosophy to science.

“The Merchant of Venice,” one of the most popular, and, at the same time, noblest productions of our great master, unites all the charms and excellencies of Shakspeare’s style. First of all, as to the characterization: overlooking the well-conceived and ably worked-out peculiarities of the other personages, who in organic contrast nicely balance and set off each other . . . we meet in Shylock the Jew a masterpiece of characterization. It is a most successful portrait of the Jewish national character generally;—not indeed of that noble and high-minded, but exclusive spirit, which in the times of Moses, David, and the prophets, still animated the people, but of the low and unworthy sentiments into which this degenerate and fallen nation had gradually sunk during the thousand years of persecution and oppression which marked its dispersion over the face of the earth. During these long years of ignominy, their firm endurance and strict adherence to their national religion, morals and law, had been degraded into conceit and stiff-neckedness—their acute intellect into subtlety and finesse, the inspired view of the prophet into superstition, the love of their inheritance (which in so far as it was united with devotion to the land which God had given them, was praiseworthy,) was corrupted into a sordid and loathsome avarice, and the sense of superiority which their separation from all other nations and kindred had engendered, had sunk into bitter and contemptuous hate, and, wherever possible, into unfeeling and cruel revenge of their persecutors. Nothing had escaped the universal degradation, except the invincible perseverance, and the dry mummy-like tenacity of their Jewish nature. Shylock looks like a mournful relic of a great and glorious past, the still glimmering spark of a dying splendour,

which though it warms and nourishes no more, can yet burn and destroy. We can no more refuse our pity than repress our horror at his conduct and sentiments. The general character of the Jewish people is, however, distinctly individualized in Shylock, and endued with concrete vitality. The spirit of revenge and hatred is in his case directed chiefly against the Christian merchants, who are willing to lend their money without security or interest, in order to assist the oppressed and unfortunate debtor, and who in his opinion injure him thereby more deeply than they ever can do by the contemptuous and dog-like treatment which they show him. It is simply on this account that the princely Antonio is a real thorn in his side. His hatred overcomes his avarice, and he plays the part of a high-minded and generous character in order to set at work a devilish design; attachment to religion, caste, and natural rights, expresses itself in Shylock merely in the most rigid and stiff-necked adherence to the letter of the law. He is not without intelligence and natural shrewdness, which reveal themselves in the peculiar humour, and the biting sarcastic wit, which he has freely at command. It is by such special motives of action and delicate touches that Shakspeare has saved his portrait from being but a caricature, and stamped the individuality of life on the abstract generalities of national peculiarity.

But not merely does Shakspeare's wonderful skill in delineating character shine forth in this piece in the most brilliant light; the composition, arrangement, and unfolding of the intricate plot are equally wonderful. The invention, it is true, is not altogether his own property. . . . [However, he] has with his usual freedom enriched the original with several additional characters, and enlarged the plot by interweaving into it a new episode. Thus we have three knots, each complicated enough, tangled together in the present fable: the money affair between Shylock and Antonio; the weddings of Bassanio and Portia, and of Gratiano and Nerissa; and lastly, Jessica's love for, and elopement with, Lorenzo. These several events and interests are disposed with remarkable clearness and precision; each proceeds so naturally of itself, and alongside the others, that we never lose the thread, but the several parts are kept perfectly distinct, while at the same time a living, free, and organic principle pervades them all, and rounds them off into a well-organized and perfect whole. As Schlegel justly remarks, in the same way that the noble Antonio is placed in delightful contrast to the hateful Shylock, so the strange bargain between them—which, although not absolutely impossible, is to the highest degree extraordinary—has its counterpart in the no less singular story of the courtship of Portia and Bassanio. The one is rendered less improbable by the other. So, again, as Portia's free choice is restrained by an odd whim of her deceased father, her attendant Nerissa voluntarily makes her own happiness to depend on the fate of her mistress. To this constraint of will and inclination, the violation of all respect of law and custom by the free choice of Jessica forms again a decided contrast. Thus are the manifold interests and situations of the plot skilfully disposed, so as to shew forth in strong light that contrariety from

which life and movement uniformly issue. The next question, however, is, where then are we to look for that intrinsic unity of idea which alone can justify before the tribunal of criticism the combination in a single drama of so many different elements? Notwithstanding all this skill of characterization and development, there is a seeming want of consistency, and the whole consequently appears to fall in pieces. No doubt we can see clearly enough an external bond holding together the several parts; Antonio falls into the Jew's power by his self-sacrificing devotion to his friend, and he is rescued by the wit and shrewdness of Portia, and with these two the heroes of the other love-stories are no doubt more or less intimately connected. This tie, however, is altogether external and accidental. In its essential and intrinsic signification, what has the business transaction, which turns out so gloomily and almost tragically, in common with the cheerful happy wedding of Portia and Bassanio? None: on the contrary, by such external juxtaposition their intrinsic dissimilarity becomes only the more apparent. Such a connection is in truth null; and a composition of which the parts are so loosely held together is not to be dignified with the title of a work of art. The aesthetical judge finds it impossible to deliver a different sentence, whenever he cannot discover a truly organic and artistic unity between the different components of a great whole; and as hitherto this has not been shown in the case of the "Merchant of Venice," it must be pronounced unworthy of the high encomiums and reputation which it has hitherto enjoyed. Indeed, the question may justly be propounded, whether it is of right to be regarded as a comedy, a spectacle, or a tragedy? and as long as the intrinsic central point is left undiscovered, no answer can be given to the question.

[A reader or viewer] must forcibly withdraw his eye from the graceful movement of the several figures, and from the beautiful hues and lovely play of light and shade, if he would hope to discover the invisible thread, which, like the eternal plan of the world's history, runs through the whole, a mystery and a wonder. And, on the other hand, we find occasional hints scattered through the whole in sufficient number to prevent any one who has penetrated the least into the profound mystery of Shakspeare's art from going altogether astray. The idea which lies at the bottom of the transaction between Antonio and Shylock, is evidently the old juristic maxim, "Summum jus summa injuria" [the highest right, the greatest injustice], which is again founded on that high dialectic principle, which the experience of life enforces, that every one-sided and exclusive right produces in this world of limitation its direct negative, and necessarily passes into its opposite. Shylock has evidently the material right on his side, but by taking it, and following it out in its mere letter and one-sidedness, he falls into the deepest and foulest wrong, which by intrinsic necessity, and agreeably to the essential nature of sin, recoils fatally on his own head. The dead letter of the law can but kill. But the same dialectic, and the same view which is here presented in its sharpest and unqualified extreme, shine through all the other parts in

various shades and refractions. The whim of Portia's father, which fetters her free-will and robs her of all participation in the choice of her husband, rests, no doubt, ultimately on parental rights and authority; but this extreme right is even extreme wrong, and Portia has good ground for her complaint:

O! these naughty times

Put bars between the owners and their rights.

[III, ii, 18–19]

Even if she had broken her oath, and by signs and hints had guided her well-beloved, amiable, and worthy lover to a right choice, would any of us have been ready to cast the first stone at her? The wrong which was involved in this capricious exercise of parental rights, might have issued in tragic misery, had not chance—again a lucky thought of the moment—led to a happy result. The flight and marriage of Jessica against her father's will is itself also a decided wrong. And, yet, who will condemn her for withdrawing herself from the rule, and for despising the rights of such a parent, who, if she had remained obedient to him, would have brought both her temporal and eternal welfare into peril. . . . The penalty which the court imposes upon the Jew, by which he is compelled to sanction the marriage of his daughter with Lorenzo, annuls these struggling contrarieties externally and accidentally, rather than furnishes a true intrinsic adjustment of them. Lastly, right and wrong are in the same manner again carried to their extreme points, and consequently to a nicely balanced ambiguity, in the quarrel, with which the piece closes, between Gratiano and Nerissa, and Bassanio and Portia, about the rings which they have parted with, in violation of their sworn promises. Here, again, the maxim "*Summum jus summa injuria*," is clearly reflected: here, too, right and wrong are driven dialectically to a strait—to that extreme boundary where both become indistinguishable and pass into each other.

Thus, then, does the intrinsic meaning and signification of these several and seemingly heterogeneous elements, combine them together into unity; they are but so many variations of the same theme. Human life is considered as a transaction of business, with right or justice as its foundation and centre. But the greater the stress that is laid upon this foundation, and the more it is built upon, the more unstable and weak it appears; and the more deeply and definitely it is taken, the more superficial and eccentric does it seem, and the more fatally it is disturbed by its own gravity. No doubt, the end of law and justice is to maintain and support human society. Nevertheless, they are not the true basis and centre of existence, and neither do they constitute the full value of life, nor comprise its whole truth. On the contrary, when conceived in such narrow one-sidedness, the whole structure of life is dialectically dissolved; right becomes wrong, and wrong is right; law and justice do in truth form but one aspect of a many-sided whole.

They have not their validity and truth, in and by themselves, but they ultimately rest on a higher principle of true morality, from which they issue like rays from the focus of light. Absolutely speaking, man has no rights, but merely duties; he is created by God not for right, but for duty. But his very duties become in turn, and in regard to others, his own rights also, and there is absolutely no true and living right which does not involve a duty, and is itself an obligation. Ultimately, therefore, human life rests not on any arrogated right, but on the grace of God; and the divine mercy, which calls him to union with God, is the true and substantial basis of his existence. The conformity of the human with the divine will is the true life-giving morality of man; and this alone gives to right and wrong their true import and significance. This truth is thus beautifully expressed by Shakspeare:—

But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then shew likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,—
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
 And that same prayer should teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

[IV, i, 193–202]

That another power, which withdraws itself from outward view, and higher than the material one—positive right—lies at the ground of human life, is clearly shewn in the character and fortune of Antonio. A strange unaccountable gloom has taken possession of him; he is weary of his former pursuits; he is so suddenly changed, that he has much ado to know himself. . . . It is only when the misfortunes which, even in his highest success, had disturbed his soul with an ill-defined boding, have actually overtaken him, that all becomes clear. It was the very magnitude of his earthly wealth, to which, however, his heart did not cling exclusively, that unconsciously hampered the free flight of his soul, and like a heavy burden weighed upon his spirit: oversatiety of earthly success had made life itself loathsome. This overflow of earthly mammon, which brings temptation in its train and leads away the mind an unwilling captive, involves in it more or less of sin, especially when man has brought the burthen upon himself. And accordingly it oppresses him; it brings with it a penalty, not indeed from the tribunal of common law and justice, but from that higher power of morality—a penalty which, if it be not legally, is nevertheless morally due.

Having thus discovered the idea which gives to the whole its organic unity, we shall be able to determine the artistic form to which it belongs. It is manifestly a comedy of intrigue, after Shakspeare's usual manner. The comic view of things is evidently the basis on which the dramatic structure is here raised. It is only from this poetical position that the picture which it draws of life, under the one-sided aspect of law and rights can be explained and justified. For the exclusiveness in which this single but indispensable spring of action is employed as the fundamental principle of the whole of life, appears ultimately destroyed by the dialectic of irony. For by shewing the insufficiency of this principle in various situations and circumstances, the truth, which is occasionally hinted at, that extreme right, when it is insisted upon, becomes a palpable wrong, is placed by the contrast in the fullest light. Right and wrong become indistinguishable when carried to their utmost limits, and are finally merged in the source of all true life—the love and mercy of God.

And this consideration serves to prove how erroneous and unfounded is the oft-repeated objection, that the last act is an unnecessary adjunct, which, after all interest has been exhausted, hobbles on feeble and languishing. It is nothing less than indispensable to the right understanding and completeness of the whole. It effaces the tragic impression which still lingers on the mind from the fourth act; the last vibrations of the harsh tones which were there struck, here die away; in the gay and amusing trifling of love the sharp contrarieties of right and wrong are playfully reconciled. In the same way that in all the preceding scenes the tragic gloom, which the misfortunes of Antonio diffuse, is painted with the softest touch and lightest shades, and their bitterness seems dissolved into sweet, soothing, and melancholy strains, amid which a happier note may be not indistinctly heard, so the concluding act impresses on the whole its appropriate comic stamp, and puts a playful mask on the profound seriousness of the entire subject. We cannot, in short, sufficiently admire the artistic skill of our poet, who, at the risk of censure, and of failure of effect on the weak-sighted and superficial reader, dares to appear indeed to be violating the rules of his art, while he is constantly and steadily pursuing it, and was attaining it so surely and unerringly.



1849—Georg Gottfried Gervinus. “The Merchant of Venice,” from *Second Period of Shakspeare's Dramatic Poetry*

Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805–1871), born in Darmstadt, Germany, was a literary and political historian who wrote extensively on Shakspeare.

Ulrici has justly remarked that the connecting threads in [*The Merchant of Venice*] lie very much hidden, owing to the different circumstances contained in it. The poet has here not given himself the trouble, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, to insinuate his design by express explanation. Ulrici . . . perceived the fundamental idea of the *Merchant of Venice* in the sentence, “*summum jus summa injuria*” [the highest right, the greatest injustice]. With ability and ingenuity he has referred the separate parts to this one central point. The lawsuit in which Shylock enforces the letter of justice, and is himself avengingly struck by the letter of justice, is thus placed in the true centre of the piece. The arbitrariness of the will, in which Portia’s father appears to assert the utmost severity of his paternal right, and which, as Portia herself laments, “puts bars between the owners and their rights” [III, ii, 19], connects the second element of the piece in one idea with the principal part. Jessica’s escape from her father forms the contrast to this; in the one, right is wrong, in the other, wrong is right. The intricacy of right and wrong appears at its height in the quarrel of the lovers in the last act. Even Launcelot’s reflections on the right and wrong of his running away, and his blame of Jessica in the fourth act, concur with this point of view. We are thus led to understand the stress which Portia, in her speech to Shylock, lays upon mercy: not severe right, but tempered equity alone can hold society together.

But when we glance at the external structure of the piece, the essential characters do not all stand in relation to this idea—a requirement which we find fulfilled in all the maturer works of our poet. Bassanio, who is really the link uniting Antonio and Portia, the principal actors in the two separate incidents, has nothing to do with this idea. Just as little are the friends and parasites of Antonio, and the suitors of Portia, connected with it. Moreover, Portia’s father is called “a virtuous and holy man” [I, ii, 27], who has left behind him the order concerning the caskets out of kindness, in a sort of “inspiration,” but in no wise in a severe employment of paternal power. But even setting aside these reasons, which we derive from the attempt to connect the acting characters with the fundamental idea of the piece, we feel that such a maxim as the above can only be the result of a forced interpretation of any of the Shakespearian plays. We only arrive at such maxims and explanations when we consider the story and the plot in this or other plays as the central point for consideration. Ulrici does this: he calls this piece a comedy of intrigue, as he has also even more unsuitably designated *Cymbeline*, a play that must be classed with those most magnificent works of the poet, which like *Lear* confine within the narrow scope of a drama almost the richness of an epos. In Ulrici’s opinion the story is the all-important point; in ours the story grows out of the peculiar nature of the characters. We do not, like him, distinguish the dramatic styles, and we believe that Shakespeare himself did not thus distinguish them, for to him the form arose naturally out of the material in obedience to internal laws. Shylock is connected in the intricacies of the action with Antonio by means of Bassanio; these men, and their characters

and motives, exist in the poet's mind before the plot is designed which results from their co-operation. Granted that the subject was transmitted to the poet, and that here, as in *All's Well that Ends Well*, he held himself conscientiously bound to the strangest of all materials; still that which most distinguishes him and his poetry, that in which he maintains his freest action, that from which he designs the structure of his pieces, and even creates the given subject anew, is ever the characters themselves and the motives of their actions. . . . To perceive and to know the virtues and crimes of men, to reflect them as in a mirror, and to exhibit them in their sources, their nature, their workings, and their results, and this in such a way as to exclude chance and to banish arbitrary fate, which can have no place in a well-ordered world, such is the task which Shakespeare has imposed upon the poet and upon himself.

We will now say what reflections the *Merchant of Venice* has excited in our own mind. . . . [The] intention of the poet in the *Merchant of Venice* was to depict the relation of man to property. However commonplace this may appear, the more worthy of admiration is that which Shakespeare, with extraordinary, profound, and poetic power, has accomplished in his embodiment of the subject.

. . . The god of the world, the image of show, the symbol of all external things, is money, and it is so called by Shakespeare, and in all proverbs. To examine the relation of man to property or to money is to place his intrinsic value on the finest scale, and to separate that which belongs to the unessential, to "outward shows," from that which in its inward nature relates to a higher destiny. As attributes of show, gold and silver, misleading and testing the chooser, are taken as the material of Portia's caskets, and Bassanio's comments on the caskets mark the true meaning of the piece:—

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
There is no vice so simple but assumes
Some mark of virtue on its outward parts:
How many cowards . . . assume but valour's excrement,
To render them redoubted! Look on beauty,
And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight . . .
So are those crisped snaky golden locks,
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind,

Upon supposed fairness, often known
 To be the dowry of a second head,
 The scull that bred them, in the sepulchre.
 Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
 To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf
 Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
 The seeming truth which cunning times put on
 To entrap the wisest.

[III, ii, 73–83, 87–89, 92–101]

The chooser therefore turns away from the gold and silver, as from the current and received image of that precarious show, and turns to the lead, "which rather threatenest, than doth promise aught" [III, ii, 105]. And so, not his relation alone, but the relation of a number of beings to gold, this perishable and false good, is depicted in our play. A number of characters and circumstances show how the possession produces in men barbarity and cruelty, hatred and obduracy, anxiety and indifference, spleen and fickleness; and again how it calls forth the highest virtues and qualities, and, by testing, confirms them. But essential prominence is given to the relation of the outward possession, to an inclination of an entirely inward character, namely, to friendship. This is indeed inserted by the poet in the original story; it is, however, not arbitrarily interwoven with it, but is developed according to its inmost nature from the materials given. For the question of man's relation to property is ever at the same time a question of his relation to man, as it cannot be imagined apart from man. The miser, who seeks to deprive others of possession and to seize upon it himself, will hate and will be hated. The spendthrift, who gives and bestows, loves and will be loved. The relation of both to possession, their riches or their poverty, will, as it changes, also change their relation to their fellow-men. For this reason the old story of Timon, handled by our poet in its profoundest sense, is at once a history of prodigality and a history of false friendship. And thus Shakespeare, in the poem before us, has shown a genuine affinity between the pictures he exhibits of avarice and prodigality, of hard usury and inconsiderate extravagance, so that the play may just as well be called a song of true friendship. The most unselfish spiritual affection is placed in contrast to the most selfish worldly one, the most essential truth to unessential show. For even sexual love, in its purest and deepest form, through the addition of sensual enjoyment, is not in the same measure free from selfishness as friendship is, which, as an inclination of the soul, is wholly based upon the absence of all egotism and self-love; its purity and elevation is tested by nothing so truly as by the exact opposite, namely, by possession, which excites most powerfully the selfishness and self-interest of men.

We shall now see how the apparently disparate circumstances of our play work wonderfully one into the other, and with what wisdom the principal characters are arranged with respect to each other.

In the centre of the actors in the play, in a rather passive position, stands Antonio, the princely merchant, of enviable and immense possessions, a Timon and Shylock in riches, but with a noble nature elevated far above the effects which wealth produced in these men. Placed between the generous giver and the miser, between the spendthrift and the usurer, between Bassanio and Shylock, between friend and foe, he is not even remotely tempted by the vices into which these have fallen; there is not the slightest trace to be discovered in him of that care for his wealth imputed to him by Salanio and Salarino, who in its possession would be its slaves. But his great riches have inflicted upon him another evil, the malady of the rich, who have never been agitated and tried by anything, and have never experienced the pressure of the world. He has the spleen, he is melancholy; a sadness has seized him, the source of which no one knows; he has a presentiment of some danger, such as Shakespeare always imparts to all sensitive, susceptible natures. In this spleen, like all hypochondriacs, he takes delight in cheerful society; he is surrounded by a number of parasites and flatterers, among whom there is one nobler character, Bassanio, with whom alone a deeper impulse of friendship connects him. He is affable, mild, and generous to all, without knowing their tricks and without sharing their mirth; the loquacious versatility and humour of a Gratiano is indifferent to him; his pleasure in their intercourse is passive, according to his universal apathy. His nature is quiet and is with difficulty affected; when his property and its management leave him without anxiety, he utters a "fie, fie," over the supposition that he is in love; touched by no fault, but moved also by no virtue, he appears passionless, and almost an automaton. The position which the poet has given him in the midst of the more active characters of the piece is an especially happy one; for were he of less negative greatness he would throw all others into deep shadow; we should feel too painful and exciting a sympathy in his subsequent danger. Yet he is not allowed, for this reason, to appear quite feelingless. For in one point he shows that he shared the choler and natural feelings of others. When brought into contact with the usurer, the Jew Shylock, we see him in a state of agitation, partly arising from moral and business principles, partly from intolerance and from national religious aversion. This sense of honour in the merchant against the money-changer and usurer urges him to those glaring outbursts of hatred, when he rates Shylock in the Rialto about his "usances," calls him a dog, "foots" him, and spits upon his beard. For this he receives a lesson for life in his lawsuit with the Jew, whom, with his apathetic negligence, he allows to get the advantage over him. His life is placed in danger, and the apparently insensible man is suddenly drawn

closer to us; he is suffering, so that high and low intercede for him; he himself petitions Shylock; his situation weakens him; the experience is not lost upon him; it is a crisis, it is the creation of a new life for him; finally, when he is lord and master over Shylock, he no longer calls up his old hatred against him, and, aroused from his apathy, he finds henceforth in Bassanio's happiness and tried friendship the source of a renovated and ennobled existence.

Unacquainted with this friend of Bassanio's, there lives at Belmont his beloved Portia, the contrast to Antonio, a character upon whom Shakespeare has not hesitated to heap all the active qualities of which he has deprived Antonio; for in the womanly being kept modestly in the background, these qualities are not likely to appear so overwhelmingly prominent as we felt that they would have been if united in the man, whom they would have raised too far above the other characters of the piece. Nevertheless, Portia is the most important figure in our drama, and she forms even its true central point; as for her sake, without her fault or knowledge, the knot is entangled, and through her and by means of her conscious effort it is also loosened. She is just as royally rich as Antonio, and as he is encompassed with parasites, so is she by suitors from all lands. She too, like Antonio, and still more than he, is wholly free from every disturbing influence of her possessions upon her inner being. She carries out her father's will in order to secure herself from a husband who might purchase her beauty by the weight. Without this will she would of herself have acted similarly; wooed by princely suitors she loves Bassanio, whom she knew to be utterly poor. She too, like Antonio, is melancholy, but not from spleen, not from apathy, not without cause, not from the ennui of riches, but from passion alone, from her love for Bassanio, from care for the doubtful issue of that choice which threatens to surrender her love to chance. A thoroughly superior nature, she stands above Antonio and Bassanio as Helena does above Bertram [in *All's Well That Ends Well*], higher than Rosaline is raised above Biron [in *Love's Labour's Lost*], and Juliet above Romeo; it seems that Shakespeare at that time created and endowed his female characters in the conviction that the woman was fashioned out of better material than the man. . . . To this man of her heart Portia represents herself as a rough jewel, although she is far superior to him; she gives herself to him with the most womanly modesty, although she is capable rather of guiding him. She is superior to all circumstances, that is her highest praise; she would have accommodated herself to any husband, and for this reason her father may have felt himself justified in prescribing the lottery; he could do so with the most implicit confidence; she knows the contents of the caskets, but she betrays it not. She has already sent from her eyes "speechless messages" to Bassanio, and now she would gladly entertain him some months before he chooses, that she may at least secure a short possession; but no hint from her facilitates his choice. And yet she has to struggle with the warm feeling which longs to transgress the will: it is a temptation to her, but she resists it with

honour and resolution. Yet, quick in judgment, skilled in the knowledge of men, and firm in her demeanour, she knows how to frighten away, by her behaviour, the utterly worthless lovers; so superior is she in all this, that her subsequent appearance as judge is perfectly conceivable.

Between Portia and Antonio stands Bassanio, the friend of the one, the lover of the other; he appears between the two boundlessly rich persons as a man utterly poor, ruined in his circumstances, inconsiderate, and extravagant at the expense of his friend. He seems to belong thoroughly to the parasitical class of Antonio's friends. In disposition he is more inclined to the merry Gratiano than to Antonio's severe gravity; he appears on the stage with the question "When shall we laugh?" [I, i, 66] and he joins with his frivolous companions in all cheerful and careless folly. On this occasion he is borrowing once more three thousand ducats, in order to make a strange Argonautic expedition to the "Golden Fleece," staking them on a blind adventure, the doubtful wooing of a rich heiress. His friend breaks his habit of never borrowing on credit, he enters into an agreement with the Jew upon the bloody condition, and the adventurer accepts the loan with the sacrifice. Before he sets forth, on the very same day and evening, he purchases fine livery for his servants with this money, and gives a merry feast as a farewell, during which the daughter of the invited Jew is to be carried off by one of the free-thinking fellows. Does not the whole conduct appear as if he were only the seeming friend of this rich man for the sake of borrowing his money, and only the seeming lover of this rich lady for the sake of paying his debts with her fortune?

But this quiet Antonio seemed to know the man thus apparently bad to be of better nature. He knew him indeed as somewhat too extravagant, but not incurably so, as one who was ready and able also to restrict himself. He knew him as one who stood "within the eye of honour" [I, i, 137], and he lent to him without a doubt of his integrity. His confidence was unlimited, and he blames him rather that he should "make question of his uttermost," than "if he had made waste of all he has" [I, i, 156-157]. In his melancholy, it is this man alone who chains him to the world; their friendship needs no brilliant words, it is unfeignedly genuine. His eyes, full of tears at parting, tell Bassanio what he is worth to Antonio; it is the very acceptance of the loan which satisfies Antonio's confidence. . . . When [Bassanio] comes to Portia, he does not accede to her tender womanly proposal that he should safely enjoy two months' intercourse with her; he will not "live upon the rack" [III, ii, 25], and he insists with manly resolution upon the decision. His choice, and the very motives of his choice, exhibit him as the man not of show, but of genuine nature; his significant speech upon this fundamental theme of the piece stands as the true centre of the play.

Bassanio's choice is crowned by success, or, we may more justly say, his wise consideration of the father's object and of the mysterious problem meets with its deserved reward. But his fair doctrine of show is to be tested immediately,

whether it be really deed and truth. His adventurous expedition has succeeded through his friend's assistance and loan. But at the same moment in which he is at the climax of his happiness, his friend is at the climax of misfortune and in the utmost danger of his life, and this from the very assistance and loan which have helped Bassanio to his success. The horror of the intelligence concerning Antonio occurs at the very prime of his betrothal happiness. The genuine character of the friend now shows itself. The intelligence disturbs his whole nature. On his wedding-day—Portia herself permits not that they should be married first—he leaves her in order to save his friend, to pay thrice the money borrowed, in the hope of being able to avert the course of the law in this case of necessity. But Portia proves even here her superior nature. She sees more keenly what an inevitable snare the inhuman Jew has dug for Antonio; she adopts the surest course of saving him by right and law itself; she devises at the same time a plan for testing the man of her love. Even with all this, the idea of the design of the whole piece concurs most closely. Her own choice had been denied her by her father's arrangement; her delight in Bassanio rested not on a long acquaintance; the alliance made by chance appears to her to acquire its true consecration and security by one solemn trial; she will test him and his friend, she will test him by his friendship. . . . [She] wishes to convince herself of the nature of this friendship, in order that she may conclude from it the nature of Bassanio's love. She saves her husband from despair, and his friend from death, at the same moment that amid their torments she is observing their value. In this catastrophe Antonio has to atone for all the sin he has committed against Shylock through sternness, and Bassanio for all that of which he was guilty through frivolity, extravagance, and participation in the offences against the Jew: the best part of both is exhibited through their sufferings in their love for each other, and Antonio's words, the seal of this friendship, must have penetrated deeply into Portia's heart. But with equally great agitation she hears the words of Bassanio, that he would sacrifice his wife, his latest happiness, to avert the misfortune which he had caused. Such an avowal must enchant her: this was indeed standing the fiery test. Whilst she turns the words into a jest, she has to overcome the deepest emotion; with those words the sin is forgiven of which Bassanio was guilty. By his readiness for such a sacrifice he deserves the friend, whom he had exposed to death through the wooing of his wife, and the means which Antonio had given him of pressing his suit; and by it also he shows that he deserves his wife, who could not be called happily won by a fortunate chance which had proved at the same time the evil destiny of his friend. This trial of Bassanio is carried on by Portia in the last act of the play. It has always been said of this act that it was added for the satisfaction of an aesthetic necessity, in order to efface the painful impression of the judgment scene; but it is equally required to satisfy the moral interest of the play by a last proof of the genuineness of this friendship. The helpful judge demands from Bassanio, as a reward, the ring which his wife had forbidden him to give away.

Antonio himself begs him to give the ring, and places his love in the scale to "be valued gainst his wife's commandment" [IV, i, 451]; love and friendship come into a final collision, amusing to the spectator, but most serious to those tested by it: friendship must carry the day, if love is to be genuine. He makes his wife secondary to his friend, because he had obtained his wife only by means of his friend. And he thus proves in an emergency, which placed a painful choice before him, that he was in earnest in those words, that he would sacrifice his wife to his friend in order that his friend might not fall a sacrifice to his wife. He proves in this severe Brutus-like sentence against that which was his dearest treasure that he is worthy of his Portia.

Such are the various characteristics of the noblest circumstances, relations, and intricacies between man and man, between worth and possession. Shylock is the contrast, which we hardly need explain; although, indeed, in this degenerated age of art and morals, lowness and madness have gone so far as to make on the stage a martyr and a hero out of this outcast of humanity. The poet has, it is true, given to this character, in order that he may not sink quite below our interest, a perception of his pariah-condition, and has imputed his outbursts of hatred against Christians and aristocrats partly to genuine grounds of annoyance. Moreover, in his delineation of the usurer he has not been biased by the hatred of the Christians of that time against all that was Jewish, otherwise he would not have imparted to Jessica her lovely character. . . . [Shylock] hates indeed the Christians as Christians, and therefore Antonio who has mistreated him; but he hates him far more because by disinterestedness, by what he calls "low simplicity," he destroys his business, because he lends out money gratis, brings down the rate of usance, and has lost him half a million. Riches have made him the greatest contrast to that which they have rendered Antonio, who throughout appears indifferent, incautious, careless, and generous. Shylock on the other hand is meanly careful, cautiously circumspect, and systematically quiet, ever shufflingly occupied as a genuine son of his race, not disdaining the most contemptible means nor the most contemptible object, speculating in the gaining of a penny, and looking so far into the future and into small results that he sends the greedy Launcelot into Bassanio's service, and against his principle eats at night at Bassanio's house, only for the sake of feeding upon the prodigal Christian. This trait is given to him by the poet in a truly masterly manner, in order subsequently to explain the barbarous condition on which he lends Antonio that fatal sum. Shakespeare after his habit has done the utmost to give probability to this most improbable degree of cruelty, which, according to Bacon, appears in itself a fabulous tragic fiction to every honest mind. Antonio has mistreated him; at the moment of the loan he was as like to mistreat him again; he challenges him to lend it as to an enemy; he almost suggests to him the idea, which the Jew places, as if jestingly, as a condition of the loan; and he, the man railed at for usury, is ready generously to grant it without interest to the man who never borrowed

upon advantage. The same crafty speculation and reckoning, attended at all events with one advantage, underlie this proposal; in one case it has the show of disinterestedness, in the other it promises opportunity for a fearful revenge. If the Jew really had only partially trifled with the idea of such a revenge, the poet does everything to make the jest fearfully earnest. Money had effaced everything human from the heart of this man, he knows nothing of religion and moral law but when he quotes the Bible in justification of his usury; he knows of no mercy but that to which he may be compelled; there is no justice and mercy in his heart nor any of the love of kindred. His daughter is carried away from him; he is furious, not because he is robbed of her, but because she has robbed him in her flight; he would see his daughter dead at his feet, provided that the jewels and gems were in her ears; he would see her 'hearsed' before him, provided the ducats were in her coffin. He regrets the money employed in her pursuit; when he hears of her extravagance, the irretrievable loss of his ducats occasions fresh rage. In this condition he pants for revenge against Antonio even before there is any prospect of it, against the man who by long mortifications had stirred up rage and hatred in the bosom of the Jew, and with whose removal his usury would be without an adversary. Obduracy and callousness continue to progress in him, until at the pitch of his wickedness he falls into the pit he had dug; and then, according to the notions of the age, he learns from the conduct of Antonio and of the Duke that mercy exercised in a Christian spirit produces other actions than those suggested by the unmerciful god of the world, who had imposed upon him its laws alone. This awful picture of the effects of a thirst for possession, however strongly it is exhibited, will not appear as a caricature to him who has met with similar instances in the actual world, in the histories of gamblers and misers.



1849—Charles Knight, from *Studies of Shakespeare*

Charles Knight's *Studies of Shakespeare* contained one of the earliest surveys of historical criticism of Shakespeare, in addition to his own thoughts.

The generosity of Antonio's nature unfitted him for a contest with the circumstances amid which his lot was cast. The Jew says—

In low simplicity,
He lends out money gratis.

He himself says—

I oft deliver'd from his forfeitures
Many that have at times made moan to me.

Bassanio describes him as—

The kindest man,
The best condition'd and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies.

To such a spirit, whose “means are in supposition”—whose ventures are “squander'd abroad”—the curse of the Jew must have sometimes presented itself to his own prophetic mind:—

This is the fool that lends out money gratis.

Antonio and his position are not in harmony. But there is something else discordant in Antonio's mind. This kind friend, this generous benefactor, this gentle spirit, this man “unwearied in doing courtesies,” can outrage and insult a fellow-creature, because he is of another creed:—

SHY.: Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me such a day; another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much monies.

ANT.: I am as like to call thee so again,
To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too.

Was it without an object that Shakspeare made this man, so entitled to command our affections and our sympathy, act so unworthy a part, and not be ashamed of the act? Most assuredly the poet did not intend to justify the indignities which were heaped upon Shylock; for in the very strongest way he has made the Jew remember the insult in the progress of his wild revenge:—

Thou call'dst me dog, before thou hadst a cause:
But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs.

Here, to our minds, is the first of the lessons of charity which this play teaches. Antonio is as much to be pitied for his prejudices as the Jew for his. They had both been nurtured in evil opinions. They had both been

surrounded by influences which more or less held in subjection their better natures. The honoured Christian is as intolerant as the despised Jew. The one habitually pursues with injustice the subjected man that he has been taught to loathe; the other, in the depths of his subtle obstinacy, seizes upon the occasion to destroy the powerful man that he has been compelled to fear. The companions of Antonio exhibit, more or less, the same reflection of the prejudices which have become to them a second nature. They are not so gross in their prejudices as Launcelot, to whom "the Jew is the very devil incarnation." But to Lorenzo, who is about to marry his daughter, Shylock is a "faithless Jew." When the unhappy father is bereft of all that constituted the solace of his home, and before he has manifested that spirit of revenge which might well call for indignation and contempt, he is to the gentlemanly Solanio "the villain Jew," and "the dog Jew." When the unhappy man speaks of his daughter's flight, he is met with a brutal jest on the part of Salarino, who, within his own circle, is the pleasantest of men;—"I, for my part, knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal." We can understand the reproaches that are heaped upon Shylock in the trial scene as something that might come out of the depths of any passion-stirred nature: but the habitual contempt with which he is treated by men who in every other respect are gentle and good-humoured and benevolent is a proof to us that Shakspeare meant to represent the struggle that must inevitably ensue, in a condition of society where the innate sense of justice is deadened in the powerful by those hereditary prejudices which make cruelty virtue; and where the powerless, invested by accident with the means of revenge, say with Shylock, "The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." The climax of this subjection of our higher and better natures to conventional circumstances is to be found in the character of the Jew's daughter. Young, agreeable, intelligent, formed for happiness, she is shut up by her father in a dreary solitude. One opposed to her in creed gains her affections; and the ties which bind the father and the child are broken for ever. But they are not broken without compunction:—

Alack! what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child!

This is nature. But when she has fled from him, robbed him, spent fourscore ducats in one night, given his turquoise for a monkey, and, finally, revealed his secrets, with an evasion of the ties that bound them which makes one's flesh creep,—

When I was *with him*,—

we see the poor girl plunged into the most wretched contest between her duties and her pleasures by the force of external circumstances. We grant, then, to all these our compassion; for they commit injustice ignorantly, and through a force which they cannot withstand. Is the Jew himself not to be measured by the same rule? We believe that it was Shakspeare's intention so to measure him.

When Pope exclaimed of Macklin's performance of Shylock,—

This is the Jew
That Shakspeare drew!

the higher philosophy of Shakspeare was little appreciated. Macklin was, no doubt, from all traditional report of him, perfectly capable of representing the subtlety of the Jew's malice and the energy of his revenge. But it is a question with us whether he perceived, or indeed if any actor ever efficiently represented, the more delicate traits of character that lie beneath these two great passions of the Jew's heart. Look, for example, at the extraordinary mixture of the personal and the national in his dislike of Antonio. He hates him for his gentle manners:—

How like a fawning publican he looks!

He hates him, "for he is a Christian;"—he hates him, for that "he lends out money gratis;"—but he hates him more than all, because

He hates our sacred nation.

It is this national feeling which, when carried in a right direction, makes a patriot and a hero, that assumes in Shylock the aspect of a grovelling and fierce personal revenge. He has borne insult and injury "with a patient shrug;" but ever in small matters he has been seeking retribution:—

I am not bid for love; they flatter me:
But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon
The prodigal Christian.

The mask is at length thrown off—he has the Christian in his power; and his desire of revenge, mean and ferocious as it is, rises into sublimity, through the unconquerable energy of the oppressed man's wilfulness. "I am a Jew: Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer,

as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and, if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." It is impossible, after this exposition of his feelings, that we should not feel that he has properly cast the greater portion of the odium which belongs to his actions upon the social circumstances by which he has been hunted into madness. He has been made the thing he is by society. In the extreme wildness of his anger, when he utters the harrowing imprecation,—“I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin,” the tenderness that belongs to our common humanity, even in its most passionate forgetfulness of the dearest ties, comes across him in the remembrance of the mother of that execrated child:—“Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor.”

It is in the conduct of the trial scene, that, as it appears to us, is to be sought the concentration of Shakspeare's leading idea in the composition of this drama. The merchant stands before the Jew a better and a wiser man than when he called him “dog:”—

I do oppose
My patience to his fury; and am arm'd
To suffer, with a quietness of spirit,
The very tyranny and rage of his.

Misfortune has corrected the influences which, in happier moments, allowed him to forget the gentleness of his nature, and to heap unmerited abuse upon him whose badge was sufferance. The Jew is unchanged. But, if Shakspeare in the early scenes made us entertain some compassion for his wrongs, he has now left him to bear all the indignation which we ought to feel against one “incapable of pity.” But we cannot despise the Jew. His intellectual vigour rises supreme over the mere reasonings by which he is opposed. He defends his own injustice of every-day occurrence—and no one ventures to answer him:—

You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
Which, like your asses, and your dogs, and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them:—Shall I say to you,
Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
Why sweat they under burthens? let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be season'd with such viands? You will answer,
The slaves are ours:—So do I answer you.

The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,
Is dearly bought; 'tis mine, and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!

It would have been exceedingly difficult for the Merchant to have escaped from the power of the obdurate man, so strong in the letter of the law, and so resolute to carry it out by the example of his judges in other matters, had not the law been found here, as in most other cases, capable of being bent to the will of its administrators. Had it been the inflexible thing which Shylock required it to be, a greater injustice would have been committed than the Jew had finally himself to suffer. Mrs. Jameson has very justly and ingeniously described the struggle which Portia had to sustain in abandoning the high ground which she took in her great address to the Jew;—"She maintains at first a calm self-command, as one sure of carrying her point in the end: yet the painful heart-thrilling uncertainty in which she keeps the whole court, until suspense verges upon agony, is not contrived for effect merely; it is necessary and inevitable. She has two objects in view: to deliver her husband's friend, and to maintain her husband's honour by the discharge of his just debt, though paid out of her own wealth ten times over. It is evident that she would rather owe the safety of Antonio to anything rather than the legal quibble with which her cousin Bellario has armed her, and which she reserves as a last resource. Thus all the speeches addressed to Shylock, in the first instance, are either direct or indirect experiments on his temper and feelings. She must be understood, from the beginning to the end, as examining with intense anxiety the effect of her own words on his mind and countenance; as watching for that relenting spirit which she hopes to awaken either by reason or persuasion."

Had Shylock relented after that most beautiful appeal to his mercy, which Shakspeare has here placed as the exponent of the higher principle upon which all law and right are essentially dependent, the real moral of the drama would have been destroyed. The weight of injuries transmitted to Shylock from his forefathers, and still heaped upon him even by the best of those by whom he was surrounded, was not so easily to become light, and to cease to exasperate his nature. Nor would it have been a true picture of society in the sixteenth century had the poet shown the judges of the Jew wholly magnanimous in granting him the mercy which he denied to the Christian. We certainly do not agree with the Duke, in his address to Shylock, that the conditions upon which his life is spared are imposed—

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit.

Nor do we think that Shakspeare meant to hold up these conditions as anything better than examples of the mode in which the strong are accustomed to deal

with the weak. There is still something discordant in this, the real catastrophe of the drama. It could not be otherwise, and yet be true to nature.



**1862—Friedrich Alexander Theodor Kreyssig, from
*Vorlesungen über Shakespeare***

Friedrich Kreyssig (1818–1879) was a Shakespeare scholar and the director of schools in Kassel and Frankfurt, Germany.

[In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare] moulds into one the stories of the daughter of the King of Apulia and the bride of Gianetto, lets the suitors choose the caskets, devotes himself to the noble character of the merchant who sacrifices himself for his friend, takes the light, hot blood of Lorenzo and Jessica into the service of poetic justice,—and then lets the sun of his genius rise upon this chaos of odd entanglements and incredible fictions. Under its beams the sharp outlines of the Piece are softened into lines of beauty, contradictions are reconciled, the little poetic world gains its due proportions, its own perspective and colouring. The Actual is nowhere copied, and yet its inner, essential laws are not violated. The facts indeed belong to the fabulous; all the firmer and the more real is the soil out of which the motives and characters spring; and in applying ourselves to work through the ever-involved details to a point of view commanding the whole, we are compensated at every step for the difficulty of the journey by an abundance of single beauties. It is as if we were seeking the spot where we may see the whole, in some charming, thickly-overgrown park. The path leads us, by artificial windings, through green, fragrant woods. Lovely pictures open on the right and on the left, side-paths are lost in the shrubberies; flowers and fruits tempt us to linger and enjoy them. We have no fatigue, no weariness to fear, but we must take care to mark the way, lest in the beautiful labyrinth we miss our goal. But, metaphor aside, in few of his Pieces does Shakespeare play hide-and-seek with his readers and commentators as happily as here. The wisdom everywhere introduced, cropping out in the action and in the scenes, allures us, in a peculiar degree, to seek ever more curiously for a “moral” in the Play.

. . . *The Merchant of Venice*, in our opinion, was written neither to glorify friendship, nor to condemn the usurer, nor, finally to represent any moral idea, rich and manifold as are the moral allusions which the thoughtful reader carries away with him, together with the aesthetic enjoyment of this work of Art. The essential and definite aspect of life here illustrated admonishes

us that lasting success, sure, practical results can be secured only by a just estimate of things, by prudent use and calm endurance of given circumstances, equally far removed from violent resistance and cowardly concession. Strong feeling and clear, good sense hold the scales in the pervading character of the whole Drama; fortune helps the honest in so far as they boldly and wisely woo its favor; but rigid Idealism, although infinitely more amiable and estimable, shows itself as scarcely less dangerous than hard-hearted selfishness.



**1863—Charles Cowden Clarke. “*The Merchant of Venice*,”
from *Shakespeare-Characters: Chiefly Those Subordinate***

Charles Cowden Clarke was a famous author and Shakespeare scholar. He published several books, including *Shakespeare’s Characters* and *Molière’s Characters*, and lectured for more than 20 years on Shakespeare and other literary subjects.

If I were required to adduce a signal proof of the question that Shakespeare lived beyond his age as a moral and social philosopher, I should not hesitate to ground my proof upon the way in which he has worked out the story of the *Merchant of Venice*, as regards the character, behaviour, and treatment of the most important person in the drama—the Jew.

Shakespeare lived in an age when the general feeling towards the sect in which Shylock was born and educated could scarcely be called a prejudice—’tis too mild a term—it was a rancour, a horror, venting itself in injustice and violence, pillage, expulsion, and, if possible, extermination of the race. I cannot suppose that he was wholly untainted with the antipathy that had been fostered for centuries before him, for he was familiar with the legends of revenge and cruelty that had, at various periods, been perpetrated by Jews, when individual opportunities of gratifying their own natural lust of retaliation had presented themselves. He was familiar with the story of Hugh of Lincoln, and with the murder of the Christian babe in Chaucer’s story of the Nun’s Tale; and he felt that here was atrocity for atrocity committed,—a course that never yet produced, and never will produce, the redress of an original wrong. He belonged to that faith, and throughout his writings he has urged its grand tenet, which inculcates the wickedness as well as the folly of revenge. But Shakespeare, in becoming the social and moral reformer of his species, possessed that point of wisdom in knowing, as it were by instinct, that he who desires to change a master-section in an age’s code, whether it be

civil or social, will not accomplish his end half so readily and effectually by an unconditional and wholesale opposition, as by a partial and rational extenuation. They who aim at reforming the masses,—who desire to lead, must at all events make a show of following. Nothing does the common mind resent more vehemently than the presumption of a single individual professing to be wiser than, and to dictate to, his whole race—the experience of all ages and of every day proves this. It was not for Shakespeare, whose profession it was to provide for the intellectual entertainment of his nation, to perk in their faces his individual opinions: it was much that he did not foster their prejudices, that he did not pander to their vices and inflate their self-love,—and he has not done this. He himself has laid down the principle upon which the drama should be constructed and sustained, and upon no other will it survive.

Upon this, his grand principle, therefore, it appears that the poet, in delineating the character and conduct of Shylock, as well as of his Christian opponents, has, with his large wisdom, preached a homily upon injustice to each sect and denomination of religionists, with a force and perspicuity of argument, as well as knowledge of human nature in its melancholy prejudices, that, to me, as I reflect upon his impartiality, his honest dispensation of justice, as displayed in this drama, place him centuries in advance of his age, and the production itself among the greatest efforts of human genius. If any reader have a doubt of the poet's sense of justice towards that most ill-used tribe, let him read the works of other writers of the period where the character of the Jew has been introduced. It is true, Shylock has been punished for his motive of revenge,—and justly; for it was an atrocious refinement of the passion, claimed and substantiated upon the worst of all unjust grounds—the right of legal justice;—no tyranny being equal to the wrenching of law for penal purposes. It is also true that the injuring party, in the first instance—the Christian—is brought off triumphantly; but in that age, or indeed in any age, the multitude could never have sympathised in a rigid fulfilment of such a compact, or of any compact that should sacrifice the one party for the benefit of the other.

But, after all, who does not sympathise with Shylock? Who, with the most ordinary notions of right and wrong, derives any gratification from the merchant Antonio's being brought off by a quirk of law, and that law an unjust one, which decreed the demolition of the Jew's whole wealth and estate? Shakespeare has made out a strong case for Shylock,—startling, indeed, it must have been to the commonalty in his time. Shylock says the finest things in the play, and he has the advantage in the argument throughout. If the motion of revenge *be* justifiable, (and his own moral code, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," bear him out,) he has all the odds against his adversaries:—

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the

same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge: if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be *by Christian example*? why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

This is strong “lex talionis,” or tooth-for-tooth argument; and strong extenuation for that age; ay, and even for our own very Christian age.

But who shall say that this very play has not been instrumental in breaking down the barriers and mounds of intolerance and persecution for faith’s sake? This noble production has, I believe, among other philosophical appeals, tended to assuage the fury of class and party prejudice, and persecution. Its course through those deep and savage ravines, wherein the stream of class-opinion was confined, and amid which it brawled and raved, tearing and wasting all before it, is gradually becoming diverted; and if it still exist, (which, alas! we all can sadly answer,) it has, nevertheless, mainly expended its force, and is slowly spreading in an inert ooze over the social campaign. The age of Diabolism is passing away; and a spirit of bearing and forbearing—the “doing unto others as we would be done by”—is becoming recognised and largely debated; and only let a question be brought to the debating point, its settlement is at no very remote distance. It is now the few only who hold fast by the integrity of the “right of might;” and the “might” is changing with the many into a calm principle of equitable adjustment.

So much is the leading principle of Christianity doing for us; gradually, but as surely as the progress of matter: and so much, in the pure spirit of its principle, did our Shakespeare anticipate and provide nearly three centuries ago.

It gives me pleasure to find that my feeling of the ethical working of this play is confirmed in a pamphlet lately brought out by Victor Hugo. The eloquent French writer has a beautiful passage in illustration; he says:—“Shylock has gained what is better than his cause—he has gained the cause of an entire people. He has caused the unknown rights of his race to be recognised, and enabled them to prevail by the exemplary condemnation of that exterminatory code which hitherto had kept them in abeyance. . . . Shakespeare has been the judge of peace in this great litigation; he has reconciled the parties by a compromise, which imposes on them reciprocal concessions. In exacting that Shylock should be converted to Christianity, he did not intend to violate the principle, unknown in his day, of liberty of conscience, he has solely desired that Jew and Christian should alike practise that ideal religion which preaches forgiveness of injuries.”

(. . .)

Shylock's "morality" appears to me founded on the great law of wild nature, *ratified by his own national code*; and all his arguments and all his actions are the offspring of the horrible injustice burnt into his own feelings and those of all his tribe: hence his scorpion-like hatred of the Christians; and not merely because one man lent out money without interest, bating the rate of usance in the money-market,—that is an apology; and a natural one for such a man to urge to himself. No; Shakespeare, with his consistent love of justice, has punished him for his cruelty; but, in the persecution exercised towards him by the professors of a sect who are enjoined to "do justice and love mercy," he has read a lesson which ought, if it do not, to last through all time.

And now, for a pleasant wind-up, "talk we of Master Launcelot; or, Master Launcelot Gobbo; or, good Gobbo; or, good Master Launcelot Gobbo;" who is a foster-brother, if not of the same family with Master Launce, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the old editions, Gobbo is called a clown, and in character he is a sort of mongrel between the thoroughbred jester-clown and the cur errand-boy. The vein of humour that distinguishes this class of persons must have been popular in Shakespeare's time, since he has repeated the character on various occasions; and although it has passed away from us, yet it still possesses more than an obsolete interest by reason of its quaint idiosyncrasy. Launcelot is a sort of "arabesque" character in the order of humanity; exhibiting the prevalent feature of likeness, with a portentous flourish of half-meaning, and which passes for embellishment. He is a fellow who will scramble through the world with a "light heart and a thin pair of inexpressibles." His spare diet at the Jew's does not waste his humour, and conscience will scarcely sit heavily on him in the night-watches, since the gravest misdemeanour that can be laid to his charge is that he runs away from a master in whose service he swears he is "famished:"—his master's character of him being—

The patch is kind enough, but a *huge feeder*.

Nevertheless he says—"You may tell every finger I have with my ribs." And yet, with all this inducement, he sedately balances the question between his conscience to remain, and the temptation of Old Scratch to run away; and Old Scratch being right—for once—carries the debate:—

Certainly, my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew, my master. The fiend is at my elbow, and tempts me, saying to me, "Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot, or good Gobbo, or good Launcelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away." My conscience says, "No;

take heed, honest Launcelot; take heed, honest Gobbo;" or, as aforesaid, "honest Launcelot Gobbo; do not run; scorn running with thy heels." Well, the most courageous fiend bids me pack:—"Vial!" says the fiend; "Away!" says the fiend; "for the heavens, rouse up a brave mind," says the fiend, "and run." Well, my conscience, hanging about the neck of my heart, says very wisely to me, "My honest friend, Launcelot, being an honest man's son,"—or rather an honest woman's son; for, indeed, my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste;—well, my conscience says, "Launcelot, budge not." "Budge," says the fiend. "Budge not," says my conscience. Conscience, say I, you counsel well; fiend, say I, you counsel well:—to be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew, my master, who (Heaven bless the mark!) is a kind of devil; and to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation; and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel:—I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment. I will run.



1864—Victor Hugo, from *William Shakespeare*

Victor Hugo, the great French author of *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, also wrote a study of Shakespeare.

A type does not reproduce any man in particular; it cannot be exactly superposed upon any individual; it sums up and concentrates under one human form a whole family of characters and minds. A type is no abridgment: it is a condensation. It is not one, it is all. Alcibiades is but Alcibiades, Petronius is but Petronius, Bassompierre is but Bassompierre, Buckingham is but Buckingham, Fronsac is but Fronsac, Lauzun is but Lauzun; but take Lauzun, Fronsac, Buckingham, Bassompierre, Petronius, and Alcibiades, and bray them in the mortar of the dream, and there issues from it a phantom more real than them all,—Don Juan. Take usurers individually, and no one of them is that fierce merchant of Venice, crying: "Go, Tubal, fee me an officer, bespeak him a fortnight before; I will have the heart of him if he forfeit." Take all the usurers together, from the crowd of them is evolved a total,—Shylock. Sum up usury, you have Shylock. The metaphor of the people, who are never mistaken, confirms unawares the invention of the poet; and while Shakespeare makes Shylock, the popular tongue creates the

bloodsucker. Shylock is the embodiment of Jewishness; he is also Judaism,—that is to say, his whole nation, the high as well as the low, faith as well as fraud; and it is because he sums up a whole race, such as oppression has made it, that Shylock is great. The Jews are, however, right in saying that none of them—not even the mediaeval Jew—is Shylock. Men of pleasure may with reason say that no one of them is Don Juan. No leaf of the orange-tree when chewed gives the flavor of the orange; yet there is a deep affinity, an identity of roots, a sap rising from the same source, a sharing of the same subterranean shadow before life. The fruit contains the mystery of the tree, and the type contains the mystery of the man. Hence the strange vitality of the type.



1872—H. N. Hudson. “*The Merchant of Venice*,” from
Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters

Henry Norman Hudson was an American schoolteacher and popular lecturer on Shakespeare.

If Portia is the beauty of this play, Shylock is its strength. He is a standing marvel of power and scope in the dramatic art; at the same time appearing so much a man of Nature’s making, that we can hardly think of him as a creation of art. In the delineation Shakespeare had no less a task than to fill with individual life and peculiarity the broad, strong outlines of national character in its most revolting form. Accordingly Shylock is a true representative of his nation; wherein we have a pride which for ages never ceased to provoke hostility, but which no hostility could ever subdue; a thrift which still invited rapacity, but which no rapacity could ever exhaust; and a weakness which, while it exposed the subjects to wrong, only deepened their hate, because it kept them without the means or the hope of redress. Thus Shylock is a type of national sufferings, national sympathies, national antipathies. Himself an object of bitter insult and scorn to those about him; surrounded by enemies whom he is at once too proud to conciliate and too weak to oppose; he can have no life among them but money; no hold on them but interest; no feeling towards them but hate; no indemnity out of them but revenge. Such being the case, what wonder that the elements of national greatness became congealed and petrified into malignity? As avarice was the passion in which he mainly lived, the Christian virtues that thwarted this naturally seemed to him the greatest of wrongs.

With these strong national traits are interwoven personal traits equally strong. Thoroughly and intensely Jewish, he is not more a Jew than he is Shylock. In his hard, icy intellectuality, and his dry, mummy-like tenacity of purpose, with

a dash now and then of biting sarcastic humour, we see the remains of a great and noble nature, out of which all the genial sap of humanity has been pressed by accumulated injuries. With as much elasticity of mind as stiffness of neck, every step he takes but the last is as firm as the earth he treads upon. Nothing can daunt, nothing disconcert him; remonstrance cannot move, ridicule cannot touch, obloquy cannot exasperate him: when he has not provoked them, he has been forced to bear them; and now that he does provoke them, he is hardened against them. In word, he may be broken; he cannot be bent.

Shylock is great in every scene where he appears, yet each later scene exhibits him in a new element or aspect of greatness. For as soon as the Poet has set forth one side or phase of his character, he forthwith dismisses that, and proceeds to another. For example, the Jew's cold and penetrating sagacity, as also his malignant and remorseless guile, are finely delivered in the scene with Antonio and Bassanio, where he first solicited for the loan. And the strength and vehemence of passion, which underlies these qualities, is still better displayed, if possible, in the scene with Antonio's two friends, Solanio and Salarino, where he first avows his purpose of exacting the forfeiture. One passage of this scene has always seemed to me a peculiarly idiomatic strain of eloquence, steeped in a mixture of gall and pathos; and I the rather notice it, because of the wholesome lesson which Christian may gather from it. Of course the Jew is referring to Antonio:

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same Winter and Summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge: if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

I have spoken of the mixture of national and individual traits in Shylock. It should be observed further, that these several elements of character are so attuned and fused together, that we cannot distinguish their respective influence. Even his avarice has a smack of patriotism. Money is the only defence of his brethren as well as of himself, and he craves it for their sake as well as his own; feels indeed that wrongs are offered to them in him, and to him in them. Antonio has scorned

his religion, balked him of usurious gains, insulted his person: therefore he hates him as a Christian, himself a Jew; hates him as a lender of money gratis, himself a griping usurer; hates him as Antonio, himself Shylock. Moreover, who but a Christian, one of Antonio's faith and fellowship, has stolen away his daughter's heart, and drawn her into revolt, loaded with his ducats and his precious, precious jewels? Thus his religion, his patriotism, his avarice, his affection, all concur to stimulate his enmity; and his personal hate thus reinforced overcomes for once his greed, and he grows generous in the prosecution of his aim. The only reason he will vouchsafe for taking the pound of flesh is, "if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge"; a reason all the more satisfactory to him, forasmuch as those to whom he gives it can neither allow it nor refute it: and until they can rail the seal from off his bond, all their railings are but a foretaste of the revenge he seeks. In his eagerness to taste that morsel sweeter to him than all the luxuries of Italy, his recent afflictions, the loss of his daughter, his ducats, his jewels, and even the precious ring given him by his departed wife, all fade from his mind. In his inexorable and imperturbable hardness at the trial there is something that makes the blood to tingle. It is the sublimity of malice. We feel that the yearnings of revenge have silenced all other cares and all other thoughts. In his rapture of hate the man has grown superhuman, and his eyes seem all aglow with preternatural malignity. Fearful, however, as is his passion, he comes not off without moving our pity. In the very act whereby he thinks to avenge his own and his brethren's wrongs, the national curse overtakes him. In standing up for the letter of the law against all the pleadings of mercy, he has strengthened his enemies' hands, and sharpened their weapons, against himself; and the terrible Jew sinks at last into the poor, pitiable, heart-broken Shylock.

The inward strain and wrenching of his nature, caused by the revulsion which comes so suddenly upon him, is all told in one brief sentence, which may well be quoted as an apt instance how Shakespeare reaches the heart by a few plain words, when another writer would most likely pummel the ears with a high-strung oration. When it turns out that the Jew's only chance of life stands in the very mercy which he has but a moment before abjured; and when, as the condition of that mercy, he is required to become a Christian, and also to sign a deed conveying to his daughter and her husband all his remaining wealth; we have the following from him:

I pray you, give me leave to go from hence;
I am not well: send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.

Early in the play, when Shylock is bid forth to Bassanio's supper, and Launcelot urges him to go, because "my young master doth expect your reproach," Shylock replies, "So do I his." Of course he expects that reproach through the

bankruptcy of Antonio. This would seem to infer that Shylock has some hand in getting up the reports of Antonio's "losses at sea"; which reports, at least some of them, turn out false in the end. Further than this, the Poet leaves us in the dark as to how those reports grew into being and gained belief. Did he mean to have it understood that the Jew exercised his cunning and malice in plotting and preparing them? It appears, at all events, that Shylock knew they were coming, before they came. Yet I suppose the natural impression from the play is, that he lent the ducats and took the bond, on a mere chance of coming at his wish. But he would hardly grasp so eagerly at a bare possibility of revenge, without using means to turn it into something more. This would mark him with much deeper lines of guilt. Why, then, did not Shakespeare bring the matter forward more prominently? Perhaps it was because the doing so would have made Shylock appear too steep a criminal for the degree of interest which his part was meant to carry in the play. In other words, the health of the drama as a work of *comic* art required his criminality to be kept in the background. He comes very near overshadowing the other characters too much, as it is. And Shylock's character is *essentially tragic*; there is none of the proper timber of comedy in him.



1879—Review of *The Merchant of Venice*, from *The Saturday Review*

The production by Mr. Irving at the Lyceum of *The Merchant of Venice* was eagerly expected and had a double source of certain attraction. The beauties of Miss Ellen Terry's Portia were already known; those of Mr. Irving's Shylock had to be discovered. The character of Shylock has given food for much discussion. It is well known that modern interpretations of the part have differed entirely from those given by the actors who, before the days of Macklin, treated the part from the point of view of the most grotesque comedy; and a good many people have told us how Shakspeare intended it to be treated. Mr. Hawkins, in the current number of the Theatre magazine, has argued very ingeniously and interestingly, from the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* appeared during the excitement caused by the iniquities of the Jew physician, Rodrigo Lopez, that the play was intended by its author as "a plea for toleration towards the Jews." The theory is well worked out and hangs well enough together, since it is admitted that, supposing this to have been Shakspeare's intention, his position as a manager, bound to please his public, hampered him in its execution. But we have always been of opinion that theorizing as to Shakspeare's intentions and the meanings of his characters, however interesting it may be as an exercise of ingenuity, has little practical import. It will hardly seem probable that Shakspeare was in the

habit of sitting down with a set purpose to teach certain moral lessons by means of certain characters, to be rendered in certain definite ways; and yet one might infer from the work of commentators that this was the case. No manager or play-writer could believe that any part would ever be given in precisely the same way by any two actors, except so far as it might be done by servile imitation; and, indeed, to make this possible would involve a degradation of character to caricature. Such a broad rule as that Shylock ought not to be played as a low-comedy part, or that Lear ought not to be from beginning to end a drivelling idiot, may of course be laid down; but one has surely no more right to expect an actor to execute a part in the way imagined to be right by commentators than to demand that a painter should seize just this or that aspect of a great historical subject. The enthusiasm aroused by Mr. Irving's Shylock, even in those who find his rendering of the character differ from their view of it, goes, however, to prove that, as has been suggested, an elaborate analysis of Shakspeare's characters made from studying the text is valuable chiefly as a mental exercise.

Mr. Irving presents Shylock as a picturesque figure, with an air as of a man feeling the bitterness of oppression, and conscious of his own superiority in all but circumstance to the oppressor—a feeling which is finely indicated when, in talk with Antonio, he touches the Christian merchant, and, seeing the action resented, bows deprecatingly, with an affectation of deep humility. He dwells with concentrated bitterness on the expressions of hatred to Antonio in the speech beginning "How like a fawning publican he looks" [I, iii, 41]; and here, in the implacable determination of "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" [I, iii, 46–47], we have the prologue, as it were, to the intense revengefulness of the last scene. It may be noted that since the first night Mr. Irving's performance has gained in leading up consistently to its climax—as consistently, that is, as is possible in the case of a human creature worked on by mixed emotions which sometimes baffle scrutiny. The point which on the first night seemed most striking to many people in the general scope of the actor's representation was that his Shylock was intended to be, before all things, dignified, and it was thought that his acting in the scene when he bewails the loss of his daughter and his ducats was at variance with the rest of the performance. It would perhaps be neither easy nor desirable to make Shylock altogether dignified at this point; but it is not the less true that Mr. Irving has improved the rendering of this scene, and, with it, the whole value of his representation.

To return, however, to Mr. Irving's first scene, we may note specially the bitterness of subdued scorn in the speech beginning "Signior Antonio, many a time and oft in the Rialto you have rated me" [I, iii, 106–107], and the diabolical mockery of good humour with which he proposes the "merry bond." In the next scene in which the Jew appears we have again his hatred and desire for revenge marked strongly in the resolution to go forth to supper "in hate, to feed upon the prodigal Christian" [II, v, 14–15], and to part with Launcelot "to one that I

would have him help to waste his borrowed purse" [II, v, 50–51]; and at the end of the act Mr. Irving has introduced a singularly fine touch of invention. Lorenzo has fled with his stolen bride and her stolen money, and a crowd of masquers has crossed the stage and disappeared over the picturesque bridge with laughter and music. Then Shylock is seen, lantern in hand, advancing, bent in thought; and, as he comes close to his robbed and deserted house, the curtain falls. The effect, however, would, to our thinking, be doubled if the curtain had not fallen for a moment and been raised again just before this appearance of Shylock—if the masquers had disappeared in sight of the audience, and the sounds of revelry had died away in the distance. It may be conjectured that the dropping of the curtain signifies the interval of time which might naturally elapse between the elopement and Shylock's return; but this is, we think, needless. Mr. Irving, in the scene already referred to of the third act, is now less vehement than might have been expected; the Jew's passion seems to have exhausted him, but is not for that the less intense in itself. He is over-weighted with trouble, and the delivery of the words "no ill luck stirring, but what lights o' my shoulders; no sighs, but o' my breathing; no tears, but o' my shedding" [III, i, 94–96], is charged with the pathos of the heaviest grief, and it may be the importance given by the actor's feeling and art to this passage which makes one think that less than its due value is given to the following passage about Leah's ring.

It is, however, in the fourth act, as is fitting, that the actor's complete triumph is attained, and in this there seems to us no room for anything but admiration. From the moment of his entrance to that of his finding his revenge torn from him he is the very incarnation of deadly, resistless hatred. While he listens to the Duke's speech in mitigation he has the horrible stillness and fascination of the rattlesnake. When he answers, his speech is that of a man possessed of his purpose, coldly tenacious of his rights. His object has been gained, and the passion which has been concentrated on it will not deign to waste itself in supporting a position that is unassailable. His scorn of Gratiano's railings seems bitter from habit, and not because he is one whit moved by them. There is something appalling in his aspect when he stands waiting for the long desired moment with the knife in one hand the scales in the other, and his pointing to the bond with the knife as he asks, "Is it so nominated in the bond?" [IV, i, 259] is admirably conceived and executed. When the moment of defeat arrives it strikes him like lightning, but its effect, like that of his expected triumph, is so powerful that it cannot find expression in any accustomed use of gesture or attitude. He is still in his despair as in his victory; but it is the stillness of one suffering instead of threatening death. Where he before inspired terror, he cannot now but command respect for the very awfulness of his downthrow. He leaves the court with a dignity that seems the true expression of his belief in his nation and himself. His mind is occupied with greater matters than the light jeers of Gratiano, and to these jeers he replies with three slow downward movements of the head, which are infinitely

expressive of his acceptance of that which has befallen him and of his power to bear himself nobly under its weight. "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing" [I, i, 114], and what he says at this moment seems empty indeed when answered with this silent eloquence. Nothing could be finer than Mr. Irving's acting at this point, which is the climax of a scene the power and imagination of which can scarcely be rivalled.

The striking excellences of Miss Ellen Terry's Portia are, if anything, bettered by being transferred to a larger stage than that on which they were first presented to a London audience. Every changing phase of the part is rendered with the highest instinct and art, and every change seems natural and easy. The tenderness; the love so fine that it finds no check to open acknowledgment; the wit, the dignity; and in the last scene the desire to be merciful and to inspire mercy, giving way to a just and overwhelming wrath, and followed again by the natural playfulness of the lady who is not the less a great lady because she indulges it, are alike rendered with a skill that one must call perfect. As feats of acting the assumption to Nerissa of a bragging youth's manner, and the exit in the trial scene are specially remarkable; but it is needless to point out in detail the patent beauties of a performance with which we can find no fault.



1881—A. Pietscher, from *Jurist und Dichter*

Pietscher was another German commentator on Shakespeare.

In truth there is nothing genuinely tragic about Shylock [in *The Merchant of Venice*]. Hence the poet called the piece, not *The Jew*, but *The Merchant*, of Venice, and termed it a *Comedy*, not a *Tragedy*. He knew nothing of the modern sympathy with a 'persecuted race,' and surely Shylock was not regarded by him as typical of one. He needed for his drama a *usurer*, not a *Jew*,—confessions of faith or nationalities have nothing to do with the central idea of the piece,—and in accordance with the views of his day he took him very naturally from the race of Jews. Then, to be sure, Shylock became for him *not merely* the 'usurer,' but a mortal and a Jew with human passions and the characteristics of his race.

When the Jew has demanded 'What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?' [IV, i, 89], he must be driven from this pharasaical pretext. It is doing him an unmerited honour to impute to him the will, at any dictate of mercy, to put an end to the contest between his legal rights and the baseness of his claim. For once this flinty heart must be made to feel that he himself may need mercy, and all other means must be exhausted before proceeding to use his

own weapons against him. If Ihering finds Shylock typical, let us, too, find him typical. He typifies all who mercilessly insist upon their rights. All such are admonished that there are other and higher duties than maintaining one's rights, and our jurists are herein instructed who call a legal contest for justice, a duty. . . . Even Shylock demands the law, he 'stands for judgement,'—we have seen how this imposes upon Ihering,—but we know well enough how hollow these high-sounding words are, and that the man cares nothing for the law, but only that by means of it he may feed his hatred, and above all his greed. . . . It is the wretched envy of a business rival that instigates him. And when this 'man of law' invokes 'his deeds upon his head,' and his bold invocation is answered, it is brought home to every one that whoever pursues his own rights in violation of the dictates of 'mercy,' is himself crushed by merciless Right.

I am much afraid that Antonio would have had to succumb, if Ihering had been of his counsel. His only plea was *turpis causa* [malicious motive]; if that would not carry him through, he would have given up his client. But his chance of making this plea good, before the Doge and the Senate, was small; they had probably from the first noticed that in this case an abominable design lay concealed under legal forms, but they could not have known how these latter were to be evaded. I believe that I dare assert that at that time in Venice the consideration that 'a contract against morals was void' was not yet recognized or regarded as a valid plea. For this consideration, or more properly its recognition in law, belongs only to the higher grades of culture, and always even then depends on the prevailing estimate of what is immoral, and its *full* significance and worth will have to remain, I suppose, a pious wish.

Ihering is particularly hostile to the way in which Portia deals with Shylock, which he terms quibbling and pettifogging.

For my part, commend me to our Portia, who, in true woman's fashion, does not allow herself to be in the least disconcerted by the pathetic appeal: 'If you deny me, fie upon your law! There is no force in the decrees of Venice' [IV, i, 101–102]; but steadily regarding the present case alone, takes no thought whatever of any dangerous consequences. . . . If the law of Venice is so bad that it will help a scoundrel to ruin an honest man, it is worthless and does not deserve the least consideration. When a man stands in peril of his life he does not stop to choose his weapon,—the first is the best,—and just so in the present case, it may be permissible to meet chicanery with chicanery, pettifogging with pettifogging. Did it really escape our learned jurist, what the poet with sovereign humor has scourged with joyous jest, that a legal contest, if it is a fight, is subject to all the chances of a fight, and that in it often enough cunning must be overcome by cunning? To observe it may be unwelcome, but it may be observed, nevertheless, every day in courts of justice. A lawsuit is therein like a duel or a fight, and the talk is of 'winners' and 'losers.' When

Portia's plea that flesh and not blood is in the bargain, is met by Ihering with the replication that blood is implied, and that the plea is frivolous, he may be met with the rejoinder that bargains of this nature are to be strictly interpreted, and in doubtful points *against* him in whom the power lay of making the terms of the agreement more explicit. And so it could go on with surrejoinders and rebutters for a good long while. But is it really 'a wretched quibble' which is here used against Shylock? What was the Jew after? The life of Anthonio. There is not the least doubt of that. For the pound of flesh in itself he cared not a jot. Well, then, why did he not have that stated clearly in his bond? He dared not; and hence he used the ambiguous phrase, 'a pound of flesh' [IV, i, 307]. And to his own words he is now kept. Is that unjust?

The discomfiture of the Jew is not the lamentable downfall of a hero; it is the victory of cunning by greater cunning; the rogue is caught in his own snare. No tears need fall; there can be here only the smiling satisfaction of a genuine comedy. But why did not the prudent man anticipate the possibility of the objection which Portia afterwards actually made? . . . The clever man was not clever enough, and a cleverer overcame him.

Nevertheless, it is to be unhesitatingly admitted that the wound which law and right received in the victory over Shylock is not healed,—a wound received at the hands of Shylock, not Portia; it is only skinned over. To overcome cunning with cunning, to take advantage of an opponent's weakness, cannot be termed executing justice. *If* the Jew had been more careful, the Merchant would have been lost. But even this point Shakespeare did not overlook. Through the mouth of Portia he shows [that 'the law hath yet another hold' on Shylock]. Here, then, at last comes forth the violated majesty of abstract law, punishing, crushing him who dared presume to make law aid wrong. The violation of private rights yields place to the deeply outraged State of Venice that now demands atonement for itself. And so the Jew, because he stood upon his law, gets more law than he desired, a different law from that for which he hoped.



1886—Rudolf von Ihering, from *Der Kampf ums Recht*

Rudolf von Ihering (1818–1892) was a German legal scholar and sociologist.

It is hatred and revenge that take Shylock to court to get his pound of flesh from the body of Anthonio, but the words the poet puts into Shylock's mouth are just

as true as from the mouth of any other. It is the language which an injured sense of right always speaks in all times and in all places; the force, not to be shaken, of the conviction that law must for ever remain law; the lofty strain and pathos of a man, conscious that he pleads not merely for his own person, but for the enacted law.

“I crave the law” [IV, i, 206]. In these four words Shakespeare has marked the true relation of law in its subjective sense to law in its objective sense, and the significance of the struggle for law, in a way that no philosopher learned in the law could have done more strikingly. With these words the case is at once changed, and it is not the claim of Shylock which is on trial, but the law of Venice. To what mighty, gigantic proportions does not the figure of Shylock dilate as he utters these words! It is no longer the Jew demanding a pound of flesh; it is Venice herself that knocks at the door of the court,—*his* rights and the rights of *Venice* are one; with *his* rights, the rights of *Venice* are struck down. And when, under the weight of the decision of a Judge who nullifies law by a miserable quibble, Shylock succumbs, and, the butt of bitter scorn and jeers, totters away with trembling knees, who can help feeling that in his person the law of Venice also is broken down, that it is not Shylock the Jew who staggers off, but the typical figure of the Jew of the Middle Ages, that pariah of society, who cried for law in vain? The mighty tragedy of his fate lies not in the denial of his right, but in that he, a Jew of the Middle Ages, has faith in the law,—we might say, just as if he were a Christian!—a faith firm as a rock which nothing can shake, and which the Judge himself sustains; until the catastrophe strikes him like a thunderbolt, shivering his delusion to atoms, and teaching him that he is nothing but the despised mediaeval Jew, whose rights are in the same breath acknowledged, and, by fraud, denied.

[Ihering’s footnote:] It is just here that in my opinion the deep tragic interest lies which Shylock wrings from us. He is indeed cheated out of his rights. So at least must a jurist regard the case. The Poet of course is free to make his own jurisprudence, and we do not regret that Shakespeare has done it here, or rather that he has kept the old story unchanged. But when the jurist undertakes to criticise it, he cannot say otherwise than that the bond was in itself null and void, in that its provisions were contrary to good morals; the Judge, therefore, on this very ground should from the very first have denied it. But since he did not so deny it, since the “second Daniel” acknowledged its validity, it was a wretched quibble, a disgraceful, pettifogging trick, to withhold from the plaintiff the right to draw blood after the right had been granted to take the flesh. Just as well might a Judge acknowledge the right of entry on land, but forbid the right to make footprints, because this was not expressly stipulated. . . .



1894—G. H. Radford. "Shylock," from *Shylock and Others: Eight Studies*

G. H. Radford's *Shylock and Others* included essays on Robin Hood, Hamlet, King Arthur, and Socrates.

It is proposed here to treat the character of Shylock as if Shakspeare was *not* an inspired writer. It is only courteous to make this announcement at the outset, so that those who do not care to read anything based on a hypothesis so gratifying to the profane may skip the remarks that follow. To such readers as remain to us we have to suggest that the people who say, or repeat the saying, that Shylock is a great creation do not for the most part know how great a creation it is. We are so familiar with the Jews as an element not to be ignored in our national life that we are apt to forget that for centuries the wisdom of our ancestors rigidly excluded them from this realm. For two centuries after the Conquest, Jews had indifferent entertainment in this country, and it was during this period that

by way of mild reminders
That he needed coin, the Knight
Day by day extracted grinders
From the howling Israelite.

But in the year 1290 Edward I. expelled them all, and it was not till the Commonwealth that the decree of banishment was rescinded. The late Mr. J. R. Green goes a little too far when he says that from the time of Edward to that of Cromwell no Jew touched English ground. Now and then during these centuries a stray Jew, protected by royal favour or stimulated by hopes of gain, found his way hither; but in Shakspeare's time the business of London (incredible as this may appear) was transacted without any help from the Jews, and it is quite likely that Shakspeare never saw a Jew in his life. It is, of course, possible that he may have met Roderigo Lopez, "a Portingale," who was chief physician to Queen Elizabeth, and was hanged in 1594 on unsatisfactory evidence for attempting to poison her. Sir Edward Coke says, with the venal scurrility of the lawyers of that day, that he was "a perjured and murdering villain and Jewish doctor worse than Judas himself;" but Gabriel Harvey, a contemporary without a professional bias, says that, though descended of Jews, he was himself a Christian. Nearly twenty years earlier Lopez was physician to Leicester, who was patron to Burbage, who was Shakspeare's "fellow," so there are links for those who want to make a chain to prove that the doctor and the dramatist may have come together.

However this may be, in presenting a Jew as one of the chief characters of the *Merchant of Venice*, Shakspeare was introducing a specimen of a species practically unknown both to the author and his audience. The Philistines among the latter no doubt held that the play was designed to inculcate by example the wisdom of our legislators in excluding the Jews from the country and the folly of the Venetians in admitting them. Frenchmen, Welshmen, and other "mountain foreigners" Shakspeare knew, and in depicting Fluellen and Dr. Caius he had numerous models on which to work; but in drawing Shylock he had to exercise his imagination, probably unassisted by any living model. Shylock is therefore a creation in the same sense that Caliban is.

But if there was no living model there was ample material to feed and stimulate imagination. Shakspeare knew the sacred writings of the Hebrews, and the traditional stories of the Jews descended from the Middle Ages. More specially suggestive material was also ready to his hand in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, then newly written, and the *Pecorone* of Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. The former contains a powerful delineation of a Jew turning with the fury of revenge on his Christian oppressors, and the latter has the very story which is followed in most of its details in Shakspeare's play. It is not known that there was any Elizabethan English translation of the *Pecorone*, and we are driven to the conclusion that Shakspeare had (notwithstanding his small Latin and less Greek) a facility for reading Italian, or that he had the help of a friend who had this facility. This presents an alternative that has no doubt been discussed by the New Shakspeare Society, and this Society can probably inform any inquiring Hebrew whether Shakspeare read Italian, and why, among Shakspeare relics, an edition of the *Pecorone* (Milano, 1558) with Shakspeare's autograph thriftily inscribed on the title page is not yet forthcoming, and when it may be expected; and who among the poet's friends read the *Pecorone*, and which of them translated at sight for his dramatisation.

At any rate, Shakspeare had all this material out of which to construct his Shylock, and he, of course, used his material in his own masterly way. The marauding mind which possesses the English dramatist who has got hold of a likely foreign original was fully developed in Shakspeare, and no useful detail in Giovanni's story was left unappropriated. The old Jew, however, is not a portrait, but a kind of grim conjecture. If Shakspeare had had the advantage of intercourse with the Jews now possessed by every playwright and journalist he would have turned out something more lifelike and (possibly) more amiable.

But it seems that Shakspeare's aim in the *Merchant of Venice* was not by any means solely to hold the mirror up to nature. This is one way of delighting an audience, but not the only one. To blend the agreeable with the surprising is

an ancient prescription for producing the same result, and this is done in the character of Antonio, the Christian merchant who had scruples about usury and lent out his money gratis. Now, though Shakspeare did not know the Jews, he well knew the City, and that he had the City largely represented in his audience. *They* knew the Christian merchant, but the Christian merchant with these scruples was entirely new to them, and no doubt delighted them hugely. The statute-book shows us clearly what was the practice of merchants at this time. *An Acte against Usurie*, 13 Eliz. c. 8, declares that "all usurie being forbidden by the laws of God, is sinne and detestable," but it does not make it illegal. It only declares all contracts void upon which "there shall be reserved or taken above the rate of X. pounds for the hundred for one yere." Recognising the hardness of heart of the Christian merchant, the legislature, while licensing the sin, merely sought to limit the evils of it by fixing ten per cent, as the maximum rate of interest. A house half-filled with usurers and borrowers was highly amused by the wildly improbable character of Antonio.

But the *rôle* of Portia is still more improbable, and consequently more diverting. Allowing everything that can be demanded and granted for the indulgence of dramatic illusion, the appearance of this young lady in a Court of Justice, which (to use an Americanism) she proceeds to "run" herself, is an incident which the audience felt to be impossible, and enjoyed none the less on that account. The incident was at least as impossible in Shakspeare's time (or Giovanni's, for that matter) as it is now.

Imagine Mary Anderson, primed with lines written for her (alas, it is difficult to imagine who could write them!), having borrowed Mr. Lockwood's wig and gown, sweeping into the Lord Chief Justice's Court, gently taking the case of the injured defendant out of the hands of the benign Chief who looks on amazed but quiescent while the extortionate plaintiff is not only nonsuited but committed for trial at the Old Bailey—imagine all this, and you have a modern counterpart of the glorious day's work of the breezy Portia. Here is not realism but something much rarer and more delightful. This is not a digression, as the learned (and courteous) reader may suppose. On the contrary it is intended to lead him by the pleasantest route to the conclusion that Shylock himself is not realistic, is not, as has been foolishly said, a libel on the Jews, but a personage whose character is determined by the requirements of the plot. Shakspeare wanted a villain vindictive enough to endanger the life and peace of the virtuous members of the cast, but not sufficiently heroic to interfere with a happy *dénoûement*, and he devised just such a villain in Shylock.

Let us consider the character in broad outlines. He is a great and prosperous merchant, and he has many and excellent reasons for the hatred of Antonio, which has become his ruling passion. The two are alien in race. This is something. The saying of the old Meynell that foreigners are fools is quoted with approval by the Christian philosopher Johnson. But it is a second-rate patriotism which

dubs a foreigner only a fool. Philologists tell us that *hostis* originally meant a foreigner; but we only knew it at school as an enemy. It is all the same. This alone was reason enough for hatred, but there were other reasons. Antonio was a Christian, and the follower of one religion is ready to believe evil of the follower of another. "Some Jews are wicked, as *all* Christians are," says Marlowe's Jew of Malta. Moreover, the Jews were but tolerated in Venice for commercial reasons, and subject to persecution and indignity which only stopped short at the point where such treatment would have deprived the Republic of the commercial advantages obtained through the Jews. Difference of race, difference of religion, persecution—this is enough to make Shylock hate *any* Christian at sight. But there were special reasons for hating Antonio. It seems he had been accustomed to spit on Shylock. This is a practice which may violently stimulate even a slight antipathy. Antonio, too, was a rival in business, and while we do not forget the possibility of a Jewish reader, it is no breach of confidence to confess that fellow-Christians have quarrelled under such circumstances. The most galling incident of the rivalry appears to be that Antonio had cut down Shylock's profits as a usurer by lending money without interest, and so "brought down the rate of usance." We presume this is sound political economy: and there seems to be a suppressed proposition that the larger the number of borrowers at interest the higher the rate the lenders can exact. It does not matter, for an antipathy founded on an economic heresy is likely to be quite as strong as if based on a perfectly orthodox doctrine. The conclusion does not seem as obvious as that drawn by Launcelot Gobbo, who found that if Lorenzo converted his Jewish bride to Christianity, he would be damned for raising the price of pork.

This *is* a digression. To return to Shylock's antipathy. Besides the general grounds above hinted at and those arising from personal reasons, Shylock was at the moment irritated by events for which Antonio was not to blame. His daughter Jessica had not only eloped in a tailor-made suit¹ with a detrimental Christian, but had carried with her quite a cargo of jewels and ready-money, and the young couple were living in Genoa on Shylock's money at the gorgeous rate of 80 ducats a night. With this respectable, old-established, and one may almost say reasonable hatred intensified by Jessica's conduct, Shylock suddenly finds himself in a position to take revenge. Antonio had made default in payment on the day, and Shylock is entitled to exact the forfeiture, "a pound of flesh to be by him cut off nearest the merchant's heart." He can kill his enemy, as he understands the laws of Venice, without incurring any risk of injury to himself. The temptation was great. There are several Christian merchants of blameless character (we mean they have never been in prison) at whose mercy we should be very sorry to be under similar circumstances. Shylock was ready to strike the blow. It was not murder, as he was advised, but justice. He could have Antonio's life without

as much as standing an action for assault and battery. It was true that by so doing he would not recover the 3000 ducats secured by the bond, but he was ready to submit to this loss and even to forego the handsome profit held out by Antonio's friends who offered thrice the principal for his release. Shylock was avaricious, but his revenge rises superior to his avarice: he will not be balked of his revenge for money. This is the noblest point in his not very noble character. He refuses the cash and stands for the law. But it is always risky to rely on a strict view of the law when the court is dead against you on the merits. The judge, or even the jury, will lay hold of some quibble to justify a finding adverse to a suitor of whose conduct they disapprove. Such a quibble was raised by Portia on the language of the bond. It had not been drawn by an Equity draughtsman of the old school, in which case it would no doubt have stipulated that the creditor was entitled not only to the pound of flesh, but also to the epidermis, cartilages, arteries, veins, capillaries, blood or sanguinary fluid, and all other appurtenances thereunto belonging or therewith usually held and enjoyed. This careless draughtsmanship enabled the Court, in accordance with its inclinations, to hold that Shylock was entitled to no drop of blood. The plaintiff was baffled by this quibble. By shedding a drop of blood he would break the law and commit a capital offence. He was not prepared to run this risk. His desire for revenge is strong enough to make him unusually indifferent to money, but not strong enough to make him regardless of his life. This is not the revenge of tragedy, and Shylock is not a hero, though the vanity of certain modern actors has exalted the character to such a pitch that they cannot "climb down" in the fourth act without being ridiculous. But Shakspeare's Shylock climbs down without absurdity and with reasonable alacrity. He is the serviceable villain, serviceable, that is, for the action of the play, who has frightened the ladies by whetting his knife, and now gratifies them by dropping (reluctantly) all thoughts of bloodshed. Antonio must be saved. The pains and penalties with which Shylock is threatened by the Bench effectually secure this end. Then comes retribution. Both the life and fortune of Shylock, according to the laws of Venice, are held to be forfeited. But it would be distressing to kill him, and his life is spared on condition that he becomes a Christian and gives up the bulk of his fortune. Shylock accepts the terms imposed on him. He appears only to retain a life interest in half his property, and the whole of it is to go on his death to the gentleman who lately stole his daughter. Shylock leaves the stage promising to execute the necessary documents, and we hear of him no more. What became of him subsequently is merely matter of conjecture, but his conduct in court justifies us in inferring that he accepted the inevitable and made the best of it. Had he lived in our day we might conjecturally sketch his subsequent career thus: His baptism was performed with pomp

in a historic temple by a distinguished ecclesiastic who knows that there is Eternal Hope for Jews if not for publishers. His marriage later on with a Dowager Countess who largely endowed the Society for Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews made his social position impregnable, and the money he subsequently made by publishing a financial newspaper far exceeded anything ever acquired by him in his old profession of usury.

NOTES

1. "*Salarino*: I for my part knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal."—Act iii. Sc. 1.



1898—Georg Brandes, from *William Shakespeare: A Critical Study*

Georg Brandes, an important Danish critic, wrote extensively on Shakespeare's plays.

We learn from Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (iv. I) that the traveller who arrived in Venice first rented apartments, and then applied to a Jew dealer for furniture. If the traveller happened to be a poet, he would thus have an opportunity, which he lacked in England, of studying the Jewish character and manner of expression. Shakespeare seems to have availed himself of it. The names of the Jews and Jewesses who appear in *The Merchant of Venice* he has taken from the Old Testament. We find in Genesis (x. 24) the name Salah (Hebrew Schelach; at that time appearing as the name of a Maronite from Lebanon: Scialac) out of which Shakespeare has made Shylock; and in Genesis (xi. 29) there occurs the name Iscah (she who looks out, who spies), spelt "Jeska" in the English translations of 1549 and 1551, out of which he made his Jessica, the girl whom Shylock accuses of a fondness for "clambering up to casements" and "thrusting her head into the public street" to see the masquers pass.

Shakespeare's audiences were familiar with several versions of the story of the Jew who relentlessly demanded the pound of flesh pledged to him by his Christian debtor, and was at last sent empty and baffled away, and even forced to become a Christian. The story has been found in Buddhist legends (along with the adventure of the Three Caskets, here interwoven with it), and many believe that it came to Europe from India. It may, however, have migrated in just the opposite direction. Certain it is, as one of Shakespeare's authorities points out, that the right to take payment in the flesh of the insolvent debtor was admitted in the Twelve Tables of ancient Rome. As a matter of fact, this

antique trait was quite international, and Shakespeare has only transferred it from old and semi-barbarous times to the Venice of his own day.

The story illustrates the transition from the unconditional enforcement of strict law to the more modern principle of equity. Thus it afforded an opening for Portia's eloquent contrast between justice and mercy, which the public understood as an assertion of the superiority of Christian ethics to the Jewish insistence on the letter of the law.

One of the sources on which Shakespeare drew for the figure of Shylock, and especially for his speeches in the trial scene, is *The Orator* of Alexander Silvayn. The 95th Declamation of this work bears the title: "Of a Jew who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian." Since an English translation of Silvayn's book by Anthony Munday appeared in 1596, and *The Merchant of Venice* is mentioned by Meres in 1598 as one of Shakespeare's works, there can scarcely be any doubt that the play was produced between these dates.

In *The Orator* both the Merchant and the Jew make speeches, and the invective against the Jew is interesting in so far as it gives a lively impression of the current accusations of the period against the Israelitish race:—

But it is no marvaile if this race be so obstinat and cruell against us, for they doe it of set purpose to offend our God whom they have crucified: and wherefore? Because he was holie, as he is yet so reputed of this worthy Turkish nation: but what shall I say? Their own bible is full of their rebellion against God, against their Priests, Judges, and leaders. What did not the verie Patriarks themselves, from whom they have their beginning? They sold their brother . . . &c.

Shakespeare's chief authority, however, for the whole play was obviously the story of Gianetto, which occurs in the collection entitled *Il Pecorone*, by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, published in Milan in 1558.

A young merchant named Gianetto comes with a richly laden ship to a harbour near the castle of Belmonte, where dwells a lovely young widow. She has many suitors, and is, indeed, prepared to surrender her hand and her fortune, but only on one condition, which no one has hitherto succeeded in fulfilling, and which is stated with mediaeval simplicity and directness. She challenges the aspirant, at nightfall, to share her bed and make her his own; but at the same time she gives him a sleeping-draught which plunges him in profound unconsciousness from the moment his head touches the pillow, so that at daybreak he has forfeited his ship and its cargo to the fair lady, and is sent on his way, despoiled and put to shame.

This misfortune happens to Gianetto; but he is so deeply in love that he returns to Venice and induces his kind foster-father, Ansaldo, to fit out another ship for him. But his second visit to Belmonte ends no less disastrously, and in

order to enable him to make a third attempt his foster-father is forced to borrow 10,000 ducats from a Jew, upon the conditions which we know. By following the advice of a kindly-disposed waiting-woman, the young man this time escapes danger, becomes a happy bridegroom, and in his rapture forgets Ansaldo's obligation to the Jew. He is not reminded of it until the very day when it falls due, and then his wife insists that he shall instantly start for Venice, taking with him a sum of 100,000 ducats. She herself presently follows, dressed as an advocate, and appears in Venice as a young lawyer of great reputation, from Bologna. The Jew rejects every proposition for the deliverance of Ansaldo, even the 100,000 ducats. Then the trial-scene proceeds, just as in Shakespeare; Gianetto's young wife delivers judgment, like Portia; the Jew receives not a stiver, and dares not shed a drop of Ansaldo's blood. When Gianetto, in his gratitude, offers the young advocate the whole 100,000 ducats, she, as in the play, demands nothing but the ring which Gianetto has received from his wife; and the tale ends with the say gay unravelling of the sportive complication, which gives Shakespeare the matter for his fifth act. (. . .)

The great value of *The Merchant of Venice* lies in the depth and seriousness which Shakespeare has imparted to the vague outlines of character presented by the old stories, and in the ravishing moonlight melodies which bring the drama to a close.

In Antonio, the royal merchant, who, amid all his fortune and splendour, is a victim to melancholy and spleen induced by forebodings of coming disaster, Shakespeare has certainly expressed something of his own nature. Antonio's melancholy is closely related to that which, in the years immediately following, we shall find in Jaques in *As You Like It*, in the Duke in *Twelfth Night*, and in Hamlet. It forms a sort of mournful undercurrent to the joy of life which at this period is still dominant in Shakespeare's soul. It leads, after a certain time, to the substitution of dreaming and brooding heroes for those men of action and resolution who, in the poet's brighter youth, had played the leading parts in his dramas. For the rest, despite the princely elevation of his nature, Antonio is by no means faultless. He has insulted and baited Shylock in the most brutal fashion on account of his faith and his blood. We realise the ferocity and violence of the mediaeval prejudice against the Jews when we find a man of Antonio's magnanimity so entirely a slave to it. And when, with a little more show of justice, he parades his loathing and contempt for Shylock's money-dealings, he strangely (as it seems to us) overlooks the fact that the Jews have been carefully excluded from all other means of livelihood, and have been systematically allowed to scrape together gold in order that their hoards may always be at hand when circumstances render it convenient to plunder them. Antonio's attitude towards Shylock cannot possibly be Shakespeare's own. Shylock cannot understand Antonio, and characterises him (iii. 3) in the words—

This is the fool that lent out money gratis.

But Shakespeare himself did not belong to this class of fools. He has endowed Antonio with an ideality which he had neither the resolution nor the desire to emulate. Such a man's conduct towards Shylock explains the outcast's hatred and thirst for revenge. (. . .)

The central figure of the play, however, in the eyes of modern readers and spectators, is of course Shylock, though there can be no doubt that he appeared to Shakespeare's contemporaries a comic personage, and, since he makes his final exit before the last act, by no means the protagonist. In the humaner view of a later age, Shylock appears as a half-pathetic creation, a scapegoat, a victim; to the Elizabethan public, with his rapacity and his miserliness, his usury and his eagerness to dig for another the pit into which he himself falls, he seemed, not terrible, but ludicrous. They did not even take him seriously enough to feel any real uneasiness as to Antonio's fate, since they all knew beforehand the issue of the adventure. They laughed when he went to Bassanio's feast "in hate, to feed upon the prodigal Christian;" they laughed when, in the scene with Tubal, he suffered himself to be bandied about between exultation over Antonio's misfortunes and rage over the prodigality of his runaway daughter; and they found him odious when he exclaimed, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear!" He was, simply as a Jew, a despised creature; he belonged to the race which had crucified God himself; and he was doubly despised as an extortionate usurer. For the rest, the English public—like the Norwegian public so lately as the first half of this century—had no acquaintance with Jews except in books and on the stage. From 1290 until the middle of the seventeenth century the Jews were entirely excluded from England. Every prejudice against them was free to flourish unchecked.

Did Shakespeare in a certain measure share these religious prejudices, as he seems to have shared the patriotic prejudices against the Maid of Orleans, if, indeed, he is responsible for the part she plays in Henry VI.? We may be sure that he was very slightly affected by them, if at all. Had he made a more undisguised effort to place himself at Shylock's standpoint, the censorship, on the one hand, would have intervened, while, on the other hand, the public would have been bewildered and alienated. It is quite in the spirit of the age that Shylock should suffer the punishment which befalls him. To pay him out for his stiff-necked vengefulness, he is mulcted not of the sum he lent Antonio, but half his fortune, and is finally, like Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, compelled to change his religion. The latter detail gives something of a shock to the modern reader. But the respect for personal conviction, when it conflicted with orthodoxy, did not exist in Shakespeare's time. It was not very long since the Jews had been forced to choose between kissing the crucifix and mounting the faggots; and in Strasburg, in 1349, nine hundred of them had in one day chosen the latter alternative. It

is strange to reflect, too, that just at the time when, on the English stage, one Mediterranean Jew was poisoning his daughter, and another whetting his knife to cut his debtor's flesh, thousands of heroic and enthusiastic Hebrews in Spain and Portugal, who, after the expulsion of the 300,000 at the beginning of the century, had secretly remained faithful to Judaism, were suffering themselves to be tortured, flayed, and burnt alive by the Inquisition, rather than forswear the religion of their race.

It is the high-minded Antonio himself who proposes that Shylock shall be forced to become a Christian. This is done for his good; for baptism opens to him the possibility of salvation after death; and his Christian antagonists, who, by dint of the most childish sophisms, have despoiled him of his goods and forced him to forswear his God, can still pose as representing the Christian principle of mercy, in opposition to one who has taken his stand upon the Jewish basis of formal law.

That Shakespeare himself, however, in nowise shared the fanatical belief that a Jew was of necessity damned, or could be saved by compulsory conversion, is rendered clear enough for the modern reader in the scene between Launcelot and Jessica (iii. 5), where Launcelot jestingly avers that Jessica is damned. There is only hope for her, and that is, that her father may not be her father:—

Jessica: That were a kind of bastard hope, indeed: so the sins of my mother should be visited upon me.

Launcelot: Truly then I fear you are damned both by father and mother: thus when I shun Scylla, your father, I fall into Charybdis, your mother. Well, you are gone both ways.

Jes.: I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian.

Laun.: Truly, the more to blame he: we were Christians enow before; e'en as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs: if we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.

And Jessica repeats Launcelot's saying to Lorenzo:—

He tells me flatly, there is no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says, you are no good member of the commonwealth, for, in converting Jews to Christians, you rise the price of pork.

No believer would ever speak in this jesting tone of matters that must seem to him so momentous.

It is none the less astounding how much right in wrong, how much humanity in inhumanity, Shakespeare has succeeded in imparting to Shylock. The spectator

sees clearly that, with the treatment he has suffered, he could not but become what he is. Shakespeare has rejected the notion of the atheistically-minded Marlowe, that the Jew hates Christianity and despises Christians as fiercer money-grubbers than himself. With his calm humanity, Shakespeare makes Shylock's hardness and cruelty result at once from his passionate nature and his abnormal position; so that, in spite of everything, he has come to appear in the eyes of later times as a sort of tragic symbol of the degradation and vengefulness of an oppressed race.

There is not in all Shakespeare a greater example of trenchant and incontrovertible eloquence than Shylock's famous speech (iii. I):—

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do not we bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

But what is most surprising, doubtless, is the instinct of genius with which Shakespeare has seized upon and reproduced racial characteristics, and emphasised what is peculiarly Jewish in Shylock's culture. While Marlowe, according to his custom, made his Barabas revel in mythological similes, Shakespeare indicates that Shylock's culture is founded entirely upon the Old Testament, and makes commerce his only point of contact with the civilisation of later times. All his parallels are drawn from the Patriarchs and the Prophets. With what unction he speaks when he justifies himself by the example of Jacob! His own race is always "our sacred nation," and he feels that "the curse has never fallen upon it" until his daughter fled with his treasures. Jewish, too, is Shylock's respect for, and obstinate insistence on, the letter of the law, his reliance upon statutory rights, which are, indeed, the only rights society allows him, and the partly instinctive, partly defiant restriction of his moral ideas to the principle of retribution. He is no wild animal; he is no heathen who simply gives the rein to his natural instincts; his hatred is not ungoverned; he restrains it with its legal rights, like a tiger in its cage. He is entirely lacking, indeed, in the freedom and serenity, the easy-going, light-hearted carelessness which characterises a ruling caste in its virtues and its vices, in its charities as in its prodigalities; but he has

not a single twinge of conscience about anything that he does; his actions are in perfect harmony with his ideals.

Sundered from the regions, the social forms, the language, in which his spirit is at home, he has yet retained his Oriental character. Passion is the kernel of his nature. It is his passion that has enriched him; he is passionate in action, in calculation, in sensation, in hatred, in revenge, in everything. His vengefulness is many times greater than his rapacity. Avaricious though he be, money is nothing to him in comparison with revenge. It is not until he is exasperated by his daughter's robbery and flight that he takes such hard measures against Antonio, and refuses to accept three times the amount of the loan. His conception of honour may be unchivalrous enough, but, such as it is, his honour is not to be bought for money. His hatred of Antonio is far more intense than his love for his jewels; and it is this passionate hatred, not avarice, that makes him the monster he becomes.

From this Hebrew passionateness, which can be traced even in details of diction, arises, among other things, his loathing of sloth and idleness. To realise how essentially Jewish is this trait we need only refer to the so-called Proverbs of Solomon. Shylock dismisses Launcelot with the words, "Drones hive not with me." Oriental, rather than specially Jewish, are the images in which he gives his passion utterance, approaching, as they so often do, the parable form. (See, for example, his appeal Jacob's cunning, or the speech in vindication of his claim, which begins, "You have among you many a purchased slave.") Specially Jewish, on the other hand, is the way in which this ardent passion throughout employs its images and parables in the service of a curiously sober rationalism, so that a sharp and biting logic, which retorts every accusation with interest, is always the controlling force. This sober logic, moreover, never lacks dramatic impetus. Shylock's course of thought perpetually takes the form of question and answer, a subordinate but characteristic trait which appears in the style of the Old Testament, and reappears to this day in representations of primitive Jews. One can feel through his words that there is a chanting quality in his voice; his movements are rapid, his gestures large. Externally and internally, to the inmost fibre of his being, he is a type of his race in its degradation.

Shylock disappears with the end of the fourth act in order that no discord may mar the harmony of the concluding scenes. By means of his fifth act, Shakespeare dissipates any preponderance of pain and gloom in the general impression of the play.



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



One of the most creative examinations of the *The Merchant of Venice* appears in “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” written in 1913 by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud did not, however, “psychoanalyze” any of the play’s characters in an effort to explain their behavior. Freud instead attempted to discover the underlying value of the lead in the famous scene in which Portia’s suitors must choose among the three caskets containing lead, silver, and gold. Freud, in effect, asks why lead trumps gold in Belmont. In the course of his analysis, Freud sees a similarity between Portia’s three caskets and King Lear’s three daughters, developing what he sees as the corresponding characteristics of lead and Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia. For Freud, they both represent the silence of death.

Other critics in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as E. E. Stoll and John Middleton Murry, took pains to overturn the sympathetic portrayal of Shylock that Henry Irving made popular toward the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Stoll argues that Shylock was intended to be a villain, which is clear from the attitude of “the good characters” in the play. He says that “to Shylock’s reproaches the admirable Antonio . . . praised and honored by every one but Shylock, retorts, secure in his virtue, that he is just as like to spit on him and spurn him again.” Stoll’s idea was supported in the late twentieth century by Harold Bloom, who calls Shylock “Shakespeare’s comic villain” and finds his portrayal so disturbing that “only an audience at ease with its own anti-Semitism could tolerate a responsible and authentic presentation of what Shakespeare actually wrote.”

John Middleton Murry objected to the denigration of the other characters, Shylock’s adversaries. He claims, “If we reflect in cold blood on Antonio’s reported behaviour to Shylock, we are in danger of thinking that Shylock’s intended revenge was not excessive. But we are not meant or allowed to reflect upon it.” Murry further asserts that critics of the play must not seek “for psychological motives where none were intended.”

A similar view is apparent in H. B. Charlton’s 1938 essay “Shakespeare’s Jew,” in which he writes “Shakespeare, it would seem, meant to make, and

never doubted he had made, a Shylock fit only for exciting execration and opprobrium. . . . Shakespeare the Elizabethan, the man of his day, addicted to the thoughts, the prejudices, and the passions of his fellows, felt like them a bitter hatred for the Jews." For Charlton, the puzzle of the play emerges from the fact that his experience of the work does not square with these a priori assumptions. "It is certain," he writes, "that the intentions of the author were in many ways defeated. Shylock, Antonio, Portia, and Jessica do not stand forth as they were meant to do. The parts they were called upon to play by their author's prejudices did not square with those the dramatist worked out for them." Charlton postulates an "unconscious dramatic instinct" in Shakespeare, a "dual personality," which made the characters he created different from the ones he intended to portray (129). Unlike Stoll and Murry, Charlton seems to be troubled by the text before him.

Another perspective can be seen in such critiques as those of Harley Granville-Barker and C. L. Barber. Writing in 1930, Granville-Barker begins consideration of the play asserting, "*The Merchant of Venice* is a fairy tale. There is no more reality in Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and the Beanstalk." Barber, writing in 1959, examines the play as it fits and deviates from what he called "festive comedy." Festive comedy derives from theatrical representations of social rituals which "celebrate life's powers" through the interplay of "revelers and kill-joys, wits and butts, insiders and intruders." Given these conditions, Barber fits the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* into the most appropriate roles.

When genre convention is made to predominate over psychology, as when E. M. W. Tillyard writes, in 1965, "Shakespeare was committed to making his play a comedy as well as a fairy romance" (183), the problem of the human evaluation of Shylock and the rest of the characters can be avoided. John Russell Brown, in "Love's Wealth and the Judgment of *The Merchant of Venice*," in 1957, concludes that

Shakespeare does not enforce a moral in this play . . . but as the action ends in laughter and affection at Belmont we know that each couple, in their own way, have found love's wealth. . . . [A]s they make free with Shylock's commercial wealth, we remember that they lacked the full measure of charity towards one who, through his hatred and possessiveness, had got his choice of that which he deserved. *The Merchant of Venice* presents in human and dramatic terms Shakespeare's ideal of love's wealth, its abundant and sometimes embarrassing riches; it shows how love is gained and possessed by giving freely and joyfully; it shows also how destructive the opposing possessiveness can become.

Russell Brown concludes that “such judgments are not made explicit in the play. . . . But, consciously or unconsciously, they were in Shakespeare’s mind as he wrote the play . . . and, it therefore follows . . . consciously or unconsciously, [they] impress themselves on our minds; they are the patterns of the dance that we are appreciating and in which, imaginatively, we participate.”

Applying his own type of creative interpretation, W. H. Auden, one of the foremost English poets of the century, sought to understand *The Merchant of Venice* by referring to historical research conducted by the twentieth-century sociologist Benjamin Nelson. Auden considers the play in light of Nelson’s scholarship regarding usury, or moneylending, in the Middle Ages; the role Jews played in society as moneylenders; and the social consequences of the ban on lending money at interest, which appears in the Bible (Deuteronomy 23:19–20). Another distinguished critic, Northrop Frye, suggested that Shylock represented the law as exemplified in the Old Testament, whereas Portia represented mercy as exemplified by the New Testament. On the other hand, the later critic A. D. Nuttall pointed out that the play exemplifies Shakespeare’s way of complicating, or working against, such standard archetypes, though “without ever overthrowing” them.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, many critics attempted to complicate existing notions of the play’s characters even further. The title of Richard A. Levin’s 1985 essay “Odd Man Out in Venice,” with its suggestive allusion to an unstated sexual undercurrent in Antonio’s psychological makeup and with its ambiguous reference to both Antonio and Shylock, who each fit its description, signals a new analytic strategy. Graham Bradshaw continues this way of thinking about the play in his 1987 essay “Appraisal: Venice’s Jew and Belmont’s Moor,” in *Shakespeare’s Skepticism*, which argues:

Instead of accepting these lovers’ valuations of each other, or endorsing that clannish version of tunnel vision which prevents Jews and Christians from recognizing their common humanity, we are continually prompted to make appraisals more complex and nuanced than any the characters can manage. The interrogative relation between the play’s different parts suggest why it could be described as a comedy of appraisal—that is a comedy concerned with diverse acts of valuing.

In the 1990s, two important book-length studies appeared. James Shapiro’s *Shakespeare and the Jews* examines Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews and Judaism in particular in order to enhance understanding and guide interpretations of the play. In his book *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*, John Gross traces how the character has evolved over the years for both actors and critics, in order to illuminate the origins of accepted versions and visions.

Historical Note:

The Merchant of Venice in Nazi Germany

When I saw [*The Merchant of Venice*] as a boy I had no feelings about Jews, for I had never met any. Now I think the plot worthy of Hitler—the plot, I say, not the play. In considering *The Merchant of Venice*, we must distinguish sharply between the plot and the play. It was Shakespeare himself who lifted Shylock above the plot.

George Sampson, 1947 (Gross 145)

Although Sampson had both the humanity and the literary sophistication—he was the author of *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*—to distinguish between the plot and the play, he was definitely in the minority. It was in Germany during the Third Reich that the distinction was most thoroughly obliterated. The Nazis did not ban Shakespeare as they did all other non-German literature. In fact, they claimed, through the admittedly great translations of his works primarily by Schlegel and Tieck, to have rescued him. *The Merchant of Venice* was a favorite of the Nazis. In 1933, the year of Hitler's accession, there were 20 separate productions of the play. Between 1934 and 1939, there were 30 more separate productions. The intermarriage between Jessica and Lorenzo, an act banned by the Nuremberg laws of 1935, was variously circumvented: Sometimes Jessica was portrayed as Shylock's illegitimate child, the child of his wife's adultery with a Christian.

The most odious production of the play was performed in May 1943 in Vienna at the Burgtheater, at the height of the extermination of European Jewry. It was ordered staged by the Gauleiter of Vienna, Baldur von Schirach, who had boasted eight months earlier that he saw the deportation of the Jews "as a positive contribution to European culture," because, he asserted, "every Jew active in Europe is a danger to European culture." The director, Lothar Muethel, had been a member of the Nazi party since 1933, and the role of Shylock was played by Werner Krauss, who portrayed Shylock as "a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanness, emphasizing danger through humor." Krauss had played Caligari in the classic early silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. He had also played the Jew in *Jew Süss* (1940), a propaganda film in defense of the racial policy made by the Nazis especially on order from Dr. Goebbels, to be shown in the territories the Germans occupied at the same time that Jews were being rounded up.



1913—Sigmund Freud. “The Theme of the Three Caskets,”¹ from *On Creativity and the Unconscious*

Sigmund Freud, the famous theorist of psychoanalysis, was a brilliant interpreter of literature. According to Harold Bloom, “Freud’s universal and comprehensive theory of the mind probably will outlive the psychoanalytical therapy, and seems already to have placed him with Plato and Montaigne and Shakespeare rather than with the scientists he overtly aspired to emulate.”

I

Two scenes from Shakespeare, one from a comedy and the other from a tragedy, have lately given me occasion for setting and solving a little problem.

The former scene is the suitors’ choice between the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*. The fair and wise Portia, at her father’s bidding, is bound to take for her husband only that one among her suitors who chooses the right casket from among the three before him. The three caskets are of gold, silver and lead: the right one is that containing her portrait. Two suitors have already withdrawn, unsuccessful: they have chosen gold and silver. Bassanio, the third, elects for the lead; he thereby wins the bride, whose affection was already his before the trial of fortune. Each of the suitors had given reasons for his choice in a speech in which he praised the metal he preferred, while depreciating the other two. The most difficult task thus fell to the share of the third fortunate suitor; what he finds to say in glorification of lead as against gold and silver is but little and has a forced ring about it. If in psycho-analytic practice we were confronted with such a speech, we should suspect concealed motives behind the unsatisfying argument.

Shakespeare did not invent this oracle of choosing a casket; he took it from a tale in the *Gesta Romanorum*, in which a girl undertakes the same choice to win the son of the Emperor.² Here too the third metal, the lead, is the bringer of fortune. It is not hard to guess that we have here an ancient theme, which requires to be interpreted and traced back to its origin. A preliminary conjecture about the meaning of this choice between gold, silver and lead is soon confirmed by a statement from E. Stucken,³ who has made a study of the same material in far-reaching connections. He says, ‘The identity of the three suitors of Portia is clear from their choice: the Prince of Morocco chooses the gold casket: he is the sun; the Prince of Arragon chooses the silver casket: he is the moon; Bassanio chooses the leaden casket: he is the star youth’. In support of this explanation he cites an episode from the Esthonian folk-epic

'Kalewipoeg', in which the three suitors appear undisguisedly as the sun, moon and star youths ('the eldest son of the Pole star') and the bride again falls to the lot of the third.

Thus our little problem leads to an astral myth. The only pity is that with this explanation we have not got to the end of the matter. The question goes further, for we do not share the belief of many investigators that myths were read off direct from the heavens; we are more inclined to judge with Otto Rank⁴ that they were projected on to the heavens after having arisen quite otherwise under purely human conditions. Now our interest is in this human content.

Let us glance once more at our material. In the Esthonian epic, as in the tale from the *Gesta Romanorum*, the subject is the choice of a maiden among three suitors; in the scene from *The Merchant of Venice* apparently the subject is the same, but at the same time in this last something in the nature of an inversion of the idea makes its appearance: a man chooses between three—caskets. If we had to do with a dream, it would at once occur to us that caskets are also women, symbols of the essential thing in woman, and therefore of a woman herself, like boxes, large or small, baskets, and so on. If we let ourselves assume the same symbolic substitution in the story, then the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice* really becomes the inversion we suspected. With one wave of the hand, such as usually only happens in fairy-tales, we have stripped the astral garment from our theme; and now we see that the subject is an idea from human life, a man's choice between three women.

This same content, however, is to be found in another scene of Shakespeare's, in one of his most powerfully moving dramas; this time not the choice of a bride, yet linked by many mysterious resemblances to the casket-choice in *The Merchant of Venice*. The old King Lear resolves to divide his kingdom while he yet lives among his three daughters, according to the love they each in turn express for him. The two elder ones, Goneril and Regan, exhaust themselves in asseverations and glorifications of their love for him, the third, Cordelia, refuses to join in these. He should have recognized the unassuming, speechless love of the third and rewarded it, but he misinterprets it, banishes Cordelia, and divides the kingdom between the other two, to his own and the general ruin. Is not this once more a scene of choosing between three women, of whom the youngest is the best, the supreme one?

There immediately occur to us other scenes from myth, folk-tale and literature, with the same situation as their content: the shepherd Paris has to choose between three goddesses, of whom he declares the third to be the fairest. Cinderella is another such youngest, and is preferred by the prince to the two elder sisters; Psyche in the tale of Apuleius is the youngest and fairest of three sisters; on the one hand, she becomes human and is revered as Aphrodite, on the other, she is treated by the goddess as Cinderella was treated by her stepmother and has to sort a heap of mixed seeds, which she accomplishes

with the help of little creatures (doves for Cinderella, ants for Psyche).⁵ Anyone who cared to look more closely into the material could undoubtedly discover other versions of the same idea in which the same essential features had been retained.

Let us content ourselves with Cordelia, Aphrodite, Cinderella and Psyche! The three women, of whom the third surpasses the other two, must surely be regarded as in some way alike if they are represented as sisters. It must not lead us astray if in *Lear* the three are the daughters of him who makes the choice; this means probably nothing more than that Lear has to be represented as an old man. An old man cannot very well choose between three women in any other way: thus they become his daughters.

But who are these three sisters and why must the choice fall on the third? If we could answer this question, we should be in possession of the solution we are seeking. We have once already availed ourselves of an application of psycho-analytic technique, in explaining the three caskets as symbolic of three women. If we have the courage to continue the process, we shall be setting foot on a path which leads us first to something unexpected and incomprehensible, but perhaps by a devious route to a goal.

It may strike us that this surpassing third one has in several instances certain peculiar qualities besides her beauty. They are qualities that seem to be tending towards some kind of unity; we certainly may not expect to find them equally well marked in every example. Cordelia masks her true self, becomes as unassuming as lead, she remains dumb, she 'loves and is silent'. Cinderella hides herself, so that she is not to be found. We may perhaps equate concealment and dumbness. These would of course be only two instances out of the five we have picked out. But there is an intimation of the same thing to be found, curiously enough, in two other cases. We have decided to compare Cordelia, with her obstinate refusal, to lead. In Bassanio's short speech during the choice of the caskets these are his words of the lead—properly speaking, without any connection:

Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence
(‘plainness’, according to another reading)

Thus: Thy plainness moves me more than the blatant nature of the other two. Gold and silver are ‘loud’; lead is dumb, in effect like Cordelia, who ‘loves and is silent’.⁶

In the ancient Greek tales of the Judgement of Paris, nothing is said of such a withholding of herself on the part of Aphrodite. Each of the three goddesses speaks to the youth and tries to win him by promises. But, curiously enough, in a quite modern handling of the same scene this characteristic of the third that has struck us makes its appearance again. In the libretto of Offenbach's *La Belle*

Hélène, Paris, after telling of the solicitations of the other two goddesses, relates how Aphrodite bore herself in this contest for the prize of beauty:

La troisième, ah! la troisième!
 La troisième ne dit rien,
 Elle eut le prix tout de même. . . .

If we decide to regard the peculiarities of our 'third one' as concentrated in the 'dumbness', then psycho-analysis has to say that dumbness is in dreams a familiar representation of death.⁷

More than ten years ago a highly intelligent man told me a dream which he wanted to look upon as proof of the telepathic nature of dreams. He saw an absent friend from whom he had received no news for a very long time, and reproached him warmly for his silence. The friend made no reply. It then proved that he had met his death by suicide about the time of the dream. Let us leave the problem of telepathy on one side: there seems to be no doubt that here the dumbness in the dream represents death. Concealment, disappearance from view, too, which the prince in the fairy-tale of Cinderella has to experience three times, is in dreams an unmistakable symbol of death; and no less so is a striking pallor, of which the paleness of the lead in one reading of Shakespeare's text reminds us.⁸ The difficulty of translating these significations from the language of dreams into the mode of expression in the myth now occupying our attention is much lightened if we can show with any probability that dumbness must be interpreted as a sign of death in other productions that are not dreams.

I will single out at this point the ninth of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, the one with the title 'The Twelve Brothers'. A king and a queen have twelve children, all boys. Thereupon the king says, 'If the thirteenth child is a girl, the boys must die'. In expectation of this birth he has twelve coffins made. The twelve sons flee with their mother's help into a secret wood, and swear death to every maiden they shall meet.

A girl-child is born, grows up, and learns one day from her mother that she had twelve brothers. She decides to seek them out, and finds the youngest in the wood; he recognizes her but wants to hide her on account of the brothers' oath. The sister says: 'I will gladly die, if thereby I can save my twelve brothers'. The brothers welcome her gladly, however, and she stays with them and looks after their house for them.

In a little garden near the house grow twelve lilies: the maiden plucks these to give one to each brother. At that moment the brothers are changed into ravens, and disappear, together with the house and garden. Ravens are spirit-birds, the killing of the twelve brothers by their sister is thus again represented by the plucking of the flowers, as at the beginning of the story by the coffins and the

disappearance of the brothers. The maiden, who is once more ready to save her brothers from death, is now told that as a condition she is to be dumb for seven years, and not speak one single word. She submits to this test, by which she herself goes into danger, *i.e.* she herself dies for her brothers, as she promised before meeting with them. By remaining dumb she succeeds at last in delivering the ravens.

In the story of 'The Six Swans' the brothers who are changed into birds are released in exactly the same way, *i.e.* restored to life by the dumbness of the sister. The maiden has taken the firm resolve to release her brothers, 'an if it cost her life'; as the king's wife she again risks her own life because she will not relinquish her dumbness to defend herself against evil accusations.

Further proofs could undoubtedly be gathered from fairy-tales that dumbness is to be understood as representing death. If we follow these indications, then the third one of the sisters between whom the choice lies would be a dead woman. She may, however, be something else, namely, Death itself, the Goddess of Death. By virtue of a displacement that is not infrequent, the qualities that a deity imparts to men are ascribed to the deity himself. Such a displacement will astonish us least of all in relation to the Goddess of Death, since in modern thought and artistic representation, which would thus be anticipated in these stories, death itself is nothing but a dead man.

But if the third of the sisters is the Goddess of Death, we know the sisters. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns, the third of whom is called Atropos, the inexorable.

II

Let us leave on one side for a while the task of inserting this new-found meaning into our myth, and let us hear what the mythologists have to say about the origin of and the part played by the Fates.⁹

The earliest Greek mythology only knows one *Μοῖρα*, personifying the inevitable doom (in Homer). The further development of this one Moera into a group of three sisters—goddesses—, less often two, probably came about in connection with other divine figures to which the Moerae are clearly related: the Graces and the Horae, the Hours.

The Hours are originally goddesses of the waters of the sky, dispensing rain and dew, and of the clouds from which rain falls; and since these clouds are conceived of as a kind of web it comes about that these goddesses are looked on as spinners, a character that then became attached to the Moerae. In the sun-favoured Mediterranean lands it is the rain on which the fertility of the soil depends, and thus the Hours become the goddesses of vegetation. The beauty of flowers and the abundance of fruit is their doing, and man endows them plentifully with charming and graceful traits. They become the divine representatives of the Seasons, and possibly in this connection acquire

their triple number, if the sacred nature of the number three is not sufficient explanation of this. For these ancient peoples at first distinguished only three seasons: winter, spring, summer. Autumn was only added in late Graeco-Roman times, after which four Hours were often represented in art.

The relation to time remained attached to the Hours: later they presided over the time of day, as at first over the periods of the year: at last their name came to be merely a designation for the period of sixty minutes (hour, *heure*, *ora*). The Norns of German mythology are akin to the Hours and the Moerae and exhibit this time-signification in their names. The nature of these deities could not fail, however, to be apprehended more profoundly in time, so that the essential thing about them was shifted until it came to consist of the abiding law at work in the passage of time: the Hours thus became guardians of the law of Nature, and of the divine order of things whereby the constant recurrence of the same things in unalterable succession in the natural world takes place.

This knowledge of nature reacted on the conception of human life. The nature-myth changed into a myth of human life: the weather-goddesses became goddesses of destiny. But this aspect of the Hours only found expression in the Moerae, who watch over the needful ordering of human life as inexorably as do the Hours over the regular order of nature. The implacable severity of this law, the affinity of it with death and ruin, avoided in the winsome figures of the Hours, was now stamped upon the Moerae, as though mankind had only perceived the full solemnity of natural law when he had to submit his own personality to its working.

The names of the three spinners have been interpreted significantly by mythologists. Lachesis, the name of the second, seems to mean 'the accidental within the decrees of destiny'¹⁰—we might say 'that which is experienced'—while Atropos means 'the inevitable'—Death—, and then for Clotho there remains 'the fateful tendencies each one of us brings into the world'.

And now it is time to return to the idea contained in the choice between the three sisters, which we are endeavouring to interpret. It is with deep dissatisfaction that we find how unintelligible insertion of the new interpretation makes the situations we are considering and what contradictions of the apparent content then result. The third of the sisters should be the Goddess of Death, nay, Death itself; in the judgement of Paris she is the Goddess of Love, in the tale of Apuleius one comparable to the goddess for her beauty, in *The Merchant of Venice* the fairest and wisest of women, in *Lear* the one faithful daughter. Can a contradiction be more complete? Yet perhaps close at hand there lies even this, improbable as it is—the acme of contradiction. It is certainly forthcoming if every time in this theme of ours there occurs a free choice between the women, and if the choice is thereupon

to fall on death—that which no man chooses, to which by destiny alone man falls a victim.

However, contradictions of a certain kind, replacements by the exact opposite, offer no serious difficulty to analytic interpretation. We shall not this time take our stand on the fact that contraries are constantly represented by one and the same element in the modes of expression used by the unconscious, such as dreams. But we shall remember that there are forces in mental life tending to bring about replacement by the opposite, such as the so-called reaction-formation, and it is just in the discovery of such hidden forces that we look for the reward of our labours. The Moerae were created as a result of a recognition which warns man that he too is a part of nature and therefore subject to the immutable law of death. Against this subjection something in man was bound to struggle, for it is only with extreme unwillingness that he gives up his claim to an exceptional position. We know that man makes use of his imaginative faculty (phantasy) to satisfy those wishes that reality does not satisfy. So his imagination rebelled against the recognition of the truth embodied in the myth of the Moerae, and constructed instead the myth derived from it, in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love and by that which most resembles her in human shape. The third of the sisters is no longer Death, she is the fairest, best, most desirable and the most lovable among women. Nor was this substitution in any way difficult: it was prepared for by an ancient ambivalence, it fulfilled itself along the lines of an ancient context which could at that time not long have been forgotten. The Goddess of Love herself, who now took the place of the Goddess of Death, had once been identical with her. Even the Greek Aphrodite had not wholly relinquished her connection with the underworld, although she had long surrendered her rôle of goddess of that region to other divine shapes, to Persephone, or to the tri-form Artemis-Hecate. The great Mother-goddesses of the oriental peoples, however, all seem to have been both founts of being and destroyers; goddesses of life and of fertility, and death-goddesses. Thus the replacement by the wish-opposite of which we have spoken in our theme is built upon an ancient identity.

The same consideration answers the question how the episode of a choice came into the myth of the three sisters. A wished-for reversal is again found here. Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. Thus man overcomes death, which in thought he has acknowledged. No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable. Just where in reality he obeys compulsion, he exercises choice; and that which he chooses is not a thing of horror, but the fairest and most desirable thing in life.

On a closer inspection we observe, to be sure, that the original myth is not so much disguised that traces of it do not show through and betray its presence. The

free choice between the three sisters is, properly speaking, no free choice, for it must necessarily fall on the third if every kind of evil is not to come about, as in *Lear*. The fairest and the best, she who has stepped into the place of the Death-goddess, has kept certain characteristics that border on the uncanny, so that from them we might guess at what lay beneath.¹¹

So far we have followed out the myth and its transformation, and trust that we have rightly indicated the hidden causes of this transformation. Now we may well be interested in the way in which the poet has made use of the idea. We gain the impression that in his mind a reduction to the original idea of the myth is going on, so that we once more perceive the original meaning containing all the power to move us that had been weakened by the distortion of the myth. It is by means of this undoing of the distortion and partial return to the original that the poet achieves his profound effect upon us.

To avoid misunderstandings, I wish to say that I have no intention of denying that the drama of *King Lear* inculcates the two prudent maxims: that one should not forgo one's possessions and privileges in one's lifetime and that one must guard against accepting flattery as genuine. These and similar warnings do undoubtedly arise from the play; but it seems to me quite impossible to explain the overpowering effect of *Lear* from the impression that such a train of thought would produce, or to assume that the poet's own creative instincts would not carry him further than the impulse to illustrate these maxims. Moreover, even though we are told that the poet's intention was to present the tragedy of ingratitude, the sting of which he probably felt in his own heart, and that the effect of the play depends on the purely formal element, its artistic trappings, it seems to me that this information cannot compete with the comprehension that dawns upon us after our study of the theme of a choice between the three sisters.

Lear is an old man. We said before that this is why the three sisters appear as his daughters. The paternal relationship, out of which so many fruitful dramatic situations might arise, is not turned to further account in the drama. But Lear is not only an old man; he is a dying man. The extraordinary project of dividing the inheritance thus loses its strangeness. The doomed man is nevertheless not willing to renounce the love of women; he insists on hearing how much he is loved. Let us now recall that most moving last scene, one of the culminating points reached in modern tragic drama: 'Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms'. Cordelia is Death. Reverse the situation and it becomes intelligible and familiar to us—the Death-goddess bearing away the dead hero from the place of battle, like the Valkyr in German mythology. Eternal wisdom, in the garb of the primitive myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying.

The poet brings us very near to the ancient idea by making the man who accomplishes the choice between the three sisters aged and dying. The regressive treatment he has thus undertaken with the myth, which was disguised by the reversal of the wish, allows its original meaning so far to appear that perhaps a superficial allegorical interpretation of the three female figures in the theme becomes possible as well. One might say that the three inevitable relations man has with woman are here represented: that with the mother who bears him, with the companion of his bed and board, and with the destroyer. Or it is the three forms taken on by the figure of the mother as life proceeds: the mother herself, the beloved who is chosen after her pattern, and finally the Mother Earth who receives him again. But it is in vain that the old man yearns after the love of woman as once he had it from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent goddess of Death, will take him into her arms.

NOTES

1. First published in *Imago*, Bd. II, 1913; reprinted in *Sammlung*, Vierte Folge. [Translated by C. J. M. Hubback.]

2. G. Brandes, *William Shakespeare*.

3. *Astralmythen*, p. 655.

4. O. Rank, *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, p. 8 *et seq.*

5. I have to thank Dr. Otto Rank for calling my attention to these similarities.

6. In Schlegel's translation this allusion is quite lost; indeed, changed into the opposite meaning: *Dein schlichtes Wesen spricht beredt mich an.* (Thy plainness speaks to me with eloquence.)

7. In Stekel's *Sprache den Traumes*, dumbness is also mentioned among the 'death' symbols (p. 351).

8. Stekel, *loc. cit.*

9. What follows is taken from Roscher's *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, under the relevant headings.

10. Roscher, after Preller-Robert's *Griechische Mythologie*.

11. The Psyche of Apuleius' story has kept many traits that remind us of her kinship with death. Her wedding is celebrated like a funeral, she has to descend into the underworld, and afterwards sinks into a death-like sleep (Otto Rank).

On the significance of Psyche as goddess of the spring and as 'Bride of Death', cf. A. Zinzow, *Psyche und Eros*.

In another of Grimm's Tales ('The Goose-girl at the Fountain') there is, as in 'Cinderella', an alternation between the ugly and the beautiful aspect of the third sister, in which may be seen an indication of her double nature—before and after the substitution. This third one is repudiated by her father, after a test which nearly corresponds with that in *King Lear*. Like the other sisters, she has to say how dear she holds their father, and finds no expression for her love except the comparison of it with salt. (Kindly communicated by Dr. Hanns Sachs.)



1927—Elmer Edgar Stoll. “Shylock,” from *Shakespeare Studies: Historical and Comparative in Method*

E. E. Stoll, a Shakespeare scholar who taught in the Department of English at the University of Minnesota, wrote extensively about Shakespeare’s plays.

His beard was red; his face was made
 Not much unlike a witches.
 His habit was a Jewish gown,
 That would defend all weather;
 His chin turned up, his nose hung down,
 And both ends met together.

So Shylock was made up, according to the report of the old actor Thomas Jordan in 1664, on a stage that was still swayed by the tradition of Alleyn and Burbage. Macklin kept all of this—nose and chin enough he had of his own—when, in the forties of the eighteenth century, he restored to the stage “the Jew that Shakespeare drew,” and he ventured a red hat in early Venetian style for the old “orange-tawney”,¹ into the bargain. “By Jove! Shylock in a black wig!” exclaimed a first-rater as Kean, seventy years after, appeared in the wings of Drury Lane for his first performance. And the part was played by Sir Henry Irving, in our day, in a grey beard and a black cap. Changes in costume (on the stage at least) are but the outward and visible tokens of change. Macklin’s grotesque ferocity gave place to Kean’s vast and varied passion, and it, in turn, to Macready’s and Irving’s Hebraic picturesqueness and pathos. Taste had changed, and racial antipathy, in art if not in life, had faded away. Macklin, in an age when a part must be either comic or tragic, and not both together, dropped the butt and kept the villain, and this he played with such effect that the audience shrank visibly from him, and, during the play and after it, King George II lost sleep. Kean made the Jew an injured human being, an outraged father. And Macready and Irving lifted him, in the words of Edmund Booth, “out of the darkness of his native element of revengeful selfishness into the light of the venerable Hebrew, the martyr, the avenger.”

With this movement criticism has kept pace, or has gone before. Macklin’s conception is in sympathy with Rowe’s; Kean’s with Hazlitt’s and Skottowe’s; and Macready and Irving take the great company of the later critics with them in their notions of racial pathos, and, despite the declarations of a Spedding, a Furnivall, and a Furness,² in their plea for toleration. Few critics have recognized the prejudices of the times, the manifest indications of the poet’s purpose, and his thoroughly Elizabethan taste for comic villainy. The few are mostly foreigners—Brandes, Brandl, Creizenach, Morsbach, and Sarcey. Others take account of this

point of view only to gainsay it. "We breathed a sigh of relief", says the *New York Nation* (as if the worst were over) in a review of Professor Baker's book on Shakespeare, "when we found him confessing his belief that Shakespeare did not intend Shylock to be a comic character;"³ and the distinguished critics Bradley and Raleigh may be supposed to have done the same. As much as fifteen years ago Professor Wendell expressed the opinion that Shylock was rightly represented on the stage in Shakespeare's time as a comic character, and rightly in our time as sympathetically human; but the dramatist's intention he left in the dark. Undertaking, perhaps, to abolish this antinomy and to bridge the gap between Shakespeare's time and ours, Professor Schelling perceives in Shylock, quite subtly, a grotesqueness bordering on laughter and a pathos bordering on tears.⁴ (. . .)

To get at Shakespeare's intention is, after all, not hard. As with popular drama, great or small, he who runs may read—he who yawns and scuffles in the pit may understand. The time is past for speaking of Shakespeare as impartial or inscrutable; study of his work and that of his fellows as an expression of Elizabethan ideas and technique is teaching us better. The puzzle whether the *Merchant of Venice* is not meant for tragedy, for instance, clears up when, as Professor Baker suggests, we forget Sir Henry Irving's acting, and remember that the title,⁵ and the hero, is not the *Jew of Venice* as he would lead us to suppose, that the play itself is, like such a comedy as *Measure for Measure* or *Much Ado*, not clear of the shadow of the fear of death, and that in closing with an act where Shylock and his knife are forgotten in the unraveling of the mystery between the lovers and the crowning of Antonio's happiness in theirs, it does not, from the Elizabethan point of view, perpetrate an anticlimax, but, like many another Elizabethan play, carries to completion what is a story for story's sake. "Shylock is, and has always been, the hero," says Professor Schelling. But when, then, does Shakespeare drop his hero out of the play for good before the fourth act is over? It is a trick which he never repeats—a trick, I am persuaded, of which he is not capable.

Hero or not, Shylock is given a villain's due. His is the heaviest penalty to be found in all the pound of flesh stories, including that in *Il Pecorone*, which served as a model for this. Not in the Servian, the Persian, the African version, or even that of the *Cursor Mundi* does the money-lender suffer like Shylock—impoverishment, sentence of death, and an outrage done to his faith from which Jews were guarded even by decrees of German Emperors and Roman pontiffs. It was in the old play, perhaps, but that Shakespeare retained it shows his indifference to the amenities, to say the least, as regards either Jews or Judaism. Shylock's griefs excite no commiseration; indeed, as they press upon him they are barbed with gibes and jeers. The lot of Coriolanus is not dissimilar, but we know that the poet is with him. We know that the poet is not with Shylock, for on that head, in this play as in every other, the impartial, inscrutable poet leaves little or

nothing to suggestion or surmise. As is his custom elsewhere, by the comments of the good characters, by the method pursued in the disposition of scenes, and by the downright avowals of soliloquy, he constantly sets us right.

As for the first of these artifices, all the characters who come in contact with Shylock except Tubal, among them being those of his own house—his servant and his daughter—have a word or two to say on the subject of his character, and never a good one. And in the same breath they spend on Bassanio and Antonio, his enemies, nothing but words of praise. Praise or blame, moreover, is, after Shakespeare's fashion, usually in the nick of time to guide the hearer's judgment. Lest the Jew should make too favorable an impression by his Scripture quotations, Antonio observes that the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose; lest the Jew's motive in foregoing interest, for once in his life, should seem like the kindness Antonio takes it to be, Bassanio avows that he likes not fair terms and a villain's mind; and once the Jew has caught the Christian on the hip, every one, from Gaoler to Duke, has words of horror for him and of compassion for his victim. As for the second artifice, the ordering of the scenes is such as to enforce this contrast. First impressions are momentous, every playwright knows (and no one better than Shakespeare himself), particularly for the purpose of ridicule. Launcelot and Jessica, in separate scenes, are introduced before Shylock reaches home, that, hearing their story, we may side with them, and, when the old curmudgeon appears, may be moved to laughter as he complains of Launcelot's gormandizing, sleeping, and rending apparel out, and as he is made game of by the young conspirators to his face. Still more conspicuous is this care when Shylock laments over his daughter and his ducats. Lest then by any means the tender-hearted should grieve, Solanio reports his outcries—in part word for word—two scenes in advance, as matter of mirth to himself and all the boys in Venice. And as for the third artifice, that a sleepy audience may not make the mistake of the cautious critic and take the villain for the hero, Shakespeare is at pains to label the villain by an aside at the moment the hero appears on the boards:

I hate him for he is a Christian,
 But more for that in low simplicity
 He lends out money gratis, and brings down
 The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

Those are his motives, confessed repeatedly,⁶ and either one brands him as a villain more unmistakably in that day, as we shall see, than in ours. Of the indignities which he has endured he speaks, too, and of revenge; but of none of these has he anything to say at the trial. There he pleads his oath, perjury to his soul should he break it, his "lodged hate", or his "humor"; but here to himself and to Tubal—"were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise

I will”—he tells, in the thick of the action, the unvarnished truth. As with Shakespeare’s villains generally, Aaron, Iago, or Richard III, only what they say concerning their purposes aside or to their confidants can be relied upon; and Shylock’s oath, or his horror of perjury, is belied, as Dr. Furness⁷ observes, by his clutching at thrice the principal when the pound of flesh escapes him, just as is his money-lender’s ruse of borrowing the cash from “a friend” (avowed as such by Moses in the *School for Scandal*) by his going home “to purse the ducats straight.” His arguments, too, are given a specious, not to say grotesque, coloring. Hazlitt and other critics say that in argument Shylock has the best of it.

What if my house be troubled with a rat
And I be pleas’d to give *ten* thousand ducats
To have it ban’d?

This rat is a human being, but the only thing to remark upon, in Shylock’s opinion, is his willingness to squander ten thousand ducats on it. Even in Hazlitt’s day, moreover, a choice of “carrion flesh” in preference to ducats could not be plausibly compared as a “humor” with an aversion to pigs or the bag-pipe, or defended as a right by the analogy of holding slaves;⁸ nor could the practice of interest-taking find a warrant in Jacob’s pastoral trickery while in the service of Laban; least of all in the day when Sir John Hawkins, who initiated the slave-trade with the Earls of Pembroke and Leicester and the Queen herself for partners, bore on the arms⁹ which were granted him for his exploits a demi-Moor, proper, in chains, and in the day when the world at large still held interest-taking to be but theft. Very evidently, moreover, Shylock is discomfited by Antonio’s question “Did he take interest?” for he falters and stumbles in his reply—

No, not take interest, not, as you would say,
Directly, interest,—

and is worsted, in the eyes of the audience if not in his own, by the use of the old Aristotelian argument of the essential barrenness of money, still gospel in Shakespeare’s day, in the second question,

Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?

For his answer is meant for nothing better than a piece of complacent shamelessness:

I cannot tell: I make it breed as fast.

Only twice does Shakespeare seem to follow Shylock's pleadings and reasonings with any sympathy—"Hath a dog money?" in the first scene in which he appears, and "Hath not a Jew eyes?" in the third act—but a bit too much has been made of this. Either plea ends in such fashion as to alienate the audience. To Shylock's reproaches the admirable Antonio, "one of the gentlest and humblest of all the men in Shakespeare's theatre",¹⁰ praised and honored by every one but Shylock, retorts, secure in his virtue, that he is just as like to spit on him and spurn him again. And Shylock's celebrated justification of his race runs headlong into a justification of his villainy:—"The villainy which you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." "Hath not a Jew eyes?" and he proceeds to show that your Jew is no less than a man, and as such has a right, not to respect or compassion as the critics of a century have had it, but to revenge. Neither large nor lofty are his claims. Quite as vigorously and, in that day, with as much reason, the detestable and abominable Aaron defends his race and color, and Edmund, the dignity of bastards. The worst of his villains Shakespeare allows to plead their cause: their confidences in soliloquy, if not, as here, slight touches in the plea itself, sufficiently counteract any too favorable impression. This, on the face of it, is a plea for indulging in revenge with all its rigors; not a word is put in for the nobler side of Jewish character; and in lending Shylock his eloquence Shakespeare is but giving the devil his due.¹¹

By all the devices of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, then, Shylock is proclaimed, as by the triple repetition of a crier, to be the villain, a comic villain, though, or butt. Nor does the poet let pass any of the prejudices of that day which would heighten this impression. A miser, a money-lender, a Jew,—all three had from time immemorial been objects of popular detestation and ridicule, whether in life or on the stage. The union of them in one person is the rule in Shakespeare's day, both in plays and in "character"-writing: to the popular imagination a moneylender was a sordid miser with a hooked nose. So it is in the acknowledged prototype of Shylock, Marlowe's "bottle-nosed" monster, Barabas, the Jew of Malta. Though more of a villain, he has the same traits of craft and cruelty, the same unctuous friendliness hiding a thirst for a Christian's blood, the same thirst for blood out-reaching his greed of gold, and the same spirit of unrelieved egoism which thrusts aside the claims of his family, his nation, or even his faith. If Barabas fawns like a spaniel when he pleases, grins when he bites, heaves up his shoulders when they call him dog, Shylock, for his part, "still bears it with a patient shrug", and "grows kind", seeking the Christian's "love" in the hypocritical fashion of Barabas with the suitors and the friars. If Barabas ignores the interests of his brother Jews, poisons his daughter, "counts religion but a childish toy", and, in various forms, avows the wish that "so I live perish may all the world", Shylock has no word for the generous soul but "fool" and "simpleton",¹² and cries, "fervid patriot" that he is, "martyr and avenger": "A diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! The

curse never fell upon our nation until now. I never felt it till now." Such is his love of his race, which Professor Raleigh says is "deep as life".¹³ And in the next breath he cries, "the affectionate father": "Two thousand ducats in that; and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear . . . and the ducats in her coffin." This alternation of daughter and ducats itself comes from Marlowe's play, as well as other ludicrous touches, such as your Jew's stinginess with food and horror of swine-eating, and the confounding of Jew and devil. This last is an old, widespread superstition: on the strength of holy writ the Fathers, with the suffrage in late years of Luther, held that the Jews were devils and the synagogue the house of Satan.¹⁴ In both plays it affords the standing joke, in the *Merchant of Venice* nine times repeated.¹⁵ "Let me say Amen betimes", exclaims Salanio in the midst of his good wishes for Antonio, "lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew". And in keeping with these notions Shylock's synagogue is, as Luther devoutly calls it, *ein Teuffels Nest*, the nest for hatching his plot once he and Tubal and the others of his "tribe" can get together. "Go, go, Tubal", he cries in the unctious of his guile, "and meet me at our synagogue; go, good Tubal, at our synagogue, Tubal!"¹⁶ It is highly probable, moreover, that Shylock wore the red hair and beard, mentioned by Jordan, from the beginning, as well as the bottle-nose of Barabas. So Judas was made up from of old, and in their immemorial orange-tawny, high-crowned hats, and "Jewish gaberdines", the very looks of the two usurers welcomed horror and derision. In both plays the word Jew, itself a badge of opprobrium, is constantly in use instead of the proper name in question and as a byword for cruelty and cunning. (. . .)

In the Elizabethan drama and character-writing, then, the Jew is both money-lender and miser, a villain who hankers after the Christians' blood, a gross egoist, even an atheist, though charged with dealings with the devil, and at the same time a butt, a hook-nosed niggard. A similar spirit of rude caricature and boisterous burlesque, with even less of characterization, prevails in the treatment of the Jews in early popular drama on the Continent. Such is the soil from which the figure of Shylock grew. For everything in Shakespeare is a growth, and strikes root deep in the present and the past, in stage tradition and in human life. (. . .)

That the Jew was a devil, we remember, was a matter of common belief and pleasantry. Nor was the Jew, in medieval imagination at least, to be outdone, for according to Luther, who in his diatribe has all too much to say of spitting, metaphorically or literally, a threefold expectoration accompanied the Jewish curse of Christ.¹⁷

Here we touch on one of the charges against the Jews which lie embedded in Shakespeare's other work, among the few casual references which he makes to them. "Liver of blaspheming Jew" is cast into the cauldron by the Witches in *Macbeth*, along with the other unholy odds and ends:—

Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,
 Finger of birth-strangled babe
 Ditch-deliver'd by a drab.

Blasphemy is a charge made from the time of the Fathers.¹⁸ Three times daily the Jews were supposed to rail against Christ in their prayers. That they should be restrained from such blasphemy was a special recommendation of the committee appointed by the Council in 1655 to consider the re-settlement of the Jews in England.¹⁹ In that day when a man had to look out for his God as well as for himself, Luther took this matter of blasphemy particularly hard. Again and again in his tractate he belabors the Jews for it; and he would have their synagogues and their houses, as the scenes of such impiety, burned down and removed forever from the sight of man. "Und solchs sol man thun unserm Herrn und der Christenheit zu Ehren, damit Gott sehe dass wir Christen seyn!" Hardness of heart is another implied accusation, several times repeated. "A Jew would have wept," sobs Launce, before his cruel-hearted cur, "to have seen our parting." Shylock himself is intended as a capital instance: the Duke, Antonio, Bassanio and Gratiano all recognize in him the "Jewish heart", "uncapable of pity"—"than which what's harder?"—and it is this that gave point, now lost, to Portia's praise of mercy. People generally—Protestants like Luther and Prynne, for instance—believed, as in some parts of Europe they believe still, that the Jews, especially about the time of the Passover, caught little Christians and crucified them, poisoned the wells or the air, and dealt death and destruction about them as freely as Barabas in the play.²⁰ After all this, one other charge, no more than vaguely hinted at in Shakespeare but made explicit, as we have seen, in Marlowe, that of atheism, need not surprise us. Absurd as it is, it comes down from ancient times, and it is no more absurd than Luther's charge of blasphemy and idolatry,²¹ made a few years before Marlowe wrote.

Shylock, we do not forget, was also a usurer. Dr. Honigmann, who is of those who interpret the *Merchant of Venice* as a plea for toleration, says that in Shakespeare's day the word did not carry with it any stigma.²² Never was opinion more mistaken. By laws civil and ecclesiastical, usury—that is, the exaction of interest of any sort—was a crime. With expanding trade and manufacture the practice was widening, but no one approved of it in principle. (. . .)

Shylock was both money-lender and Jew. In him are embodied two of the deepest and most widely prevalent social antipathies of two thousand years, still sanctioned, in Shakespeare's day, by the teachings of religion. What was religious in them Shakespeare probably shared, like any other easy-going churchman, but all that was popular and of the people was part and parcel of his breath and blood.

It is impossible to undertake a minute and particular refutation. To show that Shakespeare is entering a plea, Shylock has on the one hand been conceived

as a good man, much abused; and on the other hand as a bad man made bad. The misconception in the first case is so gross—as Professor Schelling has said, so preposterous—that we will not linger upon it. It is the result of reading Shakespeare as if he wrote but yesterday. Shakespeare, as we have seen, takes pains with first impressions and general effects, and is careless of detail: if the detail is important it is repeated or expatiated upon. Modern poets, as Browning, Ibsen and Maeterlinck, frame characters and plots that are problems and puzzles, in which detail is everything. We are likely at first to sympathize with Helmar instead of Nora, in the *Doll's House*, and with Guido instead of Prinzivalle or the heroine, in *Monna Vanna*. If we lose a word or a look, we lose the meaning of the whole. Turning straight from these to Shakespeare, we are likely to lose the meaning of the whole in our eagerness to catch every wandering word or look. Clues to the situation are found in matters such as the bits of satire in which Shylock, like Barabas, lets fling at the ways of Christians, which one might as wisely take for one's leading-strings as the gibes of Mephistopheles in *Faust*,²³ or such as the Christians' willingness to feast with the Jew, Launcelot's scruples against running away from him, or the Jew's opinion of Launcelot as a lazy and gluttonous fellow. It is by this process of making the big little and the little big, as in the reflection of a convex mirror, this process of reading into Shakespeare a lot of considerations of which he knew nothing, and reading out of him all his minor improbabilities and inconsistencies,²⁴ that Dr. Honigmann²⁵ and Professor Jastrow²⁶ arrive at the conception of Shylock as advocate and avenger,—injured by a daughter ill brought up, they say, by this Launcelot, actuated by a sense of justice, swearing his oath in a paroxysm of moral self-coercion like another William Tell, hating Antonio, not because he is a Christian, but because by lending money gratis he deprives Hebrews of the means of livelihood, and inveigling him into signing the bond that he may humble him and then by an act of generosity heap coals of fire on his head! One wonders whether the language of Shakespeare is any longer capable of conveying thought, or is become indeed a cryptogram. The Christians feast the Jew not from respect for him, but to give Lorenzo a chance to run away with Jessica; just as Lorenzo runs away with Jessica and the ducats, not, as François Victor Hugo thinks, to satisfy his own or the dramatist's enlightened convictions on the subject of intermarriage, but, so far as the purposes of the play are concerned, to give point to Shylock's revenge. Both are matters of story, of improbabilities not, in modern fashion, smoothed away, or, very likely, if Gosson's play were known, a matter of sources. And as for Launcelot's scruples, they, like his laziness and gluttony, are a joke, as in Shylock's sneer at²⁷ "these Christian husbands," Bassanio and Gratiano, who, in the presence of their newly wedded wives, as only the audience is aware, vow, in the fervor of friendship, that to save their friend they would sacrifice their wives and all. "Censure of profane swaggering about the purest sentiments," observes Professor Jastrow, severely.

Those who will have it that Shylock, though bad, was made so, do violence to Shakespeare in two different quarters. In the first place, they have recourse to an all-pervading irony. Antonio, gentlest and humblest of Shakespeare's heroes, kicking and spitting at Jews and thrusting salvation down their throats,—such, as they say, is the spectacle of race-hatred to which Shakespeare points.²⁸ And those others who will have it that Shylock is a noble spirit brought to shame, carry the irony still farther, into the characterization of Antonio and his friends. He, not Shylock, is the caricature!²⁹ His virtues are but affectations and shams; his friends are debauchees, parasites, and fribbles! That is, nothing is what it seems; a comedy ending in moonlight blandishments and badinage is a tragedy, and the play written for the customers of the Globe flies over their honest heads to the heights of nineteenth-century transcendentalism! Irony is surely unthinkable unless the author intends it, and here not the slightest trace of such an intention appears. Moreover, a play of Shakespeare's is self-contained; the irony is within it, so to speak, not underneath it. There is irony in the appearance of Banquo at the moment when Macbeth presumes hypocritically to wish for his presence at the feast, or, more obviously still, in the fulfillment of the Witches' riddling oracles, but there is no irony such as Mr. Yeats discovers in the success of Henry V and the failure of Richard II.³⁰ Shakespeare does not dream that to fail and be a Richard is better than to succeed and be a Henry—or an Antonio. He knows not the ways of modern idealism, which sets the judgment of the world aside, nor the ways of modern artistic expression, which withholds the purport of the higher judgment from the world. No abysmal irony undermines his hard sense and straightforward meaning. Shylock is indeed condemned: Sir Henry Irving took no counsel of the poet when he made his exit from the ducal palace in pathetic triumph.

In the second place, they do violence to Shakespeare in representing Shylock as the product of his environment.³¹ The thoughts of men had not begun to run in those channels; the ancient rigors of retribution held fast; men still believed in heaven and hell, in villains and heroes. Though in him there is little of George Eliot's moral rigor, as brought to bear on Tito Melema, for instance, Mr. Yeats errs, I think, in his opinion that Shakespeare's plays are, like all great literature, "written in the spirit of the Forgiveness of Sin." Macbeth is not forgiven, nor is Othello. Richard III and Iago were damned even in the making. And though the shortcomings of Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym serve a while as food for mirth, Shakespeare is in full accord with Henry V as he casts his fellows out of his company and out of his mind, to meet their end in the brothel or on the gallows. Except in comedy, he has not the spirit of forgiveness which, like Uncle Toby's for the Devil, comes of mere kindness of heart; and neither in comedy nor in tragedy has he the forgiveness of our psychological and social drama and novel, where villains and heroes are no more, which comes of fullness of knowledge. Thus he deals with poverty, the hard-handed, greasy, foul-smelling,

ignorant, and ungrateful multitude for which he so often utters his aversion; and thus he deals with the kindred subject of heredity. If a scoundrel is a bastard, or is of mean birth, the fact is not viewed as an extenuating circumstance, but is turned to a reproach. It may in a sense explain his depravity, but never explain it away. It sets the seal upon it. It confirms the prejudice that there is a difference between noble blood and that of low degree. So, though our hearts are softened by Shylock's recital of the indignities he has suffered, the hearts of the Elizabethans, by a simpler way of thinking, are hardened. It confirms the prejudice that there is a difference between Christian and Jew. The Fathers, Protestant theologians like Luther, seventeenth-century lawyers like Coke and Prynne, review the pitiful story of the Jews in Europe grimly, with at best a momentary and furtive pathos.³² It proves their notion of the curse. What else, in an age when it was the universal belief that Jew and Gentile alike took upon their heads the curse of Adam's sin on issuing from the mother's womb? Even today a man who is abused in the street is supposed, by bystanders, to deserve it; the world barks at rags and poverty like the dogs; and every one knows that there are certain scars—as of branding—which a wise man does not exhibit or complain of. And how much more in the days of literary and theological bludgeoning; when the reformers were to the common enemy, and to one another, dogs, hogs, and asses; when Shakespeare himself let one of his noblest characters cast it up to another that he possessed but one trunk of clothes; when Milton was reviled, in scholarly Latin, for his blindness and (in defiance of fact) for his guttering eyelids; and when Dryden never heard the last of the beating he got at the instigation of a fellow poet in a London street. For everything there is some one to blame, is the point of view, and who so much as he who has the worst of it?

And every loss the men of Jebus bore,
They still were thought God's enemies the more!

Such is the logic of Luther as he puts to the Jew the crushing question (naively exhorting Christians, if they must speak to Jews at all, to do likewise, and “not to quarrel with them”): “Hear'st thou, Jew, dost thou know that Jerusalem, your temple, and your priesthood have been destroyed now over fourteen hundred and sixty years?”³³ Even at the end of the seventeenth century Robert South, as he considers the universal detestation in which, through the ages, Jews have been held, must conclude that there is “some peculiar vileness essentially fixed in the genius of this people.”³⁴ It does not occur to him that there is no one to blame, and that the cause of the detestation lies in race-hatred, the incompatibility of temperament and customs. “What's his reason?” cries Shylock. It is the reason which Antonio—that is, Shakespeare—is not analytical enough to recognize or cynical enough to avow. Steadily the Jewishness of Shylock is kept before us; like Barabas, he loses his name in his nationality—“the Jew,” “the dog Jew,” “the

villain Jew," "his Jewish heart;"—and it is not merely according to the measure of his villainy that at the end and throughout the play he suffers. Shakespeare himself would have said, with Robert South, that the reason was his "essential Jewish *vileness*;" but we, who in the light of modern psychology and the history of society are aware that no man and no age can render adequately the reason why they themselves do anything, recognize that the famous reason given by Shylock himself, in the heat of his *ex parte* pleading with which Shakespeare so little sympathizes, curiously enough hits the mark.³⁵

With this conventionality in mind we may approach the final question, whether villain and butt as Shylock is, he may not also be, as Professor Schelling thinks, a pathetic creation. Mr. Schelling speaks of Shylock as "semi-humorous",³⁶ a character in whom there is a grotesqueness bordering on laughter and a pathos bordering on tears.³⁷ The union of butt and villain is, as we have seen, common in Shakespeare's day, and it is as old as the stupid devils of the miracle-plays; and the union of villain and droll goes back to the cleverer devils, those of Dante, too, and medieval painting, and underlies the characterization of most of the villains—Aaron and Iago, for instance—in Shakespearean and Elizabethan drama. But villain, butt, and pathetic figure, all in one, is a thing hard to conceive. Drollery or ludicrousness and pathos coalesce, then as now, in Ibsen's Ulric Brendel or in Shakespeare's Mercutio and his clowns; but derision mingling with pathos would be like water poured into the fire. Round Shylock's words about Leah and the turquoise the question centers.

TUBAL: One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

SHYLOCK: Out upon her. Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

This, most critics assert, the great historian of the drama³⁸ almost alone dissenting, is pathos: it is not the ducats behind the turquoise (a diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort!) but the thought of Leah that wrings his heart. "What a fine Hebraism is implied in this expression!" cries Hazlitt. "He has so deep a veneration for his dead wife," says Hawkins, with impenetrable gravity, "that a wilderness of monkeys would not compensate for the loss of the ring she had given him in youth."³⁹ More Elizabethan wit running to waste! We may not be used to laughing at a man as he mourns the flight of his daughter, the memory of his wife, or the theft of his ducats; but neither are we used, any more than Salanio or the boys of Venice, to the manner of his mourning.

I never heard a passion so confus'd,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable.

Shylock is a puppet, and Tubal pulls the string. Now he shrieks in grief for his ducats or his daughter, now in glee at Antonio's ruin. In his rage over the trading of a turquoise for a monkey, he blurts out, true to his instinct for a bargain, "not for a wilderness of monkeys," and the Elizabethan audience, as well as some few readers today, have the heart—or the want of it—to think the valuation funny. The rest may find it hard to laugh at that, as, in the opinion of Rousseau, Taine, Mantzius, and many another candid spirit, it is nowadays hard to laugh at the plight of Molière's *Alceste*, Georges Dandin, or Arnolphe, or, to come nearer home, as it is hard to laugh at the torments of Malvolio; but in all these instances the invitation to hilarity is plain and clear. It is too late in the day to modernize and transmogrify Molière; but in lands where Shylock's love for Leah moves men to tears, Mr. Sothern may presume, as Professor Baker has noted, to elicit sympathy for the "affection'd ass," pleading in his madman's chains to be set free. The mistake of the critics in the present case, however, is in part that of viewing the text piece by piece and not as a whole. Torn from the context, there are phrases, even sentences, that may, indeed, seem pathetic. But Shakespeare plays the familiar dramatic trick of taking the audience in for a moment—of clapping upon a seemingly pathetic sentiment a cynical, selfish, or simply incongruous one. Shylock cannot wish that his daughter were dead at his foot (if that be pathos) without, while he is at it, wishing that the jewels were in her ear, the ducats in her coffin;⁴⁰ he cannot think of Launcelot's kindness, as he parts with him, without also thinking of his appetite; and when he hears of his turquoise traded off for a monkey, thoughts of Leah, his bachelorhood, and a wilderness of monkeys clatter through his brain. Here is pathos side by side with laughter, but not according to Mr. Schelling's thought. The nuances, the harmony is lacking—in true Elizabethan style, there is glaring contrast instead. The pathos is a pretense, the laughter alone is real. The laughter is not restrained, either, but would be nothing less than a roar: the grotesqueness goes over the border of laughter—perhaps of tears.

The trial scene is another place where Shylock has seemed pathetic. Almost all critics make him so, in spite of the scales and the knife-whetting and the jeers at the Jew's discomfiture. Professor Baker holds that Shakespeare evinces a sense of dramatic values in presenting Shylock's disappointment as tragic through his eyes, amusing through Gratiano's. How is the tragic value presented? By the miser and usurer's prostrate prayer to the Duke to take his life if he will take his wealth, or by his plea that he is not well? The biter bit, is the gibe cast at him at the end of *Il Pecorone*,⁴¹ and that, exactly, is the spirit of the scene. Nor is Gratiano the only one to crow. "Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desir'st.—Soft! The Jew shall have all justice—Why doth the Jew pause? Take thy forfeiture—Tarry,

Jew; the law hath yet another hold on you—Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?” Aimed at Shylock as he pleads and squirms, these words fall from lips which a moment before extolled the heavenly qualities of mercy! But here, as in Antonio’s notion of conversion, or the Duke’s notion of clemency to Jews, is the irony of history, not of art. Shakespeare’s thought is as simple and sincere as is the old hagiographer’s about the balancing of Jews’ ledgers by royal edict. *Pacem operatur justitia.*

Professor Baker asks why “if Shakespeare wished to create laughter by Shylock, he kept him out of the fifth act, thus losing the many opportunities which his forlorn, defeated condition would have given to delight the Jew-baiters.” But that would have been to make a point of the matter, and to raise the Jewish question in a play where the Jew’s story is, and is meant to be, but an episode. That question, or the slavery question, which Professor Jastrow—not Shylock—raises,⁴² or the sex question, or any other, had for Shakespeare, or his brother playwrights, no existence. To him things were solid and settled; he was a conservative in art, as well as in life; and in his plays he had no brief, followed no program. The Jews he made ridiculous not because he himself had a grudge against them, but, just as he made London citizens, Puritans, Frenchmen, and Welshmen ridiculous, because, as he might have said, they were so. He took the world as he found it, and in no respect more than in matters of mirth.

Nor by nature was Shakespeare a satirist. Shylock is the only full-length caricature, perhaps, he ever drew, and he is rather a burlesque,—a burlesque by virtue not only of the extravagance of the portrayal but of the inadvertent indulgence of it. Unlike Mr. Sidney Lee⁴³ (if he still holds to the view), I cannot find pathos in the remark

The patch is kind enough,

which Shylock makes as he looks after Launcelot dancing out the door, any more than I can in that about the turquoise. Our sympathies—even ours today—are engrossed and forestalled by Launcelot and Jessica, and we are not likely to concern ourselves, as Mr. Lee would have us do, about Launcelot’s present deceptions and scant deservings. Any pathos, moreover, that the remark might have evoked would immediately have been swallowed up, as is the thought of Launcelot’s kindness in the miser’s breast, by the words “but a huge feeder” which follow. The real significance of the remark, as of the other little touches in Shylock’s character, his pride in his sober house, his memories of Leah, or the simplicity of his last words on the stage, lies in the casual quality of it—beyond the satiric scheme—a cozy individuality which Shakespeare adds almost unawares. Thus the logic of the characterization is disturbed, but the reality of it is heightened. It is thoroughly English, free-handed art, not French. Here, no doubt, lies one of the difficulties of the critics, imbued, as is

all the modern world, with Gallic regularity and restraint. That at Harpagon, miser every inch of him, we are meant to laugh, there can be no question; but at Shylock, miser, usurer, and Jew we hesitate, at times, to laugh, because at those times he is something more.

So far and so far only is there any basis for the modern notion of Shylock as a sympathetic character. Yet most critics, I apprehend, will hold, as some hold already, that to us he must be a man more sinned against than sinning, a hero or martyr, despite the fact that to Shakespeare he was nothing of the sort. From of old the inroads of science and history have driven men to their refuge of the "two-fold truth." It is the weakness of our minds, perhaps their safeguard. The Romans enthroned the Greek and Egyptian gods by their own. A century and a half after Copernicus, Milton, the iconoclast, ventured to make room in his great poem for the Solar System only by the side of the Ptolemaic. But truth is not twofold, for all "the higher synthesis." The question is, is the earth—the twentieth century—the hub and centre of things? Is criticism to remain as naive and arrogant as the philosophy of many a primitive people, which has it that the navel of the earth is in Delphi, the Forum, or a certain spot in Greenland, and that the name "people" belongs to them alone?⁴⁴ If for us the real and permanent meaning of the *Merchant of Venice* was reserved, then Shakespeare must have reserved it knowingly or unknowingly. That the actor and gentleman-sharer, who never published a play, should have written for the globe a burlesque part which he meant, in some milder time, to be taken for nothing short of pathetic and tragic, is an hypothesis too colossal for my mind, at least, to compass. He, of all men, surely, was no alien and stranger to his age, no "pilgrim of eternity." And as for unconscious deviation from his purpose and inadvertent relenting toward the mark of his ridicule, traces of that I have pointed out above. But why not go farther? Why is Shylock, though meant to be butt and villain, not, in spite of the poet, a hero, like Milton's Satan? But Milton's Satan, like Dante's Farinata, is not a hero—we sentimentalize and wrest the text when we make him such—and is just such an instance of unconscious sympathy, artistic rather than moral, as we have already found. And neither Milton nor Dante swerves so far, consciously or unconsciously, as to turn burlesque comedy into tragedy, or villainy into vengeance and martyrdom? What poet could? For genius, though mysterious, is nothing mystical, and is not uplifted beyond reach of reason and common sense. It is no oracle, but the true and troubled voice of the age. It has no knowledge of the future—*sortes Homericae, Virgilianae, Biblicae*, forsooth! When will criticism have done with Apollo and his tripod, cast aside by poetry long ago? At present, the word "prescience" or "omniscience of genius" is little else than a critic's innocent method of begging the question. It lends color to the foisting into a sixteenth-century playhouse book of twentieth-century morals, ideas, and scientific facts. Why do they not find them in Beaumont or Webster, Jonson or Marlowe?

Shakespeare's ways are their ways, and his thoughts their thoughts (and the ways and thoughts of many another, for that matter, before him); nor does his genius differ from theirs except in rank and degree. To hear the critics, you would think that on the twenty-third day of April, 1616, the earth yawned and the light of the sun and moon was darkened.⁴⁵

As we have done with many another monster in history, literature, or holy writ, we have tanned and domesticated the "dog Jew", and drawn his "fangs." "He will speak soft words unto us," he no longer grins or bites. But Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, as we have seen, shuddered at him and laughed at him, and except at popular performances, where racial antipathy is rather to be allayed than fomented, so should we, as much as in us lies, today. Thus we shall come into sympathy with the manifest intention of the poet, with the acting of the part on the Elizabethan stage, with the conception of the money-lending Jew in the contemporary drama, character-writing, and ballad, and with the lively prejudices of the time. A villain and a butt, "une simple figure a gifles," as Francisque Sarcey shrewdly observes, "un monstrueux grotesque, sur le nez de qui tombent à l'envi d'effroyables nasardes",⁴⁶—such, save for a few happily irrelevant touches, and for the splendor of poetry shed, like the rain and the light of heaven, on the just and the unjust, is the impression which Shylock makes after he has been duly restored to the sixteenth century, an impression in which pathos has no place, and with which our notions of justice and social responsibility, on the one hand, or of ironical art, on the other, have, so far as they are merely modern, nothing to do. So he is not lost to us. That Hebraic and picturesque figure will be remembered long after he has retreated from the warm circle of our sentiments, and be visited again and again, by an exhilarating sally of the imagination, in the midst of the harsh and sturdy life where he belongs.

NOTES

1. Usurers should have orange-tawney Bonnets, because they doe Judaize:—Bacon's *Essay of Usury* (Furness).

2. See Furness's *Variorum Merchant of Venice*, pp. 433–5.

3. August 15, 1907.

4. Since this article was finished I have come upon the third volume of Mr. W. H. Hudson's *Elizabethan Shakespeare*, which contains the *Merchant of Venice*. In the introduction Mr. Hudson declares for historical criticism almost as unreservedly as heart could wish, and except for his silence concerning the comic aspects of Shylock, his interpretation of the character is in spirit almost identical with that presented in these pages.

5. No great weight, of course, can, with justice, be given to this circumstance, but it is significant that modern critics and translators object to the title as it stands.

6. *M. V. I.* 3, 43f; *III. I.* 55f, 133; *III. 3*, 2—the fool that lends out money gratis; line 22f:

I oft delivered from his forfeitures
Many that have at times made moan to me:
Therefore he hates me.

7. *Variorum M. V.* p. 233.

8. *M. V.* IV. I, 35–100.

9. See Hawkins in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

10. Cf. J. W. Hales, *English Historical Review* ix, p. 652f. Cf. p. 660 for an accumulation of the evidence for his goodness and amiableness. "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth."

11. It is in these passages, no doubt, that, according to Mr. Hudson (*v. ante*, n. 4), the racial feeling rises superior to Shylock's greed and personal ferocity and Shylock becomes an impressive, tragic figure. I dislike to disagree with a critic with whom I have found myself, unawares, so often agreeing, but I think that at this point Mr. Hudson has not quite shaken off the spell of the *Zeitgeist*, of which, as he himself confesses, it is hard to rid the mind. As I show below, these appeals did not reach the hearts of the Elizabethans as they reach ours. Mr. Hudson explains them, like Professor Wendell, as moments where Shylock "got too much for Shakespeare", and said what he liked. But that dark saying I cannot comprehend—not in itself and still less on the lips of a critic who protests, so justly, against treating the characters of Shakespeare as if they were real people in a real world. What else are Mr. Hudson and Mr. Wendell doing when they let the poet be inspired by those whom he himself had inspired, and so say things in a spirit of racial sympathy beyond his ken? "Shylock spoke as Shylock would speak"—not Shakespeare—"spoke so simply because of the life which had been breathed into him." Granting that, Mr. Hudson surrenders all the ground he had gained for historical criticism. Shylock is thereupon free to say, regardless of his maker, whatever it enters into the head of the critic to have him say; and here is the entering in of the wedge for all those modernizing tendencies which Mr. Hudson, like a scholar, abhors.

12. Cf. III. 3, where the word, as Cowden Clarke remarks, is significant. "This is the fool that lent out money gratis;"—"in low simplicity, he lends out money gratis."

13. *Shakespeare*, p. 150.

14. See *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, article *Church Fathers*. Prynne in his *Short Demurrer*, (1656, Pt. i, p. 35) quotes Matthew Paris, and (p. 7) Eadmerus, in passages where the Jew is identified with the devil. Other evidence I shall present shortly in a special article. In the cases cited here and below, *devil* is not used loosely as the equivalent of *villain*. Shylock is a devil because he is a Jew.

15. Bartlett's Concordance, *Jew*.

16. There is a medieval picture of such a meeting to be found in Lacroix, t. i., fol. viii, *Conspiration des Juifs*, a miniature in *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*. How they lay their heads together! For the unrealistic red hair and beard put upon the Jews in medieval literature and art there is a deal of evidence, some of which I hope soon to publish.

17. *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*, in *Werke* (Altenburg, 1662), Theil viii, p. 254.

18. Justin, Origen, Epiphanius, Jerome. V. *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, article *Church Fathers*.

19. Hyamson, *Jews in England*, p. 205.

20. See Graetz *passim*; or any history of the Middle Ages.

21. *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*.

22. *Jahrbuch*, xviii, p. 216.

23. Shakespeare's intention is nowhere so evident as in the case of Shylock's outcry:

O Father Abraham, what these Christians are
Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others!

The satire is not bad; but the critics forget (what Shakespeare had seen to it that the audience should not forget) that this is unctuous piety, to hide "a villain's mind." It is such satire as that of the atrocious Barabas and Zariph and the devils in the mysteries.

24. See quantities of these in the appendix to Professor Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

25. *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, xvii, p. 200ff.

26. *Penn Monthly*, 1880, p. 725f.

27. *M. V. IV. I*, 205-7.

28. C. A. Brown; Sir Theodore Martin; J. W. Hales, *English Historical Review* ix, p. 656; Frederick Hawkins, *Theatre*, Nov. 1879, p. 194 (quoted by Furness):—"In availing himself of the greatest popular madness of the time, he sought to appease it." I sympathize with Mr. W. H. Hudson's impatience with the theory—"perilously near to talking downright nonsense." (Op. cit. p. xxxviii.)

29. Jastrow, op. cit., p. 737.

30. *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Essay entitled "At Stratford-on-Avon."

31. Mr. Hudson also remarks upon this, op. cit., p. xxxvii.

32. In his *Short Demurrer* Prynne tells at length the story of their sufferings, seldom with an epithet of commiseration, frequently in terms of reproach. Coke, in his comment on the Statute De Judaismo, tells the tale of the outrage committed in 1290 at the mouth of the Thames not without tokens of satisfaction at the "divine ultion."

33. Op. cit., p. 208.

34. *Sermons* (London, 1865) ii, p. 228.

35. Yet it is no case of poetic divination or of writing for the comprehension of a later age. "I am a negro!" a victim of race-hatred will say today, with as little comprehension of the psychology of race-hatred or of Professor Summer's theory of the *mores*.

36. *Elizabethan Drama*, i, p. 232.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

38. Creizenach, *Works*, iv, pp. 279-80.

39. Quoted by Furness, p. 433. Cf. Jastrow, op. cit., p. 733, for a like interpretation.

40. Professor Jastrow and Dr. Honigmann see no fun in these prompt afterthoughts, these anti-climaxes, which, if they had stood in the text of one of Robertson's plays, would have been printed each with a dash before it. "He would prefer *burying his child and his gold*," says the former, "to knowing them to be in the possession of the Christian fools."

41. Talche chiunque vera presente, di questo faceva grandissima allegrezza, e ciascuno si faceva beffe di questo Giudeo, dicendo, Tale si crede uccellare ch'è uccellato. Hazlitt's *Shakespeare's Library*, Pt. ii, vol. i, p. 348.

42. P. 737: "The Jew reproaches the Christian with his sinful traffic in human flesh." Surely not; that would have spoiled Shylock's argument from analogy.

43. *Academy*, Nov. 27, 1880.

44. Cf. the etymology of the word Dutch or Deutsch, and similar instances of ethnocentrism in language given in Sumner, *Folkways*, p. 14.

45. See a sensible scientific discussion of "inspiration" and the relation of the genius to his age in Joly, *Psychologie des grands hommes*, ch. v and vi. I hope to return to the subject so far as it concerns Shakespeare, before long.

46. *Quarante ans de théâtre: Shylock*.



1930—Harley Granville-Barker. "*The Merchant of Venice*," from *Prefaces to Shakespeare, Second Series*

Harley Granville-Barker (1877–1946) was an English actor, playwright, producer, and critic.

The Merchant of Venice is a fairy tale. There is no more reality in Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and the Beanstalk.

Shakespeare, it is true, did not leave the fables as he found them. This would not have done; things that pass muster on the printed page may become quite incredible when acted by human beings, and the unlikelier the story, the likelier must the mechanism of its acting be made. Besides, when his own creative impulse was quickened, he could not help giving life to a character; he could no more help it than the sun can help shining. So Shylock is real, while his story remains fabulous; and Portia and Bassanio become human, though, truly, they never quite emerge from the enchanted thicket of fancy into the common light of day. Æsthetic logic may demand that a story and its characters should move consistently upon one plane or another, be it fantastic or real. But Shakespeare's practical business, once he had chosen these two stories for his play, was simply so to charge them with humanity that they did not betray belief in the human beings presenting them, yet not so uncompromisingly that the stories themselves became ridiculous. . . .

The Merchant of Venice is the simplest of plays, so long as we do not bedevil it with sophistries. Further, it is—for what it is!—as smoothly and completely successful, its means being as well fitted to its end, as anything Shakespeare wrote. He was happy in his choice of the Portia story; his verse, which has lost glitter to gain a mellow beauty and an easier flow, is now well attuned to such romance. The

story of Shylock's bond is good contrast and complement both; and he can now project character upon the stage, uncompromising and complete. Yet this Shylock does not overwhelm the play, as at a later birth he might well have done—it is a near thing, though! Lastly, Shakespeare is now enough of the skilled playwright to be able to adjust and blend the two themes with fruitful economy. . . .



1936—J. Middleton Murry. “Shakespeare’s Method: *The Merchant of Venice*,” from *Shakespeare*

J. Middleton Murry (1889–1957) was a prolific author, editor, and scholar. Among his other works was *Keats and Shakespeare* (1926).

The Merchant of Venice probably shares with *Hamlet* the distinction of being the most popular of all Shakespeare’s plays. It was not always so. After the Restoration, *The Merchant of Venice* suffered eclipse. When it was at last revived (in a drastic adaptation) at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Shylock was played as a purely comic part. Not until 1741, when Macklin played Shylock at Drury Lane, did something near to Shakespeare’s text come back to the stage. The return was triumphant. “Macklin made Shylock malevolent,” says Mr. Harold Child, “and of a forcible and terrifying ferocity.” Macklin’s Shylock, which Pope accepted as Shakespeare’s, dominated the stage for nearly fifty years; and it imposed the conception described by Hazlitt:

When we first went to see Mr. Kean in Shylock, we expected to see, what we had been used to see, a decrepit old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy, inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge.

With this conception of Shylock *The Merchant of Venice* became truly popular. Garrick chose it for the opening performance of Drury Lane under his management in 1747, and in it Kean made his triumphant first appearance at the same theatre in 1814. It was Kean’s Shylock, as Hazlitt makes plain, which caused a revolution in the attitude of criticism towards the character. “In proportion as Shylock has ceased to be a popular bugbear, ‘baited with the rabble’s curse,’” wrote Hazlitt, “he becomes a half-favorite with the philosophical part of the audience, who are disposed to think that Jewish revenge is at least as good as Christian injuries.”

That is a singular and significant stage-history. For both these popular Shylocks are Shakespeare's: or rather both are to be found in Shakespeare. As the attitude to the Jew became more civilized, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, so it was discovered that the new attitude also was prophetically contained in Shakespeare's Jew.

But *The Merchant of Venice* is more than Shylock. It is, more even than *Hamlet*, more than any other of Shakespeare's plays, a matter-of-fact fairy tale: a true folk story, made drama; and it makes its secular appeal to that primitive substance of the human consciousness whence folk tales took their origin. Or, without reaching back to these dark and dubious beginnings, we may say that it is, as nearly as possible, a pure melodrama or tragicomedy, an almost perfect example of the art-form which being prior to art itself, most evidently and completely satisfies the primitive man in us all. If the English theatre be considered as a place of popular entertainment, strictly on a level with the football field, the prize ring and the racecourse, then *The Merchant of Venice* is the type of entertainment the theatre should supply—villain discomfited, virtue rescued, happy marriages, clowning, thrills, and a modest satisfaction of the general appetite for naughtiness.

The Merchant of Venice happens to be Shakespeare's; but Shakespeare has not much to do with its popularity. True, *The Merchant of Venice* almost *is* Shakespeare in the popular mind. But this popular Shakespeare, who wrote *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*, is scarcely a person. He is rather a name which gives to these satisfactions of our elementary appetites for melodrama the prestige of art. This impersonal "Shakespeare" is a great stumbling block to criticism, which is for ever engaged, consciously and unconsciously, in the effort to dissolve him out of existence. But he did most certainly exist: he is the Shakespeare who, in his own day as in ours, was veritably popular, who tickled the groundlings because his living lay that way (and surely it was a better way than being hand-fed by the aristocracy, gratification for dedication), who did what he could to season his caviar to the general appetite, and made not a virtue of his necessity—that was hardly his nature—but the best of it.

It is the more striking, therefore, that of all the plays of this period *The Merchant of Venice* is the most typical of Shakespeare—the most expressive of what Coleridge once called his "omni-humanity". It contains tragedy, comedy high and low, love lyricism; and, notably, it does not contain any "Shakespearian" character. The Berowne-Mercutio-Benedick figure, witty, debonair, natural, is diffused into a group of young Venetian noblemen, all credible and substantial, but none possessing the inimitable individuality of their progenitor. Antonio, who stands apart from them, and was (if my judgment of the various verse-styles of the play is to be trusted) the last figure in it to have been elaborated, is a singular character. He supplies a background of sadness to the whole drama. He seems to be older than the friends who surround him, and detached from

their thoughtless extravagance. Actually, in his final elaboration, by reason of the quality and color given to him by Shakespeare's rewriting of Act I, Scene I, he becomes, as a character, slightly inconsistent with the contemptuous opponent of Shylock of later scenes; but it is not the function of Antonio to be primarily a dramatic "character." In that capacity, he is negative; he is a shadow beside Shylock and Portia, and unsubstantial even in comparison with his Venetian entourage. But as the vehicle of an atmosphere, he is one of the most important elements in the play. He provides, for the beginning of the play, what the lyrical antiphony of Lorenzo and Jessica supplies for the end of it—a kind of musical overtone which sets the spiritual proportions of the drama. He shades into the Duke of *Twelfth Night*.

The analogue between *The Merchant of Venice* and a musical composition is significant, I think, when taken in conjunction with the basic popularity of the play and the probability that its origin is to be sought in a play of many years before called *The Jew*, which Stephen Gosson exempted from abuse in 1579 because it displayed "the greediness of worldly chusers and the bloody mind of usurers." That is too apt a summary of the purely dramatic content of *The Merchant of Venice* to be accidental, and it fits too well with our impression of the play as the product of much rewriting to be ignored. Whether or not *The Merchant* is, as Malone suggested, the "Venetian Comedy" mentioned by Henslowe in 1594—a date which would suit very well for Shakespeare's first drafting of *his* play—may be left undecided. The important fact is that in *The Merchant* we have, almost certainly, Shakespeare's treatment of a dramatic plot which came to him, substantially, as a datum.

Out of this substance Shakespeare wrought a miracle. He transformed it, and yet he left the popular substance essentially the same. What he did not, could not, and, so far as we can see or guess, would not do, was to attempt to make it an intellectually coherent whole. That seems to have been no part of his purpose; he did not entertain the idea because he knew it was impossible. The coherence of *The Merchant of Venice* is not intellectual or psychological; and there has been much beating of brains in the vain effort to discover in it a kind of coherence which it was never meant to possess.

As an example of what I believe to be a radical misunderstanding of the nature of *The Merchant of Venice*, we may take the edition of the play in the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*. It will serve as a typical example of a mistaken approach to Shakespeare, for *The Merchant* in its origins, its methods of composition, and its final splendor, is typical of Shakespeare's achievement. The very stubbornness of his material compelled, I believe, a more or less complete abeyance of Shakespeare's personality. In his work upon this play he was pre-eminently the "artist," but not in the modern and largely romantic sense of the word.

When the news of the disaster to Antonio's ventures comes to Belmont, in the very ecstasy of happiness there, Jessica adds her witness to Salerio's report of Shylock's implacability:

When I was with him, I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him: and I know, my lord,
If law, authority and power deny not,
It will go hard with poor Antonio. (III. ii. 285–91)

On this passage, the New Cambridge editors have the following note:

We are tempted to put this speech into square brackets as one from the old play which Shakespeare inadvertently left undeleted in the manuscript. Note it jars upon a nerve which Shakespeare of all writers was generally most careful to avoid: that a daughter should thus volunteer evidence against her father is hideous . . .

This fits, precisely, with the description of Jessica given in the essay of general introduction to the play:

Jessica is bad and disloyal, unfilial, a thief; frivolous, greedy, without any more conscience than a cat, and without even a cat's redeeming love of home. Quite without heart, on worse than an animal instinct—pilfering to be carnal—she betrays her father to be a light-of-lucre carefully weighted with her father's ducats.

This is, indeed, to break a butterfly upon a wheel. But more alarming than the severity of the sentence is its irrelevance. *The Merchant of Venice* is not a realistic drama; and its characters simply cannot be judged by realistic moral standards. Jessica, taken out of the play, and exposed to the cold light of moral analysis, may be a wicked little thing; but in the play, wherein alone she has her being, she is nothing of the kind—she is charming. She runs away from her father because she is white and he is black; she is much rather a princess held captive by an ogre than the unfilial daughter of a persecuted Jew. Whether or not it is true that Shakespeare “of all writers” was most careful to avoid representing unfilial behaviour without condemning it—and the proposition becomes doubtful when we think of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*—it is almost certainly true that he did not himself conceive, or imagine that others would conceive, that Jessica's behaviour was unfilial. The relations between the wicked father and the lovely daughter are governed by laws nearly as old as the hills.

Yet even so, in rejecting Jessica's words as un-Shakespearian because morally hideous, the *New Cambridge Shakespeare* is not consistent; for the introductory essay discusses the problem how it is that Shylock is made “sympathetic” to us, and argues that it is because he is deserted by his bad and disloyal daughter: “he is intolerably wronged,” and we feel for him accordingly. We cannot have it

both ways; we cannot argue that Shakespeare deliberately made Jessica unfilial in order to gain our sympathy for the Jew, and at the same time reject a passage as un-Shakespearian because in it Jessica reveals herself unfilial. The dilemma is absolute, but it is of the modern critic's making, not Shakespeare's. It is the direct result of applying to *The Merchant of Venice* a kind of criticism which it was never meant to satisfy.

Criticism of this kind seeks for psychological motives where none were intended or given. Shylock's hatred of Antonio is, in origin, a fairy-tale hatred, of the bad for the good. And perhaps this fairy-tale hatred is more significant than a hatred which can (if any hatred can) be justified to the consciousness. At any rate Shakespeare was at all times content to accept this antagonism of the evil and the good as self-explanatory. Not to speak of Iago, or Goneril, or Edmund, in the very next play in the Folio, *As You Like It*, which was probably written at about the same time as *The Merchant of Venice*, Oliver, in plotting Orlando's death, similarly confesses his elemental hatred of his brother: "I hope I shall see an end of him; for my soul, yet I know not why, hates nothing more than he." Some would explain these simple assertions of a primal antagonism as compelled by the conditions of the Elizabethan theatre, which required the characters clearly to label themselves as villains or heroes; but it is quite as likely that Shakespeare accepted the sheer opposition of good and evil as an ultimate fact of the moral universe. Assuredly, if it was a necessary convention of the Elizabethan theatre, it was a convention which Shakespeare found it easy to use for his own purposes. For the hatred of his villains always lies deeper than their consciousness.

Thus Shylock at one moment declares that he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian"; at another, because he is a trade rival: "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will." If we take the psychological point of view, the contradiction should not trouble us. We may say that Shylock is trying, as later Iago will try, to rationalize his hatred of Antonio: that he contradicts himself in so doing, is in accord with everyday experience. Or, on a different level, we may say that Shakespeare himself is trying to rationalize his elemental story. Unlike Oliver, who appears only at the beginning and the end of *As You Like It*, unlike the unsubstantial Don John in *Much Ado*, Shylock is the main figure of the play. What is in reality the simple fact of his hatred has to be motivated. Oliver and Don John are not required to be credible; Shylock is.

But these two kinds of explanation are not contradictory, as some critics think they are. They are two modes, two levels, of the operation of the same necessity: the "psychologization" of a story that is a datum. In the process, Antonio's character suffers some slight damage. He spits upon Shylock's Jewish gaberdine. If we reflect in cold blood on Antonio's reported behavior to Shylock, we are in danger of thinking that Shylock's intended revenge was not excessive. But we are

not meant or allowed to reflect upon it. We are not made to *see* this behavior. It is a sudden shifting of the values in order to make Shylock sympathetic to us at the moment he is proposing the bond. This is a dramatic device of which Shakespeare was always a master. But because Shakespeare was Shakespeare it is something more than a dramatic device.

Shylock undoubtedly is, to a certain degree, made sympathetic to us; and it is important to discover how it is done. For this, almost certainly, was a radical change wrought by Shakespeare in the crude substance of the old play. But the effect was certainly not achieved by Shakespeare's representing Shylock as the victim of Jessica's ingratitude. On the contrary, Shakespeare is most careful to prevent any such impression from taking lodgment in our minds. At the moment when we might feel a little uneasy about Jessica's treatment of her father, any nascent misgiving is stifled by Salerio's description of Shylock's outcry at the discovery:

My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats. (II. viii. 14–22)

It is not the loss of his daughter that moves Shylock, but only the loss of his money. Shylock, at this moment, is presented as an ignoble being whom Jessica does well to escape and despoil.

Shylock is deliberately made unsympathetic when it is required to cover Jessica. He is made sympathetic when Shakespeare feels the need, or welcomes the opportunity of making a truly dramatic contrast between Shylock and Antonio. At critical moments he is given dignity and passion of speech and argument to plead his cause to us and to himself. His hatred then is represented as deep, irrational and implacable, but not as mean and mercenary. It is then a force of nature—something greater than himself:

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. (IV. i. 59–62)

"A losing suit," because he, who grieves more for his ducats than his daughter, refuses many times the value of his debt to have his bond of Antonio; and his

implacability is supplied with excuses enough to more than half persuade us—Antonio's expressed contempt for him, and the magnificent speech, which may have been hardly less magnificent in the verse from which Shakespeare seems to have changed it.

And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
 If we are like you in the rest, we will
 Resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong
 A Christian, what is his humility?
 Revenge! And if a Christian wrong a Jew
 What should his sufferance be?
 By Christian example, why, revenge!
 The villainy you teach me
 I will execute: and it shall go hard
 But I will better the instruction. (III. i. 71 *sq*)

Not content with that, Shakespeare in the trial scene gives Shylock a truly tremendous argument:

DUKE. How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?
 SHY. What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?
 You have among you many a purchased slave,
 Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
 You use in abject and in slavish parts,
 Because you bought them: shall I say to you,
 Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
 Why sweat they under urthens? let their beds
 Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
 Be seasoned with such viands? You will answer
 "The slaves are ours": so do I answer you:
 The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,
 Is dearly bought: 'tis mine and I will have it.
 If you deny me, fie upon your law!
 There is no force in the decrees of Venice.
 I stand for judgment: answer, shall I have it? (IV. i. 87–103)

Shall I not do as I will with mine own? It is the morality of a whole society, to which Antonio and his friends belong no less than Shylock, which Shylock challenges here, and by anticipation blunts the edge of Portia's great plea for mercy. As Hazlitt put it, in his tempestuous way, "the appeal to the Jew's mercy, as if there were any common principle of right and wrong between them, is the rankest hypocrisy, the blindest prejudice." The world where mercy

prevails is not the world of the play. That is a world where justice is the bulwark of injustice.

This is much more than a dramatic device to gain a momentary sympathy for Shylock; yet it is less, or at least other, than a deliberate posing of a profound moral problem. *The Merchant of Venice* is not a problem play; it is a fairy story, within the framework of which Shakespeare allowed free working to the thoughts of his mind and the feelings of his heart. What an unfettered Shylock might say, this fettered Shylock does say.

In other words, Shylock is both the embodiment of an irrational hatred, and a credible human being. He is neither of these things to the exclusion of the other. And if we ask how can that be? the only answer is that it is so. This was Shakespeare's way of working. If we choose, we may say that there are in the story primitive elements which he could not wholly assimilate to his own conception; but such an explanation, in *The Merchant of Venice* as in *Hamlet*, brings us against the fact that the dramatic impression made by these plays is the impression of an artistic whole. And, indeed, it seems more probable that Shakespeare did not deal in "conceptions" of the kind that are often attributed to him. He set himself in successive attempts to infuse a general impression of credibility into an old story, and to secure from his audience no more, and no less, than "that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith."

One cannot too often emphasize the nature of Shakespeare's dramatic "method." It was not chosen by him, neither was it imposed upon his reluctant genius; it was simply the condition of the work he had chosen to do. The situation was given; necessarily, therefore, the "characters" in a certain primitive sense—much the same sense in which we can speak of "characters" in a nursery-story like Cinderella or Robin Hood or a Punch and Judy show. They are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story. Shakespeare proceeded to endow them with poetic utterance, and with character in a quite different sense. He did what he could to make them credible human beings to himself. He gave them so far as was possible, humanly plausible motives for their acts and situations, although these were often in fact prior to humane psychology. In a word, the method of Shakespeare's drama consists, essentially, in the humanization of melodrama. And each of those terms must have real validity for the Shakespeare critic who is to avoid ascending or descending into some private universe of his own and calling it Shakespeare.

This Shakespeare, who strove to humanize melodrama, and yet was perforce content with the immediate dramatic impression—an "essential Shakespeare," if ever there was one—is apparently very difficult for modern criticism to grasp. There is something monstrous about him which must be brought to order. The methods of disciplining him are various. In their extreme form they were practised by the late Mr. J. M. Robertson, and consisted in assigning to somebody else, on "stylistic" grounds, nearly all that was unpalatable in

Shakespeare. In the more circumspect form, practised by the New Cambridge editors, they are a combination of discovering “old-play-fossils,” which generally contain the parts of Shakespeare which are held to be morally or aesthetically reprehensible, and downright charges of bad workmanship, by standards which are irrelevant. Thus, the New Cambridge edition argues that, since “everyone of the Venetian *dramatis personae* is either a ‘waster’ or a ‘rotter’ or both, and cold-hearted at that,” the true dramatic contrast between Shylock and Antonio and his friends is blurred.

For the evil opposed against these curious Christians is specific; it is Cruelty; and yet again specifically, the peculiar cruelty of a Jew. To this cruelty an artist at the top of his art would surely have opposed mansuetude, clemency, charity and specifically Christian charity. Shakespeare misses more than half the point when he wakes his intended victims, as a class and by habit, just as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock’s passionate excuse.

The basis of this argument is surely mistaken. To supply the true dramatic contrast to Shylock’s insistence upon his bond, not rare Christian charity, but ordinary human decency is enough. The contrast would not be heightened, but made intolerable, if Antonio and his friends were represented as uncanonized saints. Deliberate and conscious cruelty is an outrage upon ordinary human nature. And the careless paganism of Antonio’s friends—ordinary “decent” young aristocrats—is the proper foil to it.

Antonio and his friends are unconscious. They do not realize any more than did the average decent man of Shakespeare’s day, that their morality is essentially no finer than Shylock’s, or rather that Shylock’s is the logical consequence of their own. Because they are unconscious, they are forgiven; where Shylock, being conscious, cannot be. And that is true to life. Logic in morality is intolerable and inhuman, and Antonio’s escape from Shylock’s revenge by a legal quibble is poetic justice. The impediment of logic and law is broken down by logic and law, and the stream of human life—ordinary, approximate, unconscious, instinctive human life—can flow on. The decency of an age and an average prevails over the design of an isolated bitterness.

There is a morality in *The Merchant of Venice*, though it is not of the formulable kind; nor is it a morality on the level of the deepest insights expressed in the play. Shylock’s incrimination of “Christian” society, Portia’s appeal to Christian mercy—these are overtones, as it were caught from the celestial spheres.

Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There’s not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
But in his motion like an angel sings

Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close us in, we cannot hear it. (V. i. 58–65)

No one distinctly hears that harmony in the play: and it would be fatal if they did. For this play was never intended to vex us with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls, but “to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in these points where the nature of things doth deny it.”

That axiom of Bacon’s may be applied not merely to *The Merchant of Venice* as a whole, but to Shakespeare’s work upon the story. If we try to make the play as a whole consistent with the points in which Shakespeare gave satisfaction to his own mind, we retire discomfited. If we persist, we are landed in critical extravagance. Thus one of the New Cambridge editors (who is in general a very fine critic) condemns Shakespeare as a bad workman because he did not attune all the Venetian gallants to the key of Portia’s appeal for mercy. He dismisses the rest of Antonio’s friends as beneath contempt, and concentrates his indignation upon Bassanio.

When we first meet him, he is in debt, a condition on which—having to confess it because he wants to borrow more money—he expends some very choice diction.

’Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
[No, it certainly was not!]
How much I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance.

That may be a mighty fine way of saying you have chosen to live beyond your income; but Shakespeare or no Shakespeare, if Shakespeare means us to hold Bassanio for an honest fellow, it is mighty poor poetry. For poetry, like honest men, looks things in the face and does not ransack its wardrobe to clothe what is naturally unpoetical.

Moral indignation runs floodgate here: for the consequences of this statement are, first, that it is “naturally unpoetical” to live beyond your income, and second that poetry should look such a condition “in the face.” What the effect of this contemplation would be we cannot surmise—perhaps a naturally unpoetical poetry. At all events it is clear that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has for the moment become unmindful of the very nature of poetic drama; he would banish the generous spendthrift from it for ever.

Even so Bassanio is not done with. He crowns his unmitigated offences by paying suit among the rivals to Portia’s hand.

O my Antonio, had I but the means
 To hold a rival place with one of them,
 I have a mind presages me such thrift,
 That I should questionless be fortunate.

Now this (says his stern mentor) is bad workmanship and dishonoring to Bassanio . . . But he gets the money of course, equips himself lavishly, arrives at Belmont; and here comes in worst workmanship. For I suppose that, while character weighs in drama, if one thing more than another is certain, it is that a predatory young gentleman such as Bassanio would *not* have chosen the leaden casket.

To all which the only reply is that every ordinary reader of the play, so far from considering Bassanio predatory, hopes, expects, is certain, that so debonair a gentleman will choose the right box. The lapse is not in Shakespeare's workmanship, but in his editor's judgment. Shakespeare remembered what he was doing, his editor has forgotten. *The Merchant of Venice* is not, and was never intended to be, a realistic problem-play. It is possible not to like what it is; but the first duty of a critic is to see it as what it is, and not as something quite different. No one would hold up tragicomedy as the highest form of poetic drama; but it is a separate form, with a quality and flavor all its own. *The Merchant of Venice* is the finest example of it that we possess.

Dr. Dover Wilson's method of dealing with the baffling substance of *The Merchant of Venice* is different. He does not accuse Shakespeare of being a bad workman. He convinces himself that there are substantial elements of a pre-Shakespearian play in Shakespeare's text. He reaches this conviction, in fact, on *a priori* grounds, for his bibliographical evidence points merely to the probability of revision, which any careful reader of the play will admit; it supplies no ground for supposing that the original text, which Shakespeare revised and revised again, was not Shakespeare's own. But for some cause Dr. Dover Wilson is anxious to prove that there is non-Shakespearian matter in the play. There is—and it hardly needs proving. The bare plot is, almost certainly, not Shakespeare's own. But Dr. Dover Wilson wants to prove much more than this: namely, that substantial elements of the writing are not Shakespeare's. And the cause of this anxiety, we believe, is that he is perplexed by the substance of the play. At all events, the anxiety must needs be devouring to enable him to imagine that there is any validity in the argument he uses. "Mere surmise is not enough," he truly says. "What we need is proof, and proof of such a kind as will leave no doubt that two distinct dramatists have been at work on the structure of the play." The sentiment is admirable. But Dr. Wilson thus continues:

The divergent conceptions of the Venetian polity evident in the play, though hitherto unnoticed by critics, furnish, we think, the proof required. Consider these three passages:

He plies the duke at morning and at night,
And doth impeach the freedom of the state,
If they deny him justice. (III. ii. 278–80)

The duke cannot deny the course of law:
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. (III. iii. 26–31)

I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond:
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and the city's freedom. (IV, i. 35–9)

In the second we recognize the historical Venetian republic, the independent state, the great world port and world market, whose trade and confidence were only secured by the city's even-handed and rigorous enforcement of the law of contract. In the third passage the constitution has completely changed; Venice has now become a city, like London or many other English townships, enjoying privileges under a royal charter, privileges liable to suspension if the city misbehaved itself. As for the first of the three passages, it must remain uncertain what type of constitution it has in view, seeing that "freedom" may refer either to "the commodity (i.e. privileges) that strangers have" in the port of Venice, or to the freedom of the city itself from royal or baronial interference. Indeed, one may hazard the guess that it was just the ambiguity of this word "freedom" which gave rise to the contradiction in the other two passages. In any case, it can hardly be denied that the contradiction is there and that its presence makes it absolutely certain that two different dramatists have been at work upon the text. Nor, we think, should there be any doubt which of the two was Shakespeare. The historically accurate lines from III, iii give us pedestrian and unskillful verse, witness the awkwardness of "since that," the ugly repetition in "deny . . . denied," and the muddled construction of the whole sentence which no commentator has quite succeeded in

unravelling. On the other hand, the lines which inaccurately credit Venice with a royal charter come not only from the trial scene, but from the mouth of one of Shakespeare's supreme creations at his most characteristic moment.

We have quoted the argument entire, because it shows very plainly the process by which non-literary theory can tamper with literary judgment. No one reading those three passages without prepossession would be inclined to deny any one of them to Shakespeare. To adduce the "muddled construction" of the second as evidence that it is not Shakespeare's is perverse. Compressed and pregnant syntax of precisely that kind (where the main drift is plain) is pre-eminently Shakespearian.¹ Further, if the passages came before us simply as anonymous fragments, we should naturally conclude that the second was from the same hand as the first: the phrases, "impeach the freedom of the state," "impeach the justice of the state," would certainly be attributed by the ordinary literary critic to the same pen. Dr. Wilson, however, requires us to believe that each is the work of a different hand, simply because the conceptions of Venetian polity in two of them are inconsistent. Since when is Shakespeare required to be rigidly consistent in such matters? Shall we conclude that two distinct dramatists had a hand in *Othello* because the members of the Council are in one place called "senators" and in another "consuls," and a third where Iago says that Brabantio is twice as powerful as the Duke and has power of his own motion to divorce Desdemona from the Moor. Every reader of Shakespeare knows that he was quite careless of consistency in such matters. Dr. Wilson himself knows this far better than most of us, but he has managed to persuade himself, and would persuade us, that the negligible inconsistency "makes it absolutely certain" that in *The Merchant of Venice* two different dramatists have been at work upon the text of yet a third.

We believe that these are aberrations of criticism, and that they ultimately derive from the peculiarity of Shakespeare's methods, which are perhaps exceptionally prominent in *The Merchant of Venice*. The unity of a Shakespeare play (if we may generalize) is seldom what would be described today as a unity of conception. That was precluded, save in rare cases, by the necessities of Shakespeare's peculiar craft. The axiom, which has long been current in Shakespeare criticism, that the situation derives from the character is, in the main, a mistaken one. The reverse is nearer to the truth; for the situations are generally prior to the characters. But that does not mean, as some modern critics assert, that the reverse is the truth, and that the characters derive from the situations. They do not. They are largely epiphenomenal to the situations.

This is difficult to grasp, because it is so simple. There is an element in a Shakespeare character which derives from the situation; but that element is relatively small compared to the element which floats as it were free of the situation. On this element Shakespeare lavished himself, because here he was,

within limits, a free agent. A simple example is Antonio's motiveless melancholy at the opening of *The Merchant*. It is motiveless: because it is motiveless, modern "scientific" criticism explains it away by a "cut." "We have here," says Dr. Dover Wilson, "a dramatic motive deliberately suppressed at the time of a revision, and the broken line 'I am to learn' shows us where one of the 'cuts' involved in this suppression took place." On the contrary, I am persuaded that Shakespeare intended Antonio's melancholy to be motiveless and that the half-line was deliberate. Shakespeare was taking advantage of that part of Antonio's character which was free to introduce a depth into his character, and still more a feeling-tone into the play, which he felt the play could bear, and which would enrich it. That Antonio's character, as fixed by the situation, does not fully square with this; that he has subsequently to be one who "rails upon" the Jews, and spits upon a Jewish gaberdine, did not trouble Shakespeare. He had had to learn not to be troubled by such necessities. Antonio would remain a presence in the responsive imagination, a character whose nature was not wholly expressed in the acts required of him. It is not otherwise with Shylock. Shylock's "free" character is created of sentiments and thoughts which are, on any cool analysis, incompatible with the acts required of him. The "bloody-minded usurer" is the mouthpiece of an oppressed nation and the impassioned critic of current Christian morality; yet he is, because he has to be, "the bloody-minded usurer" as well. And Shakespeare, as we have seen, will exalt and degrade him at need, either to make uncouthness in the action more plausible, or to wring every atom of imaginative and dramatic possibility out of the central situation. As Dr. Bridges wrote, "He had, as it were, a balance to maintain, and a fine sense of its equipoise: if one scale descends, he immediately throws something into the other, and though he may appear to be careless as to what he throws in, he only throws in such things as he knows he may be careless about. But an examination of those matters would tend to prove that he did not regard the reader as well as the audience of his plays."

Coherent, in the modern sense of the word, such characters are not. Nor are they even consistent among themselves, so to speak. At their best, which is often, they create the inimitable Shakespearian impression of being imagined "in the round" and exhibiting in action only one aspect of their rich substance to us; at the worst, which is rare, they are puzzling and demand from the reader more than the normal effort towards the willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith. Such a method of character-creation could arise (I think) only out of a sort of consubstantiality of the poet with the theatre. It was imposed by the practice of rewriting time-honored and time-proven theatrical material: and it is notable that where Shakespeare had a relatively free hand this imaginative ambiguity is much less frequent. For in this order we should need to make a distinction between story-material which was familiar to Shakespeare's audience, and story-material which, though not of Shakespeare's invention, was not familiar to them. The degree of Shakespeare's liberty to adjust his dramatic

action to his imaginative need must have varied greatly according to the definiteness of popular expectation.

To determine that variation is, perhaps fortunately, beyond our power. We lack the knowledge, and it is unlikely that we shall ever attain it. But it is worthy of more than passing notice that the two perennially popular plays of Shakespeare—*The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*—are the two of which we can say, most definitely, that his freedom to alter the action was most limited; and that they are also the plays in which the nature of the chief character is most disputed.



1959—C. L. Barber. “The Merchants and the Jew of Venice: Wealth’s Communion and an Intruder,” from *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*

C. L. Barber was a professor of literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He also wrote *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare’s Power of Development* and *The Story of Language*.

When Shylock comes on in the third scene, the easy, confident flow of colorful talk and people is checked by a solitary figure and an unyielding speech:

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats—well.

BASSANIO: Ay, sir, for three months.

SHYLOCK: For three months—well.

BASSANIO: For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

SHYLOCK: Antonio shall become bound—well.

BASSANIO: May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound. (I.iii.1–10)

We can construe Shylock’s hesitation as playing for time while he forms his plan. But more fundamentally, his deliberation expresses the impersonal logic, the mechanism, involved in the control of money. Those *well*’s are wonderful in the way they bring bland Bassanio up short. Bassanio assumes that social gestures can brush aside such consideration:

SHYLOCK: Antonio is a good man.

BASSANIO: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

SHYLOCK: Ho, no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. (I.iii.12–17)

The laugh is on Bassanio as Shylock drives his hard financial meaning of “good man” right through the center of Bassanio’s softer social meaning. The Jew goes on to calculate and count. He connects the hard facts of money with the rocky sea hazards of which we have so far been only picturesquely aware: “ships are but boards”; and he betrays his own unwillingness to take the risks proper to commerce: “and other ventures he hath, squand’red abroad.”

. . . I think I may take his bond.

BASSANIO: Be assur’d you may.

SHYLOCK: I will be assur’d I may; and, that I may be assured, I will bethink me. (I.iii.28–31)

The Jew in this encounter expresses just the things about money which are likely to be forgotten by those who have it, or presume they have it, as part of a social station. He stands for what we mean when we say that “money is money.” So Shylock makes an ironic comment—and is a comment, by virtue of his whole tone and bearing—on the folly in Bassanio which leads him to confuse those two meanings of “good man,” to ask Shylock to dine, to use in this business context such social phrases as “Will you *pleasure* me?” When Antonio joins them, Shylock (after a soliloquy in which his plain hatred has glittered) becomes a pretender to fellowship, with an equivocating mask:

SHYLOCK: This is kind I offer.

BASSANIO: This were kindness.

SHYLOCK: This kindness I will show. (I.iii.143–144)

We are of course in no doubt as to how to take the word “kindness” when Shylock proposes “in a merry sport” that the penalty be a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

In the next two acts, Shylock and the accounting mechanism which he embodies are crudely baffled in Venice and rhapsodically transcended in Belmont. The solidarity of the Venetians includes the clown, in whose part Shakespeare can use conventional blacks and whites about Jews and misers without asking us to take them too seriously:

To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master,
who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil. . . . My master’s a very Jew.
(II.ii.24–25, III)

Even the street urchins can mock Shylock after the passion which “the dog Jew did utter in the streets”:

Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
Crying his stones, his daughter, and his ducats. (II.viii.23–24)

Historical changes in stock attitudes have made difficulties about Shylock's role as a butt, not so much in the theater, where it works perfectly if producers only let it, but in criticism, where winds of doctrine blow sentiments and abstractions about. The Elizabethans almost never saw Jews except on the stage, where Marlowe's Barabas was familiar. They did see *one*, on the scaffold, when Elizabeth's unfortunate physician suffered for trumped-up charges of a poisoning plot. The popular attitude was that to take interest for money was to be a loan shark—though limited interest was in fact allowed by law. An aristocrat who like Lord Bassanio ran out of money commanded sympathy no longer felt in a middle-class world. Most important of all, suffering was not an absolute evil in an era when men sometimes embraced it deliberately, accepted it as inevitable, and could watch it with equanimity. Humanitarianism has made it necessary for us to be much more thoroughly insulated from the human reality of people if we are to laugh at their discomfiture or relish their suffering. During the romantic period, and sometimes more recently, the play was presented as a tragi-comedy, and actors vied with one another in making Shylock a figure of pathos. I remember a very moving scene, a stock feature of romantic productions, in which George Arliss came home after Bassanio's party, lonely and tired and old, to knock in vain at the door of the house left empty by Jessica. How completely unhistorical the romantic treatment was, E. E. Stoll demonstrated overwhelmingly in his essay on Shylock in 1911, both by wide-ranging comparisons of Shylock's role with others in Renaissance drama and by analysis of the *optique du théâtre*.

To insert a humanitarian scene about Shylock's pathetic homecoming prevents the development of the scornful amusement with which Shakespeare's text presents the miser's reaction in Solanio's narrative:

I never heard a passion so confus'd,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.
“My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! . . .” (II.viii.12–16)

Marlowe had done such a moment already with Barabas hugging in turn his money bags and his daughter—whom later the Jew of Malta poisons with a pot

of porridge, as the Jew of Venice later wishes that Jessica “were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin” (III.i.93–94). But the humanitarian way of playing the part develops suggestions that are also in Shakespeare’s text:

I am bid forth to supper, Jessica.
There are my keys. But wherefore should I go?
I am not bid for love; they flatter me.
But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon
The prodigal Christian. (II.v.11–15)

Shakespeare’s marvelous creative sympathy takes the stock role of Jewish usurer and villain and conveys how it would feel to be a man living inside it. But this does not mean that he shrinks from confronting the evil and the absurdity that go with the role; for the Elizabethan age, to understand did not necessarily mean to forgive. Shylock can be a thorough villain and yet be allowed to express what sort of treatment has made him what he is:

You called me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own. (I.iii.112–114)

We can understand his degradation and even blame the Antonios of Venice for it; yet it remains degradation:

Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause;
But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs. (III.iii.6–7)

Shylock repeatedly states, as he does here, that he is only finishing what the Venetians started. He can be a drastic ironist, because he carries to extremes what is present, whether acknowledged or not, in their silken world. He insists that money is money—and they cannot do without money either. So too with the rights of property. The power to give freely, which absolute property confers and Antonio and Portia so splendidly exhibit, is also a power to refuse, as Shylock so logically refuses:

You have among you many a purchas’d slave,
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
“Let them be free, marry them to your heirs! . . .”
You will answer,

“The slaves are ours.” So do I answer you.
 The pound of flesh which I demand of him
 Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it. (IV.i.90–100)

At this point in the trial scene, Shylock seems a juggernaut that nothing can stop, armed as he is against a pillar of society by the principles of society itself: “If you deny me, fie upon your law! . . . I stand for judgement. Answer. Shall I have it.” Nobody does answer him here, directly; instead there is an interruption for Portia’s entrance. To answer him is the function of the whole dramatic action, which is making a distinction that could not be made in direct, logical argument.

Let us follow this dramatic action from its comic side. Shylock is comic, so far as he is so, because he exhibits what should be human, degraded into mechanism. The reduction of life to mechanism goes with the miser’s wary calculation, with the locking up, with the preoccupation with “that which is mine own.” Antonio tells Bassanio that

My purse, my person, my extremest means
 Lie all unlock’d to your occasions. (I.i.138–139)

How open! Antonio has to live inside some sort of rich man’s melancholy, but at least he communicates with the world through outgoing Bassanio (and, one can add, through the commerce which takes his fortunes out to sea). Shylock, by contrast, who breeds barren metal, wants to keep “the vile squeeling of the wry-neck’d fife” out of his house, and speaks later, in a curiously revealing, seemingly random illustration, of men who “when the bagpipe sings i’ th’ nose, / Cannot contain their urine” (IV.i.49–50). Not only is he closed up tight inside himself, but after the first two scenes, we are scarcely allowed by his lines to feel with him. And we never encounter him alone; he regularly comes on to join a group whose talk has established an outside point of view towards him. This perspective on him does not exclude a potential pathos. There is always potential pathos, behind, when drama makes fun of isolating, anti-social qualities. Indeed, the process of *making fun* of a person often works by exhibiting pretensions to humanity so as to show that they are inhuman, mechanical, not validly appropriate for sympathy. With a comic villain such as Shylock, the effect is mixed in various degrees between our responding to the mechanism as menacing and laughing at it as ridiculous.

So in the great scene in which Solanio and Salerio taunt Shylock, the potentiality of pathos produces effects which vary between comedy and menace:

SHYLOCK: You knew, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.
SALERIO: That's certain. I, for my part, knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal. (III.i.27–30)

Shylock's characteristic repetitions, and the way he has of moving ahead through similar, short phrases, as though even with language he was going to use only what was his own, can give an effect of concentration and power, or again, an impression of a comically limited, isolated figure. In the great speech of self-justification to which he is goaded by the two bland little gentlemen, the iteration conveys the energy of anguish:

—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III.i.60–71)

Certainly no actor would deliver this speech without an effort at pathos; but it is a pathos which, as the speech moves, converts to menace. And the pathos is qualified, limited, in a way which is badly falsified by humanitarian renderings that open all the stops at “Hath not a Jew hands, etc. . . .” For Shylock thinks to claim only a part of humanness, the lower part, physical and passional. The similar self-pitying enumeration which Richard II makes differs significantly in going from “live with bread like you” to social responses and needs, “Taste grief, / Need friends” (*Richard II* III.ii.175–176). The passions in Shylock's speech are conceived as reflexes; the parallel clauses draw them all towards the level of “tickle . . . laugh.” The same assumption, that the passions and social responses are mechanisms on a par with a nervous tic, appears in the court scene when Shylock defends his right to follow his “humor” in taking Antonio's flesh:

As there is no firm reason to be render'd
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a woollen bagpipe—but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend himself, being offended;
So I can give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear unto Antonio . . . (IV.i.52–61)

The most succinct expression of this assumption about man is Shylock's response to Bassanio's incredulous question:

BASSANIO: Do all men kill the things they do not love?

SHYLOCK: Hates any man the thing he would not kill? (IV.i.66–67)

There is no room in this view for mercy to come in between "wrong us" and "shall we not revenge?" As Shylock insists, there is Christian example for him: the irony is strong. But the mechanism of stimulus and response is only a part of the truth. The reductive tendency of Shylock's metaphors, savagely humorous in Iago's fashion, goes with this speaking only the lower part of the truth. He is not cynical in Iago's aggressive way, because as an alien he simply doesn't participate in many of the social ideals which Iago is concerned to discredit in self-justification. But the two villains have the same frightening, ironical power from moral simplification.

Shylock becomes a clear-cut butt at the moments when he is himself caught in compulsive, reflexive responses, when instead of controlling mechanism he is controlled by it: "O my daughter! O my ducats!" At the end of the scene of taunting, his menace and his pathos become ridiculous when he dances like a jumping jack in alternate joy and sorrow as Tubal pulls the strings:

TUBAL: Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—

SHYLOCK: What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?

TUBAL: Hath an argosy cast away coming from Tripolis.

SHYLOCK: I thank God, I thank God!—Is it true? is it true?

TUBAL: I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wrack.

SHYLOCK: I thank thee, good Tubal. Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Where? in Genoa?

TUBAL: Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night fourscore ducats.

SHYLOCK: Thou stick'st a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again. Four-score ducats at a sitting! Fourscore ducats!

TUBAL: There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break.

SHYLOCK: I am very glad of it. I'll plague him; I'll torture him. I am glad of it.

TUBAL: One of them show'd me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

SHYLOCK: Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

TUBAL: But Antonio is certainly undone.

SHYLOCK: Nay, that's true, that's very true. (III.i.102–130)

This is a scene in the dry manner of Marlowe, Jonson, or Molière, a type of comedy not very common in Shakespeare: its abrupt alternations in response convey the effect. Bergson describes so well in *Le Rire*, where the comic butt is a puppet in whom motives have become mechanisms that usurp life's self-determining prerogative. Some critics have left the rhythm of the scene behind to dwell on the pathos of the ring he had from Leah when he was a bachelor. It is like Shakespeare once to show Shylock putting a gentle sentimental value on something, to match the savage sentimental value he puts on revenge. There *is* pathos; but it is being fed into the comic mill and makes the laughter all the more hilarious.

In the trial scene, the turning point is appropriately the moment when Shylock gets caught in the mechanism he relies on so ruthlessly. He narrows everything down to his roll of parchment and his knife: "Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond . . ." (IV.i.139). But two can play at this game:

as thou urgest justice, be assur'd

Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st. (IV.i.315–316)

Shylock's bafflement is comic, as well as dramatic, in the degree that we now see through the threat he has presented, recognizing it to have been, in a degree, unreal. For it is unreal to depend so heavily on legal form, on fixed verbal definition, on the mere machinery by which human relations are controlled. Once Portia's legalism has broken through his legalism, he can only go on the way he started, weakly asking "Is that the law?" while Gratiano's jeers underscore the comic symmetry:

A Daniel still say I, a second Daniel!

I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word. (IV.i.340–341)

The turning of the tables is not, of course, simply comic, except for the bold, wild and "skipping spirit" of Gratiano. The trial scene is a species of drama that uses comic movement in slow motion, with an investment of feeling such that the resolution is in elation and relief colored by amusement, rather than in the evacuation of laughter. Malvolio, a less threatening kill-joy intruder, is simply laughed out of court, but Shylock must be ruled out, with jeering only on the side lines. The threat Shylock offers is, after all, drastic, for legal instruments, contract, property are fundamental. Comic dramatists often choose to set them hilariously at naught; but Shakespeare is, as usual, scrupulously responsible to the principles of social order (however factitious his "law" may be literally). So

he produced a scene which exhibits the limitations of legalism. It works by a dialectic that carries to a more general level what might be comic reduction to absurdity. To be tolerant, because we are all fools; to forgive, because we are all guilty—the two gestures of the spirit are allied, as Erasmus noted in praising the sublime folly of following Christ. Shylock says before the trial “I’ll not be made a soft and dull-ey’d fool” by “Christian intercessors” (III.iii.14–15). Now when he is asked how he can hope for mercy if he renders none, he answers: “What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?” As the man who will not acknowledge his own share of folly ends by being more foolish than anyone else, so Shylock, who will not acknowledge a share of guilt, ends by being more guilty—and more foolish, to judge by results. An argument between Old Testament legalism and New Testament reliance on grace develops as the scene goes forward. (Shylock’s references to Daniel in this scene, and his constant use of Old Testament names and allusions, contribute to the contrast.) Portia does not deny the bond—nor the law behind it; instead she makes such a plea as St. Paul made to his compatriots:

Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this—
 That, in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. (IV.i.97–102)

Mercy becomes the word that gathers up everything we have seen the Venetians enjoying in their reliance on community. What is on one side an issue of principles is on the other a matter of social solidarity: Shylock is not one of the “we” Portia refers to, the Christians who say in the Lord’s Prayer “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” All through the play the word Christian has been repeated, primarily in statements that enforce the fact that the Jew is outside the easy bonds of community. Portia’s plea for mercy is a sublime version of what in less intense circumstances, among friends of a single communion, can be conveyed with a shrug or a wink:

Dost thou hear, Hal? Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell;
 and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villany? (*I Henry IV*
 III.iii.185–188)

Falstaff, asking for an amnesty to get started again, relies on his festive solidarity with Hal. Comedy, in one way or another, is always asking for amnesty, after showing the moral machinery of life getting in the way of life. The machinery as such need not be dismissed—Portia is very emphatic about not doing that. But social solidarity, resting on the buoyant force of a collective life that transcends

particular mistakes, can set the machinery aside. Shylock, closed off as he is, clutching his bond and his knife, cannot trust this force, and so acts only on compulsion:

PORTIA: Do you confess the bond?
ANTONIO: I do.
PORTIA: Then must the Jew be merciful.
SHYLOCK: On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.
PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest—
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes. (IV.i.181–187)

It has been in giving and taking, beyond the compulsion of accounts, that Portia, Bassanio, Antonio have enjoyed the something-for-nothing that Portia here summarizes in speaking of the gentle rain from heaven. (. . .)

I must add, after all this praise for the way the play makes its distinction about the use of wealth, that *on reflection*, not when viewing or reading the play, but when thinking about it, I find the distinction, as others have, somewhat too easy. While I read or watch, all is well, for the attitudes of Shylock are appallingly inhuman, and Shakespeare makes me feel constantly how the Shylock attitude rests on a lack of faith in community and grace. But when one thinks about the Portia Bassanio group, not in opposition to Shylock but alone (as Shakespeare does not show them), one can be troubled by their being so very very far above money:

What, no more?
Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.
Double six thousand and then treble that . . . (III.ii.298–300)

(. . .)

About Shylock (. . .) there is a difficulty which grows on reflection, a difficulty which may be felt too in reading or performance. His part fits perfectly into the design of the play, and yet he is so alive that he raises an interest beyond its design. I do not think his humanity spoils the design, as Walter Raleigh and others argued, and as was almost inevitable for audiences who assumed that to be human was to be ipso-facto good. But it is true that in the small compass of Shylock's three hundred and sixty-odd lines, Shakespeare provided material that asks for a whole additional play to work itself out. Granville-Barker perceptively summarizes how much there is in the scene, not sixty lines long, in which Shylock is seen at home:

The parting with Launcelot: he has a niggard liking for the fellow, is even hurt a little by his leaving, touched in pride, too, and shows it childishly.

Thou shalt not gormandize
As though hast done with me . . .

. . . The parting with Jessica, which we of the audience know to be a parting indeed; that constant calling her by name, which tells us of the lonely man! He has looked to her for everything, has tasked her hard, no doubt; he is her jailer, yet he trusts her, and loves her in his extortionate way. Uneasy stranger that he is within these Venetian gates; the puritan, who, in a wastrel world, will abide by law and prophets!

To have dramatized “he has looked to her for everything, has tasked her hard, no doubt,” would have taken Shakespeare far afield indeed from the prodigal story he was concerned with—as far afield as *King Lear*. Yet the suggestion is there. The figure of Shylock is like some secondary figure in a Rembrandt painting, so charged with implied life that one can forget his surroundings. To look sometimes with absorption at the suffering, raging Jew alone is irresistible. But the more one is aware of what the play’s whole design is expressing through Shylock, of the comedy’s high seriousness in its concern for the grace of community, the less one wants to lose the play Shakespeare wrote for the sake of one he merely suggested.



1962—W. H. Auden. “Love and Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*,” from *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*

W. H. Auden was one of the great English poets of the twentieth century. He also wrote essays, dramas, a libretto for Igor Stravinsky, and other works. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his book-length poem *The Age of Anxiety*.

The Merchant of Venice is, among other things, as much a ‘problem’ play as one by Ibsen or Shaw. The question of the immorality or morality of usury was a sixteenth-century issue on which both the theologians and the secular authorities were divided. Though the majority of medieval theologians had condemned usury, there had been, from the beginning, divergence of opinion as to the correct interpretation of Deuteronomy xxiii.19–20: ‘Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon

usury: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury', and Leviticus xxv.35-7, which proscribe the taking of usury, not only from a fellow Jew, but also from the stranger living in their midst and under their protection.

Some Christian theologians had interpreted this to mean that, since the Christians had replaced the Jews as God's Chosen, they were entitled to exact usury from non-Christians.¹

'Who is your brother? He is your sharer in nature, co-heir in grace, every people, which, first, is in the faith, then under the Roman Law. Who, then, is the stranger? the foes of God's people. From him, demand usury whom you rightly desire to harm, against whom weapons are lawfully carried. Upon him usury is legally imposed. Where there is the right of war, there also is the right of usury.' (ST. AMBROSE)

Several centuries later, St. Bernard of Siena, in a statement of which the sanctity seems as doubtful as the logic, takes St. Ambrose's argument even further.

'Temporal goods are given to men for the worship of the true God and the Lord of the Universe. When, therefore, the worship of God does not exist, as in the case of God's enemies, usury is lawfully exacted, because this is not done for the sake of gain, but for the sake of the Faith; and the motive is brotherly love, namely, that God's enemies may be weakened and so return to Him; and further because the goods they have do not belong to them, since they are rebels against the true faith; they shall therefore devolve upon the Christians.'

The majority, however, starting from the Gospel, command that we are to treat all men, even our enemies, as brothers, held that the Deuteronomic permission was no longer valid, so that under no circumstances was usury permissible. Thus, St. Thomas Aquinas, who was also, no doubt, influenced by Aristotle's condemnation of usury, says:

'The Jews were forbidden to take usury from their brethren, i.e., from other Jews. By this we are given to understand that to take usury from any man is simply evil, because we ought to treat every man as our neighbor and brother, especially in the state of the Gospel whereto we are called. They were permitted, however, to take usury from foreigners, not as though it were lawful, but in order to avoid a greater evil, lest to wit, through avarice to which they were prone, according to Isaiah, lvi.7 they should take usury from Jews, who were worshippers of God.'

On the Jewish side, talmudic scholars had some interesting interpretations. Rashi held that the Jewish debtor is forbidden to pay interest to a fellow Jew, but he may pay interest to a Gentile. Maimonides, who was anxious to prevent Jews

from being tempted into idolatry by associating with Gentiles, held that a Jew might borrow at usury from a Gentile, but should not make loans to one, on the ground that debtors are generally anxious to avoid their creditors; but creditors are obliged to seek the company of debtors.

Had Shakespeare wished to show Shylock the usurer in the most unfavourable light possible, he could have placed him in a medieval agricultural society, where men become debtors through misfortunes, like a bad harvest or sickness for which they are not responsible, but he places him in a mercantile society, where the role played by money is a very different one.

When Antonio says:

I neither lend nor borrow
By taking or giving of excess

he does not mean that, if he goes into partnership with another merchant contributing, say, a thousand ducats to their venture, and their venture makes a profit, he only asks for a thousand ducats back. He is a merchant and the Aristotelian argument that money is barren and cannot breed money, which he advances to Shylock, is invalid in his own case.

This change in the role of money had already been recognized by both Catholic and Protestant theologians. Calvin, for example, had come to the conclusion that the Deuteronomic injunction had been designed to meet a particular political situation which no longer existed.

‘The law of Moses is political and does not obligate us beyond what equity and the reason of humanity suggest. There is a difference in the political union, for the situation in which God placed the Jews and many circumstances permitted them to trade conveniently among themselves without usuries. Our union is entirely different. Therefore I do not feel that usuries are forbidden, to us simply, except in so far as they are opposed to equity and charity.’

The condemnation of usury by Western Christendom cannot be understood except in relation to the severity of its legal attitude, inherited from Roman Law, towards the defaulting debtor. The pound of flesh story has a basis in historical fact for, according to the Law of the Twelve Tables, a defaulting debtor could be torn to pieces alive. In many medieval contracts the borrower agreed, in the case of default, to pay double the amount of the loan as a forfeit, and imprisonment for debt continued into the nineteenth century. It was possible to consider interest on a loan immoral because the defaulting debtor was regarded as a criminal, that is to say, an exception to the human norm, so that lending was thought of as normally entailing no risk. One motive which led the theologians of the sixteenth century to modify the traditional theories about usury and to

regard it as a necessary social evil rather than as a mortal sin was their fear of social revolution and the teachings of the Anabaptists and other radical utopians. These, starting from the same premise of Universal Brotherhood which had been the traditional ground for condemning usury, drew the conclusion that private property was unchristian, that Christians should share all their goods in common, so that the relation of creditor to debtor would be abolished. Thus, Luther, who at first had accused Catholic theologians of being lax towards the sin of usury, by 1524, was giving this advice to Prince Frederick of Saxony:

‘It is highly necessary that the taking of interest should be regulated everywhere, but to abolish it entirely would not be right either, for it can be made just. I do not advise your Grace, however, to support people in their refusal to pay interest or to prevent them from paying it, for it is not a burden laid upon people by a Prince in his law, but it is a common plague that all have taken upon themselves. We must put up with it, therefore, and hold debtors to it and not let them spare themselves and seek a remedy of their own, but put them on a level with everybody else, as love requires.’

Shylock is a Jew living in a predominantly Christian society, just as Othello is a Negro living in a predominantly white society. But, unlike Othello, Shylock rejects the Christian community as firmly as it rejects him. Shylock and Antonio are at one in refusing to acknowledge a common brotherhood.

I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you nor pray with you.
(SHYLOCK)

I am as like
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee, too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends . . .
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty. (ANTONIO)

In addition, unlike Othello, whose profession of arms is socially honourable, Shylock is a professional usurer who like a prostitute, has a social function but is an outcast from the community. But, in the play, he acts unprofessionally; he refuses to charge Antonio interest and insists upon making their legal relation that of debtor and creditor, a relation acknowledged as legal by all societies. Several critics have pointed to analogies between the trial scene and the medieval, *Processus Belial* in which Our Lady defends man against the prosecuting Devil who claims the legal right to man's soul. The Roman doctrine

of the Atonement presupposes that the debtor deserves no mercy—Christ may substitute Himself for man, but the debt has to be paid by death on the cross. The Devil is defeated, not because he has no right to demand a penalty, but because he does not know that the penalty has been already suffered. But the differences between Shylock and Belial are as important as their similarities. The comic Devil of the mystery play can appeal to logic, to the letter of the law, but he cannot appeal to the heart or to the imagination, and Shakespeare allows Shylock to do both. In his ‘Hath not a Jew eyes . . .’ speech in Act III, scene i, he is permitted to appeal to the sense of human brotherhood, and in the trial scene, he is allowed to argue, with a sly appeal to the fear a merchant class has of radical social revolution:

You have among you many a purchased slave
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,

which points out that those who preach mercy and brotherhood as universal obligations limit them in practice and are prepared to treat certain classes of human beings as things.

Furthermore, while Belial is malevolent without any cause except love of malevolence for its own sake, Shylock is presented as a particular individual living in a particular kind of society at a particular time in history. Usury, like prostitution, may corrupt the character, but those who borrow upon usury, like those who visit brothels, have their share of responsibility for this corruption and aggravate their guilt by showing contempt for those whose services they make use of.

It is, surely, in order to emphasize this point that, in the trial scene, Shakespeare introduces an element which is not found in *Pecorone* or other versions of the pound-of-flesh-story. After Portia has trapped Shylock through his own insistence upon the letter of the law of Contract, she produces another law by which any alien who conspires against the life of a Venetian citizen forfeits his goods and places his life at the Doge’s mercy. Even in the rush of a stage performance, the audience cannot help reflecting that a man as interested in legal subtleties as Shylock, would, surely, have been aware of the existence of this law and that, if by any chance he had overlooked it, the Doge surely would very soon have drawn his attention to it. Shakespeare, it seems to me, was willing to introduce what is an absurd implausibility for the sake of an effect which he could not secure without it: at the last moment when, through his conduct, Shylock has destroyed any sympathy we may have felt for him earlier, we are reminded that, irrespective of his personal character, his status is one of inferiority. A Jew is not regarded, even in law, as a brother.

If the wicked Shylock cannot enter the fairy-story world of Belmont, neither can the noble Antonio, though his friend, Bassanio, can. In the fairy-story world, the symbol of final peace and concord is marriage, so that, if the story is concerned with the adventures of two friends of the same sex, male or female, it must end with a double wedding. Had he wished, Shakespeare could have followed the *Pecorone* story in which it is Ansaldo, not Gratiano, who marries the equivalent of Nerissa. Instead, he portrays Antonio as a melancholic who is incapable of loving a woman. He deliberately avoids the classical formula of the Perfect Friends by making the relationship unequal. When Salanio says of Antonio's feelings for Bassanio

I think he only loves the world for him

we believe it, but no one would say that Bassanio's affections are equally exclusive. Bassanio, high-spirited, elegant pleasure-loving, belongs to the same world as Gratiano and Lorenzo; Antonio does not. When he says:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage, where everyman must play a part,
And mine a sad one

Gratiano may accuse him of putting on an act, but we believe him, just as it does not seem merely the expression of a noble spirit of self-sacrifice when he tells Bassanio:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.

It is well known that love and understanding breed love and understanding.

The more people on high who comprehend each other,
the more there are to love well, and the more
love is there, and like a mirror, one giveth
back to the other. (*Purgatorio*, xv)

So, with the rise of a mercantile economy in which money breeds money, it became an amusing paradox for poets to use the ignoble activity of usury as a metaphor for love, the most noble of human activities. Thus, in his Sonnets, Shakespeare uses usury as an image for the married love which begets children.

Profitless usurer, why dost thou use
 So great a sum of sums, yet canst not live?
 For having traffic with thyself alone
 Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive. (Sonnet IV)

That use is not forbidden usury
 Which happies those that pay the willing loan,
 That's for thyself, to breed another thee,
 Or ten times happier, be it ten for one. (VI)

And, even more relevant, perhaps, to Antonio are the lines

But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure
 Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure. (XX)

There is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare had read Dante, but he must have been familiar with the association of usury with sodomy of which Dante speaks in the Eleventh Canto of the *Inferno*.

'It behoves man to gain his bread and to prosper. And because the usurer takes another way, he contemns Nature in herself and her followers, placing elsewhere his hope. . . . And hence the smallest round seals with its mark Sodom and the Cahors. . . .'

It can, therefore, hardly be an accident that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex.

In any case, the fact that Bassanio's feelings are so much less intense makes Antonio's seem an example of that inordinate affection which theologians have always condemned as a form of idolatry, a putting of the creature before the creator. In the sixteenth century, suretyship, like usury, was a controversial issue. The worldly-wise condemned the standing surety for another on worldly grounds.

'Beware of standing suretyship for thy best friends; he that payeth another man's debts seeketh his own decay: neither borrow money of a neighbour or a friend, but of a stranger.' (LORD BURGHLEY)

'Suffer not thyself to be wounded for other men's faults, or scourged for other men's offences, which is the surety for another: for thereby, millions of men have been beggared and destroyed . . . from suretyship as from a manslayer or enchanter; bless thyself.' (SIR WALTER RALEIGH)

And clerics like Luther condemned it on theological grounds.

‘Of his life and property a man is not certain for a single moment, any more than he is certain of the man for whom he becomes surety. Therefore the man who becomes surety acts unchristian like and deserves what he gets, because he pledges and promises what is not his and not in his power, but in the hands of God alone. . . . These sureties act as though their life and property were their own and were in their power as long as they wished to have it; and this is nothing but the fruit of unbelief. . . . If there were no more of this becoming surety, many a man would have to keep down and be satisfied with a moderate living, who now aspires night and day after high places, relying on borrowing and standing surety.’

The last sentence of this passage applies very well to Bassanio. In *Pecorone*, the Lady of Belmonte is a kind of witch and Gianetto gets into financial difficulties because he is the victim of magic, a fate which is never regarded as the victim’s fault. But Bassanio had often borrowed money from Antonio before he ever considered wooing Portia and was in debt, not through magic or unforeseeable misfortune, but through his own extravagances,

’Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled my estate
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance

and we feel that Antonio’s continual generosity has encouraged Bassanio in his spendthrift habits. Bassanio seems to be one of those people whose attitude towards money is that of a child; it will somehow always appear by magic when really needed. Though Bassanio is aware of Shylock’s malevolence, he makes no serious effort to dissuade Antonio from signing the bond because, thanks to the ever-open purse of his friend, he cannot believe that bankruptcy is a real possibility in life.

Shylock is a miser and Antonio is openhanded with his money; nevertheless, as a merchant, Antonio is equally a member of an acquisitive society. He is trading with Tripoli, the Indies, Mexico, England, and when Salanio imagines himself in Antonio’s place, he describes a possible shipwreck thus:

. . . the rocks
Scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks.

The commodities, that is to say, in which the Venetian merchant deals are not necessities but, luxury goods, the consumption of which is governed not by

physical need but by psychological values like social prestige, so that there can be no question of a Just Price. Then, as regards his own expenditure, Antonio is, like Shylock, a sober merchant who practises economic abstinence. Both of them avoid the carnal music of this world. Shylock's attitude towards the Masquers

Lock up my doors and when you hear the drum
 And the vile squeaking of the wry-necked fife
 Clamber not you up the casement then,
 Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter
 My sober house

finds an echo in Antonio's words a scene later:

Fie, fie, Gratiano. Where are all the rest?
 'Tis nine o'clock: our friends all stay for you.
 No masque to-night—the wind is come about.

Neither of them is capable of enjoying the carefree happiness for which Belmont stands. In a production of the play, a stage director is faced with the awkward problem of what to do with Antonio in the last act. Shylock, the villain, has been vanquished and will trouble Arcadia no more, but, now that Bassanio is getting married, Antonio, the real hero of the play, has no further dramatic function. According to the Arden edition, when Alan McKinnon produced the play at the Garrick theatre in 1905, he had Antonio and Bassanio hold the stage at the final curtain, but I cannot picture Portia, who is certainly no Victorian doormat of a wife, allowing her bridegroom to let her enter the house by herself. If Antonio is not to fade away into a nonentity, then the married couples must enter the lighted house and leave Antonio standing alone on the darkened stage, outside the Eden from which, not by the choice of others, but by his own nature, he is excluded.

Without the Venice scenes, Belmont would be an Arcadia without any relation to actual times and places, and where, therefore, money and sexual love have no reality of their own, but are symbolic signs for a community in a state of grace. But Belmont is related to Venice, though their existences are not really compatible with each other. This incompatibility is brought out in a fascinating way by the difference between Belmont time and Venice time. Though we are not told exactly how long the period is before Shylock's loan must be repaid, we know that it is more than a month. Yet Bassanio goes off to Belmont immediately, submits immediately on arrival to the test of the caskets, and has just triumphantly passed it when Antonio's letter arrives to inform him that Shylock is about to take him to court and claim his pound of flesh. Belmont, in

fact, is like one of those enchanted palaces where time stands still. But because we are made aware of Venice, the real city, where time is real, Belmont becomes a real society to be judged by the same standards we apply to any other kind of society. Because of Shylock and Antonio, Portia's inherited fortune becomes real money which must have been made in this world, as all fortunes are made, by toil, anxiety, the enduring and inflicting of suffering. Portia we can admire because, having seen her leave her Earthly Paradise to do a good deed in this world (one notices, incidentally, that in this world she appears in disguise), we know that she is aware of her wealth as a moral responsibility, but the other inhabitants of Belmont, Bassanio, Gratiano, Lorenzo and Jessica, for all their beauty and charm, appear as frivolous members of a leisured class, whose carefree life is parasitic upon the labours of others, including usurers. When we learn that Jessica has spent fourscore ducats of her father's money in an evening and bought a monkey with her mother's ring, we cannot take this as a comic punishment for Shylock's sin of avarice; her behaviour seems rather an example of the opposite sin of conspicuous waste. Then, with the example in our minds of self-sacrificing love as displayed by Antonio, while we can enjoy the verbal felicity of the love duet between Lorenzo and Jessica, we cannot help noticing that the pairs of lovers they recall, Troilus and Cressida, Aeneas and Dido, Jason and Medea, are none of them examples of self-sacrifice or fidelity. Recalling that the inscription on the leaden casket ran, 'Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath,' it occurs to us that we have seen two characters do this. Shylock, however unintentionally, did, in fact, hazard all for the sake of destroying the enemy he hated, and Antonio, however unthinkingly he signed the bond, hazarded all to secure the happiness of the friend he loved. Yet it is precisely these two who cannot enter Belmont. Belmont would like to believe that men and women are either good or bad by nature, but Shylock and Antonio remind us that this is an illusion: in the real world, no hatred is totally without justification, no love totally innocent.

NOTE

1. N.B. For the quotations which follow, I am indebted to Benjamin Nelson's fascinating book *The Idea of Usury*, Princeton University Press.



1965—Northrop Frye. *From A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*

The Canadian Northrop Frye was one of the most influential literary critics of the twentieth century. Harold Bloom has called him "the largest and most crucial literary critic in the English language" since

Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. One of Frye's most famous books is *The Anatomy of Criticism*.

Comedy, like tragedy, has its catharsis, sympathy and ridicule being what correspond to pity and terror in tragedy. The action of *The Merchant of Venice* moves from justice to mercy, and mercy is not opposed to justice, but is an authority which contains or internalizes justice. The justice of Shylock's bond is external, and the fall of Shylock is part of the process of internalizing justice (. . .). To regard Shylock ultimately either with sympathy or with contempt is a response of mood only: either attitude would keep him externalized. Shylock is the focus of the comic catharsis of the play because both moods are relevant to him. We feel the possibility of both, but neither is the comic point of Shylock's role.

We approach nearer to this comic point when we recognize the strength of the dramatic tension between Shylock and the rest of the play. The sense of festivity, which corresponds to pity in tragedy, is always present at the end of a romantic comedy. This takes the form of a party, usually a wedding, in which we feel, to some degree, participants. We are invited to the festivity and we put the best face we can on whatever feelings we may still have about the recent behavior of some of the characters, often including the bridegroom. In Shakespeare the new society is remarkably catholic in tolerance; but there is always a part of us that remains a spectator, detached and observant, aware of other nuances and values. This sense of alienation, which in tragedy is terror, is almost bound to be represented by somebody or something in the play, and even if, like Shylock, he disappears in the fourth act, we never quite forget him. We seldom consciously feel identified with him, for he himself wants no such identification: we may even hate or despise him, but he is there, the eternal questioning Satan who is still not quite silenced by the vindication of Job. Part of us is at the wedding feast applauding the loud bassoon; part of us is still out in the street hypnotized by some graybeard loon and listening to a wild tale of guilt and loneliness and injustice and mysterious revenge. There seems no way of reconciling these two things. Participation and detachment, sympathy and ridicule, sociability and isolation, are inseparable in the complex we call comedy, a complex that is begotten by the paradox of life itself, in which merely to exist is both to be a part of something else and yet never to be a part of it, and in which all freedom and joy are inseparably a belonging and an escape. (. . .)

The action of a Shakespearean comedy (. . .) is not simply cyclical but dialectical as well: the renewing power of the final action lifts us into a higher world, and separates that world from the world of the comic action itself. This dialectical element in Shakespeare's comic structure we have now to examine. The first feature of it is the parallel between the structure of a romantic comedy and the central myth of Christianity: the parallel that made

Dante call his poem a *commedia*. The framework of the Christian myth is the comic framework of the Bible, where man loses a peaceable kingdom, staggers through the long nightmare of tyranny and injustice which is human history, and eventually regains his original vision. Within this myth is the corresponding comedy of the Christian life. We first encounter the law in its harsh tyrannical form of an external barrier to action, a series of negative commands, and we are eventually set free of this law, not by breaking it, but by internalizing it: it becomes an inner condition of behavior, not an external antagonist as it is to the criminal.

Two of Shakespeare's comedies present the action within this familiar Christian setting. In *The Merchant of Venice* the supporter of the irrational is a Jew, or at least what Shakespeare's audience assumed to be a Jew. Shylock is frequently called a devil, because his role at the trial is the diabolical one of an accuser who demands death. When he says: "My deeds upon my head!" and prefers the seed of Barabas to Christians, he is echoing the Jews at the trial of Christ. The redeeming power which baffles him is the blood that he cannot have. His insistence on his bond and on justice is countered by Portia's explicitly Christian appeal to mercy, and his claim to his bond is not denied until he has renounced mercy. In the background of the imagery are allusions to the story of the prodigal son, the parable which sums up, in epitome, the whole Christian story of the exile and return of man to his home.



**1972—Leslie A. Fiedler. "The Jew As Stranger;
or 'These Be the Christian Husbands,'"
from *The Stranger in Shakespeare***

A controversial professor and critic whom Harold Bloom has called "a Freudian with a difference," Fiedler is best known for his critical study *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

The Merchant of Venice is surely one of the most popular of Shakespeare's works, but by the same token, perhaps, one of the least well understood. The common error which takes the "Merchant" of the title to be Shylock is symptomatic of a whole syndrome of misconceptions about a play which few of us have ever really confronted, so badly is it customarily annotated, taught, and interpreted on the stage and so totally does the Jew now dominate its action. The play has captured our imagination, but Shylock has captured the play, turning, in the course of that conquest, from grotesque to pathetic, from utter alien to one of us.

And why not, since the Jew is, to begin with, an archetype of great antiquity and power, a nightmare of the whole Christian community, given a local

habitation and a name by Shakespeare, so apt it is hard to believe that he has not always been called “Shylock,” has not always walked the Rialto. The contest between him and the play’s other characters—Antonio, for instance, that projection of the author’s private distress, or Portia, that not-far-from-standard heroine in male garb—is as unequal as that between mythic Joan and historic Talbot in *Henry VI, Part I*. Even the sort of transformation he has undergone is not unprecedented in the annals of theater. Molière’s “Misanthrope,” for example, was converted much more quickly, in less than a generation, rather than over nearly two centuries, from absurd buffoon to sympathetic dissident. But Molière’s margin of ambivalence toward *Alceste* was greater by far than Shakespeare’s toward Shylock, and a major revolution in taste and sensibility had begun before he was long dead.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, though not without some prophetic reservations about the wickedness of Jews, had to wait two centuries or more before such reservations had moved from the periphery to the center of the play. To be sure, the original entry in the Stationer’s Register for 1598 refers to the play as “a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce”; and by 1701, Lord Lansdowne had quite rewritten it as *The Jew of Venice*. But even at that point, the appeal of Shylock was not so much pathetic as horrific and grotesque. It took three generations of nineteenth-century romantic actors to make the Jew seem sympathetic as well as central, so that the poet Heine, sitting in the audience, could feel free to weep at his discomfiture. The final and irrevocable redemption of Shylock, however, was the inadvertent achievement of the greatest anti-Semite of all time, who did not appear until the twentieth century was almost three decades old. Since Hitler’s “final solution” to the terror which cues the uneasy laughter of *The Merchant of Venice*, it has seemed immoral to question the process by which Shylock has been converted from a false-nosed, red-wigged monster (his hair the color of Judas’s), half spook and half clown, into a sympathetic victim.

By the same token, it proved possible recently to mount a heterodox production of *The Merchant* as an anti-Semitic play within the larger play of anti-Semitic world history—by enclosing it in a dramatic frame which made clear to the audience that the anti-Semitic travesty they watched was a command performance put on by doomed Jewish prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp. The play within a play turned out in this case to lack a fifth act, since the actor-Shylock “really” stabbed a guard with the knife he whetted on his boot; and that same actor spoke all his speeches in a comic Yiddish accent, except for those scant few lines in which Shakespeare permits the Jew to plead his own humanity. But none of this seems as important finally as its renewed insistence on what everyone once knew: that the play in some sense celebrates, certainly releases ritually, the full horror of anti-Semitism. A Jewish child, even now, reading the play in a class of Gentiles, feels this in shame and fear, though the

experts, Gentile and Jewish alike, will hasten to assure him that his responses are irrelevant, even pathological, since "Shakespeare rarely 'takes sides' and it is certainly rash to assume that he here takes an unambiguous stand 'for' Antonio and 'against' Shylock. . . ."

It is bad conscience which speaks behind the camouflage of scholarship, bad conscience which urges us to read Edmund Kean's or Heinrich Heine's Shylock into Shakespeare's lovely but perverse text, as it had almost persuaded us to drop *Henry VI, Part I* (which means, of course, the Pucelle) quite out of the canon. And which finally is worse: to have for so long forgotten Joan, or to persist in misremembering Shylock? In either case, we have, as it were, expurgated Shakespeare by canceling out or amending the meanings of the strangers at the heart of his plays.

The problem is that both of these particular strangers, the woman and the Jew, embody stereotypes and myths, impulses and attitudes, images and metaphors grown unfashionable in our world. Not that we have been emancipated from those impulses and attitudes, whatever superficial changes have been made in the stereotypes and myths, the images and metaphors which embody them; but we have learned to be ashamed, *officially* ashamed of them at least. And it irks us that they still persist in the dark corners of our hearts, the dim periphery of our dreams. What is demanded of us, therefore, if we would find the real meaning of these plays again, is not so much that we go back into the historical past in order to reconstruct what men once thought of Jews and witches, but rather that we descend to the level of what is most archaic in our living selves and there confront the living Shylock and Joan.

Obviously, it is easier to come to terms with such characters on the "enlightened" margin of Shakespeare's ambivalence. We are pleased to discover how much he is like what we prefer to think ourselves, when, for instance, he allows Shylock a sympathetic apology for himself: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

And we are similarly delighted when Shakespeare lets him for an instant speak out of deep conjugal love: "It was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys," or when Shakespeare permits him to rehearse the list of indignities he has suffered at Antonio's hands:

Signior Antonio, many times and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances.

Still I have borne it with a patient shrug,
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
 You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
 And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine. . . .

But we must not forget that immediately following that first speech, Shylock is crying “revenge” and vowing that he will practice “villainy,” and that scarcely has he spoken the second, when he is dreaming that he will “have the heart of” the Christian merchant. True, he bows and fawns and flatters throughout the third, but in a tone so obviously false, it could fool no one but gullible Antonio. And we would do better, therefore, to face that in ourselves which responds to the negative, which is to say, the stronger, pole of Shakespeare’s double view: the uneasiness we feel before those terrible others whom we would but cannot quite believe no longer alien to us and all that we prize.



1987—A. D. Nuttall. “*The Merchant of Venice*,” from *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*

A. D. Nuttall, who died in 2007, was a professor at Oxford and one of the most admired Shakespearean scholars of his time. His last book was *Shakespeare the Thinker*.

Shakespeare saw that Rome was not England. He also saw that Venice was not London.

Venice, to the Elizabethans, was in some ways what Hollywood was to the rest of the world in the 1930s, or perhaps it would be better to say a mixture of Hollywood and Paris: *the* glamorous, daring, brilliant, wicked city. Even today as the senile, jewel-encrusted Bride of the Adriatic sinks malodorously beneath the waters of the Lagoon, one can glimpse, in the real city, what the effect must once have been. The rest of the world is black, white and grey and here alone, among gilded lions, rosy brick and white marble stained with green, is the Coloured City. The most neutral description of Venice begins to sound like overwriting. Many things, to be sure, have changed. The city of sexual licence has become oddly puritanical; notices in the *vaporetto* stops alert the visitor to the possible indecorousness of his or her costume. Meanwhile the frescoed walls still blaze with the great Venetian scenes of social splendour, ruffs, brocade, fruit, wine and amazing people. Here is the only adequate equivalent in visual art to the Shakespearean mode of, say, *Antony and Cleopatra*. The painters of his own land, Isaac Oliver or Nicholas Hilliard, lacked the necessary physical amplitude and

much more besides. In Shakespeare's time travellers' reports of the city abounded and moralists debated whether it was better, in the name of Experience, to send one's son to Venice (with all its attendant perils) or to provide him with suitable books about the place instead.

But the strangest thing of all, to the Elizabethan Englishman, is still unsaid. In 1597 (the probable date of *The Merchant of Venice*) the cycle by which we are sustained was plainly visible to any inhabitant of this country. The food he ate he saw first in his own or his neighbour's fields. Even in the nineteenth century Thomas Hardy tells in the fourteenth chapter of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* how from the streets of an ordinary English country town you could actually nod to the men cutting corn in the fields. Corn, bread, beans, pigs, cows, sheep, wool, cloth, all made a natural sense, authorized and watched over by the seasonally changing English sky. But Venice is actually built in the sea. Salt, undrinkable seawater flows in its great streets. Again and again the traveller to Venice must have thought, first, 'How can anyone live in this barren place?' and, next, 'How can these people be so rich?' No trees, no grass, but everywhere brick, marble, porphyry, bronze and gold. Here was a people living in a way that in Shakespeare's time must still have seemed partly unnatural, for they appeared to live on money alone. Money, traditionally defined as the medium of exchange, itself barren, had here proved strangely fruitful and multiplied itself hourly in the market place.

To put the case in this simple way involves both exaggeration and some distortion. The English practised usury and Venice had her subject territories. Yet the fundamental contrast retains a certain force. Venice was the single, most spectacular example of the power of wealth to beget wealth, and its miraculous setting in the sea is emblematic of that power. Venice is the landless landlord over all.

The crucial part of this finds expression in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It is in a way futile to search for the sources of Shakespeare's knowledge of Venice. By the time he came to write *Othello* he was able to consult Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, perhaps in Lewis Lewkenor's translation of 1599. But meanwhile London was full of vigorous talk and Venice was an excellent subject of conversation. For all we know Shakespeare may have visited Venice himself in 'the missing years'. The word 'merchant' alerts us first. In his plays set in England merchants hardly figure. We may revive the original impact of the title if we substitute 'the Capitalist' for 'the Merchant', but such 'equivalents' are never truly equivalent. Then, the imagery of money, the chink of coins pervades this play as it does no other. Moreover, this golden imagery is in places pointed very sardonically; it is applied with an almost brutal directness to the central romantic love story of the play. There was of course a convention of applying the language of finance to love, but the point of the convention lay in a paradox, the paradox of applying the lowest and most contemptible terms to the highest and at the same time most human situation, love. Thus the usual thing

is to set the metaphor at odds with its application. The lady 'out-values value', makes wealth into poverty as long as she is lacking, and so on. In place of this serviceable and well-worn ingenuity *The Merchant of Venice* offers a disquieting simplicity. Bassanio tells of his love in these words:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair and fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. (I.i.161–2)

First he tells us of the money and then, in simple, joyous juxtaposition, of her beauty and virtue. Bassanio is not an out-and-out fortune-hunter who is after Portia for her money. He really loves her and her wealth is simply a component of her general attractiveness. There is a certain repellent ingenuousness about Bassanio. He can trust his own well-constituted nature. It would never allow him to fall in love with a poor woman; for, after all, poor women are not attractive. After such a start a strange light is cast on the rest of his speech:

her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (I.i.169–72)

The Golden Fleece in another context would have been a paradox of love language. Here it is uncomfortably close to the centre of Bassanio's interest.

Shakespeare deliberately involves Bassanio's love from the outset in a faintly humiliating financial atmosphere. But he plants no overt stylistic signals of what he is about so that the effect is faint indeed. The flow is as smooth as that of any poem by Drayton or Daniel and one almost begins to suspect Shakespeare of a cynical contempt for his audience ('I'll make them drink this and they'll never know what they swallowed') were it not for the fact that, in the trial scene, he plainly relies on the fact that some of this, at least, has stuck in the mind. Bassanio's first move in his courtship is less than heroic. It is to touch his friend Antonio for a loan so that he can improve his sartorial image.

It is curious how wit can consist in the very avoidance of an expected complexity. One may compare the conversational practice known in the slang of forty years ago as 'kidding on the level'; the speaker makes a remark which sounds ironic but the real joke lies in the fact that every word is literally intended: 'Hello darling, you know I hate your guts.' Shakespeare with his strangely bland coupling in this play of the language of love and the language of money is in a manner kidding on the level. Even Portia, who is generous in her love, speaks of her own money as one of her attractions in a strangely unconscious manner when she says to Bassanio,

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,
That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. But the full sum of me
Is sum of something which, to term in gross,
Is an unlesson'd girl. (III.ii.149–60)

Notice how wealth is twice placed at the summit of an ascending rhetorical scale involving character and beauty. The accountant's language, 'to term in gross', is uncomfortably close to what is actually going on. An imprudent director—I could not call him perverse—might well have Bassanio surprised by these words in the very act of appraising with his eye the value of the room's hangings.

But Portia is not really unconscious. She understands Bassanio with that peculiar, pitiless clarity of love which characterizes all the great Shakespearean heroines, these women who so utterly transcend their contemptible lovers. After she has said that she will pay off Antonio's debt for Bassanio, she says to her betrothed,

Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear. (III.ii.315)

The play on 'dear' is not wholly comfortable and, at the same time, the love is real and unstinting.

It is perhaps not surprising that this speech should help to make one of the principal 'echoes' of the play:

'Tis dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it. (IV.i.100)

This time it is not one of the nice people who speaks. It is Shylock and he is talking about a pound of flesh cut from the breast of Antonio.

The Merchant of Venice is about the Old Law and the New; about the low Jewish justice of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and the way this justice is transcended by Christian charity and mercy. The climactic trial scene is archetypal. The black-clad Jew haggling for the flesh of the fair-skinned Christian, the supervening figure of Justice who is also Love, all this is the stuff of legend. It recalls the medieval *Processus Belial*, as has often been observed, in which the Virgin Mary defends Man against the Devil who lays legal claim to his soul. Behind this analogue lies the doctrine of the atonement itself, in which

God paid the legal price for man with his son who was also himself. In the fact of such powerful patterning all ethical ambiguities, we shall be told, must surely fall silent. The Jew is wicked, unhappy, usurious, greedy, vengeful. The Christians are happy, generous, forgiving. This, it might be said, is the plain meaning of the play, and it takes a determined 'Transparent' critic to darken it. In fact it is not difficult to do so. For as soon as we enter the fiction and treat the figures of the drama as possible human beings in a possible, great mercantile city, everything feels slightly different.

It is true, of course, that certain archetypes operate powerfully in the play. But it is not true that they are the only thing there, that the mind should be arrested at their level of generality, that there is nothing behind them. It is Shakespeare's way to take an archetype or a stereotype and then work, so to speak, against it, without ever overthrowing it. Shakespeare himself darkens the pristine clarity of these ethical oppositions and he does so, in the first instance, with allusions to money. To this he adds the figure of Antonio, about whom shadows gather from the beginning. If Bassanio's love for Portia sounds uneasily shallow and mercenary, Antonio's love for Bassanio is disquietingly intense. The stereotypical impression of Christian society in *The Merchant of Venice* is of a world of felicity, conviviality, parties, easy commerce of like spirits, harmony. In all this Antonio is from the first incongruous. He is melancholic. Later, when he is in great peril, he sees himself as in some way polluted and wishes to die:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me. (IV.i.114–16)

In the first scene of the play Antonio is left alone with Bassanio and says, with an air of one coming to the point,

Well; tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
That you to-day promis'd to tell me of? (I.i.119–21)

Bassanio does not answer, but dwells at length on his lack of cash. Antonio with extreme generosity places at his friend's disposal,

My purse, my person, my extremest means. (I.i.138)

The reference to 'person' and 'extremest means' evidently looks forward to the horror so narrowly averted in Act IV. The 'Opaque' critic will feel an impulse at this point to arrest the structure of allusion at the level of thematic motifs: Antonio's words 'pre-echo' the situation in Act IV as an early musical phrase

may 'pre-echo' a major development in the last movement of a symphony. The 'Transparent' critic will not be patient of such impediments to humane inference; he will at once begin to wonder if Antonio, aware of the dangerous extremity of his own love for Bassanio, senses the obscure likelihood of a violent outcome. Some may go further, and surmise a kind of deathwish in Antonio. None of this is verifiable or has the force of necessary truth. A moderate alliance of Opaque and Transparent criticism might tell us that Antonio speaks with sudden violence because of the strength of his love, but neither foresees nor deliberately invokes the later horror; that is 'inadvertently' alluded to, by a species of dramatic irony. But what happens to the ordinary spectator, sitting in the audience? It is possible that the majority of spectators, since 1597, had no conscious reaction at all; simply did not separately 'notice' the connection between Antonio's words. But those who did, explicitly, notice the connection will have construed it in terms of character, to a greater or lesser extent. For the bias of theatrical apprehension, oddly enough, is to 'Transparency'. The figures on the stage are apprehended as people. The very tawdriness of the visible means of presentation in a theatre renders this compensatory exercise of Transparent interpretation the more necessary. Otherwise all audiences would see as Natasha saw in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (VIII.ix) and drama would die. In the history of drama Brechtian alienation is very much the special case, but even it is not fully Opaque, entirely formalist. Brecht, admittedly, deliberately arrests the apprehension of the spectator at the level of the ostentatiously artificial means; he 'foregrounds' the mechanisms of his art. But he counts on a residuum of unused imaginative sympathy, which he is able to channel the more efficiently in the direction of 'doctrine'. In so far as this channelling occurs (and it is essential to his enterprise) his art is neither abstract nor formalist. Meanwhile it is manifestly, *creakingly* unlike other forms of dramatic experience. It may resemble the drama of 'primitive' societies as that drama appears to a cultural outsider, but the *Towneley Play of Noah*, say, never felt to its first observers as Brechtian drama feels to us.

The most natural inference from any or all of the Transparent interpretations of Antonio's words, from the most modest to the most speculative, is that Antonio loves Bassanio with a love so intense as to throw Bassanio's more decorous love for Portia into unhappy relief. Some may feel that this secondary inference is merely monstrous and inherently improbable. But in a manner the thought of Antonio in love occurred to Solanio within the play before it occurred to any spectator or reader outside it, for at I.i.46 he suddenly says to Antonio,

Why, then, you are in love.

Antonio answers, 'Fie, fie!' Solanio treats this as a negative but, strictly speaking, it is not. The New Arden editor J. Russell Brown notes with admirable precision that it is 'an exclamation of reproach rather than a clear negative'. Of course

Solanio does not suggest that Antonio is in love with Bassanio. He merely plants the idea that Antonio's melancholy is connected with love and then the play itself, with overwhelming singleness of purpose, directs us to a single love object. Antonio's love is exercised against the bias of financial interest. Setting aside the more obvious impediments, one could not imagine Antonio speaking of Bassanio in the unconsciously self-interested way Bassanio spoke of Portia. Bassanio sees Portia as the centre of his future happiness and wealth. Antonio looks very differently at Bassanio; he sees the beloved extinction of both wealth and happiness.

A seed is thus planted at the back of our minds and the progress of the drama brings it to an obscure flowering. In II.viii Solanio describes the parting of Bassanio and Antonio, in which Antonio was unable to hold back his tears, and comments, 'I think he only loves the world for him' (II.viii.50). While the dapper Bassanio seeks joy and a fortune in Belmont, Antonio, for mere love, faces mutilation and death in the city. When all seems to be over Antonio says to Bassanio,

Commend me to your honourable wife;
 Tell her the process of Antonio's end;
 Say how I lov'd you; speak me fair in death;
 And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
 Whether Bassanio had not once a love. (IV.i.268-72)

What gives the business of the ring-begging in V.i its extraordinary tension if it is not the half-buried conflict between male love and heterosexual love? Here formally—and not so formally—a brief dramatic 'minuet' enacts the rivalry of Antonio and Portia. At its end, although we are in a comedy and the figures are pairing off in the soft Italian night, Antonio does not get a partner. We may remember that great, drab line from the Sonnets:

I may not evermore acknowledge thee. (xxxvi.9)

Given this 'transparent' psychological intuition the story of the caskets ceases to be an inert, decorative centerpiece and becomes charged with latent irony. Bassanio, dressed up to the nines with someone else's money, is mockingly rewarded with the gift proper to plain virtue. The leaden casket bore as its legend,

Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath. (II.vii.16)

W. H. Auden in one of the most brilliant critical remarks of the century observed that this requirement is met by two people in the play, neither of

whom is Bassanio. It is met by Antonio and Shylock. That is where the real *agon* lies.

I have granted that the stereotype gives us a mercenary Shylock and merciful Christians (the Christians being 'above' vengeance) and that this stereotype is observed in the play. But we have already seen how Shylock's savage 'Tis dearly bought' was pre-echoed, in a more elevated setting, by Portia. 'My daughter! O my ducats!' cries the grief-stricken, confused, mercenary Shylock (II.viii.15). 'Like a golden fleece', says Bassanio (I.i.170).

I will make fast the doors, and gild myself
With some moe ducats, and be with you straight. (II.vi.49–50)

says Jessica to her Christian lover, as they make off in the night with the turquoise Leah gave to Shylock when he was a bachelor (III.i.105). All of which gives added force to Shylock's plea at the trial, where he says, in effect, 'Remember me? I'm the usurer, the man who makes deals. So where is the pound of flesh which is owed me?'

In the course of the play we are told certain things about the state of Venice. The Christians have among them 'many a purchased slave' (IV.i.90). Jews are employed when ready capital is needed. They are considered as aliens (as emerges when Shylock forfeits his goods and places his life at the Doge's mercy, on the ground that he sought the life of a *Venetian* citizen). All this Auden brings out in his admirable essay. Shakespeare is clearly aware of the covert manner in which Christian merchants make money breed, which is by the ancient doctrine a kind of usury ('usury' originally referred to any form of interest and was later—very revealingly—restricted to *excessive* interest). Shakespeare is likewise aware of the lower, 'coarser' kinds of interest for which Shylock and his kind are needed. He shows with great clarity the almost exclusively mercantile character of the Venetian economy:

the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. (III.iii.30–1)

Here it is Antonio who speaks. The tenor of his argument is that justice must be maintained because if it is not foreign investors may withdraw their money. It is hard to imagine a similar subordination of justice to the profit motive in one of the English histories. In this way Shakespeare shows both the separateness and the economic symbiosis of Christian and Jew.

In I.iii Antonio tells Shylock that he makes no use of usury (line 65) and Shylock in reply tells the curious story of Laban, who agreed with Jacob that he (Laban) should have any particoloured lambs that were born while Jacob could have the others. At conception time Laban set peeled wands before the ewes,

who subsequently gave birth to particoloured lambs. Antonio in reply eagerly distinguishes 'venturing' from 'usury'; Laban, he insists, merely trusted in God, he had no power of his own to affect the outcome of the bargain. Or are the ewes to be understood as themselves signifying gold and silver . . . ? Shylock, sardonic, uncooperative, turns the question aside (91):

I cannot tell; I make it breed as fast.

Antonio, one senses, is not confident that he has won the argument (it is hard to be sure that Laban did not intervene, with his peeled wands, for had he simply wanted to accept God's dispensation he could surely have waited till it became evident at lambing time). Antonio's words 'The devil can cite scripture for his purpose' are the words of a man who is holding fast to a conviction that his opponent must be wrong, but cannot quite see how. Meanwhile we sense that Antonio's money (whether by 'venturing' or indirect usury) may breed as fast as Shylock's. He is the merchant, after all.

We thus have a curious situation in this play. Shakespeare employs throughout a latent system of allusions to the economic character of Venetian society and this system of allusions, instead of corroborating the stark opposition of good and evil proposed in the play's main action, subtly undermines it. The economic allusions tell us—against the simple plot—that the Jews and the Christians are deeply similar, for all are mercenary. The general vice which Christians ascribe to the Jews is one of which they are themselves—in a less obvious manner—guilty. The Jews therefore perform a peculiar ethical function in that they bear the brunt of the more obvious dirty work necessary to the glittering city. This counter-system of allusions is organically joined to the drama as a whole and therefore exhibits artistic form. But at the same time it is mimetic of reality, in a pretty specific manner. For it can hardly be pure coincidence that Venice really was thus. A recent historian of Venice in the sixteenth century, Brian Pullan, notes, 'Jews were deemed to be there for the purpose of saving Christians from committing the sin of usurious lending', and again, 'The Venetians had consistently combined the attitude of ritual contempt for the Jews with a shrewd and balanced appreciation of their economic utility.' He quotes the diarist, Marino Sanuto, 'Jews are even more necessary than bakers to a city, and especially to this one, for the sake of the general welfare.' It is quite obvious that Shakespeare, Sanuto, Pullan are all discussing a single, real object.

As commonly with Transparent criticism there is a penumbra of unverifiable, remoter possibilities. Since these also compose a relevant system they are worth noting. Shakespeare's sense of background may be very detailed indeed. Anyone who knew anything about Jewish religion would be aware that Shylock, no less than Antonio, was out on a limb. First, the practice of usury is, in the Jewish religion also, tainted with moral dubiety. *Leviticus* 25:35–7 simply forbids usury,

but *Deuteronomy* 23:19–20 permits the exaction of interest from a stranger, though not from a brother (hence the title of Auden's essay). Thus as the Christians need the Jews, so the Jews need the Christians to practise usury on. The symbiosis is more perfectly symmetrical than we may have thought. Shylock, however, breaks with his religion, in particular with *Deuteronomy* 24:6, when he agrees to take Antonio's *life* as a pledge. The passage in *Deuteronomy* uses the metaphor of a millstone: 'No man shall take the nether or the upper millstone to pledge: for he taketh a man's life to pledge'; the metaphor suggests that 'life' is here equivalent to 'means of living'. We may compare *Ecclesiasticus* 34:22, 'He that taketh away his neighbour's living, slayeth him.' Shylock makes precisely this equation at IV.i.371–2:

you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

This pattern of scriptural reference would tend to reinforce an impression, already subliminally present in the play, that the Christians, in taking away Shylock's capital, are doing to him what he wished to do to Antonio. The act of mercy has an inner likeness to the act of revenge. Shakespeare completes the ironic pattern by making Antonio say to Portia, 'Sweet lady, you have given me life and living' (V.i.286). It is typical of Shakespeare's genius that in his great comedy of economic reality he finds the single point where language most powerfully asserts the interdependence of economics and humanity, in the etymological affinity between a person's *life* and a person's *living*. This is in its turn analogous to the economic and ethical meanings of *worth* and *value*.

One effect of Shakespeare's economic subtheme is to make one suspect that the high-minded talk of the Christians is a luxury available only to the dominant class. Old money can afford to talk in this way. We notice that Portia speaks of mercy when Shylock is sharpening his knife for Antonio, but as soon as the tables are turned and Shylock is on the run, Gratiano cries out again and again that Shylock must hang. Shylock is in fact forgiven and the central ethical plot is clearly dominant at this point. Yet even here one senses something less than ethical, a faint smell of patronizing contempt in the very exercise of mercy. Again, though Shylock's money is new and the Christian's old, the misfortune of Antonio the merchant shows us that we are now in a world in which even old money can be horribly at risk. Portia alone has so much old money that she rises above the rest, as Belmont rises above Venice in the sweet summer night. In this way a cruel reductive pun is worked, dramatically rather than verbally, on the notion of transcendence.

That Shakespeare's picture of Venice is not one of minute, documentary accuracy is obvious. The law shown in this play, for example, is fairy-tale law, not real law. But Shakespeare's art in this play remains—not only in the obvious

triumphs of probable human motivation at the level of individual character, but also at the less accessible level of influences and conditions—cognitive, with a breath-taking intelligence. He saw the economic peculiarity of Venice and then made the second, greater leap of perceiving how an economic fabric may condition the very nature of moral action: mercy and charity lose their primal simplicity; in the new order personal loyalty, bereft of traditional feudal support, is both sharpened and made more dubious. The ancient stratagem of the Atonement, whereby God sends his substitute to take on himself our sins and save the world, fascinated Shakespeare both in this play and in *Measure for Measure*. There a figure of Christian mercy discovers that his city needs not mercy but rigorous justice, finds a substitute to do his dirty work for him and, when the substitute is drawn into evil of the worst sort, forgives him with a charity at once generous and insulting. In both plays Shakespeare admits what others might have wished to exclude, the ugly anthropological ancestor of the Atonement, the scapegoat, the unhappy creature on which a society vents its bad conscience.

But the most difficult point remains. These half-buried echoes and subauditions in the play really do compose a structure, and an exciting subversive thesis. But they are not the play. After years of pious criticism the views of A. D. Moody and H. C. Goddard are very seductive. Moody says, ‘Shylock avows the moral sense by which they actually live. We can see that in condemning Shylock they are condemning their own sins. It would seem then that they are making him literally their scapegoat . . . or, as H. C. Goddard puts it, “They project onto him what they have dismissed from their own consciousness as too disturbing.”’ But in agreeing with this we are in danger of forgetting the real generosity, however produced, of the Christians, the real ferocity, however explained, of Shylock. They did forgive Shylock. Shylock would have torn open the breast of Antonio. These are things which no theatrical experience of the play will ever let you forget. As William Empson says, we must view the Bassanio–Portia relationship with ‘a generous scepticism which can believe at once that people are and are not guilty.’ So Shakespeare will not let us rest even here. The subversive counter-thesis is itself too easy. We may now begin to see that he is perhaps the least sentimental dramatist who ever lived. We begin to understand what is meant by holding the mirror up to nature.



1991—Harold Bloom.
“Introduction,” from *Shylock*

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of anthologies of literature and literary criticism and is the author of more than 30 books, including *The Western Canon* and *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Of Shakespeare's displaced spirits, those enigmatic figures who sometimes seem to have wandered into the wrong play, Shylock clearly remains the most problematical. We need always to keep reminding ourselves that he is a comic villain, partly derived from the grandest of Marlovian scoundrels, Barabas, Jew of Malta. In some sense, that should place Shylock in the Machiavellian company of two villains of tragedy, Edmund and Iago, yet none of us wishes to see Shylock there. Edmund and Iago are apocalyptic humorists; self-purged of pathos, they frighten us because continually they invent themselves while manipulating others. Shylock's pathos is weirdly heroic; he was meant to frighten us, to be seen as a nightmare made into flesh and blood, while seeking the audience's flesh and blood. It seems clear to me that if Shakespeare himself were to be resurrected, in order to direct a production of *The Merchant of Venice* on a contemporary stage in New York City, there would be a riot, quite without the assistance of the Jewish Defense League. The play is both a superb romantic comedy, and a marvelously adequate version of a perfectly Christian, altogether murderous anti-Semitism, of a kind fused into Christianity by the Gospel of John in particular.

In that latter assertion, or parts of it, I follow after the formidable E. E. Stoll, who observed that Shylock's penalty was the heaviest to be discovered in all the pound-of-flesh stories. As Stoll said, in none of them "does the money-lender suffer like Shylock—impoverishment, sentence of death, and an outrage done to his faith from which Jews were guarded even by decrees of German Emperors and Roman pontiffs." Of all the enigmas presented by *The Merchant of Venice*, to me the most baffling is Shylock's broken acceptance of forced conversion. Is it persuasive? Surely not, since Shakespeare's Shylock, proud and fierce Jew, scarcely would have preferred Christianity to death. Consistency of character in Shylock admittedly might have cost Shakespeare the comedy of his comedy; a Shylock put to death might have shadowed the ecstasy of Belmont in Act V. But so does the forced conversion, for us, though clearly not for Shakespeare and his contemporary audience. The difficult but crucial question becomes: why did Shakespeare inflict the cruelty of the false conversion, knowing he could not allow Shylock the tragic dignity of dying for his people's faith?

I find it astonishing that this question never has been asked anywhere in the published criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*. No other Shakespearean character who has anything like Shylock's representational force is handled so strangely by Shakespeare, and ultimately so inadequately. That Shylock should agree to become a Christian is more absurd than would be the conversion of Coriolanus to the popular party, or Cleopatra's consent to become a vestal virgin at Rome. We sooner could see Falstaff as a monk, than we can contemplate Shylock as a

Christian. Shakespeare notoriously possessed the powers both of preternatural irony, and of imbuing a character with more vitality than a play's context could sustain. I cannot better the judgment upon Christian conversion that Launcelot Gobbo makes in his dialogue with the charmingly insufferable Jessica, that Jewish Venetian princess:

JESSICA: I shall be sav'd by my husband, he hath made me a Christian!

LAUNCELOT: Truly, the more to blame he; we were Christians enow before, e'en as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs. If we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money.

But Shakespeare takes care to distance this irony from the play's comic catastrophe, when the Jew is undone by Christian mercy. It is Antonio, the pious Jew-baiter, who adds to the Duke's pardon the requirement that Shylock immediately become a Christian, after which Shakespeare seems a touch anxious to get Shylock offstage as quietly and quickly as possible:

DUKE: He shall do this, or else I do recant
The pardon that I late pronounced here.

PORTIA: Art thou contented, Jew? what dost thou say?

SHYLOCK: I am content.

PORTIA: Clerk, draw a deed of gift.

SHYLOCK: I pray you give me leave to go from hence.

I am not well. Send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.

And in a moment, Shylock walks out of the play, to the discord of what must seem to us Gratiano's Nazi-like jeers and threats. In our post-Holocaust universe, how can we accommodate Shylock's "I am content," too broken for irony, too strong for any play whatsoever? That question, I think, is unanswerable, and does not belong to literary criticism anyway. What is essential for criticism is to ask and answer the double question: why did Shakespeare so represent his stage Jew as to make possible the Romantic interpretation that has proceeded from Hazlitt and Henry Irving right through to Harold C. Goddard and innumerable actors in our century, and having done so, why did the playwright then shatter the character's consistency by imposing upon him the acceptance of the humiliating forced conversion to that religion of mercy, the Christianity of Venice?

In his lively essay on the play, W. H. Auden remarks on a different kind of implausibility that Shakespeare confers upon Shylock:

After Portia has trapped Shylock through his own insistence upon the letter of the law of Contract, she produces another law by which any alien who conspires against the life of a Venetian citizen forfeits his goods and places his life at the Doge's mercy. Even in the rush of a stage performance, the audience cannot help reflecting that a man as interested in legal subtleties as Shylock, would, surely, have been aware of the existence of this law and that, if by any chance he had overlooked it, the Doge surely would very soon have drawn his attention to it. Shakespeare, it seems to me, was willing to introduce what is an absurd implausibility for the sake of an effect which he could not secure without it.

Auden is very shrewd here, but I cite him primarily to help suggest that Shylock's acceptance of enforced Christianity is a far more severe implausibility, and one that distracts from dramatic or even theatrical effect. Indeed, as drama Shylock's "I am content" is necessarily a puzzle, not akin say to Iago's "From this time forth I never will speak word." Iago will die, under torture, in absolute silence: a dramatic death. We anticipate that Shylock the broken new Christian will live in silence: not a dramatic life. Is it that Shakespeare wished to repeal Shylock, as it were, and so cut away the enormous pathos of the character? We have seen no weaknesses in Shylock's will, no signs indeed that he can serve the function of a comic villain, a new Barabas. No red wig and giant nose will transform the speaker of Shylock's three hundred and sixty dark lines into a two-dimensional character. Shylock, however monstrous his contemplated revenge, is all spirit, malign and concentrated, indifferent to the world and the flesh, unless Antonio be taken to represent both for him. Displaced spirit and so villain as he is, Shylock confronts in the heroically Christian merchant of Venice his tormentor and his double, the play's best Christian, who demonstrates the authenticity of his religious and moral zeal by his prowess in spitting at and cursing Shylock. I intend no irony there, and I fear that I read Shakespeare as he meant to *be* read. And yet every time I teach *The Merchant of Venice*, my students rebel at my insistence that Shylock is not there to be sympathized with, whereas Antonio is to be admired, if we are to read the play that Shakespeare wrote. One had best state this matter very plainly: to recover the comic splendor of *The Merchant of Venice* now, you need to be either a scholar or an anti-Semite, or best of all an anti-Semitic scholar.

E. E. Stoll sensibly said that if you sympathize with Shylock, then you must turn against Portia, a lesson that modern directors refuse to learn, preferring to have it both ways: a Shylock of sublime pathos, and a Portia triumphant and wholly delightful. What is a serious reader to do with the more severe difference that is confronted when Goddard and C. L. Barber, two of the handful of great critics of Shakespeare in our time, are juxtaposed on the question of Shylock?

Barber deftly improves upon Stoll, first by noting that we never encounter Shylock alone, which denies the villain his inwardness, and makes him subject to a group perspective. Second, Barber goes on:

This perspective on him does not exclude a potential pathos. There is always potential pathos, behind, when drama makes fun of isolating, anti-social qualities. Indeed, the process of *making fun of* a person often works by exhibiting pretensions to humanity so as to show that they are inhuman, mechanical, not validly appropriate for sympathy.

Barber's persuasive view cannot be reconciled with Goddard's grand sentence: "Shylock's conviction that Christianity and revenge are synonyms is confirmed." For Goddard, Portia becomes one with the golden casket, and fails her own inner self. On that reading, we return to a Shylock of tragic pathos, and hardly to Barber's comic butt. René Girard, our contemporary authority on scapegoating, attempts to solve contradictory readings by ironizing Shakespeare:

Ultimately we do not have to choose between a favorable and an unfavorable image of Shylock. The old critics have concentrated on Shylock as a separate entity, an individual substance that would be merely juxtaposed to other individual substances and remain unaffected by them. The ironic depth in *The Merchant of Venice* results from a tension not between two static images of Shylock, but between those textual features that strengthen and those features that undermine the popular idea of an insurmountable difference between Christian and Jew.

I am myself a survivor of those "old critics" whom Girard scorns, and like them I do not speak of entities, substances, textual features, and ironic differences. One learns from Shakespeare to speak of characters, and the issue remains: why did Shakespeare ultimately refuse consistency to his Jew, whether viewed as comic or as a figure of profound pathos? I cannot find more than a few aesthetic flaws in Shakespeare, and Shylock's acceptance of conversion seems to me much the most egregious, surpassing the peculiar final scene of *Measure for Measure* and even the brutal treatment of Malvolio at the end of *Twelfth Night*. Since Act V of *The Merchant of Venice* is a triumphal ecstasy, the collapse of Shylock's pride in his Jewishness perhaps becomes an artistic blemish only when I brood on it in my study, but then I have never seen, will never see, and could not bear seeing a production of the play that is consonant with the play's own values.

Shylock is one of Shakespeare's displaced spirits, together with Barnardine, Lear's Fool, Malvolio, in some sense even Caliban, perhaps even an aspect of Sir John Falstaff, perhaps even the outcast Edgar, who is so slow to abandon his mask as poor Tom o'Bedlam. We do not know who wrote the great lyric,

“Tom o’Bedlam,” found in a manuscript commonplace that scholars date about 1620, but being very unscholarly I always cheerfully assume that it was Shakespeare, because it is too good to be by anyone else. I cite its final stanza here because it sums up, for me, the ethos of the ultimately displaced spirit, the Shakespearean outsider who needs a context less alien than Shakespeare will provide for him:

With an host of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear and a horse of air,
To the wilderness I wander.
By a knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to a tourney
Ten leagues beyond the wide world’s end:
Methinks it is no journey.
Yet will I sing, Any food, any feeding,
Feeding, drink, or clothing;
Come dame or maid, be not afraid,
Poor Tom will injure nothing.

One can hardly say that poor Shylock, incessantly demanding that he will have his bond, will injure nothing, and even I would hesitate at speaking of “poor Shylock” had not Shakespeare invented the monstrosity of the forced conversion. But the great Tom o’Bedlam song, whoever wrote it, manifests the same mixture of unbearable pathos and visionary intensity that I find in all of Shakespeare’s displaced spirits: Shylock, Barnardine, Lear’s Fool, Malvolio, and in a weird mode, Caliban. Ambivalence emanates from all of these, as it does from the alienated Edgar, and ambivalence is part of our response to them also. Oddly the least original of these, Shylock is too much the Belial figure of Christian tradition, and one wonders why Shakespeare could accept so much crudity of stock representation, even as he allowed the apparent pathos in Shylock that continues to divide critics. I suspect that the enigmas concerning Shylock can be resolved only if we return Shakespeare’s Jew to his agonistic context, the Shakespearean need to compete with and overgo Marlowe’s superb villain, Barabas, the Jew of Malta. Barabas is a farcical hero-villain, while Shylock is a comic villain, yet the contrast between them tends to abolish such distinctions. Could we conceive of Barabas accepting an imposed conversion? The question’s absurdity turns upon Marlowe’s dramatic art, which works here as the purest caricature, excluding any possibilities of pathos. Barabas could no more say “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?” than Shylock could roar out the parodic outrageousness and exuberance of Marlowe’s Jew:

As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights,
 And kill sick people groaning under walls;
 Sometimes I go about and poison wells.

Marlowe, subverting every established order and tradition, loathes Christians, Muslims, and Jews with admirable impartiality, and so he is happy to have Barabas satirize the Christian myth of the Jewish sport of poisoning wells. Shakespeare hardly could have missed the jest, but for him Marlowe always represented, in art as in life, the way down and out, the way not to go. The savage gusto of Barabas is deliberately lacking in the rugged Shylock, whose only exuberance is his will to revenge himself, and his people, upon that sincere Christian, the noble Antonio. Antonio's superior goodness is shown to us by his righteous contempt for Shylock. Splendid as this must have been for Shakespeare's audience, it is now our largest burden, I sometimes think, in reading *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio is a Jew-baiter, plain and simple. Marlowe gives us no such figure in *The Jew of Malta*, yet I suspect that Marlowe provoked Shakespeare into the ambivalence of our having to accept Antonio and Portia as angels, and Shylock as the Devil, albeit a Devil with strong feelings, akin to Marlowe's Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*.

Though Barabas seems to me Shakespeare's prime model for Richard III and even for Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, Barabas has nothing Shakespearean about him. There is a mad zest in Barabas, a kind of antic ferocity, that Shakespeare rejected as too raw, a rejection of great consequence, since it spurred Shakespeare into the creation of Edmund and Iago. That Marlovian parody, Ancient Pistol, is Shakespeare's sardonic commentary upon Marlowe's exaltation of self-celebratory and exuberant ferocity. "I'll show you a Jew!" Shakespeare says to us by Shylock, thus implying that Barabas is no Jew, but simply is: Kit Marlowe. Barabas of course is a superbly outrageous representation of a Jew; he is no more Jewish than Marlowe's Christians are Christians or his Muslims are Muslims. Is there a more vivid, a more memorable representation of a Jew in post-Biblical literature than Shakespeare's Shylock? Well, there is the Fagin of Charles Dickens, clearly more memorable than George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, but about as acceptable to a post-Holocaust sensibility as Shylock. Jewish novelists from Disraeli to the present hardly have given us a being as intense as Shylock, or as eloquent, though Shylock's eloquence is somber, even so rancid:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
 A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
 Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that,
 But say it is my humor. Is it answered?
 What if my house be troubled with a rat,
 And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats

To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others, when the bagpipe sings i' th' nose,
Cannot contain their wine; for affection,
Master of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes.

Extraordinary psychologist as Shakespeare has made him (akin in this to Edmund and Iago), Shylock is totally unable to achieve self-understanding. If “affection” (innate antipathy) totally dominates “passion” (any authentic emotion) in him, that is because he wills such domination. But thus he plays the Christian’s game, and unlike Barabas he can only lose. Barabas goes down in pained but clamorous triumph, cursing Christians and Muslims with his final burst of spirit. Shylock, as Shakespeare deftly creates him, defeats himself, as Iago will, and ends in the terrible humiliation of being “content” to become a Christian, when in some sense (the Venetian one) he has been Christianized already, by accepting their exaltation of antipathy governing emotion, as in the good Antonio. Is this Shakespeare’s irony, or does it not belong instead to a commonplace older than Shakespeare, as old as the Talmud? If, as Blake grimly insisted, we become what we behold, it is an ancient lesson, far older even than Hebraic morality. Shakespeare’s comic villain undoes himself as Barabas does not, in a critique of Marlowe that nevertheless was expensive for the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, since it ultimately destroys Shylock’s heretofore strong plausibility as a character.

A displaced spirit, in Shakespeare, never ceases to be spirit, and though it is warped by displacement, such a spirit contaminates the drama through which it passes, and of necessity contaminates the audience as well. To stage the play of Antonio, Portia, and Shylock now is to attempt what is virtually impossible, since only an audience at ease with its own anti-Semitism could tolerate a responsible and authentic presentation of what Shakespeare actually wrote. In this one play alone, Shakespeare was very much of his age, and not for all time.



**1992—John Gross. “Three Thousand Ducats,” from
*Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend***

John Gross is a theater critic, writer, and editor. He is the author of an exhaustive study of the character of Shylock and reactions to Shylock

over the centuries. After examining Shakespeare's own financial dealings, Gross states the following.

The Merchant of Venice has a closer bearing on [Shakespeare's] role as a man of affairs than anything else he wrote. To suggest that he identified himself with Shylock would be absurd; but I don't think it would be too much to claim that he understood the usurer from the inside, that he sensed an affinity with him even while rejecting it. Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* put it best: "He drew Shylock out of his long pocket."

The question of whether or not [Shakespeare] charged interest seems to me a secondary consideration. If he was inconsistent, if he didn't practice what he preached, his entire society was engaged in a similar piece of double-think. But there is a more fundamental conflict discernible in the play. Property is desirable, but the means by which property is acquired are problematic; and if the problem is 'solved' by the means being idealized (in the person of Antonio), it is at the cost of their also being demonized (in the person of Shylock).



1996—James Shapiro. "‘The Pound of Flesh,’" from *Shakespeare and the Jews*

James Shapiro teaches at Columbia University in New York. He is also the author of the acclaimed *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*.

What a matter were it then if I should cut of his privy members,
supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?

—spoken by the Jew in the English translation
of Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator*, 1596

I hope I shall never be so stupid as to be circumcised. I would rather cut
off the left breast of my Catherine and of all women.

—Martin Luther, c. 1540

Perhaps the least explicable feature of the ritual murder accusations was the charge that Jews first circumcised their victims before killing them. In some ways it must have made perfectly good sense. After all, it was well known that Jews circumcised young boys, and it was not all that difficult to imagine this practice as part of a more complex and secretive Jewish ritual ending in human sacrifice. In other ways, however, it made no sense at all, for as Menasseh ben

Israel justifiably wondered, “to what end he was first circumcised” if “it was intended that shortly after this child should be crucified?” The confusion is understandable, since the ritual significance of what is described in the Bible as cutting the “foreskin” of the “flesh” remains poorly understood even by Jews and other peoples who have long practiced this rite. In the twentieth century we stand doubly removed from appreciating the effect of circumcision upon cultural identity. Even as circumcision is now routinely practiced in Western cultures for hygienic and aesthetic reasons, an awareness of its symbolic meanings (aside from psychoanalytic ones) has been virtually lost. Current debate about circumcision has focused almost exclusively on the pain it might cause the child, or on its effects upon reducing the spread of certain diseases. A very different situation prevailed in early modern Europe, where there was an intense curiosity about the often unnerving implications of a ritual bound up with theological, racial, genealogical, and sexual concerns. I am interested here not only in restoring a sense of the fascination and importance circumcision held for Elizabethans but also in arguing that an occluded threat of circumcision informs Shylock’s desire to cut a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Before turning to the presence of circumcision in *The Merchant of Venice* and its sources, it is important to consider what this ritual might have meant to Elizabethans, what their understanding of it was based on, and what light this casts on their cultural beliefs.

I. Elizabethan ideas about circumcision

In the twentieth century circumcision has often been described as a symbolic form of castration or emasculation. This association has undoubtedly been influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, who, in an argument that bears a striking resemblance to Maria Edgeworth’s ideas about childhood trauma and the wellsprings of anti-Jewish feelings, writes in *Little Hans* that the “castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis—a piece of his penis, they think—and this gives them a right to despise Jews. And there is no stronger unconscious root for the sense of superiority over woman.” For Freud, the symbolic act of circumcision proves a vital source of both misogyny and antisemitism. The notion that circumcision could easily slide into the more definitive cut of castration did not originate with Freud and in fact had long circulated in English culture. D’Blossiers Tovey, in his account of instances in medieval England in which Jews were charged with being “emasculators,” cites a case from the reign of King John in which “Boneland a Jew of Bedford was indicted not for circumcising, but totally cutting off the privy member” of a boy named Richard. And Shakespeare’s contemporaries used circumcision as a metaphor for castration: the poet Gabriel Harvey, for example, implores God to “circumcise the tongues and pens” of his enemies.

For early modern English writers, though, the threat of circumcision did not begin and end with emasculation. In the sixteenth century circumcision was more than a cut, it was an unmistakable sign. But of what, exactly? When the Elizabethan preacher Andrew Willet tried to answer this question he found himself describing circumcision as not only a “a sign of remembrance or commemoration of the Covenant . . . made between God and Abraham” but also as a sign “distinguishing the Hebrews from all other people.” To this genealogical, Jewish association, he added a few more that are distinctly Christian: circumcision prefigured “baptism” and demonstrated “the natural disease of man, even original sin.” To these Willet might have added yet another: that through circumcision, one “is . . . made a Jew,” a troubling thought for a Christian who might find himself threatened with such a cut.

One such individual was Thomas Coryate, the celebrated Elizabethan traveler. Coryate describes how his efforts to convert the Jews of the Venetian ghetto soured, leading him to flee from the hostile crowd. Though this specific detail is never mentioned in the narrative itself, a picture of Coryate pursued by a knife-wielding Jew is included in a series of scenes illustrating the title page of his travel book, *Coryats Crudities* (see illustration 9). For those who wrote commendatory poems to Coryate’s book—including Laurence Whitaker—this Jew threatens not death but circumcision: “Thy courtesan clipped thee, ’ware Tom, I advise thee, / And fly from the Jews, lest they circumcise thee.” Hugh Holland, too, draws attention to the danger to Coryate’s foreskin: “Ulysses heard no Syren sing: nor Coryate / The Jew, least his prepuce might prove excoriate.” Coryate’s conversionary effort backfires, and instead of turning Jews into Christians he finds himself in danger of being religiously transfigured by means of a circumcising cut. Holland, comparing Coryate to Hugh Broughton, the evangelizing Elizabethan Hebraist, makes this symmetrical relationship between baptism and circumcision explicit:

He more prevailed against the excoriate Jews
Than Broughton could, or twenty more such Hughs.
And yet but for one petty poor misprision,
He was nigh made one of the circumcision.

With the exception of a handful of infants circumcised by the radical Puritan group led by John Traske around 1620, and a few self-circumcisors like Thomas Tany and Thomas Ramsey thirty years later, there is no evidence that circumcisions took place in early modern England. Nonetheless, the same post-Reformation interest that led to this Judaizing impulse also inspired a broader curiosity about a ritual not only central to the Old Testament accounts of the patriarchs but also crucial to the theological position maintained by the apostle Paul in that central text of the Protestant Reformation, Epistle to the Romans.

One result of this new interest was that English travelers eagerly sought out invitations to circumcisions and recorded what they witnessed for the benefit of their contemporaries. As noted earlier, the resilient Coryate, who in the course of his extensive travels had long desired to observe a circumcision, finally had his wish granted in Constantinople, at the “house of a certain English Jew called Amis” [i.e., Ames]. The fact that Ames and his two sisters spoke English no doubt made it easier for Coryate to have various details of the ritual explained to him. Coryate describes how the Jews

came into the room and sung certain Hebrew songs, after which the child was brought to his father, who sat down in a chair and placed the child being now eight days old in his lap. The whole company being desirous that we Christians should observe the ceremony, called us to approach near to the child. And when we came, a certain other Jew drawing forth a little instrument made not unlike those small scissors that our ladies and gentlewomen do much use, did with the same cut off the prepuce or foreskin of the child, and after a very strange manner, unused (I believe) of the ancient Hebrews, did put his mouth to the child’s yard, and sucked up the blood.

English observers were particularly struck by how the rite symbolically enacted the male child’s passage from his mother to the community of men. Coryate observes that at the conclusion of the rite, the “prepuce that was cut off was carried to the mother, who keepeth it very preciously as a thing of worth,” and Fynes Moryson, describing a circumcision he had witnessed in Prague, was alert to the fact that women were “not permitted to enter” the room and that they “delivered the child to the father” at the door. Like Coryate, Moryson records his surprise at witnessing another practice for which Scripture had offered no precedent, *metzizah*, the part of the ceremony in which the circumcisor sucks the blood from the glans of the circumcized “yard” or penis of the infant. Moryson writes that “the rabbi cut off his prepuce, and (with leave be it related for clearing of the ceremony) did with his mouth suck the blood of his privy part.” Apparently, this innovative practice, introduced during the Talmudic period, though not universally practiced by Jews, must have seemed to these English observers to have sodomitical overtones.

Coryate, Moryson, and other Elizabethan observers express surprise at the discrepancy between the ceremonies that they witnessed and that which they had expected to see based on the divinely ordained precepts set forth in the Bible. There was also disagreement over whether the Jews were the first people to have practiced circumcision. At stake in this debate was whether circumcision should be viewed as something peculiarly Jewish. On one side there were those like Samuel Purchas, who had read too many accounts from too many foreign lands to accept the argument that all peoples who practiced circumcision had

learned this rite from the Jews. Purchas insisted that the “ceremony and custom of circumcision hath been and still is usual among many nations of whom there was never any suspicion that they descended from the Israelites.” Opposing this minority view were those like Andrew Willet, who maintained that “circumcision was a peculiar mark of distinction for the Hebrews” and further urged that “some nations among the Gentiles retained circumcision by an apish imitation of the Hebrews, but they did abuse it superstitiously and did not keep the rite of institution as the Lord had appointed it.” Writers who sided with Willet’s position used this as a basis for substantiating claims about the discovery of the ten lost tribes of Israel. When Thomas Thorowgood, for example, writes that “many Indian nations are of Judaical race,” he offers as evidence that the “frequent and constant character of circumcision, so singularly fixed to the Jews, is to be found among them.”

While it was widely accepted that others—especially Turks—practiced circumcision, there was still considerable resistance to abandoning the idea that it was a distinctively Jewish rite. An unusual story regarding Turkish circumcision—and murder—made its way to England in February 1595 when John Barton, the English ambassador in Constantinople, forwarded to Lord Burghley a report describing the events surrounding the accession of the Turkish monarch Mohamet III. The narrative, written in Italian by a Jew named Don Solomon, describes how Mohamet consolidated his power by inviting his nineteen brothers, the eldest eleven years old, to greet him. Mohamet “told them not to fear, he meant no harm to them but only to have them circumcised according to their custom. . . . As soon as they kissed his hand, they were circumcised, taken aside by a mute, and dextrously strangled with handkerchiefs. This certainly seemed strange and cruel, but it was the custom of this realm.” The story offers yet one more instance, in the year preceding the first staging of *The Merchant*, of the association of circumcision with ritualistic and surreptitious murder.

II. Romans and the theological meanings of circumcision

This unprecedented interest in the physical act of circumcision was directly related to some of the theological preoccupations of post-Reformation England. Elizabethans knew that circumcision had caused something of an identity crisis for early Christians, especially Paul. Paul, who was himself circumcised and had circumcised others, directed his epistles to communities for whom to circumcise or not to circumcise was a matter of great concern. But Paul’s remarks on circumcision went well beyond approving or disapproving of the act itself: they offered a revolutionary challenge to what defined a Jew, and by implication, a Christian. Luther and Calvin both devoted themselves to explicating Paul’s often cryptic remarks on circumcision, and a host of English translators, commentators, theologians, and preachers enabled the widespread

circulation of these interpretations to the broadest community possible. More than anything else in the late sixteenth century—including firsthand reports like the ones described above—Paul’s ideas about circumcision saturated what Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought, wrote, and heard about circumcision. At times confusing and even contradictory, Paul’s remarks, and the extraordinary commentary produced to explain and resolve various ambiguities contained in them, had an immeasurable impact on Elizabethan conceptions of Jews. This body of commentary, much of it gathering dust in a handful of archives, richly repays close examination.

The first problem confronting a Christian explicator of Paul’s Romans was a fairly simple one. Since God had first ordered Abraham to undertake circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, what justified abandoning this practice? And what were the consequences of such a break? The immediate answer was that the Jews had misunderstood that this Covenant, like the Law, was not changed or abolished by Jesus, “but more plainly expounded . . . and fulfilled.” “Surely,” Philippe de Mornay wrote, in a text translated by Sir Philip Sidney, “in this point . . . we [Christians] be flat contrary to them.” And sounding a bit like a modern deconstructive critic, Mornay adds, that the “thing which doth always deceive” the Jews is that “they take the sign for the thing signified,” since circumcision was merely a “sign or seal of the Covenant, and not the Covenant itself.”

For John Calvin, the “disputation and controversy” over circumcision similarly masked a more consequential debate over “the ceremonies of the Law,” which Paul “comprehendeth here under the particular term of circumcision.” By equating circumcision with the Law and its supersession by faith, English Protestants drew an analogy between Paul’s rejection of circumcision and their own repudiation of Catholicism’s emphasis on justification through good works: it is “not circumcision, but faith [that] makes us wait for the hope of righteousness; therefore not circumcision but faith justifies.” Calvin’s interpretation of Paul had made it clear that “circumcision” had lost its “worth,” having been replaced by the sacrament of baptism. No longer even “a sign,” it was “a thing without any use.”

But such an outright rejection of circumcision seemingly contradicted Paul’s own assertion that “circumcision verily is profitable, if thou do the Law.” Confronted with such a claim, commentators had to work hard to show that Paul’s words actually meant quite the opposite of what literalists might mistakenly imagine. In order to achieve this end, the gloss to the Geneva Bible takes Paul’s wonderfully concise and epigrammatic phrase and turns it into a ponderous argument: “The outward circumcision, if it be separated from the inward, doeth not only not justify, but also condemn them that are circumcised, of whom indeed it requireth that, which it signifieth, that is to say, cleanness of heart and the whole life, according to the commandment of the Law.”

The commentator’s overreading is enabled by the fact that Paul in the verses that follow introduces a crucial distinction between inward and outward

circumcision. It is a distinction central to his redefinition of Jewish identity in a world in which circumcision has been superseded: "He is not a Jew which is one outward, neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one within, and the circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God." Paul here attacks Jewish identity at its genealogical root. If he can deny that outward physical circumcision alone defines the Jew from generation to generation, he can insist on a figurative reading of the Law in all other matters as well. For Joseph Hall, Paul's message is unambiguous: "He that would be a true Israelite or Jew indeed must be such inwardly" and must be "cleansed from all corrupt affections and greed." Moreover, this "circumcision must be inwardly in the heart and soul and spirit (in cutting off the unclean foreskin thereof) and not a literal and outward circumcision of the flesh."

Before turning to the symbolic circumcision of the heart touched on here by Paul and his explicators—the most striking feature of his argument and the most relevant to a reading of *The Merchant of Venice*—it is important first to emphasize that Paul and his followers were reluctant to abandon the outward, physical implications of trimming the foreskin, in part because this surgical act so perfectly symbolized the cutting off of sexual desire. Andrew Willet, drawing on the work of Origen, remarks that even if "there had been no other mystery in circumcision, it was fit that the people of God should carry some badge or cognizance to discern them from other people. And if the amputation or cutting off some part of the body were requisite, what part was more fit then that . . . which seemed to be obscene?" The gloss to the Geneva Bible reads this puritanical perspective back into Genesis 17.11, explaining there that the "privy part is circumcised to show that all that is begotten of man is corrupt and must be mortified." And the 1591 Bishops' Bible similarly stresses the connection between circumcision and the curbing of sexual desire, explaining that Deuteronomy 30.6—"And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart"—means that God will "cut away thy ungodly lusts and affections." These commentaries effectively rewrite Old Testament allusions to circumcision, infusing them with Paul's deep discomfort with human sexuality.

John Donne was particularly drawn to this line of thought. In his New Year's Day sermon preached in 1624 commemorating the Feast of the Circumcision, Donne imagines himself in Abraham's place after having been commanded by the Lord to circumcise himself and all the men in his household. Given that it was to be done "in that part of the body," Donne surmises that this command must have struck Abraham as too "obscene a thing to be brought into the fancy of so many women, so many young men, so many strangers to other nations, as might bring the promise and Covenant itself into scorn and into suspicion." Why, Abraham must have wondered, "does God command me so base and unclean a thing, so scornful and misinterpretable a thing, as circumcision, and

circumcision in that part of the body?" The answer, of course, is that in "this rebellious part is the root of all sin." The privy member "need[s] this stigmatical mark of circumcision to be imprinted upon it" to prevent Abraham's descendants from "degenerat[ing] from the nobility of their race." Willet, Donne, and like-minded commentators never quite acknowledge that insofar as the cutting off of the foreskin effectively subdues that rebellious and sinful part of men's bodies, circumcision once again veers perilously close to the idea of a (partial) sexual castration and emasculation.

It was also clear to Christian theologians that for the Jews who literally circumcised the flesh, the Covenant could only be transmitted through men. This helps explain why Jewish daughters like Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* and Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* can so easily cross the religious boundaries that divide their stigmatized fathers from the dominant Christian community. The religious difference of Jewish women is not usually imagined as physically inscribed in their flesh, and the possibility of identifying women as Jews through some kind of incision never took hold in England, though for a brief time in the fifteenth century in northern Italy the requirement that Jewish women have their ears pierced and wear earrings served precisely this function. In her investigation of this sumptuary tradition, Diane Owen Hughes cites the Franciscan preacher Giacomo della Marca, who in an advent sermon said that earrings are jewels "that Jewish women wear in place of circumcision, so that they can be distinguished from other [i.e., Christian] women." One wonders whether Pauline ideas about circumcising desire also shaped this bizarre proposal. Though this method of marking Jewish women was short-lived (other women also wanted to wear earrings) and apparently not widespread, a trace of it may possibly be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Shylock, upon hearing that Jessica has not only left him but also taken his money and jewels, exclaims: "Two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!" Shylock fantasizes that his converted daughter returns, and through her earring is reinscribed at last as a circumcised Jewess.

The problems that circumcision raise for issues of gender and sexuality persist into our own more secular age. To cite an unfortunate instance of this, modern medicine, when confronted with the extremely rare cases of botched circumcisions, has found it advisable to alter the gender of the child by reconstructing female rather than male genitalia. Does this procedure confirm the kind of anxieties we have been exploring about the underlying castrating and feminizing threat of circumcision? Or does it suggest that doctors are perhaps so influenced by such deeply embedded cultural beliefs as to translate them into scientific practice? In either case it underscores how provisional the assignment of gender is, a point familiar enough to Shakespeare's audiences confronted in *The Merchant* with cross-dressing women and a hero who describes himself as a "tainted wether," or castrated ram. Circumcision, then, was an extraordinarily

powerful signifier, one that not only touched on issues of identity that ranged from the sexual to the theological but, often enough, on the intersection of the two. The threat of Shylock's cut was complex, resonant, and unusually terrifying.

III. *Circumcision in the sources of The Merchant*

The foregoing analysis may help explain why *The Merchant of Venice*, more than any other depiction of Jews in this period, has continued to provoke such controversy and has also continued to stir long-buried prejudices against the Jews. I want to be careful here about being misunderstood. I am not proposing that Shakespeare is antisemitic (or, for that matter, philosemitic). *The Merchant of Venice* is a play, a work of fiction, not a diary or a polygraph test; since no one knows what Shakespeare personally thought about Jews, readers will continue to make up their own minds about this question. *The Merchant of Venice* is thus not "about" ritual murder or a veiled circumcising threat any more than it is about usury, or marriage, or homosocial bonding, or mercy, or Venetian trade, or cross-dressing, or the many other social currents that run through this and every other one of Shakespeare's plays. Plays, unlike sermons, are not reducible to one lesson or another, nor do they gain their resonance from being about a recognizable central theme. Surely, in the hands of a talented dramatist, the less easily definable the social and psychological currents a play explores, the greater its potential to haunt and disturb. We return again and again to Shakespeare's plays because they seem to operate in these depths and tap into the roots of social contradictions on a stunningly regular basis, leaving critics with the task of trying to explain exactly what these are and how Shakespeare's plays engage them. With this in mind, I offer the following interpretation of the pound of flesh plot.

Those watching or reading *The Merchant of Venice* are often curious about what part of Antonio's body Shylock has in mind when they learn of Shylock's desire to exact "an equal pound" of Antonio's "fair flesh, to be cut off and taken" in that "part" of his body that "pleaseth" the Jew. Those all too familiar with the plot may forget that it is not until the trial scene in act 4 that this riddle is solved and we learn that Shylock intends to cut from Antonio's "breast" near his heart. Or partially solved. Why, one wonders, is Antonio's breast the spot most pleasing to Shylock? And why, for the sake of accuracy, wouldn't Shylock cut out rather than "cut off" a pound of flesh if it were to come from "nearest" Antonio's "heart"? Moreover, why don't we learn of this crucial detail until Shylock's final appearance in the play?

It is not immediately clear how for an Elizabethan audience an allusion to a Jew cutting off a man's "fair flesh" would invoke images of a threat to the victim's heart, especially when one calls to mind the identification of Jews as circumcisors and emasculators. On a philological level, too, the choice of the word flesh here carries with it the strong possibility that Shylock has a different part of Antonio's anatomy in mind. In the late sixteenth century the word *flesh* was consistently

used, especially in the Bible, in place of *penis*. Readers of the Geneva Bible would know from examples like Genesis 17.11 that God had commanded Abraham to “circumcise the foreskin of your flesh,” and that discussions of sexuality and disease in Leviticus always use the word *flesh* when speaking of the penis.

Not surprisingly, popular writers took advantage of the punning opportunities made available by this euphemism. Shortly before writing *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare himself had played on the sexual possibilities of *flesh* in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the opening scene of that play the servant Samson, boasting of his sexual prowess, tells Gregory: “Me [the maids] shall feel while I am able to stand, and ’tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh.” Playing on the contrast between erect flesh and flaccid fish, Gregory responds: “’Tis well thou art not fish.” Mercutio returns to the same tired joke about the loss of tumescence when he says of Romeo’s melancholy: “O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified.” *The Merchant of Venice* is similarly replete with bad jokes about trimmed male genitals. As noted above, Antonio in the court scene speaks of himself as “a tainted wether” best suited to suffer the exaction of Shylock’s cut.” In addition, Salerio’s jibe about Jessica having Shylock’s “stones,” that is, testicles, “upon her” and Gratiano’s tasteless joke about “mar[ring] the young clerk’s pen” (i.e., penis) offer two other instances from the play of men’s obsessive anxiety about castrating cuts. It should also be noted that in Elizabethan England such a cut was not merely the stuff of jokes. As a deterrent to crime, convicted male felons were told at their sentencing to prepare to be “hanged by the neck, and being alive cut down, and your privy members to be cut off, and your bowels to be taken out of your belly and there burned, you being alive.”

Scholars have long recognized that Shakespeare drew upon a well established tradition in his retelling the story of the pound of flesh. Among the printed sources Shakespeare may have looked at were Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone* and Alexander Silvayn’s *The Orator*. Other scholars have uncovered a range of analogues and antecedents, including popular English ballads like “Gernatus the Jew” and medieval works like the *Cursor Mundi* that bear a strong resemblance to Shakespeare’s plot. Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to what part of the body the pound of flesh is taken from in these sources and analogues. In fact, when Shakespeare came to one of the main sources that we are pretty confident he consulted, Silvayn’s *The Orator*, he would have read about a Jew who wonders if he “should cut of his [Christian victim’s] privy members, supposing that the same would altogether weigh a just pound?” Before turning to this story and its curious reception, I want to consider another first, one that is even more revealing about the significance of the pound of flesh: Gregorio Leti’s *The Life of Pope Sixtus the Fifth*.

Leti was a popular Italian historian, born in the early seventeenth century, who left Italy and took up residence in Northern Europe after converting to Protestantism. For a brief period in the early 1680s he lived and wrote in

England. Although there are no recorded performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during his stay there, Leti may well have become familiar with the printed text of Shakespeare's play in the course of the extensive research he undertook on Elizabethan England. The earliest edition of his biography of Sixtus V, first published in Lausanne in 1669, omits any reference to the celebrated pound of flesh story; the anecdote was only introduced in the revised version, published in Amsterdam after Leti's visit to England, which may suggest that Leti drew on English sources for this addition.

After 1754, when Ellis Farnsworth translated Leti's story, those unable to read the Italian original could learn how in the days of Queen Elizabeth I it was "reported in Rome" that the great English naval hero, Sir Francis Drake, "had taken and plundered St. Domingo, in Hispaniola, and carried off an immense booty. This account came in a private letter to Paul Secchi, a very considerable merchant in the city, who had large concerns in those parts, which he had insured." Leti then relates that Secchi then "sent for the insurer, Sampson Ceneda, a Jew, and acquainted him with it. The Jew, whose interest it was to have such a report thought false, gave many reasons why it could not possibly be true; and, at last, worked himself up into such a passion, that he said, "I'll lay you a pound of my flesh it is a lie." Secchi replied, "If you like it, I'll lay you a thousand crowns against a pound of your flesh, that it's true." The Jew accepted the wager, and articles were immediately executed betwixt them, the substance of which was "that if Secchi won, he should himself cut the flesh, with a sharp knife, from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased."

Leti then relates that "the truth of the account" of Drake's attack "was soon after confirmed by other advices from the West Indies," which threw the Jew "almost into distraction, especially when he was informed that Secchi had solemnly sworn [that] he would compel him to the exact literal performance of his contract, and was determined to cut a pound of flesh from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." We move here from a cut "from whatever part of the Jew's body he pleased" to the more precisely defined "part of his body which it is not necessary to mention." The original Italian version conveys even more strongly a sense that only modesty prevents specifying that Secchi's intended cut will come from the unmentionable genitals of the Jew ("e che la modestia non vuo che io nomine"). The circumcised Jew faces a bit more surgery than he reckoned for.

The rest of the story should be familiar to anyone who has read Shakespeare's play, except, of course, that this time it is the Christian who is intent on cutting the flesh of the Jew. The Governor of Rome referred the tricky case to the authority of Pope Sixtus V, who tells Secchi that he must fulfill the contract and "cut a pound of flesh from any part you please, of the Jew's body. We would advise you, however, to be very careful; for if you cut but a scruple, or a grain, more or less than your due, you shall certainly be hanged. Go, and bring hither

a knife and a pair of scales, and let it be done in our presence." This verdict led both Secchi and the Jew to agree to tear up the contract, though the affair was not fully settled until Sixtus V fined both of them harshly to serve as an example to others.

Farnsworth, in a note appended to his translation, states the obvious: the "scene betwixt Shylock and Antonio in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* seems to be borrowed from this story, though the poet has inverted the persons and decently enough altered some of the circumstances." Farnsworth's comment that Shakespeare "decently enough . . . altered some of the circumstances" presumably alludes to the threatened castration of the Jew. And while we don't know why Leti in the version of the story has "inverted the persons," there is little likelihood that he did it out of love of the Jews. In his book on Great Britain published in England shortly before his departure, Leti reveals his familiarity with London Jewry, describes the services at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London in somewhat mocking terms, and makes fun of the ridiculous gestures of the Jewish worshippers. We can only speculate about the original source of Leti's seventeenth-century story. Did it antedate Shakespeare's play, and was Shakespeare familiar with versions in which the Jew was the victim? Or did it emerge out of a tradition that was itself influenced by *The Merchant of Venice*? Did turning the tables and having the Christians threaten to castrate or symbolically recircumcise the Jew ultimately prove more satisfying to Christian readers?

Farnsworth's translation of Leti's story made a strong impression on eighteenth-century English interpreters of *The Merchant of Venice*. Edmond Malone reproduced this passage in his influential edition of Shakespeare's works in 1790, and David Erskine Baker, though he does not acknowledge his source, wrote that Shakespeare's story "is built on a real fact which happened in some part of Italy, with this difference indeed, that the intended cruelty was really on the side of the Christian, the Jew being the happy delinquent who fell beneath his rigid and barbarous resentment." Tellingly, he adds that "popular prejudice, however, vindicates our author in the alteration he had made. And the delightful manner in which he has availed himself of the general character of the Jews, the very quintessence of which he has enriched his Shylock with, makes more than amends for his deviating from a matter of fact which he was by no means obliged to adhere to." Again, we are left with a set of difficult choices: is it "popular prejudice" that "vindicates" Shakespeare reassigning the "intended cruelty" to Shylock? Or is it Shakespeare's play that by the late eighteenth-century is influential enough to perpetuate and channel this "popular prejudice"?

Familiarity with this inverted version of the pound of flesh story was given even broader circulation by Maria Edgeworth in her novel *Harrington*, where she allows the Jew, Mr. Montenero, to present what he believes to be the historically accurate version of the facts in his response to Harrington, who had recently attended a performance of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Edgeworth, too, sees

the issue of “popular prejudice” as a central one, and has Mr. Montenero politely acknowledge that while “as a dramatic poet, it was” Shakespeare’s “business . . . to take advantage of the popular prejudice as a *power*,” nonetheless “we Jews must feel it peculiarly hard, that the truth of the story should have been completely sacrificed to fiction, so that the characters were not only misrepresented, but reversed.” Harrington “did not know to what Mr. Montenero meant to allude. He politely tried to “pass it off with a slight bow of general acquiescence,” before Mr. Montenero went on to explain that in “the true story, from which Shakespeare took the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, it was a Christian who acted the part of the Jew, and the Jew that of the Christian. It was a Christian who insisted upon having the pound of flesh from next the Jew’s heart.” Seeing how struck Harrington is by this revelation, Mr. Montenero magnanimously offers that “perhaps his was only the Jewish version of the story, and he quickly went on to another subject.” Edgeworth adds her own authority to Montenero’s when she provides a footnote to the words “true story” directing readers to “Steevens’ Life of Sixtus V and Malone’s Shakespeare,” where the Farnworth translation appears. Strikingly, though, at the very moment that she insists on the original version, Edgeworth herself either misremembers or swerves away from a key feature of Leti’s “true story” in favor of Shakespeare’s version of the events when she substitutes the words “having the pound of flesh from next the Jew’s heart” for Farnworth’s translation of Leti’s original: “from that part of his body which it is not necessary to mention.”

Once nineteenth-century Shakespearean source-hunters like Francis Douce and James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps pointed out that Leti’s version could not have antedated Shakespeare’s play, and, moreover, that this episode in Sixtus V’s life was probably fictional, interest in Leti’s narrative rapidly declined. H. H. Furness, in his still influential variorum edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, includes Farnworth’s translation but then invokes the authority of those who dismiss it as a source. And though he quotes Farnworth’s observation that Shakespeare’s plot “is taken from this incident,” he cuts off the quotation at the point where it leads Farnworth to point out that Shakespeare has also made the Jew the victim and left out indecent details. Interest in pure sources—rather than near contemporary versions that might cast light on various aspects of the story—has been influential enough in Shakespeare studies in this century to account for the virtual disappearance of Leti’s story from editions or even from collections of Shakespeare’s sources. Nowadays, Leti’s version is no longer cited, mentioned, or even known to most Shakespeareans.

When we turn to Alexander Silvayn’s *The Orator*, which these same source-hunters agree is one of Shakespeare’s primary sources for the pound of flesh plot, we find a clear precedent for the argument that a Jew considers the possibility of castrating the Christian. The ninety-fifth declamation of *The Orator*, translated into English in 1596 shortly before the composition of *The Merchant*, describes

“a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian.” In his appeal to the judge’s sentence that he “cut a just pound of the Christian flesh, and if he cut either more or less; then his own head should be smitten off,” the Jew insists that in the original agreement the Christian was to hand over the said pound:

Neither am I to take that which he oweth me, but he is to deliver it me.
 And especially because no man knoweth better than he where the same
 may be spared to the least hurt of his person, for I might take it in such
 a place as he might thereby happen to lose his life. What a matter were
 it then if I should cut of his privy members, supposing that the same
 would altogether weigh a just pound?

While Shakespeare’s eighteenth-century editors included this source in unadulterated form, a century later it would be partially suppressed, apparently proving too obscene for Furness to reprint in unexpurgated form. In a strange act of textual castration and substitution, Furness alters the line to read “what a matter were it then, if I should cut of his [head], supposing that the same would weigh a just pound.” This makes little sense, no matter how light-headed the victim might be, since in the next sentence the Jew continues, “Or else his head, should I be suffered to cut it off, although it were with the danger of mine own life,” and in the sentence after that wonders if his victim’s “nose, lips, his ears, and . . . eyes . . . make of them altogether a pound.” Furness’s textual intervention immediately influenced subsequent editions of the play, a year after his edition was published, for example, Homer B. Sprague wrote “head” (without brackets) in his popular school edition of the play. The bowdlerization of this source, and the lack of interest in Leti, have effectively deflected critical attention away from aspects of the play that touch upon ritual Jewish practices.

IV. The circumcision of the heart

Why this bond is forfeit,
 And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
 A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
 Nearest the merchant’s heart.

The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.22–30

When Paul declares that “the circumcision is of the heart” and is “in the spirit, not in the letter,” we are presented with a double displacement: of the physical by the spiritual and of the circumcision of the flesh by the circumcision of the heart. Elizabethan commentators were well aware that Paul’s metaphorical treatment of circumcision builds upon a preexisting tradition in the Old Testament, expressed particularly in Deuteronomy 10.16 and 30.6: “Circumcise the foreskin

of your heart,” and “The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart.” Mornay, in Sidney’s translation, also notes that when the Old Testament prophets “rebuke us, they call us not simply uncircumcised, but uncircumcised of heart or lips,” and Peter Martyr simply confirms that “Paul borrowed” this “phrase touching the circumcision of the heart . . . out of the Old Testament.”

Hugo Grotius understood that this substitution of heart for flesh neatly defined the relationship between Christian fellowship and the genealogical Judaism it replaced, since the Covenant “should be common to all people.” He even argued that the Old Testament prophets recognized this “mystical and more excellent signification contained” in “the precept of circumcision,” since they in fact “command the circumcision of the heart, which all the commandments of Jesus aim at.” John Donne is particularly eloquent on this symbolic displacement: “The principal dignity of this circumcision was that it . . . prefigured, it directed to that circumcision of the heart.” For Donne, “Jewish circumcision were an absurd and unreasonable thing if it did not intimate and figure the circumcision of the heart.”

The unexplained displacement of Shylock’s cut from Antonio’s “flesh” upward to his heart is now considerably clearer. Viewed in light of this familiar exegetical tradition, Shylock’s decision to exact his pound of flesh from near Antonio’s heart can be seen as the height of the literalism that informs all his actions in the play, a literalism that when imitated by Portia leads to his demise. Also echoing through the trial scene of *The Merchant* are the words of Galatians 6.13: “For they themselves which are circumcised keep not the Law, but desire to have you circumcised, that they might rejoice in your flesh,” that is to say (as the gloss to this line in the Geneva Bible puts it), “that they have made you Jews.” Shylock will cut his Christian adversary in that part of the body where the Christians believe themselves to be truly circumcised: the heart. Shylock’s threat gives a wonderfully ironic twist to the commentary on Paul’s Romans that “he is the Jew indeed . . . who cuts off all superfluities and pollutions which are spiritually though not literally meant by the law of circumcision.” Psychoanalytically inclined readers will immediately recognize how closely the terms of this Pauline displacement correspond to the unconscious substitution central to Freud’s secular theories. Theodore Reik, a disciple of Freud’s, interpreted Shylock’s bond in just these terms, arguing first that the “condition that he can cut a pound of flesh ‘in what part of your body pleaseth me’” is “a substitute expression of castration.” Reik adds that when it is later decided that “the cut should be made from the breast, analytic interpretation will easily understand the mechanism of distortion that operates here and displaces the performance from a part of the body below to above.

In repudiating circumcision, Paul’s sought to redirect the Covenant, sever the genealogical bond of Judaism, distinguish Jew from Christian, true Jew from false Jew, and the spirit from the flesh (while retaining in a metaphorical

sense the sexuality attendant on the flesh). Yet his actual remarks about circumcision are enigmatic and confusing. It is only mild consolation that they proved no less puzzling to the sixteenth-century theologians who tried to untangle the various levels of Paul's literal and symbolic displacements. Take, for example, the Geneva Bible's gloss to Romans, which reaches new depths of convolution in its attempt to iron out these difficulties by asserting that "Paul useth oftentimes to set the letter against the spirit. But in this place the circumcision which is according to the letter is the cutting off of the foreskin. But the circumcision of the spirit is the circumcision of the heart. That is to say, the spiritual end of the ceremony is true holiness and righteousness, whereby the people of God is known from profane and heathenish men." In their frustration, Paul's interpreters often turned against one another. Andrew Willet, for example, chastised Origen for misreading Paul and "thus distinguishing the circumcision of the flesh; that because there is some part of the flesh cut off and lost, some part remaineth still. The lost and cut off part (saith he) hath a resemblance of that flesh, whereof it is said, all flesh is grass. The other part which remaineth is a figure of that flesh, whereof the Scripture speaketh, all flesh shall see the salutation of God." Willet is sensitive to Origen's conflation of the two kinds of circumcision here, spiritual and fleshly—"Origen confoundeth the circumcision of the flesh and the spirit, making them all one"—but it is hard to see how to maintain hard and fast divisions when, on the one hand, commentators drive a wedge between the spiritual and the physical, while, on the other, they show how even in the Old Testament circumcision was used both literally and metaphorically. For Willet, then, the correct interpretation, and one that seems to require a bit of mental gymnastics, requires that we think not of the circumcision of the flesh and the circumcision of the heart "as though there were two kinds of circumcisions" but as "two parts of one and the same circumcision which are sometimes joined together, both the inward and the outward."

V. Uncircumcision

If the distinction between inward and outward circumcision were not confusing enough, Paul further complicated matters by introducing the concept of reverse, or *uncircumcision*. Even if a faithful Christian were circumcised in the heart, what if one's body still carried (as Paul's did) the stigmatal mark that revealed to the world that one was born a Jew? The seventeenth-century Scottish preacher John Weemse recognized that the early Christians were embarrassed by this Judaical scar: "When they were converted from Judaism to Christianity there were some of them so ashamed of their Judaism that they could not behold it; they took it as a blot to their Christianity. Uncircumcision, then, was the undoing of the seemingly irreversible physical act that had been accomplished through the observance of Jewish law, and it was a topic that Paul would return to

obsessively (in large part because it was a pressing issue within the new Christian communities he was addressing). Paul asks in Romans “if the uncircumcision keep the ordinances of the Law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature (if it keep the Law) condemn thee, which by the letter and circumcision art a transgressor of the Law?” In Galatians he writes in a similar vein that “in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything” nor “uncircumcision, but faith, which worketh by love.” His remarks in Corinthians on the irrelevance of this mark are even more forceful: “Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not gather his circumcision. Is any called uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.”

Paul’s shifts between literal and figurative uncircumcision in these key passages are dizzying, and the commentators had to scramble to keep up with him. Thomas Godwyn voices the question that must have been on many readers’ minds: “Here it may be demanded how it is possible for a man, after once he hath been marked with the sign of circumcision, to blot out that character and become uncircumcised?” He is responding to Paul’s warning that one should not “gather” or reverse one’s circumcision. The gloss to this line in the Geneva Bible also takes Paul in the most literal sense imaginable, explaining that this “gathering” is accomplished with “the help of a surgeon” who undoes the effect of the cutting of the foreskin by “drawing the skin with an instrument, to make it to cover the nut” or glans of the penis. The Geneva Bible even directs readers to the medical source for this procedure, the seventh book of Celsus’s *De Medicina*. Other writers explained that Paul forbids this literal uncircumcision in his letter to the Corinthians “because some that were converted to Christianity from Judaism did so renounce all their Judaical rites that they used means to attract the preputia again, which was an act of too much superstition and curiosity, and so is censured here.” It also needs to be stressed here that, uncircumcision, like circumcision, was understood by Paul’s commentators to operate both spiritually and literally; Andrew Willet reminds his readers that “as there are two kinds of circumcision, so there is also a twofold uncircumcision, “an uncircumcision of the heart, and another of the flesh.”

The belief that one could be uncircumcised, could have one’s irreducible Jewish identity replaced with a Christian one, is also a fantasy that powerfully shapes the final confrontation between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio’s consummate revenge upon his circumcised adversary, whose actions symbolically threaten to transform not just his physical but his religious identity, is to ask of the court a punishment that precisely reverses what Shylock had in mind for him. When Antonio demands that Shylock “presently become a Christian,” a demand to which the Duke readily agrees, the “christ’ning” that Shylock is to receive will metaphorically uncircumcise him. The new covenant has

superseded the old, as the sacrament of baptism, which has replaced circumcision, turns Jew into Christian. In his commentary on Romans Peter Martyr offers up a summary of Paul's treatment of the Jews that ironically foreshadows Antonio's victory over Shylock at the end of the trial scene: "In civil judgments, when any is to be condemned which is in any dignity or magistrateship, he is first deprived of his dignity or office, and then afterward condemned. So the apostle first depriveth the Jews of the true Jewishness, and of the true circumcision, and then afterward condemneeth them."

Antonio and Shylock, who fiercely insist on how different they are from each other, to the last seek out ways of preserving that difference through symbolic acts that convert their adversary into their own kind. Paradoxically, though, these symbolic acts—a threatened circumcision of the heart and a baptism that figuratively uncircumcises—would have the opposite effect, erasing, rather than preserving, the literal or figurative boundaries that distinguish merchant from Jew. It is just this fear of unexpected and unsatisfying transformation that makes *The Merchant of Venice* so unsettling a comedy, and that renders the even more deeply submerged and shadowy charge of ritual murder such a potent one. The desire to allay such fears produces a fantasy ending in which the circumcising Jew is metamorphosed through conversion into a gentle Christian. While this resolution can only be sustained through legal force in the play (Shylock's alternative, after all, is to be executed), its power was sufficiently strong for this spectacle of conversion to be reenacted in a number of English churches in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, as a handful of Jews were led to the baptismal font.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



Early twenty-first-century responses to *The Merchant of Venice* continue to be concerned foremost with Shylock, particularly with re-evaluating the degree and the nature of Shylock's villainy and the degree to which the Christian characters can be considered virtuous or flawed with regard to their treatment of him. Rather than focusing on Shylock as a self-created monster, however, or as a broken-hearted outsider, many have examined the context in which he behaves. For example, in the 2004 film of the play with Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio, Shylock's faults are set in the context of Antonio's abuse, and Antonio's melancholy is related to an erotically tinged, socially unacceptable love for Bassanio. The actor F. Murray Abraham, preparing for a 2007 stage performance as Shylock, suggested that "*The Merchant of Venice* examines people's intolerance of each other. The Christians don't come off any better than Shylock does. And the idea that you can try to use your religion as a cudgel against someone else or to separate yourself by your religion is something that we try to examine in our production."

Recent writing about *The Merchant of Venice* has focused less on comprehensive readings of the play or character analysis and more on the interplay of characters and their effects upon one another, as well as on particular themes such as "the outsider," law, sadism, the use of music in the play, homophobia and racism, usury, compulsive behavior, and on historical circumstances, such as the diplomatic connections between Queen Elizabeth's court and Morocco, as suggested by Portia's relation to her suitor from Morocco, or the Elizabethan conception of Venice as a social and political entity.

2002—Gary Rosenshield. "Deconstructing the Christian Merchant: Antonio and *The Merchant of Venice*," from *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*

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For several millennia conservative writers have seen their times as corrupted by a lust for material gain and thus inherently destructive of the moral, spiritual, and religious values of an idealized older order. This attitude frequently manifests itself in quixotic nostalgia, but just as often it elicits a rancorous response. One need only recall Dostoevsky's diatribe against the Jewish idea in *The Diary of a Writer* (March 1877), which he associates with the modern world dominated by finance and the stock market, in short, by a materialistic idea that signals the death knell of the old world of Christian love and fellowship.

Thus, it is not for nothing that over there Jews are reigning everywhere over stock-exchanges; it is not for nothing that they control capital, that they are the masters of credit, and it is not for nothing—I repeat—that they are the masters of international politics, and what is going to happen in the future is only known to the Jews themselves: their reign, their complete reign is approaching! We are approaching the complete triumph of ideas before which the sentiments of humanity, thirst for truth, Christian and national feelings, and even those of national dignity, must bow. On the contrary, we are approaching materialism, a blind, carnivorous craving for personal material welfare, a craving for personal accumulation of money by any means—this is all that has been proclaimed as the supreme aim, as the reasonable thing, as liberty, in lieu of the Christian idea of salvation only through the closest moral and brotherly fellowship of men.¹

Shakespeare, on the other hand, hardly sees a solution to the threat of materialism in a resurrection of the past; nor does he despair over modernity. In *The Merchant of Venice*, he may be suggesting a compromise between the old and new age. In fact, the play may be seen as an experiment, metaphorically testing the viability in the contemporary world of a marriage of capital and Christian ideals.² The question that the play implicitly asks is not whether Shylock can become a Christian but whether Antonio can be both a Christian and a merchant: that is, a merchant and not in some way also a Jew. Is it possible for a Christian to escape “Judaization” in a world rapidly being transformed by a mercantile and pre-capitalist economy? And if Antonio cannot escape the corruption of finance, can anyone?

Much of the historical criticism of the play has dealt with the way in which Shylock's and Antonio's roles reflect the economic realities of Shakespeare's age. Different conceptualizations of the economic and social realities of late sixteenth-century England, however, lead to different interpretations of these

roles. Shylock may appear as a precursor of modern capitalism and his usury as an early form of banking or money capital, a position traced and elucidated by Richard Halpern.³ Or he may represent, as Walter Cohen has remarked, a “quasifeudal fiscalism,” which would make him more a “figure from the past: marginal, diabolical, irrational, archaic, medieval,” “an old man with obsolete values trying to arrest the course of history.” Antonio, by contrast, emerges “as a special instance of bourgeois mercantilism, a harbinger of modern capitalism.”⁴ In any case, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, Jew, and usurer emerge as synonymous opprobrious terms.⁵ Antonio is neither Jew nor usurer, but a Christian merchant. How Christian a merchant he is, and can be, in the new age is one of the most important issues explored by the play.

Although *The Merchant of Venice* must insist on the distinction between usurer and merchant in order to argue the possibility of a Christian merchant, we know that the difference between the two was not always clear in late sixteenth-century England. Before they were expelled from some European countries and restricted in their professions in others, Jews figured prominently as merchants in international trade, taking advantage of their contacts with their coreligionists throughout the Mediterranean. During this time, the term Jew was as associated with trade as with usury.⁶ Though usury had traditionally been associated with an unproductive, sterile form of profit, a purely monetary exchange, (“barren metal” 1.3.131)⁷—profit from trade being more favorably associated with the exchange of goods or productive labor⁸—European mercantile society was seriously challenging the moral distinction between lending at interest and other forms of profit. In the sixteenth century, the English Parliament spent a good deal of time debating and amending laws regulating lending at interest (a common English practice),⁹ which became legal after 1571. Thereafter, the term usury, at least in a legal sense, seems to have been reserved for excessive interest (extortion), interest greater than ten percent.¹⁰ Before 1571, since lending money incurred significant risk, interest rates were considerably higher.

Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* gives a rather rosy view of the merchant class of London, but we know that many merchants were regularly involved in usury, especially after 1571.¹¹ William Ingram notes that after 1571, “many more people engaged themselves in the business, borrowing became respectable, and the covert procedures of the underground moneylenders quickly surfaced as the standard practice of the newly legalized brokers.”¹² John Langley, the uncle of Francis Langley (a short-time owner of The Swan playhouse), was a merchant-goldsmith who held the position of Lord Mayor of London for one year. Though he did not lend money, after 1571 goldsmiths and scribes were almost euphemisms for moneylenders. Francis Langley, himself a draper, was continually involved in moneylending, often borrowing and lending at the same time. There were few loans that he entered into that did not include a bond (a forfeiture penalty) as an essential aspect of the contract.¹³ Since he forfeited on

many of his loans, as did many who borrowed from him, he spent a good deal of his life in court, suing and being sued.

Shakespeare does not ignore the English reality, he circumvents it by setting the action in Venice, where, for want of more accurate information, the distinction between usurer and merchant and the possibility of a self-sacrificing merchant-Christian may be more credibly entertained.¹⁴ According to Walter Cohen, English history could only evoke Shakespeare's fears about capitalism. Italian history, or rather Shakespeare's re-creation of it, could allay those fears. Venice also gives the merchant the possibility of circulating primarily in non-merchant circles, with courtiers and the representatives of aristocratic landed wealth, lest he be tainted by intercourse with other less upright merchants.¹⁵ But the Italian strategy is made a little more difficult because of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, a work which takes place close enough to Italy, and to which *The Merchant of Venice* is obviously reacting.¹⁶

The Jew of Malta presents a rather grim picture of the new world emerging at the end of the sixteenth century. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all motivated by the same desire for power and material gain. The spirit of the new age is explicitly presented in the prologue by Machiavel, who cautions the audience that those who do not heed his words will pay the consequences in lost wealth and power. He counts "Religion but a childish Toy" and holds that "there is no sinne but ignorance." Barabas is his model, whose "mony was not got without my meanes."¹⁷

At the beginning of the play, Barabas and the Jews of Malta seem unjustly treated by their Christian rulers, who strip the Jews of their wealth to pay tribute to the Turkish Sultan. At first, the reader might harbor sympathy for Barabas's anger and desire for revenge. But after the second act, Barabas turns into a monster, poisoning his own daughter, along with all the nuns in the nunnery where she has taken refuge. Moreover, as his words make clear, he has not so much changed his ways as concentrated his stratagems. He brags that even in his youth, long before the action of the play begins, he preyed upon the Christian population of Europe.

As for myselfe, I walke abroad a nights,
 And kill sicke people groaning under walls:
 Sometimes I goe about and poyson wells. . . .
 Being young I studied Physicke, and began
 To practise first upon the Italian;
 There I enrich'd the Priests with burials,
 And alwayes kept the Sexton's arms in ure
 With digging graves and ringing dead mens knells

(II, iii, 178–189)

Cartelli and Humphreys have argued that the Christians in the play are no better than Barabas: they have the same desires, commit the same villainies, but are just more skillful in concealing their thoughts and actions, mostly beneath a veneer of religious piety and civic duty.¹⁸ The Duke's main motivation is power and revenge. And even the monks sing a different tune when gold is at issue. But *The Jew of Malta* paints a somewhat inconsistent, if not ambivalent, picture of the new world. On one hand, the monster Barabas of the last three acts epitomizes the economic egoism of the new age. On the other, the play exhibits a certain embarrassed admiration for its hero-villain, who appears less interested in revenge, gold, and power than in excitement, risk, and adventure.¹⁹ At times Barabas seems to "rise" above Christian, Jews, and Muslims by realizing their unconscious—or perhaps subconscious—criminal fantasies.

The Merchant of Venice appeared several years after *The Jew of Malta*. The writing may have received impetus from the successful revival of Marlowe's play in 1596, during the trial of the Queen's doctor, Rodrigo Lopez, a Portuguese-born Marrano who was found guilty of conspiring to poison the queen and subsequently executed.²⁰ Many have noted the important differences between Barabas and Shylock, not to speak of other significant differences in the plays. Continually humiliated in the market place by his Christian rival Antonio, Shylock is a much lesser figure than Barabas. His scope is smaller, and even when he manages to find Antonio in his power, he is thwarted by no more than a young lady posing as a judge. But what is most different about the plays is not so much the characterization or even the image of the Jew, but their authors' different attitudes toward the new world, in which the lust for gold and self-aggrandizement militates against the preservation of older Christian values.²¹ In Marlowe, the modern world has arrived. Christian values appear only sporadically, and even then mostly in the hypocritical posturing of unscrupulous statesmen and clergymen. Shakespeare still entertains the hope, not that the Golden Age of Christian fellowship can return, but that Christian values can hold their own, if not thrive, midst the social and economic realities of the new age.

The Merchant of Venice makes several different transformations of *The Jew of Malta*. First, it carries over the Jewish and Christian enmity from Marlowe's play, but alters it considerably. The Shylock/Barabas plot structure is similar. Barabas seeks revenge against his Christian tormentor the Duke (he is responsible for the death of the Duke's son and the Turkish capture of Malta), but in the end the Duke turns the tables on Barabas and engineers Barabas's death in a boiling cauldron. Shylock's pursuit of vengeance against Antonio concludes with Antonio's complete victory. But Shylock is not only a scaled-down version of the romantic villain, even in his vengefulness he is presented as far more human. Furthermore, whereas Marlowe presents Barabas and the Duke, the Jew

and Christian, as equally corrupt, two forms of the same modern phenomenon, Shakespeare sharply separates his Jew and Christian to emphasize the moral and spiritual chasm between Jewish and Christian worlds, the split between the pursuit of revenge and usurious capital on one hand and Christian charity and merchant “venture” on the other.²²

Shakespeare must highlight the essential differences between Shylock and Antonio to test the viability of an alternative to the Barabases, the Shylocks, and even the Dukes of the new world. Assuming that the modern world will be ruled by merchants, the play needs to show if its masters can also be Christian and noble. The Christian antithesis is already at hand in Shylock. However humanized, he conforms, for the most part, to a medieval Jewish stereotype. But a Christian merchant must be created who can be sharply differentiated from the Jewish usurer. Gross has seen the difference between Shylock and Antonio precisely in this dichotomy.

Between them, Antonio and Shylock represent two extreme versions of Economic Man, one benevolent, the other malign. Jekyll-Antonio embodies the *fantasy* that you can enjoy the benefits of economic enterprise, and confer them on your society, without being competitive and self-assertive. Hyde-Shylock is the capitalist as total predator, conferring good upon no one except himself. They are twin aspects of the same phenomenon; and a tremendous amount of the play’s energy is spent keeping them apart. . . . [Antonio] represents an attempt to resolve—or deny—the tension between Christian ideals of renunciation and the pursuit of worldly wealth. [*italics mine*]²³

Antonio consciously asserts and defines himself as a Christian merchant: that is, the antithesis of Shylock. He not only refuses to take interest (perhaps even in contrast to his fellow Christian merchants), but engages in a crusade to humiliate Shylock at every opportunity and to assist Christians who have suffered from Shylock’s usury. Shakespeare not only dissociates Antonio’s profession from Shylock’s usury, he elevates Antonio’s mercantile activities, presenting them as regal, noble, knightly, courteous, and gentle. Salerio describes Antonio’s ships as great seigneurs who fly by their competitors as on woven wings. Grantanio refers to him as “that royal merchant, good Antonio” (III, ii, 239), as does the duke at the beginning of the trial (IV, i, 29). Bassanio calls him that “one in whom / The ancient Roman honor more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy” (III, ii, 294–96). The whole enterprise, fraught with danger, seems adventurous, bold, daring, and risky, perhaps the newest knightly profession, surely not for the faint of heart. Antonio is a new breed of merchant prince.²⁴ But given the usurious activities of English merchants of the time, Shakespeare not only had to change the locus of the action to Venice, he had to play his Christian merchant against type. As Holmer writes, “Shakespeare is almost *avant garde* in abandoning the old,

despicable usurer-merchant figure in drama for the new, heroic merchant-prince figure that begins to gain dominance in popular literature in the 1590s."²⁵

Frank Whigham, who has emphasized the importance of style and appearance in creating reality in *The Merchant of Venice*, notes how "stylized assertion" in Salerio's speech becomes one of the "tools" in Antonio's defense as merchant. Style dresses mercantile enterprise in heroic clothes.²⁶ On the other hand, "the intermixture of heroic and mercantile language emphasizes their relation to each other; the tonal disjunction suggests an ironic reading, since in romantic heroics financial foundations are usually suppressed as tawdry."²⁷ Bassanio wins Portia, the landed aristocrat and arbiter of style in the play, primarily through wit, not bravado or money. Although Shakespeare problematizes the issue of appearance and reality, he often plays both ends against the middle, using appearances as "a laudable decoration or revelation of consonance of inner and outer value,"²⁸ as he does in the representation of Antonio and Bassanio, while exposing the disjuncture between appearance and reality in the words of Shylock, who like

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

An evil soul producing holy witness

Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,

A goodly apple rotten at the heart.

O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

(I, iii, 95–99)

Poetry is used to raise the merchant socially and ethically. Antonio, appears, like Bassanio, in search of "the golden fleece" (I, i, 170), not "money-bags" (II, v, 18). Shylock is aesthetically, thus morally, deficient, and as Antonio finds out too late, not to be trusted.²⁹

Antonio remains a model of friendship, love, and care in his relationships with all his Christian acquaintances—no small virtue in Venice. Although some critics argue that Antonio exploits his virtue to manipulate Bassanio,³⁰ to most commentators Antonio is an exemplary friend. He is loved and revered by all the Christians who know him. Even Portia, who sees Antonio as a rival for her husband's affections, reveres his character and appreciates—with reservations, of course—his willingness to die for Bassanio. Ready to do everything in his power to help his friend, Antonio goes against his own principles (breaking "a custom," I, iii, 61) by borrowing money from Shylock. One might argue that Antonio also enters into the bond because he does not suspect that he is undergoing a significant risk. Perhaps he does not take Shylock's penalty—the pound of flesh—seriously: that is, he regards it as an interest-free loan. "Hie thee, gentle Jew. The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I, iii, 174–175). But Antonio is not naive; he is a rich merchant who knows the ways of the world, the international rules and pitfalls of big business. He knows Shylock hates him above all other Christians

and knows that Shylock must be relishing the opportunity of avenging himself on his worst enemy. Given the wide-spread currency of the blood accusation, Antonio understands, on some level, the implications of the bond and Shylock's seriousness. He is thus willing, if need be, to sacrifice himself for his friend in imitation of Christ. One may even view Antonio's actions against Shylock as motivated less by hatred than by a desire to protect fellow Christians. The situation demands aggressive behavior; when engaging the devil, one needs to fight fire with fire. Few in Shakespeare's audience would have found much fault with any of Antonio's actions against a Jew in defense of his fellow Christians.

If Antonio were an exemplary Christian merchant, the play would, as many have argued, constitute a standard comedy in which, according to generic expectations, the world is set right at the end. But he is not. And that is why we must not only read the play otherwise but also see it as containing a contravening vision about the modern age both in Christian Venice and, by extension, Christian London. But to read the play otherwise, we must read Antonio otherwise, arguing not only for a less exemplary Antonio, but a more complicated and conflicted one as well, an Antonio who is closer to Shylock, in some ways, than he would care to imagine. It is not perverse of modern readers to see Portia's comment about which is the merchant here and which the Jew as a textual invitation to explore similarities, especially since the differences are made explicit.³¹ Antonio's hatred of and obsession with Shylock is something more than just a justifiable Christian reaction to the person and idea of Jew and usurer. It is an overreaction betraying Antonio's subconscious, or more probably unconscious, fears about himself and his profession, about who he is and what he is.

Interpretation has understandably focused on Shylock's hatred of Antonio and the revenge that it activates when Antonio forfeits his bond.³² But Shylock's hatred of Antonio is presented as less a generic hatred of Christians than a direct response to Antonio's greater hatred of Shylock. Shylock has personal reasons for his animus toward Antonio. Antonio has sought him out on the Rialto. According to Shylock (I, iii, 103–126), Antonio has habitually berated him, baited him, humiliated him, spat on his clothes and in his face, and kicked him. Antonio confirms it. "I am as like to call thee so again / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" (I, iii, 127–128). He will behave exactly in the same way after the loan is repaid. For the moment, however, he will suspend hostilities for his friend's sake. He will say "there is much kindness in the Jew" (I, iii, 150) and "Hie thee, gentle Jew. The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I, iii, 174–175). The play does not mention anyone else who has been so taken up with Shylock nor takes it as his personal mission to provide relief to the Christian population suffering from Shylock's usury. Antonio seems to have specifically chosen Shylock; there is no mention of his having humiliated any other usurers, Jewish or Christian, nor is there any mention of other Christian merchants' singling Shylock out, or any other Jew for that matter. Shylock does not squeeze

his Christian borrowers to wage war against Antonio. To others, Antonio is the model of exemplary Christian love; to Shylock, Antonio is a symbol of Christian hatred. "He hath disgraced me, and hind'ered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew" (III, i, 51–55).

Such personal hatred seems quite out of keeping for a Christian merchant in a play in which the Christian merchant is being advanced as an ideal. It is all the more surprising that this hatred is lodged in a character who is viewed by all his friends as even-tempered and reasonable. We can understand Antonio's hatred after Shylock demands his pound of flesh. But Antonio's hatred of and obsession with Shylock predate the action proper of the play. He has been on a personal mission against Shylock long before then. Antonio needs Shylock and continually seeks him out, for Shylock is important for Antonio's continual self-fashioning as a Christian merchant.³³ He engages Shylock so intensely because he needs to define himself as the antithesis of the Jew, to see himself as a merchant and not a usurer, for a usurer obviously cannot be a true Christian. But it is not enough for Antonio to define himself as the enemy of the Jew, he must be Shylock's greatest enemy, a Christian merchant whose main mission is thwarting the activities of the most prominent Jewish usurer of Venice. There must be no doubt in Antonio's mind about "which is the merchant here and which the Jew."³⁴

Bernard J. Paris argues that Antonio hates Shylock because Shylock acts out Antonio's "forbidden impulses."³⁵ He gives no indication, however, of what those forbidden desires might be. Besides, there is little evidence in the play that suggests that Antonio unconsciously desires to be a Shylock. Quite the contrary: because he becomes involved in money matters—how else does Antonio thwart Shylock's bargains and cool his friends?—Antonio fears any association and thus identification with Shylock. Rather than wanting to be Shylock, Antonio dreads that he may be like Shylock already. Robert Alter hints at this self-doubt more generally when he writes about Shylock's relationship to Shakespeare's Christian audience, which "may harbor the fearsome attributes it habitually projects on the other," and "in the savage give-and-take of the commercial world of Venice, the barriers between the insider and the outsider are not always impermeable, and there are fleeting hints that the savagery exists on both sides."³⁶ This is what Richard Halpern, after Girard, has called the mirror-image interpretation of the Christian characters of the play: "Shylock is merely the double, or mirror image, of the play's Christian characters, who persecute him because they have projected onto him what they hate in themselves."³⁷ Shylock is not "better than he appears to be, but . . . the Christians are as bad as he appears to be."³⁸ Shylock is not like the Christians, the Christians are like Jews.³⁹

The irony of Antonio's battle with Shylock is that the means he employs in the struggle are bound to lead to the most untoward, unchristian results. The

more he becomes involved with Shylock, the more doubts he must have about himself both as a Christian and a merchant. When Antonio is among his kith and kin, it is considerably easier to be the noble Roman and faithful friend; when he sees Shylock in the market place, he can no longer control his hatred. He acts toward Shylock no differently than Shylock acts or would act towards him, had he the power. The anxiety and hatred that Antonio feels in Shylock's presence stems in part from an unconscious recognition, not that he is the mirror image of Shylock but that there is something that nevertheless links him with his enemy. Antonio seeks to destroy Shylock precisely because Shylock is a constant reminder of the fine line dividing the Christian merchant and the Jewish usurer. A sort of modern-day paladin Templar, Antonio engages in both an economic and religious crusade to rid Venice (a sort of financial Holy Land) of Jewish usurers and replace them by Christian merchants.⁴⁰ In the end, Shylock indeed becomes a merchant of Venice. But it is a pyrrhic victory. The ferocity of Antonio's crusade so corrupts him that in the end he is as much defined by his hatred of his enemies (the antithesis of the Christian ideal) as by his love of his friends. He hates with the same passion as his enemy and becomes part of the hatred against which he fights. Even worse, his love is corrupted by his hatred, which, as we shall see, becomes a subtle instrument of revenge.

Antonio intuitively understands that his life as a merchant cannot be the life of a true Christian. Refusing to lend money at interest and rescuing Shylock's debtors cannot obscure the truth about his profession: that many Christian merchants lend money at interest and that the profits derived from buying low and selling high may involve risk, but do not constitute a significantly different transaction from usury.⁴¹ The play emphasizes the distinction between merchant and usurer, even creating a Venice where only Christians are merchants and Jews usurers; but the need to create such a distinction implicitly acknowledges that in the real world many Christian merchants are usurers—the terms and professions, as Shakespeare well knew, were hardly mutually exclusive—and that many Jews are still merchants.⁴² The play's postulation of a Christian merchant is based on the existence of its antithesis: the increasing convergence of the activities of merchant and usurer in the real world.

Scholars have had a difficult time explaining Antonio's melancholy, but it may derive from his concerns about his profession. Less would have been written about his melancholy, if it could be explained by Antonio's knowledge of Bassanio's courtship of Portia.⁴³ For any unironic interpretation of Antonio, the most defensible explanation of his melancholy is that he is simply of a melancholy disposition. Many characters in Shakespeare do not "develop," they just manifest their intrinsic natures. Antonio is melancholy from the very first line of the play ("In sooth I know not why I am so sad" [I, i, 1]). He is disturbed that he does not know the reason for his depression, and thinks that perhaps only more self-knowledge will alleviate his condition. Salerio suggests a cause:

Antonio is anxious about his ships on the ocean. Solanio and then Salerio expand on this explanation. Had they ventured so much at such risk, they would have been far more melancholy than Antonio; in fact, they would have been preoccupied by the fate of their merchandise every moment of the day, whether at table or in church. But, curiously, Antonio dismisses this explanation outright: his fortune is not in danger for he has sent out many ships; besides he still has considerable unventured capital at home: "Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad" (I, i, 45). Antonio is both right and wrong about his melancholy.⁴⁴ He must deny outright the implication of Salerio's statement that merchandise interferes with spiritual concerns. "Should I go to church / And see the holy edifice of stone, / And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks" (I, i, 28–31). Only an exemplary merchant can place the spirit over the material, if the average merchant can think only of his merchandise while in "a holy edifice of stone." Antonio may be less concerned about his ships (merchant risk) than about his gains (questionable profit). In fact, he has had, it seems, few losses; his ships have regularly come home. Yet he still suffers from melancholy. The melancholy lasts from beginning to end, and it is unaffected by his changes of fortune. It is something eating away at Antonio's soul. Can we imagine Antonio enjoying the sweet music of Belmont any more than Shylock could? Are Antonio's "spirits," like Jessica's, "attentive" (V, i, 70)?

If we assume that Antonio's main mission regarding Shylock is to prove himself a gentle Christian merchant—that is, completely to dissociate himself from the Jew—then the trial scene provides Antonio with an ideal opportunity to fashion himself according to his own self-conception. Before the trial, he had played the role of Crusader knight rescuing poor Christians from Shylock's usurious practices. At the trial, Antonio takes on more self-sacrificing, though no less self-serving and self-aggrandizing, roles.⁴⁵ He attempts to accomplish his two most cherished goals simultaneously: to demonstrate the depth of his love for Bassanio in his contest with Portia, and to prove himself an exemplary Christian merchant, using his archenemy, Shylock, as his primary instrument. Antonio is the fulcrum of the play's two main rivalry plots, and here Shakespeare ingeniously brings them together in one dramatic scene with Antonio at its center.

Antonio becomes the Christ who offers himself up to the Jews for crucifixion for the sake of others. He, thus, incorporates Bassanio into his contest with Shylock and Shylock into his contest with Portia. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Shylock's desire for a pound of flesh, a recognizable transformation of the blood accusation, makes it even easier for Antonio to assume his Christlike role and fashion himself into the antithesis of Shylock, the exploiting Jewish usurer. The duke pleads with Shylock to behave like a Christian, to show mercy, pity, commiseration, compassion, "remorse," gentleness, love, and tender

courtesy. By rejecting the duke's plea, Shylock not only reinforces himself in the role as quintessential Jew and usurer, he plays into Antonio's higher sacrificial purpose. Antonio can now prepare himself for a death in imitation of Christ.⁴⁶ "Therefore, I do beseech you make no moe offers, use no farther means / But with all brief and plain conveniency / Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will" (IV, i, 80–83). Antonio is leery of using the language of scripture in accepting his fate, since, after all, "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" [I, iii, 95]). He leaves it for the duke and Portia to frame Shylock's choice in terms of Jewish flint-heartedness and Christian mercy.⁴⁷ They set the scene for Antonio to play the martyr. Since this role is worked out for him, all he must do is passively and silently accept his suffering.⁴⁸

Let us take an additional imaginative step. It is one thing for Antonio morally and personally to exploit the situation in which he unfortunately finds himself; it is another purposely to put himself in such a position: that is, not only to accept death in imitation of Christ but actually seek it. Once we adopt an ironic stance toward Antonio, we need not confine ourselves to his motivation at the trial scene. We need to ask why Antonio borrows money from Shylock in the first place. I do not intend to reconstruct a psychological history for Antonio but merely pursue what the text suggests. Everyone reasonably assumes that Antonio attempts to procure a loan from Shylock because he cannot get it elsewhere: Shylock must be the only moneylender who has the ready money that Antonio needs. Therefore it is somewhat suprising that Shylock himself does not have the money that Antonio requires and must himself resort to a more wealthy Jew, Tubal.

I am debating of my present store,
 And, by the near guess of my memory,
 I cannot instantly raise up the gross
 Of full three thousand ducats. What of that?
 Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe,
 Will furnish me.

(I, iii, 50–55)

Perhaps Shylock could have thwarted, in revenge, Antonio's attempt to borrow from other Jewish usurers. At least for Antonio, all borrowing inevitably goes through Shylock. It is also curious that Antonio cannot borrow the money from his Christian friends—of course at no interest—who all seem to revere and love him. Will they not do for him what he intends to do for Bassanio? After all, Antonio has rescued many Christians, and probably many Christian merchants, from Shylock's clutches: "I oft deliver'd from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me" (III, iii, 22–23). Are they now not in the position to reciprocate? One has one to assume that they do not have sufficient funds,

implying that Antonio is not only a merchant of Venice, but the richest merchant of Venice, or that the Christian merchants of Venice resemble usurers more than Antonio would like to admit. Antonio asks Bassanio to find out how much he can borrow in Venice, but he also repeats his pledge to go to extremes if necessary to help his friend.

Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
Neither have I money nor commodity
To raise a present sum; therefore go forth,
Try what my credit can in Venice do;
That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.
Go presently inquire, and so will I,
Where money is; and I no question make
To have it of my trust or for my sake.
(I, i, 177–85)

But there is more than pure expedience to Antonio's borrowing from Shylock. The play shows at every turn that Antonio's relationship with Shylock is motivated by his assumption of the role of Christian merchant. None of his dealings with Shylock are disinterested. As we have seen, by showing his willingness to borrow from Shylock, his worst enemy, Antonio proves to Bassanio how prepared he is to put himself at risk for his friend. To those who focus on Antonio's jealousy over Portia, Antonio's contract with Shylock is an attempt to test his love against Portia's. But in terms of the other plot, the Antonio-Shylock rivalry, Antonio transforms himself into a Christian victim, similar to the Christians whom he was wont to rescue from Shylock's clutches. The more he can see himself as the victim, the more he can see himself as a Christian merchant, the less he need fear resembling Shylock himself. If he is seeking to atone for unconscious guilt over his profession, there could be no greater avenging agent than his archenemy. He has played the role of savior for other Christians; now he places himself in a position where he risks being the most helpless of all Shylock's victims because there is no one in Venice, it would seem, who can redeem him. It was not uncommon in England of the time to forfeit one's bond and have to pay a large penalty. Hundreds of lawsuits were brought to force debtors to honor such penalties. But since in *The Merchant of Venice* the bond penalty is nonmonetary, even those who could pay the bond price ten times over cannot rescue Antonio. Portia succeeds only because she bends the law to her own purposes. Moreover, Antonio enters into the bond with Shylock not with fear and trepidation, nor with reluctance and disgust, but willingly, almost flippantly, as though he had nothing to fear. His ships will come home as they have in the past. But if they do not, his purpose will be served even better.

Bassanio: You shall not seal to such a bond for me;
I'll rather dwell in my necessity.

Antonio: Why, fear not, man; I will not forfeit it;
Within these two months—that's a month before
This bond expires—I do expect return
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.

(I, iii, 151–56)

But the true measure of Antonio as Christian merchant emerges at the end of the trial, in the unexpected victory rather than in the expected but self-fashioned defeat. The dichotomy between the flint-hearted Jew and merciful Christian has been fully set up by Portia and the Duke. Antonio has the opportunity to fulfill his role as merciful Christian as exemplarily as he fulfilled his role as loyal friend and Christian merchant. But he does not. After the tables have been turned against Shylock, the Duke tells him: “That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, / I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it” (IV, i, 367–368). Portia then turns to Antonio expecting him to respond likewise, showing “the difference” of his spirit. “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (IV, i, 377). Antonio requests that the court let Shylock retain one-half of his goods. But under the guise of even greater mercy, he requests two things that accomplish his revenge. He places Shylock in a position to which anyone might prefer death: all that Shylock accumulates must be willed to the daughter who betrayed him and to the son-in-law who conspired against him. Further, Shylock must accept conversion himself.⁴⁹ As a Christian, Shylock will no longer be allowed to lend money at interest. But more important, Antonio will no longer be confronted by a *usurious* alter-ego on the Rialto. In this relatively idealized Venice, Antonio's victory is assured. The success of Jewish revenge would be Christian tragedy, a reenactment of the crucifixion. Christian revenge must be comic; it must be seen not as revenge but mercy. “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (IV, i, 277). The pound of flesh has been trumped by conversion and revenge by *ressentiment*, “an act of the most spiritual revenge.”⁵⁰

As antagonistic doubles, both Shylock and Antonio are attempting to rid themselves of their hated rival-others, by transforming their rivals into versions of themselves. Shylock wishes, literally, to cut the heart out of Antonio. Theodore Reik maintains that the excision of the flesh functions symbolically as Shylock's attempt not only to emasculate Antonio, but to circumcise him, and thus turn him, at least physically, into a Jew: the worst possible punishment.⁵¹ Shapiro argues that Shylock's choice of the heart is appropriate since St. Paul (Rom. 2:28–30) implies that for Christians the New Covenant, which has taken the place of circumcision, now resides in the heart, a view that Paul may have found justification for in Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30.6, and a view that had

become part of the English exegetical tradition.⁵² We might conclude, then, that Antonio vanquishes Shylock not by a physical but by a spiritual act: that is, by conversion—though no reader could interpret Shylock's forced conversion a circumcision of the heart.⁵³

But Antonio achieves an even more subtle revenge through conversion. He not only turns Shylock into a Christian, outwardly like himself, but he also turns him into a merchant, in fact, another merchant of Venice. Shylock retains half of his money, but since he now is a Christian he must abandon usury and become a merchant to earn his living. Antonio says to Bassanio at the end of Act I. "The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind." Shylock does not grow kind, but he still can be turned into a Christian and be forced to leave off usury in favor of merchantry. The issue here is certainly one of supersession, but not so much religious as economic. It is Antonio's mission to stamp out usury, the old economic dispensation, with a new dispensation represented by a class of merchants like himself, who can amass great wealth without resorting to the base and barren practice of making money from money. As long as Jewish usurers ply their trade, there will always be the suspicion of usury, especially given the English situation, in the merchant enterprise. Antonio is trying to rid the world of the old in preparation for the new, in which, ideally, Jews will become Christians, usurers merchants, barren feudalism will give way to venture capitalism, and the Shylocks of the world will become potential Antonios: Christian merchants. In the new age, Portia's question, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" will have no meaning.⁵⁴ At the end of the play, we know that Antonio is victorious because of the creation of another merchant of Venice—Shylock.

But what is the viability of an economic system built on hatred and *ressentiment*, especially one in which Shylock, erstwhile usurer and nouveau merchant, will be a direct competitor of Antonio? Before Shylock's conversion, the competition between Antonio and Shylock was primarily ideological and moral. Will Antonio's hatred of Shylock abate when Shylock becomes his direct competitor? An economic comedy that is based on the transformation of a Jewish usurer into a Christian merchant not only lacks credibility, it contains the seeds of its own deconstruction. It is as unconvincing economically as well as characterologically, and not only because of Shylock.⁵⁵

Nor is everything patched over in the fifth act. Walter Cohen argues that "the aristocratic fantasy of Act V, unusually sustained and unironic even for Shakespearean romantic comedy, may accordingly be seen as a formal effort to obliterate the memory of what has preceded."⁵⁶ But if that is true, the Shylock-Antonio plot works against Shakespeare's putative intentions. Antonio's victories (his defeat of his archenemy, his demonstration of his friendship for Bassanio, and his assumption of the role of sacrificial victim in imitation of Christ) are spiritually, socially, and economically diminished in Act V with the

transfer of locus from Venice to Belmont. But the damage starts even earlier, with Portia's arrival in Venice in Act IV. She scores a significant victory over Antonio for Bassanio's affections on Antonio's own turf. Antonio had hoped with his sacrificial death to have bonded Bassanio to him for life. By saving his life, Portia simultaneously deprives him of his most strategic weapon and makes him indebted to her.⁵⁷ Further, Bassanio, now a rich landowning aristocrat, will hardly be in need of his friend's services again.

Antonio's cause is further undermined by another bond, a ring. In Venice, he has persuaded Bassanio to give away the ring that Portia had Bassanio swear "never to part with" (V, i, 171).

Myself and what is mine to you and yours
 Is now converted. But now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants, and this same myself,
 Are yours—my lord's. I give them with this ring,
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love,
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

(III, ii, 166–174)

Bassanio responds:

But when this ring
 Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence;
 O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!
 (III, ii, 183–185)

Antonio thus becomes, unwittingly of course, complicit in Bassanio's breaking of his most sacred promise (a most Christian bond)⁵⁸ to the one who saved Antonio's life.⁵⁹

Act V thus finds Antonio attempting to make amends to the person who saved his life. He is compelled to plead for his friend, Bassanio, much as Bassanio had once pleaded for him.

Antonio: I once did lend my body for his wealth,
 Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,
 Had quite miscarried; I dare be bound again,
 My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
 Will never more break faith advisedly.

Portia: Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.

Antonio: Here, Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring.
(V, i, 249–256)

Portia's victory over Antonio is complete: she not only saves the life of her husband's best friend, she compels him to be the one who returns her ring, the bond of affection, to her husband. Forcing Antonio to acknowledge her preeminent rights to Bassanio's affections, she seals her victory over Antonio forever. So complete is her victory that she gives the impression that she is less a character in a play than a playwright who has ingeniously staged all the events to her singular purpose. In the end, the caskets, the trial, the ring givings (and return), and the final nuptial ceremonies all seem of a piece.⁶⁰

But in Act V Antonio has not sufficiently learned his lessons about bonds. No sooner has he been saved than he pledges himself again, this time offering not his body as a bond but his soul. For those who see Antonio as an exemplary friend and Christian, Antonio's offer for Bassanio's faithfulness may seem an ever greater testimony to his ardent friendship, however metaphorically he means it. But Portia turns this offer on its head as well. She accepts a pledge that means that Antonio will sacrifice his soul if Bassanio in effect ever places Antonio's interest above hers, and then she bids Antonio to make Bassanio to swear to the conditions, as it were, placing Bassanio in the same situation from which she just saved him.

Portia is of the Belmont landed aristocracy. Her wealth is inherited, not earned. For all her respect for Antonio, she still sees him as a merchant of Venice, and perhaps not so different, after all, in profession, from the Jew—thus, her “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” Whereas Antonio's merchant activities are built up as noble ventures at the beginning of the play, they seem less so from the perspective of aristocratic Belmont where Antonio, lacking both polish and music, seems out of his element.⁶¹ The play gives significant support for Antonio as the new economic ideal, the Christian merchant, but it also undercuts the ideal from opposite directions, by Antonio's association with Shylock whom he comes to resemble in his ferocious hatred, and also by his reduction in Belmont, where he is put in his place by Portia and where his merchant activities seem far less noble than Salerio presented them in Act I. And Portia has one more card to pull from her deck of tricks. She has known for a while that most of Antonio's ships have arrived safely and made significant profits (“richly come home to harbor,” V, i, 278). Antonio ultimately has made no monetary sacrifice; in fact, he is even richer than ever before. Now that he has performed his function, Portia is ready to send him back home to ply his

profit-making trade.⁶² He has no more business in Belmont, where there is no business. His place is with his newly arrived ships in Venice. He has more in common with Shylock, the new merchant of Venice, than he has with Portia or her spendthrift husband, Bassanio. When Antonio first hears the news about his safe ships, he responds like a true merchant. "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living!" (V, i, 286). Antonio's words echo Shylock's after Antonio had destroyed Shylock's argosies, his livelihood:

Nay, take my *life* and all! Pardon not that!
 You take my house, when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house. You take my *life*
 When you take the means whereby I *live*.

(IV, i, 373–376). [italics mine]

When the merchant's (Antonio's) means are restored, he responds with the words of the Jew: "you have given me life and living"! No more the tainted wether, no more the weakest kind of fruit. The only way Antonio can become a true Christian is for his ships not to come in—in fact, never to come. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 20:23–24).

But Act V has the potential of diminishing not only Antonio's victory over Shylock but the whole capitalistic order that Antonio embodies. If Antonio's victory represents a supersession of the pre-capitalist economy over feudalism, then, at least aesthetically, Belmont represents a utopic supersession of the economic orders represented by both Shylock and Antonio, a supersession of Belmont over Venice and all that it represents. It is not Antonio who defeats Shylock, but the *dea ex machina* Portia. She not only defeats Shylock, she appropriates him as an instrument to vanquish Antonio. Exhausted from their battle with each other, Antonio and Shylock lie prostrate before her. Bassanio has exchanged Belmont for Venice. So have Jessica and Lorenzo. And so has Shylock's former servant, Lancelot. Only Antonio is sent back to Venice to the world in which he—and Shylock—belong. Antonio's victory is once again a pyrrhic one. In the utopic world of Act V, art triumphs over reality; the spiritual, social, and economic victory is Portia's, not Antonio's.

Portia's victory in utopic Belmont does not deny Antonio's victory in the real world of Venice. But it vitiates it no less than his ferocious hatred of Shylock. Both the Portia and Shylock plots reveal the inherent contradiction and limitations of Antonio as a Christian merchant; they also give pause to those who envision a world in which these contradictions and limitations can be overcome. The dichotomy between an evil Jewish usurer and good Christian

merchant turns out to be a literary construct, an ideology that, unlike Belmont, cannot be sustained through artifice and the aesthetic. As Antonio is confronted with the dark side of his profession in Shylock, he begins to react obsessively and with hatred: that is, unchristianly and ungently. Christian merchantry seems to work in the milieu of Antonio's fellow Christians, but it also contains its own Christian deconstruction in its hatred of the other. If the best of merchants, the Antonios of the world, succumb to hatred and *ressentiment* when faced with the new economic realities, how will they act when they meet on the Rialto not Shylock the usurer but Shylock the merchant of Venice? Which will be the merchant there and which the Jew? Which the superseded feudal remnant, and which the king of the modern world?

NOTES

1. F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, tr. Boris Brasol (Santa Barbara: Smith, 1979), p. 650.

2. Walter Cohen sees the play in the context of a wider, international development, in which rationalizations were being created for the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Walter Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *Journal of English Literary History* 49 [1982], p. 783).

3. "His role as economic scapegoat is thus connected with his vulnerable and visible position within the realm of economic circulation; it is not capital as such but rather money capital that he is forced to represent" (Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997], p.186). Halpern builds his argument on the difference between Marx's formulation of the difference between the more concrete use-value and the more abstract and relational exchange-value (Shylock).

4. Cohen, "The Possibilities of Historical Criticism," p. 771.

5. For a discussion of the synonymy of ethic, religious, and economic categories in the figure of the Jew in general and Shylock in particular, see Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, pp. 184–85.

6. See Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), pp. 309–12; H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Middle Ages," in H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 469–72.

7. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (Glenview: Scott, 1980), pp. 260–91.

8. Halpern writes that Shylock "is neither more nor less exploitive than other Venetians, but he does suffer the misfortune of working an unusually conspicuous mode of exploitation, one lacking any social cover or indirection. Even the Duke's slaves are tucked quietly away on his estate; we learn of them only because Shylock alludes to them polemically in court" (Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 185).

9. The small number of Jews who lived in London during Shakespeare's time did not practice usury; the usurers of London were Christians, who often charged higher interests than Jews did in the countries where the Jews were permitted to lend money. See Margaret Hotine, "The Politics of Anti-Semitism: *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Notes and Queries* (March 1991), p. 37.

10. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 98–99.

11. According to Walter Cohen, “Writers of the period register both the medieval ambivalence about merchants and the indisputable contemporary fact that merchants were the leading usurers” (Cohen, “The Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” pp. 768–69).

12. William Ingram, *A London Life in the Brazen Age: Francis Langley, 1548–1608* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 40.

13. According to Ingram, Langley was probably the first to demand of the players at his theater that they sign a bond, a penalty that would be exacted if they did not fulfill their contractual agreement of playing only at the Swan (Ingram, *A London Life*, p. 155).

14. Walter Cohen shows how “Venetian reality during Shakespeare’s lifetime contradicted almost point for point its portrayal in the play. Not only did the government bar Jewish usurers from the city, it also forced the Jewish community to staff and finance low-interest, nonprofit lending institutions that served the Christian poor” (Cohen, “The Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” p. 770).

15. According to John W. Draper, Antonio “constitutes a panegyric of a princely Italian merchant in private life and in world-wide affairs, and is far from Elizabethan or Venetian actuality” (John W. Draper, “Shakespeare’s Antonio and the Queen’s Finance,” *Neophilologus* 51 [1967], p. 184).

16. As is well known, by his death in 1593, Marlowe was more renowned and imitated than his rival, William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice* is called “Shakespeare’s most Marlovian play” (James Shapiro, “Which is *The Merchant* here, and which *The Jew*?: Shakespeare and the Economics of Influence,” *Shakespeare Studies* 20 [1988], p. 269). Many studies have been devoted not only to Marlowe’s relation to Shakespeare, but to *The Merchant of Venice* as a reaction to *The Jew of Malta*. See for example, Maurice Charney, “Jessica’s Turquoise Ring and Abigail’s Poisoned Porridge: Shakespeare and Marlowe as Rivals and Imitators,” *Renaissance Drama* 10 (1979), pp. 33–44; Arthur Humphreys, “*The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*: Two Readings of Life,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50:3 (1987), pp. 279–93; Shapiro, “Which is *The Merchant*?”; Thomas Cartelli, “Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, Marlowe’s *Jew*: The Problem of Cultural Difference,” *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988), pp. 255–60.

17. I have used the following edition for Marlowe’s play: Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, in Fredson Bowers, ed., *Complete Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 259–335.

18. Cartelli, “Shakespeare’s *Merchant*,” p. 255; Humphreys, “*The Jew of Malta*,” p. 286.

19. Indeed, at times Barabas seems to treat the injustice done to him as a welcome excuse to plan, to scheme, to strategize: that is, to live his idea of life at its fullest. “A kingly kinde of trade to purchase Townes / By treachery, and sell ’em by deceit? / Now tell me, worldlings, underneath the sunne, / If greater falsehood has ever bin done” (V, v, 47–50).

20. Though it is often maintained that Lopez was falsely accused, David S. Katz argues that according to any reasonable interpretation of contemporary English law, Lopez had acted treasonously. He may not have actively plotted to poison the queen, but his “secret contacts with Spanish Crown and his numerous discussions about the possibility of poisoning the queen were more than enough

to hang him many times over" (David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England: 1485–1850* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], p. 106).

21. Few critics now contest the proposition that the play presents Jewishness and the Jewish idea as anything other than the antithesis of the Christian ideal. According to Derek Cohen, "though it is simplistic to say that the play equates Jewishness with evil and Christianity with goodness, it is surely reasonable to see a moral relationship between the insistent equation of the *idea* of Jewishness with acquisitive and material values while the *idea* of Christianity is linked to the values of mercy and love" (Derek Cohen, "Shylock and the Idea of the Jew," *Shakespearean Motives* [New York: St. Martin's, 1988], p. 105).

22. The play often refers to Antonio's business at sea as "ventures." Antonio assures his friends: "My ventures are not in one bottom trusted" (1.1.42). Shylock uses the same word, though demystifyingly and dismissively ("and other ventures he hath, squand'red abroad" I, iii, 20–21).

23. John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (New York: Simon, 1992), pp. 54, 93.

24. Most commentators see Antonio as a Shakespearian ideal. Draper describes him as "ideal man of commerce and affairs" (Draper, "Shakespeare's Antonio," p. 178), "a pious eulogy" (p. 179), "a symbol of commercial and also of personal rectitude" (p. 179). For Humphreys, he is "the soul of self-sacrificing friendship" (Humphreys, *The Jew of Malta*, p. 289). For August Schlegel "the melancholy and self-sacrificing magnanimity of Antonio is affectingly sublime" (August Schlegel, *Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature: The Jew of Malta* [Bohn: London, 1846], p. 389). For detailed discussions of Antonio as Shakespeare's hero and ideal, see in addition: Myron Taylor, "The Passion of Antonio: A Reply to Recent Critics," *Christian Scholar* 99 (1966), pp. 127–31; Henry Morris Partee, "Sexual Testing in *The Merchant of Venice*," *McNeese Review* 32 (1986–89), pp. 64–79; Bernard J. Paris, "The Not So Noble Antonio: A Horneyan Analysis of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49.3 (1989), pp. 189–200. Paris presents Antonio as an ideal despite the title of his article. The phrase "princely merchant" seems to be an attempt to elevate both Antonio and merchants in general: that is: not only can Antonio be a prince, but so can all merchants. It should be emphasized that as a merchant Antonio belongs to a lower class than his improvident friend Bassanio—in fact, to a class more like that of his rival, Shylock. For a discussion of Antonio's class, see Lars Engle, "Thrift Is Blessing: Exchange and Explanation in the Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986), pp. 28–29.

25. Joan Ozark Holmer, *The Merchant of Venice: Choice, Hazard, and Consequence* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995), p. 156.

26. Frank Whigham maintains that Shylock also uses style, but to demystify: specifically, to diminish the aura of Antonio's merchant enterprises. Shylock "strives to demystify their power and prestige, to strip to essences what is romantically obscured. He takes the incantatory terms with which Solanio and Salerio sang Antonio's reputation and stands them on their feet." In Act III, Shylock remarks that "ships are but boards, sailors but men, there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, (I mean pirates), and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks" (I, iii, 15–23) (Frank Whigham, "Ideology and Class Conduct in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Renaissance Drama* 10 [1979], p. 104).

27. Whigham, *Ideology and Class Conduct*, p. 96.

28. Whigham, *Ideology and Class Conduct*, p. 105.

29.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.

Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

(V, i, 83–88)

30. For perhaps the earliest full statement arguing for Antonio's sacrifice as a means of possessing Bassanio, see Lawrence Hymen, "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21 (1970), pp. 109–16.

31. In this century, criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* has taken three basic paths. The first interprets the play as a romantic comedy and sees the Venetians as embodiments (though not perfect embodiments, to be sure) of the virtues of love, friendship, joy, and sacrifice. The second is ironist; it interprets the values that the characters ostensibly embody as superficial, more often than not the means to disguise more selfish motives. Since irony is much less obvious than romantic assertion, ironist interpretations are invariably more ingenious; on the other hand, they often seem less textually grounded. The third understands *The Merchant of Venice* as a hybrid, combining significant romantic and ironist elements, which lend the play its wonderful power but also create its many problems for interpretation. "The magnetism of the work," writes Robert Alter, "is generated by the interplay between the two perspectives" (Robert Alter, "Who Is Shylock," *Commentary* 96.1 [1993], p. 34). As will be evident, my interpretation is based on the dynamic and unresolved tension between the antagonistic romantic and ironic elements inherent in the text. For a similar description of the approaches to the play in terms of harmonious, utopian and aestheticizing interpretations vs. rational, ironic, demystifying, and ironic, ones, see Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, pp. 210–26. In "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew? Subversion and Recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 202, Thomas Moisan argues that in *The Merchant of Venice* art trumps ideological contradictions: "The play manages to transcend the issues its text problematizes to render a dramatically, theatrically satisfying experience."

32. See Halpern's analysis of Shylock's primitive hatred of Antonio in terms of the desire to feed on the flesh of the Christian (Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, pp. 202–3).

33. It has been argued that Antonio's virtues have less to do with his actions and more with his pious self-fashioning. "That Antonio appears less devoted to these [acquisitive] aims than do Bassanio and Shylock is as much the consequence of his chosen mode of self-fashioning as it is a demonstration of actual disinterestedness" (Cartelli, "Shakespeare's *Merchant*, Marlowe's *Jew*", p. 257).

34. Shylock calls Antonio a publican: "how like a fawning publican he looks" (I, iii, 38). The word publican, which has been the object of much critical scrutiny, was occasionally associated with usury. See, for example, Holmer, *Choice, Hazard, and Consequence*, pp. 151–53.

35. Paris, "The Not So Noble Antonio," p. 197.

36. Alter, "Who Is Shylock," pp. 33, 34.

37. Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 161. The mirror image involves projection and distortion. But fear can come from the belief that one has much in common with what the play presents as an objectionable and objective reality: Shylock. A rather extravagant example of precisely this type of fear is argued by Seymour Kleinberg, who maintains that Antonio hates Shylock because he unconsciously equates usury with homosexuality and alienness, and therefore sees himself in the tainted Jewish moneylender. "He hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has come to identify symbolically as a Jew. It is the earliest portrait of the homophobic homosexual" (Seymour Kleinberg, "The Merchant of Venice: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism," in Stuart Kellogg, ed., *Literary Visions of Homosexuality* [New York: The Haworth Press, 1983], p. 120). Cynthia Lewis maintains that in the end Antonio's hatred so alienates him that he comes to resemble Shylock in his isolation (Cynthia Lewis, "Antonio and Alienation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *South Atlantic Review* 48.4 [1983], p. 29).

38. Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 179.

39. Halpern sees this kind of denigration of Christians as a subtle form of antisemitism, in which Jewishness remains a "standard of degeneration. . . . The vices of the dominant groups are figured as further developments or elaborations of an originally tainted Jewish essence. If the Jews' enemies are even worse than they, this is because they are super-Jews, Jews to the second power, the 'real' Jews in relation to which the originals are now only pale reflections" (Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 162).

40. The Knight Templars were a military, religious community devoted to the protection of Christians in the Holy Land. They had their quarters in the area of the former Jewish Temple. The Templars took vows of chastity and poverty; however, as they gained in strength, they came to possess tremendous financial power, owning extensive properties, engaging in banking, and transporting gold to and from the Holy Land. They were, in effect, the first Christian merchant knights.

41. The play adopts the medieval position on usury—Antonio's position against Shylock's. But Mark R. Benbow points out that large profits were viewed almost as a form of usury in England of the time (Mark R. Benbow, "The Merchant Antonio, Elizabethan Hero," *Colby Literary Quarterly* 12 [1976], pp. 158–59). Much has been written about the difference—and similarities—between usury and venture capital (risk capital) in *The Merchant of Venice*. See for example, Graham Holderness, "Purse and Person: For Love or Money," in Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey, eds., *The Merchant of Venice: Longman Critical Essays* (Essex: Longman, 1992), pp. 29–40; Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 139–50; Cohen, "Historical Criticism," pp. 142–82. It should be emphasized that before the usury law of 1571, lending money was often considered the riskiest of all exchange enterprises.

42. See Katz, *The Jews in the History of England*, p. 77. We have seen that Jewish Venetian merchants not only existed but were required "to finance low-interest, nonprofit lending institutions that served the Christian poor" (Cohen, "Historical Criticism," p. 770).

43. It is probably impossible to know for certain whether Antonio's melancholy precedes his knowledge of Bassanio's wooing: "Well; tell me now what lady is the

same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage, / That you to-day promis'd to tell me of?" (I, i, 119–21).

44. The mysterious sources or reasons for Antonio's melancholy have always engaged scholarly interest. See, for example: R. Chris Hassel, "Antonio and the Ironic Festivity of the Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Studies* 6 (1970), pp. 67–74; Carl Goldberg, "What Ails Antonio? The Nature of Evil in Psychiatric Disorders," *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* 9.2 (1985), pp. 68–85; Cartelli, "Shakespeare's *Merchant*," pp. 255–60.

45. Hassel sees Antonio's desire for self-sacrifice as "a perplexingly selfish desire to exhibit the perfection of his love" (Hassel, "Antonio and the Ironic Festivity," p. 71).

46. According to Benjamin Nelson, "Antonio's heroic suretyship to Shylock for Bassanio finds its prototype in Christ's act in serving as 'ransom' to the Devil for all mankind" (Benjamin Nelson, *The Idea of Usurety: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* [Chicago, 1969], p. 144).

47. In *The Jew of Malta*, it is Jewish Barabas who uses the word flinty to describe Christian hearts (I, ii, 144). He also accuses Christians of using scripture for their own ends.

48. He more *actively* plays the role of the stoic and noble Roman friend, arguing that it is better to die now than to risk the misfortunes that await a merchant in old age, and requesting that Bassanio tell Portia the story of his noble end and the value of his friendship: "And he repents not that he pays your debt" (IV, i, 278).

49. To Shakespeare's audience, this may have been no terrible coercion, but true "favor"—the granting of Shylock the possibility of salvation. One need only recall the Mortara affair of 1858, when the Church was able to take a Jewish child from his parents because he had been christened by his Christian nurse.

50. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 167. Gross calls the conversion "a form of soul-murder" (*Shylock: A Legend*, p. 90). As René Girard, the ultimate ironist, has written: "The truth of the play is revenge and retribution. The Christians manage to hide that truth even from themselves. They do not live by the law of charity, but this law is enough of a presence in their language to drive the law of revenge underground, to make this revenge almost invisible. As a result, this revenge becomes more subtle, skillful, and feline than the revenge of Shylock" (René Girard, "'To Entrap the Wisest': A Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*," in Edward W. Said, ed., *Literature and Society* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980], pp. 106–7).

51. Theodore Reik, *The Search Within* (New York: Aronson, 1974), pp. 358–59.

52. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, p. 127.

53. The conversion plays into the received theology of supersession, in which the Jews represent the "old" repudiated world of law, obedience, and matter and Christians the "new" world of grace, love, and spirit.

54. From the point of view of ideology, Shylock is not a direct competitor of Antonio. The Shylocks must go not because they engage in direct or indirect competition with merchants but because they represent an outdated, barren economic system that is retarding progress of a new pre-capitalist system destined to take its place.

55. According to Walter Cohen, "the very contrast between the two occupations may be seen as a false dichotomy, faithful to the Renaissance Italians'

understanding of himself but not to the reality that self-conception was designed to justify" (Cohen, "The Possibilities of Historical Criticism," p. 771).

56. Cohen "The Possibilities of Historical Criticism," p. 777.

57. Against Antonio's failure to get himself crucified, we can place Portia's divine power of "mercifixion" (Harry Berger, "Mercy and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32 [1981], p. 161). On this point see Hymen, "The Rival Lovers," p. 112. Graham Midgley has argued that Antonio is defeated in the end because his victory over Shylock deprives him of his main goal: sacrificing himself for his friend (Graham Midgley, "*The Merchant of Venice*: A Reconsideration," *Essays in Criticism*, 10.2 [1960], pp. 130–33).

58. Portia's formulation is: "And so riveted with faith unto your flesh" (V, i, 169).

59.

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
Let his deservings, and my love withal,
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

(IV, ii, 448–50)

60. Harry Berger writes that "Portia's advantage is like that of the conquering hero in Act V" (Berger, "Mercy and Mercifixion," p. 161).

61. Lawrence Stone writes that "[m]oney was the means of acquiring and retaining status, but it was not the essence of it; the acid test was the mode of life, a concept that involved many factors. Living on a private income was one, but more important was spending liberally, dressing elegantly, and entertaining lavishly. Another was having sufficient education to display a reasonable knowledge of public affairs, and to be able to perform gracefully on the dance-floor, and on horseback, in the tennis court and the fencing-school" (Lawrence Stone, *The Cult of the Aristocracy* [Oxford, 1965], p. 50).

62. Claudine Defaye argues that Portia serves Antonio his worst defeat by depriving him of his noble sacrifice and sending him back to Venice to reassume his life as a merchant ("réendosser son habit de marchand" (Claudine Defaye, "Antonio ou le marchand malgré lui," in Michèle Willems, ed., *Le Marchand de Venise et Le Juif de Malte: Texte et représentations* [Rouen: Publications de l'université de Rouen, 1985], pp. 25–35).

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