
Shylock's Conversion

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The thesis of this essay is simply stated: *The Merchant of Venice* is a Christian play and a comedy that ends well for all. I argue for this reading not because I am a Christian—I'm not—but because Shakespeare was, his audience was, and the play is. The great majority of critics who interpret Shakespeare's plays from an ideological stance strive to make him accord with them and it: Catholics will have a Catholic Shakespeare, Marxists discover a proto-Marxist Shakespeare, Queer Theorists have outed a queerish Shakespeare (vide *Shakespeare: The Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 2010). Unlike such critics I am not proselytizing for any credo I hold, seeking rather to provide a disinterested analysis of this highly contested play. Or as they say down home, I got no dog in this theomachia. Nevertheless my thesis, put simply, is that Antonio's stipulation that Shylock convert to Christianity stands as the greatest act of kindness and mercy that he could have possibly rendered his tormentor. Antonio saves Shylock from eternal damnation. At least in the Globe, in the 1590s.

*A Christian
play that ends
well for all.*

Some years ago, in John Gross's *Shylock*, an exemplary study of the four hundred year long career of this vexing character, I encountered this claim by a French critic, Pierre Spriet: "It is unthinkable to imagine that today's audiences could adopt, even for the brief moment of a performance, the Christian version of a world which prevailed in medieval and

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Renaissance times." Indeed, he concluded, "The play must be abandoned." Intrigued by the boldness of this assertion and by the title of his article, "*The Merchant of Venice's Doom*," I ferreted it out in the *Cahiers Elizabethians* to find a perceptive and provocative revisiting of the not unfamiliar argument that the play enacts the conflict between the Judaic concept of the Law and the Christian concept of Mercy (or Grace); but unlike the conciliatory interpretations of this conflict—Nevill Coghill's probably the best known: "we return to Belmont to find Lorenzo and Jessica in each other's arms. Christian and Jew, New Law and Old are visibly united in love"—Spriet stresses instead the supersession, the express rejection, of the Judaic faith in the law in the Pauline formulation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. "Saint Paul, being a convert from Judaism, did not attempt in any way to underline the continuity between the Jewish faith and the new Christian one. On the contrary, he built his whole system upon the irreconcilable opposition of the two visions. . . . The Jews, instead of acknowledging that the Old Alliance [with Yahweh] had been replaced by the new one, persist in obtaining justice through their strict observance of the letter of the law and, so doing, they only hasten their condemnation. In direct opposition to this reliance on justice and the law, the Christians put their trust in grace, that is, the mercy of God obtained through Christ." Spriet's hardnosed analysis of *The Merchant* in such orthodox Pauline terms trumps Coghill's sweetness-and-light reconciliation, its falseness revealed in the inaccuracy of his illustrative instance: Christian and Jew are not in each other's arms at Belmont, Christian and (converted) Christian are; New Law and Old are not united in love, the New just having demolished the Old in the trial scene. Sentimental readers in the nineteenth century and humanitarian readers in the twentieth recoil at the play's unequivocal condemnation of Shylock—and have tried in a variety of ways to mitigate or even reverse it—but why would not an at least nominally Christian audience rejoice that, through Antonio's act of mercy, Shylock's soul is saved? Why should that denouement prove so unpalatable to an audience today?

To address that question, let me adopt Polonius' strategy by indirection to find direction out. My indirection is a short 1773

poem by the slave Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too;
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their color is a diabolic dye."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

In her own day the last two couplets, presumably, would have been the controversial ones, a matter of contention; now the first two, the poem's given, would prove far more problematic. I never had the nerve to teach this poem, but my educated guess is that, in a class with a sizable contingent of Christians, not one would have been willing to defend the institution of slavery on Wheatley's grounds: that it saved her immortal soul. If slavery, that is, instructed millions of otherwise benighted Africans "to understand/ That there's a God, that there's a savior too," then, in the Christian scheme of things, wasn't it actually beneficial, a sort of *felix dolor*? Shouldn't today's African-American Christians give thanks for the "mercy" of the slave traders who, however incidentally, brought their chained ancestors to salvation, spiritually speaking? These are what are called rhetorical questions, since there is not—to retain the theological terminology—a snowball's chance in hell of getting affirmative answers, probably even from the most pious.

Christianity is at once universal and exclusivistic: universal in accepting into its fold all who believe, regardless of ethnicity, color, nationality, condition of servitude, or as Donne puts it in a Holy Sonnet "most true and pleasing to thee, then/ When she's embrac'd and open to most men"; exclusivistic in claiming itself the only true path to salvation: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one cometh unto the Father but by me." Such, at least, was the claim of Christianity from the beginning and still very much operative in Shakespeare's age. So seriously was religion then taken, so significant the correct doctrinal beliefs held to be that even among the various Christian sects heretics were burned, martyrs were martyred, thirty-years wars fought and the populations of Europe de-

Christianity at once universal and exclusivistic.

spoiled. In Mary Tudor's England, for instance, from 1555 to 1558, 280 Protestant men, women, and children were burned at the stake. Comparing European practices unfavorably with those of the New World cannibals, Montaigne averred, "I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read about but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion) than in roasting and eating him after he is dead." (I am reminded of the story, perhaps apocryphal, of the papal legate in the crusade against the Albigensians, who advised his troops about to attack a town, only some of whose inhabitants were heretics, "Kill them all. God will know his own.")

This is Christianity militant, hegemonic, supremely self-confident, the Christianity of the Globe audience for *The Merchant of Venice*. That was then; this is now. The twentieth-twenty-first century version has morphed into an accommodationist, ecumenical, rather-ashamed-of-its-past humanitarianism, with occasional biblical verses about love thrown in. The Revised Standard Version should now probably read: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one cometh unto the Father but by me—or some other prophet of your choice—or some spiritual uplift movement or self-actualizing philosophy—whatever." Recently *The New York Times* reported that the Archbishop of Canterbury, spiritual leader (more or less) of the world's eighty million Anglicans, made nice with Muslims by proposing that some elements of Shariah, their Koran-based legal system, be incorporated into British law. A firestorm of protest broke out, but the Archbishop received a "standing ovation" after delivering an address on the subject to the church's governing body. The ever-so-tolerant Anglicans clearly wanted to have their communion wafer and eat it too.

At the same time, in an instance more directly germane to my subject, Pope Benedict XVI roiled the ecumenical waters by approving a revision of the Good Friday prayer in the traditional Latin or Tridentine Mass, only recently resurrected from the graveyard for superannuated rituals to which

Vatican II had relegated it. The old prayer for the conversion of the Jews referred to their “blindness” and called upon God “to lift the veil from their hearts”; the new, presumably improved version reads: “Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord Our God enlighten their hearts so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, the savior of all men.” Spiritual dynamite still, in our new world order, where being prayed for is insulting. In any event, an international assembly of Conservative Judaism’s rabbis declared the prayer “cast a harsh shadow over the spirit of mutual respect and collaboration . . . making it more difficult for Jews to engage constructively in dialogue with Catholics.” Expect papal backpedaling, dialogue proving much more sacrosanct than dogma these days. Only Southern Baptists, the most retrograde among the mainline Protestant denominations, and some fired-up evangelicals on the fringes of Christendom still target Jews explicitly for their missionizing efforts, but they are considered gauche by their politer, more politically correct co-religionists. In 1994 the largest Lutheran denomination in America repudiated Martin Luther’s calumny, *Against the Jews and their Lies*. But the extreme (so far) in mea culpaing may have been reached in a resolution of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2000 condemning parts of the New Testament itself as anti-Jewish and recommending that their use in the liturgy be avoided.

Few, however, can regret the transformation of Christianity from its militant, combative, baptize-or-be-damned phase of five centuries ago to its much gentler, attenuated, and more pacific institution of today, one that leaves the beheading of infidels and the stoning of adulterers to younger, brasher religions. On balance, this evolution must be considered beneficial to the peace and comfort of the world. One baleful consequence of Christianity’s desuetude, however, has been the rise of anti-Semitism.

The Merchant of Venice is not anti-Semitic; it is anti-Judaic, a very different matter. Over and over again, too often to count, one encounters the claim that the play is anti-Semitic, but the claim is both incorrect and anachronistic. Anti-Semitism is a pseudo-scientific theory that emerged in the late nineteenth century, contending in that Social Darwinist age that Jews

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constituted a distinct and inferior race. The term itself seems not to predate 1879 when it was coined by the German political agitator Wilhelm Marr, founder of the League of Anti-Semites: he thought it sounded more scientific and respectable than Jew-hater. As late as the 1840s Czar Nicholas I, an old-fashioned Jew-hater, set up a network of schools as a means of assimilating Jews into Russian society, not exterminating them. His declaration stated “the purpose of the education of the Jews is to bring them nearer to Christians and to uproot their superstitions and harmful practices instilled by the Talmud.” The most extreme manifestation of the new racial anti-Semitism was, of course, the Nazism of the 1930s and the Final Solution. By contrast, the anti-Judaism of *The Merchant of Venice* is a religious phenomenon, antagonism toward a rival faith, the desideratum of which is the conversion, not the extermination, of the Jews. Some students of the subject have declared the delineation of anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism to be a distinction without a difference, but it seems to me that there is a very great difference. Cancer and cyanide can both kill you, but their both being fatal doesn’t make them the same thing, and there are good and sufficient reasons for distinguishing between them. To confuse, then, a nineteenth-century secularist ideology with a sixteenth-century religious doctrine can lead only to gross misunderstandings—and has.

The Nazis perpetuated this confusion by staging *The Merchant* as a condemnation of Jews on racial grounds; but Jessica, Shylock’s daughter who elopes with a Christian and converts, posed a problem: her role in the plot hardly accords with the Nuremburg laws. Sometimes, as I have read, Jessica was portrayed as an Aryan foundling who was only adopted by Shylock, her apostasy thus a reversion to racial type. (How this addendum was insinuated into the text I’ve never discovered.) But she poses an equally perplexing problem for modern-day critics and directors intent on finding anti-Semitic animus in the play: why, that is, if Shakespeare were attacking Jews on racial grounds, do his Christian characters accept Jessica readily, raising never a question or cavil about Lorenzo’s “mixed marriage” with her? The attempts to circumvent or burke this question, though perhaps not as egregious as the Nazi emendations, still fundamentally distort the play, a romantic comedy

after all. And how we view Jessica's conversion anticipates what we are to make of Shylock's later on.

In *The Librettist of Venice*, a life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Rodney Bolt describes a scene occurring at 2 o'clock in the afternoon on 29 August 1736. The Bishop of Ceneda led a procession of the city's elite, accompanied by tolling bells and cannon firing salvos, to the cathedral, adorned with banners and flowers, where the Conegliano family of converted Jews—a father and four sons—were to be baptized and given first communion. The bishop's name was Lorenzo Da Ponte, which he then bestowed as the Christian name for the eldest son, who went on to become, among many other things, a priest and the librettist of Mozart's two greatest operas, *Don Giovanni* and *La Nozze di Figaro*. In his annual report to the council of bishops, Monsignor Da Ponte expressed great satisfaction and genuine emotion at having saved these souls; and, while Papa Conegliano's motives for converting may have been mixed, Bolt notes that in his old age he was an extremely devout Catholic. This grandiose conversion scene occurred, of course, nearly two hundred years after Shakespeare, but similar celebrations were not unknown in Elizabethan times. James Shapiro in *Shakespeare and the Jews* gives one example:

On April 1, 1577, Londoners gathered in the small parish church of All Hallows in Langbourn Ward to witness the conversion of Yehuda Menda, who had been living in London the previous five years. Following his baptism Menda took on a new name, Nathaniel, and no less a figure than John Knox then provided a stirring sermon to mark the event. Knox praises God for "glorious work begun with this Israelite stranger," and asks for His help "to allure the whole remnant of the circumcised race, by his example."

Accounts such as these provide what must have been the Christian ideal of Jewish conversion, each convert celebrated as proof of the truth of the New Dispensation. The reality was often quite different. Consider the dilemma faced by the Jews of Portugal in 1497. The new king Manoel wanted to marry Princess Isabel of Spain, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella who in 1492 had expelled all the Jews from Spain who would not convert; but the monarchs imposed as a condition for the marriage that Manoel must do the same with Portugal's Jews. Reluctantly—for he valued their skills—the king agreed. On

Coerced conversions were a frequent practice.

Friday, March 19, 1497 (the first day of Passover), Jewish parents were ordered to bring their children between the ages of four and fourteen to Lisbon where they were given the choice of the whole family's converting or the children being baptized and given to gentile families to be raised as Catholics. A few converted; some smothered their children or threw them down wells to save them from the disgrace of apostasy and then killed themselves; in most cases the forcible relocation was effected and the recalcitrant parents dragged to the font where holy water was sprinkled on them and they were declared Christians. King Manoel then informed their Catholic Majesties of Spain: "There are no more Jews in Portugal." About a century and a half before, in 1349, writes one German historian, "all the Jews in Strasbourg who refused to kiss the crucifix, nine hundred in number, were burned in one huge pile of wood. . . . Only children were spared, and they were baptized before the eyes of their parents. Eleven hundred Jews escaped death by kissing the cross and becoming Christians." (A recent review in *The New York Times Book Review* began: "When the Portugese conquered parts of the western coast of India in the 16th century, Jesuits leading gangs of African slaves captured the local Hindus and rubbed their mouths with raw pork, instantly transforming them into untouchables. The Roman Catholic Church then embraced these outcasts via mass baptisms, creating a large population of converts." Coerced conversion was not limited to Jews.)

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In an age like ours, of personal conscience and individual responsibility, coerced conversion, whole populations being marched en masse into rivers for sword-point baptisms, seems, at best, of questionable validity, not the maximally effective way to engender love of Christ. But in Shakespeare's age the principle prevailed *cujus regio, ejus religio*. Subjects should adhere to the religious faith practiced by their prince, not follow some still quiet voice speaking to them alone: unity of faith seemed a corollary to loyalty to the realm. Thus while the Bishop Da Ponte-John Knox approach to conversion probably always seemed preferable, the methods of the King of Portugal or the authorities of Strasbourg were in nowise unacceptable: had they not strong-armed countless lost souls out of perdition? Just as Rousseau in *The Social Contract* argued that

people must be forced to be free, so the theologians of an earlier time argued that they must be forced to be saved. Shakespeare's audience, then, would have seen Antonio's stipulating that Shylock become a Christian not as a punishment, an act of revenge, but one of mercy toward his would-be nemesis. This stipulation (which, by the way, does not figure in Shakespeare's source *Il Pecorone*) is part of the broader remission of the penalties that Shylock incurred in plotting against Antonio. The Duke spares the guilty man's life, which should, by the letter of the law he insisted on, have been forfeit; and, at Antonio's urging, remits that half of Shylock's wealth that the state could have seized into only a fine. The other half, which by the same law, should have gone to Antonio, the merchant will hold in trust during Shylock's lifetime, to go upon his death to Jessica and Lorenzo. The whole tenor here is one of forgiveness, a quality superior even to justice, the Christian ideal Portia enunciates in her famous paean to mercy. And Shylock's response? "I am content."

Mrs. Siddons is reputed to have said that her interpretation of Ophelia turned on four words, spoken in reply to Hamlet's question, "Where is your father?" "At home, my lord." Can we imagine an interpretation of Shylock built upon, leading to his penultimate statement, those three words, "I am content": not jubilant surely, not even (as yet, presumably) feeling particularly blessed, but a chastened and wiser man who has just learned life's greatest lesson? Can we imagine a sincere, non-ironic "I am content" that segues the drama seamlessly into the comic resolution of Act V, that supports the structure of *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy, ending, as comedies should, happily?

*Life's
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Anyone who knows much of the stage history of the play for at least the last two hundred years knows how unlikely seeing such a production would be. After Shakespeare's lifetime, no record exists of the play's being performed, until the very successful revival of Charles Macklin in 1741, the interim having been filled by a nasty little pastiche of George Granville's called *The Jew of Venice*, in which Shylock appears as such a buffoon that no one, understandably, expresses the least desire to convert him. Macklin's controversial interpretation began

Saint
Shylock.

the metamorphosis of Shylock into the play's star role, not by making him sympathetic but monumental and frightening. (According to John Gross, whose wide-ranging and delightful stage history I am drawing on here, he scared even George II so much that the monarch couldn't sleep the night after seeing the performance.) The sympathetic, more-sinned-against-than-sinning Shylock began early in the next century, with Charles Kean on the stage and William Hazlitt, his avid admirer, in the audience. Between them, the great romantic thespian and the great romantic essayist, they effected a "paradigm shift" in how *The Merchant of Venice* would increasingly be viewed, as the tragedy of Shylock; so much so that in some Victorian productions the whole last act, the post-trial *villeggiatura* of the young lovers at Belmont, was omitted as a distraction. Kean's great successor in the role, Henry Irving, in 1884 said, for example: "I look upon Shylock as the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play." Shaw declared his portrayal of the pound-of-flesh-demanding money lender that of "a martyred saint." Saint Shylock achieved dramaturgical beatification as a result of the increasing sentimentality and liberalism of the nineteenth century. So hypertrophied became this phenomenon that one critic early in the last century suggested a revised, more up-to-date title: "the tragicall Historie of the Jewe in Venice, with the extreme injustice of Portia toward said Jewe in denying him the right to cut a just pound of the Merchant's flesh."

This Shylock-as-victim *tendenz* prevailed through the twentieth century, but with ever increasing import as historical events threw an Elizabethan play into sharper relief. As anti-Semitism proper developed, so, of course, did anti-anti-Semitism, an ideomachia in which *The Merchant of Venice* became contested ground and, to a great degree, a casualty. The Nazis staged the play, with their particular take on it, for propaganda purposes, which did nothing to enhance its reputation in the rest of the world. As the horrors of the Final Solution demonstrated the fathomless evil of anti-Semitism, civilized people became increasingly aware of traces of this toxin in the thought and literature of the past. Yet *The Merchant of Venice* remains one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, one of the most frequently taught, one of the most frequently

produced, often with Jewish actors as Shylock. This was sometime a paradox, but the time gives it proof. How to reconcile the inclusive university syllabus and the repertoire company schedule with today's countervailing zeitgeist never to offend anyone, ever?

The Merchant of Venice provides a particularly striking example of the postmodern academy's strategies for coping with the canonical works of Dead White Men of mixed memory—most, that is, of the great western writers from Homer on. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century critics have resorted to what I call (largely for the sake of the alliteration) savaging or salvaging. Savaging involves the exposing of the various sins and shortcomings of the literary idols of yore, whose heads and hearts as well as feet are revealed to be made of clay, at least when judged by the exacting standards prevailing in academia today. The radical “presentism” of these critics, denominated by Harold Bloom the Schools of Resentment, has the great advantage of allowing the most modestly talented of them to feel morally and even intellectually superior to the sexist, racist, elitist, veal-eating, benighted, pre-Foucault running dogs of whatever power structure ruled in their day—your Swift, your Pope, your Conrad, your Mark Twain.

Savaging or salvaging.

A couple of examples must suffice to demonstrate savaging at work on *The Merchant of Venice*. Derek Cohen in “Shakespeare and the Idea of the Jew,” a chapter in his *Shakespearean Motives* (1988), goes straight to the point in the first sentence: “*The Merchant of Venice* seems to me a profoundly and crudely anti-Semitic play.” He finds completely justified “the fear and shame that Jewish audiences have always felt from the moment of Shylock’s entrance to his final exit.” Unlike most critics, who want to defend Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock as a victim of a cruelly unjust society, “a bearer of the pain of the ages,” Cohen will have none of this sentimental misreading: “Shylock is, in short, a complete and unredeemed villain . . . cruel and monstrous and utterly unlike other men in their capacity for love, fellowship and sympathy.” Even his most sympathetic (and famous) speech, Cohen notes, is belied by the specific events of the play: Shylock claims that he has learned to exact revenge “by Christian example” (III.i.62-64), but “In fact what happens is that in return for the crime which Shylock commits

against Antonio, he is offered not revenge but mercy." And if we come to have some pity for Shylock's humiliation at the outcome of the trial scene, Cohen concludes, "It results simply from the sympathy that we are likely to admit at the sight of any human suffering, no matter how deserved it may be."

Arnold Wesker, the British playwright and my second example, similarly finds *The Merchant* irredeemably anti-Semitic. "The Jew in Shakespeare's play is meant to embody what he wishes to despise," so vile that "he deserves to be spat on." "Nothing," he says, "will make me admire it, nor has anyone persuaded me the holocaust is irrelevant to my response."

All the productions I've seen of *The Merchant of Venice* have failed to hide the message which insists on coming through clearly and simply. No matter with what heavy tragedy the actor plays the role, no matter how thuggishly or foppishly the Venetians are portrayed . . . the image comes through inescapably: the Jew is mercenary and revengeful, sadistic, without pity.

*Character of
Jessica a
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Common to both Cohen's and Wesker's readings—and presumably any other that would characterize the play as anti-Semitic—is the assumption that for Shakespeare Shylock is not *a Jew*, but *the Jew*. Wesker allows that one can offer a negative depiction of a Jew without being anti-Semitic. But Shylock, the assumption runs, is the epitome, the paradigm, the Jew who figures a whole people. Why, then, is Jessica in the play? I have already noted the difficulties her character posed for the Nazis, for whom Jewishness is racial: she might become a Christian, she can't become a gentile. But Jessica proves a stumbling block for other varieties of critics as well, including the savagers. She is genetically as Jewish as Shylock (the Aryan foundling invention aside), but shares none of his hateful characteristics, finds them, in fact, appalling. Unless one is ideologically determined to discover otherwise, Jessica emerges as a romantic, fun-and-monkey-loving young girl, eager to escape the "hell" of her father's house, at home in the free and easy comic environs of Belmont. Where is the anti-Semitism in the portrait of Jessica? I am certainly not suggesting that Shakespeare proleptically introduced Shylock's daughter as a counterweight to Shylock, in order to deflect the criticism that might be leveled at him centuries later over a concept that he might well not have been able to fathom. But one can eas-

ily imagine the play without the Lorenzo-Jessica subplot, and if Shakespeare had really wanted to make Shylock *the Jew* in the play, would he not have been wiser to omit altogether his ever-so-different, ever-so-much-nicer daughter? (Abigail, the daughter of the truly evil Jew Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, also converts to Christianity and has not one but two aristocratic gentile suitors vying for her hand.) Significantly, Cohen says nothing about Jessica, and Wesker's single comment is to complain about the bad accent of one actress he'd seen in the role. A good rule of thumb for testing the honesty and adequacy of any production or interpretation of *The Merchant* is to keep your eye on Jessica. How does it account for her?

Immediately after the bond is struck between Shylock and Antonio, seemingly with advantageous terms for the borrower, Antonio declares, "The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (I.ii.74). Perhaps the use of Hebrew here rather than Jew signifies little, but it may be used to distinguish the race from the religion, kindness the purview of Christians which a (converted) Hebrew might attain but a Jew (stubborn adherent to that faith) never. Cohen, as already noted, points out what most critics, of whatever stripe, mistake: that the Christian example in the trial scene teaches not vengeance, as Shylock has claimed, but forgiveness, mercy. "I do pardon thy life before thou ask it," says the Duke. Viewed so (and I contend that so Shakespeare's audience would have viewed it) Shylock's malevolence stems from his religion, not his ethnicity: when he "turns Christian" his rage and cruelty, presumably, will disappear and he can truly "grow kind." In a sixteenth century variant of "hate the sin, love the sinner," *The Merchant of Venice* hates the Jew but loves the Hebrew—enough to save his soul by converting him.

This is not anti-Semitism, although for most readers/viewers, in this our tolerant and ecumenical age, it may be just as bad. I grant that unreservedly, but the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism is still worth insisting on—a distinction that, say, Saint Edith Stein, a Catholic nun of Jewish heritage who died at Auschwitz, would, unfortunately, have clearly grasped. The logical inference of the savagers' view is that the play really ought not be produced (and perhaps even taught only very selectively). Outraged by what he saw on

Throwing the
baby out with
the holy water.

stage, Wesker wrote his own version of the story in 1977, *The Merchant*, which—with Shylock now a noble humanist—he thought preferable to Shakespeare’s. Pierre Spriet, as noted, saw the play, for today’s audience, as “doomed”; and Harold Bloom in his popular *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) agreed: “The Holocaust made and makes *The Merchant of Venice* unplayable, at least in what appears to be its own terms.” The wider the venue for the play—for example, the 1974 Laurence Olivier version broadcast on American television—the wider and more indiscriminate the attacks. Anti-defamation groups opposed the airing, and *The New York Times’* editorial page was filled with protesting letters. Some people have contended that not just *The Merchant of Venice* but Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic, although there were few practicing Jews anywhere in England during his lifetime: his animus would have had to have been highly abstract. Recently a group of 14-year old girls at the Yesoday Girls School just outside London refused to sit for an exam on Shakespeare—on *The Tempest* not *The Merchant of Venice*—on the grounds that he was an anti-Semite, a clear case of throwing the baby out with the holy water. In any event we have here the *ne plus ultra* of savaging: *The Merchant of Venice* is so offensive that all Shakespeare’s plays should be shunned

The salvagers, by contrast, intent on rescuing Shakespeare from himself, constitute a much larger and more diverse cohort than the savagers. Our Will must not have imputed to him views or attitudes that would offend the vaguely liberal, vaguely tolerant denizens of later ages. A Shakespeare who sanctioned war or social inequality or religious prejudice?—unthinkable. So *The Merchant of Venice*, with its Jewish villain and cast of bright young things enjoying, the villainy averted, a comic denouement at Belmont, poses a particular problem for the salvagers: how to prevent Our Will from appearing crudely anti-Semitic, like Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta*? The answer, the fuller’s earth of modernist-cum-postmodernist criticism, is irony. John Gross puts the matter succinctly: “we have been increasingly asked to think of *The Merchant* as a play which cannot possibly mean what it appears to say, a play which constantly subverts its own surface values and

throws doubt on the purported motives of its characters. Where the key words were once 'justice' and 'mercy,' 'gold' and 'love,' they are now (among others) 'skeptical,' 'tension,' 'discrepancy,' 'distancing' and 'demystify.'" The convenient thing about irony is that, for the "perceptive," for the "alert," for the "deep reading against the grain" reader—that is, the critic and such followers as he may attract—nothing ever has to mean what it seems to mean: as in, "for the attentive reader, alert to Shakespeare's all-embracing irony, the Macbeths will actually be seen as perfect hosts." The ironized Shakespeare, and he only, is Shakespeare Our Contemporary.

Perhaps the perfect example of this kind of reading is H. C. Goddard's chapter in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (1951). Over half a century old—an eternity in today's critical climate in which the usual shelf life of a revolutionary cutting-edge book is measured in months—the chapter is still frequently referenced and often reprinted, with good reason: Goddard writes eloquently, is perceptive and imaginative, and evidences a capacious and humane worldview (was my favorite Shakespeare interpreter when I was a tyro). Few critics have woven the three plots—the caskets, the bond, and the rings—together in so artful an interpretation: but, alas, only through irony-colored glasses. "But what if, all the while, underneath and overhead, [*The Merchant of Venice*] were something different from all this as the three caskets are from their outward appearance?"; "nearly every character in it is seen to be one thing on the outside and another underneath"; "if Shakespeare did not intend the irony it got in in spite of him." There is a great deal here about the subconscious, Shakespeare's own as well as his characters', which has the same advantage as irony: nothing has to mean what it says, can, in fact, mean just the opposite. For example:

"Would she were hearsed at my foot and the ducats in her coffin!" That tormented cry is usually taken as meaning, "I would give my daughter's life to get my ducats back." And doubtless that is what Shylock thinks he is saying. But note that it is not Jessica dead and the ducats locked up in his vault. The ducats are in the coffin too! Plainly an unconscious wish to bury his own miserliness. [Along with his daughter?] Shylock is ripe for a better life. It takes a Shakespeare to give a touch like that.

Ironically? Subconsciously? "What is deep down in Shylock"—apparently very, very deep down—"is precisely this goodness."

The strategy that allows Goddard his more baroque flights of fancy depends on dividing Shakespeare into the dramatist and the poet. The former “must make a wide and immediate appeal to a large number of people of ordinary intelligence. The playwright must make his plots plain, his characters easily grasped, his ideas familiar. The public does not want truth. It wants confirmation of its prejudices.” The poet, by contrast, “seeks the secrets of life, and even if he would, he cannot share with a crowd in a theater . . . such gleams as it may have revealed to him. He can share it only with a few, and with them mostly in solitude.” An earlier critic, H. B. Charlton, in what Gross calls “the fullest defense of Shylock ever undertaken by a reputable scholar,” similarly separates Shakespeare into the witting panderer to the Jew-hating mob and the artist who, “albeit unconsciously and perhaps quite unrecognizably to his contemporary audiences,” modified the nature of his Jew into a kind of crypto-hero. “There is throughout the clash of rival schemes, the proposals of Shakespeare’s deliberate will, and the disposals of his creative imagination.” The many critics such as these realize that they must posit a bifurcated Shakespeare “beneath and above” in whose literal plays they can discover whatever elaborate patterns or arcane meanings suit their fancy. These smack not of grease paint and the footlights but of midnight oil and Mr. Casaubon’s *Key to All Mythologies*, usually implausible, frequently impossible to convey in any imaginable production. Thus the denigration of the audience-in-the-theater—all groundlings, it seems—for missing the supersubtleties that the scholars discover on, say, the twelfth or twentieth or hundredth reading of the play; and the glorification of the scholarly enterprise itself for uncovering all those subconscious meanings and all that irony. (I recall one reviewer’s comment on the supplement to the *Variorum Henry IV*: a scholar’s dream, all notes and no text.)

Other, more recent and even more daring critics feel no need to posit an artistically schizophrenic Shakespeare championing Shylock only subconsciously, but contend that, with a proto-modernist and even postmodernist sensibility, he wrote the kind of *Merchant of Venice* that a Brecht or an Alfred Jarry would. Terry Eagleton, for instance, in his Marxist screed *William Shakespeare* (1986) suggests, only semi-facetiously, that

"it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Derrida." How in the world Heidegger and Gramsci got left off the list I can't imagine; but isn't this like a foot fetishist claiming that one cannot look at a pair of stiletto heels without experiencing an erection, a claim that says more about the fetishist than about shoes? In any event, names and influences like these are far more likely to appear in contemporary criticism of Shakespeare than, say, Hooker, Holinshed, or the *Homilies*.

A postmodernist Shakespeare.

To stay with Eagleton as an example: he declares that "Shylock is triumphantly vindicated even though he loses the case. . . . Indeed it is tempting to speculate that Shylock never expected to win in the first place . . . a solitary, despised outsider confronting a powerful, clubbish ruling class. One can imagine him waiting with a certain academic interest to see what dodge the Christians will devise to let one of their own off the hook. Perhaps he throws the audience a knowing wink when Portia produces her knockout argument." This passage may tell us all we need to know about Eagleton's feel for the play, but through its pixilation we can discern his desire to present a Shakespeare/Shylock who, four hundred years *avant le parole*, espoused a radical chic trend in contemporary jurisprudence, Critical Legal Theory. The ideological offspring of Thrasymachus in Book I of *The Republic*—justice is only the will of the strongest—CLT, as it is called, holds that "the law exists to support the interests of the party or class that forms it," according to Cornell's Legal Information Institute, "and is merely a collection of beliefs and prejudices that legitimize the injustice of society. The wealthy and powerful use the law as an instrument for oppression in order to maintain their place in hierarchy." One would be hard pressed to find a clearer demonstration of CLT at work than in *The Merchant of Venice's* trial scene, as construed by Eagleton.

It is almost as though Shylock is defying the court to deny him in order to expose its own hollowness. Either way he will win: by killing Antonio, or by unmasking Christian justice as a mockery. If the decrees of Venice were shown to be worthless, troubling political consequences might be in store for the state. To catch the Christians out in a *particular* judicial shuffle is of course to discredit the law in general. . . . What is at stake in the

courtroom, then, is less Shylock's personal desire to carve up Antonio than the laws of Venice itself. . . . To protect itself, the law is forced into a hermeneutical errancy [don't you hate it when that happens?], the final consequence of which might be political anarchy. . . . He takes 'for real' the dramatic charade of a system in which he has little faith, in order to uncover the genuine illusions at its heart.

So we have a Shylock that the Frankfurt School would be proud of, Shakespeare's consciously crafted—no subconscious eruptions here—deconstruction of the false discourse of the bourgeoisie, or something like that. Of course, no political anarchy occurred as a result of Shylock's trial (that we know of), no mobs of *sans culottes* taking to the canals crying, "Let that man have his pound of flesh!" And I doubt that a single member of the Globe audience or any since ever dwelt very long on the hermeneutical errancy of the Venetian court system.

But, like Gonzago's description of his ideal commonwealth in *The Tempest*, the end of Eagleton's chapter forgets its beginning: Shylock's disinterested exposé of the class bias of Venetian law (wink, wink) soon gives way to the existential imperative of proving his humanity, which he will achieve by butchering Antonio. Antonio "owes" Shylock his body—"an acknowledgement of common humanity with Shylock"—which he "arrogantly denies. . . . [T]he ritual carving up of Antonio . . . is a kind of . . . grotesque parody of eucharistic fellowship. . . . To refuse Shylock his bond means denying him his flesh and blood, and so denying his flesh and blood, his right to human recognition." The relationship between the two men "is a dark, bitter inversion of the true comradeship Shylock desires, the only form of it now available to him." If, through the murk of Eagleton's prose, I follow his reasoning—we are clearly back in the Macbeths-as-ideal-hosts territory—Shylock's full humanity (*his* flesh and blood) would have been affirmed and a salutary lesson taught to uncongenial snobs if he had actually been allowed to take the pound of Antonio's flesh, in eucharistic parody, of course. Since we can never have too much humanity in the world, perhaps the play ought to be altered that way, like the gouging out of Gloucester's eyes, to provide a civics lesson to us all, a dark, bitter lesson in human solidarity.

A second, perhaps even more representative example

comes from the New Historicist study of Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (1995). Not particularly interesting in itself, the book exemplifies in simplistic form the assumptions and agenda of the reigning Schools of Resentment. “[T]he essential function of orthodox criticism,” he writes, “has been to reinforce the beliefs upon which our patriarchal, class-divided culture depends.” Any serious venture to transform literary studies and “the existing social order,” he continues, must involve “the sustained reappropriation of Shakespeare’s plays. . . . The progressive critic’s task is to demystify Shakespeare’s plays, by exposing them as elaborate devices employed by the repressive cultural machinery of his time to secure the status quo.” Agreed *ab ovo* on their goal, the progressive critics—or what I like to call the Crew of Momus—disagree about how best to go about their exposing and demystifying. Their agenda would appear to lead more to savaging than salvaging, and that often proves the case, the Momusites more adept with the wrecking ball than the trowel. But in this specific instance, Ryan discovers that *The Merchant of Venice* is “dynamised by a profound struggle between conflicting impulses. Its true achievement consists in the subversion of its own conventional commitments.” That discovery should make for a decent salvaging effort.

Shylock’s cruel behavior reflects only “the deliberate mirror-image of [the Venetians’] concealed real nature. The revenge is a bitter parody of the Christians’ actual values, a calculated piercing of their unconsciously hypocritical façade.” The fact that commercial Venice is metaphorically heartless explains (and justifies? it’s not clear) Shylock’s desire to render Antonio literally heartless. Or something like that. Ryan spends less time rehabilitating Shylock than in revealing “the play’s tortured unconscious,” but to discover there a profound struggle between conflicting impulses, he must, of course, undertake some apology for Shylock’s actions, and he does so, rather cursorily, on two grounds.

The first, unavoidably, the “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech. “With this speech there erupts into the play an irresistible egalitarian attitude . . . indict[ing] all forms of inhuman discrimination. This speech provokes a sharp shift of emotional allegiance, from which our perception of the Christian protagonists never recovers.” Whether or not an audience of Shake-

spere's quite unegalitarian and not particularly philosemitic age (or many since) would, at this point, have shifted emotional identification from the Christians to Shylock seems, at the very best, doubtful. What is undeniable, however, is that the force and eloquence of the speech (for whatever reason) far surpasses anything required, in a purely utilitarian sense, to make its argument, so forceful and eloquent that it has, excerpted from its context, become a prose anthem to Jewish identity. But the speech also has the specific dramatic purpose of arguing the case for a Jew's taking revenge by Christian example: "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? . . . The villainy you teach me, I will execute." The speech functions *in the play*, then, not as a plea for universal tolerance, but as a justification for vengeance; and, in any case, as already noted, it is belied by the conduct of the Christians in the play, who are not revengeful when their chance for it comes.

The second argument focuses on Shylock's analogy in the trial scene (IV.i.90-101) between his defense of his legal right to the pound of flesh and the Venetians' owning of slaves. His evil deed is no worse, Ryan argues that Shylock argues, than the evil of slavery, which they routinely practice. This analogy is, admittedly, a strange and rather strained one, but Ryan gets its import almost exactly backward. Shylock argues in no sense whatsoever that slavery is wrong, only that it is legal—as is his bond. He compares the legality of both, not to condemn the one, but to justify the other. "Shall I say to you, / 'Let them be free?'" he asks *rhetorically*, for if that were his true plea, he would be undercutting his own argument: namely, the law is the law, a deal is a deal.

Ryan believes that "here is Shylock's irrefutable demonstration" that the inhumanity of the Venetians "is ratified as 'justice' by its laws." At the end of his discussion, Ryan contends that "all along, the play knew more about both its time and the time to come than historicist critics deemed it capable of knowing; that all along it was waiting to reveal uncharted shores of insight to the alien eyes of modern understanding." There is a rousing ring to that, but what does it mean? To read back into the past the emotional response elicited by the subject of slavery today is clearly anachronistic, an odd tactic for a critic who insists on the historical grounding of his

reading. Slavery, in various forms, has existed the world over through most of recorded history, mentioned as early as the Code of Hammurabi. Aristotle wrote a defense of it; St. Paul condoned it. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, one historian notes, over three quarters of all the people alive were in bondage of one sort or another, slavery or serfdom. The Elizabethans felt no outrage over slavery; indeed, as the historian Seymore Drescher puts it, “freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution” prior to the nineteenth century. In short, Ryan reads sentiments back into the play that no member of Shakespeare’s audience likely ever experienced.

The legion of salvaging celebrators of Shylock, of whatever stripe or school, might well have considered the caveat—but obviously didn’t—of James Spedding, the crusty Victorian scholar and severe critic of Irving’s sentimentalist approach, who dryly suggested that “had [Shakespeare] been in search of a subject under cover of which he might steal into [his audience’s] mind ‘a more tolerant feeling toward the Hebrew race,’ I cannot think that he would have selected for his hero a rich Jewish merchant plotting the murder of a Christian rival by means of a fraudulent contract. . . . Can anybody believe that . . . Shakespeare would have *chosen* such a case as a favorable one to suggest toleration to a public prejudiced against the Jews?” In the face of such a compelling example, one can see why common sense stands in such low esteem among our contemporary critical orthodoxies, the arrow puncturing their hot air balloons that would float, unobstructed by anything as mundane as gravity, into Cloud Cuckooland of pure speculation.

The apotheosis of Shylock, however, is but one part of a two-pronged assault on the traditional comic reading of *The Merchant*; the equal and opposing denigration of every other character from Portia to Launcelot Gobbo (excepting perhaps his blind father) forms the other. For Shylock to be justified, that is, the rest of the *dramatis personae* must be arraigned. While this strategy constitutes an essential and by now commonplace element in criticism of the play, the classic formulation is probably one of the earliest, Heinrich Heine’s mid-nineteenth cen-

Apotheosis of Shylock matched by denigration of other characters.

ture fulmination against every citizen of Venice who was not practicing usury. Antonio is a spineless sort, "with the heart of a worm," not worth saving. Bassanio is a feckless fortune hunter. Lorenzo, "accomplice in a most infamous burglary," belongs in prison, and Jessica "has no heart, but only a light mind." The other Venetian grandees, who profess such admiration and concern for Antonio, are arrant hypocrites, doing nothing to help their beleaguered friend repay his debt before it comes due, not even, as another critic charges, providing Antonio with the physician whom they condemn Shylock for not providing. "Verily, it would have been a satire on Christianity had Shakespeare meant to represent it in the persons who are enemies of Shylock, and who are hardly worthy to unloose the latches of his shoes." In numerous permutations and variations, this view has become the standard gravamen in the salvagers' case against the Christians. True, Heine spares Portia, once considered one of Shakespeare's premier heroines, but later critics have repaired this omission, offering a manipulative, callous, hypocritical, domineering, thoroughly postmodern Portia. In one of her novels, Edith Wharton poses the rhetorical question, "Does one go to Caliban for a judgment on Miranda?" little suspecting that before long precisely to Caliban the critics would go for their judgments on Miranda—and, I would add, on Portia.

"Under Prussian laws," Heine informs us, Lorenzo "would have been condemned to fifteen years in the penitentiary" and branded. Luckily for Lorenzo (and us) he did not live in Prussia. He did not—rather, does not—live under any jurisdiction but the fictive one of a play, where only the laws of dramaturgy hold sway. To argue, then, that Antonio's friends are false or irresponsible because they do not repay his loan for him before it falls due substitutes real-world logic for the imperatives of illusion: the *willing* suspension of disbelief that makes drama possible. When my students ask why X happens in a play or Y behaves improbably, I usually reply, "So there can be an Act V." Or in the case of *The Merchant of Venice* an Act IV. Some critics (Auden for instance) have expressed puzzlement or incredulity that the Duke would be unfamiliar with a law as fundamental as that, which Portia seemingly pulls out of a hat, condemning "any alien/ That by direct or

indirect attempts/ . . . seek the life of any citizen." In fact, were verisimilitude our criterion, Shylock himself and even Antonio would appear exceedingly dim in having failed to discover this major and rather obvious complication to their bond: at a minimum they need better legal counsel. But, of course, no one in the court is aware of this determinative proscription—very like the Sixth Commandment—precisely so that Portia can deliver her *coup de grace* as a *coup de théâtre*. We aren't talking real laws of a real Venice here, but only of drama, what make the scene maximally effective.

Understanding clearly that the dramatist creates his own specific play-long reality should greatly attenuate, if not negate most of the criticism of the Venetians—and the Belmontese—in *The Merchant*: the offenses of which they stand critically indicted are not explicit, usually not even implicit, *in the play*, but, like Shylock's supposed sympathy for slaves, are bootlegged in from other times and other places (like Prussia). When Portia declares that she would not willingly wed one of the Prince of Morocco's complexion—a person, we would now say, of color—today's academic critics recoil in synchronized horror at her racism: sheer anachronism. But if every character in the play, save Shylock, stands morally compromised, then their good opinion, one for the other, counts for little or nothing. All the praise accorded Antonio, the high esteem in which he is held by all, becomes in this scheme of things only part of the prevailing pseudo-Christian hypocritocracy. Every thing that is actually *said* the salvagers would invert as irony.

A crucial misconception of many critics stems from a failure to grasp what would have passed for a Christian society for Shakespeare and his audience. Reacting to Shylock's coerced conversion, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch acidly protests, "Being such Christians as the whole gang were, they might at least have spared him *that* ignominy." But Sir Arthur's censure of the whole gang, like that of many another critic, depends on an image of Christianity closer to the evangelical ethos of Bunyan or *Adam Bede* than anything one encounters in the Forest of Arden or on the Seacoast of Bohemia. Tacitly, all Shakespeare's happy comedies take place in a vaguely limned Christian world. Even Ephesus in the classically derived and situated *Comedy of Errors* has a priory, an abbess and a gossip's (baptis-

Criticism of Venetians based on offenses exterior to the play.

Pleasure,
not piety,
typical of
Shakespeare's
Christians.

mal) feast for a finale. Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*, after “meeting with an old religious man” (presumably Christian), gives up his evil designs and turns to doing good. I can’t recall any character in a Shakespeare comedy going to a church for anything other than a marriage, but when needed for that purpose, there’s always one there. His comic world is genial, ludic, pleasure-loving and sensuous, devoted to the love game, celebrating wit and beauty as much as virtue: a world of aristocratic taste and values. Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, like Shylock, stands outside and opposed to this hedonistic aristocratic realm, “a kind of Puritan” who thinks that, because he is virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale (or so says Sir Toby). My point here is that “the gang of Christians” in *The Merchant* differs in no essential way from the casts of the other comedies, no more or less “Christian” than they. Had Malvolio been a Jew or a blackamoor, the obloquy visited on Antonio *et al.* would have fallen on Sir Toby and his crew (“cruel racists”); and had Shylock been only an old miser, of uncertain provenance, his comeuppance would have been as generally welcome as Malvolio’s. Bassanio is not greatly different from Orlando or Orsino as a lover; Portia could hold her own with Rosalind and Beatrice. Even the much maligned Jessica has a counterpart in Hermia in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who defies her father, under pain of death, to elope with her lover. There are no saints in Shakespeare’s comedies, no one wears hair shirts or spends much time over orisons; pleasure, not piety, is the keynote; but the comic world is Christian enough for the dramatist’s purposes, as much so in *The Merchant of Venice* as anywhere else.

For the salvagers, who would render *The Merchant* palatable for (let me use the Marxist critic’s favorite formulation) a Late Capitalist audience, Portia poses the major obstacle: to salvage Shylock, that is, they must savage Portia, an enterprise that has dominated the criticism of the play this last half century. Her statement that she would not marry any of Morocco’s color (a North African beige?) has allowed the savagers, for starters, to brand her a racist, although if to express an unwillingness to marry outside one’s own ethnicity were proof positive of racism, then a vast majority of the world’s population is

racist yet, including most observant Jews. Again, however, the charge is anachronistic. Are we to assume that the Globe audience would have felt offended by her comment, more than, say, her dismissal of her English suitor as a dumbshow with awful taste in clothes? Have these critics no sense of history whatever, or does criticism offer none of the protection from *ex post facto*-ry that the laws of most civilized nations afford? Portia seems to have become a racist about the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*, after four hundred years or so of being an exemplary heroine.

Portia's ex post facto racism.

The more crucial and by now clichéd charge against Portia, however, is hypocrisy: that, in the trial scene, she preaches one thing—"The quality of mercy is not strained," etc.—and practices quite another; that she advocates forgiveness, but exacts revenge. Surfing the Internet, I came across a study guide for *The Merchant* by Michael Cummings, a sort of on-line Cliff's Notes of the sort sophomores use to plagiarize their papers. It included sections with titles such as "Christians, Not Jews, Are the Real Villains" and "Portia: Detestable Hypocrite." Its prose style may be gauged by the following: "In effect, they abort Shylock and flush him into oblivion"; and the content accords perfectly with the style. Here, one might have thought, was salvagism at its most simple minded, what the flummoxed high school teacher might grasp with relief and retail as gospel. But, in fact, many bigger name critics concoct much worse: hoping to go beyond the modernist *consensus gentium*, they seek originality in absurdities that are uniquely their own. Again Godard states this position concisely and better than most:

The Jew is about to get his just deserts. Will Portia forget her doctrine that mercy is mercy precisely because it is not deserved? The Jew is about to receive justice. Will she remember that our prayers for mercy should teach us to do deeds of mercy and that in the course of justice none of us will see salvation? Alas! She will forget, she will not remember it. Like Shylock, but in a subtler sense, she who appealed to logic "perishes" by it.

But such contra-Portia commentators direct their censure, unfailingly, to the wrong place. Portia is not in court, only Balthazar—and he, of course, is a complete fiction. Behind "him" stands the actual intended judge in the case, Bellario, and behind Bellario stands the actual (at least in the context of

the drama) law. If we press the matter logically, we must conclude that the outcome of the trial would be the same, whichever judge, Bellario or Balthazar, officiated, the law, that is, not changing with the cast. In the letter read to the court, Bellario vouches for Balthazar who “is furnished with my opinion, which bettered with his own learning the greatness whereof I cannot commend enough comes with him. . . .” Portia has, of course, no legal training or knowledge: not even the heroine of a Shakespeare comedy can have passed the bar overnight. Nor is this a quibble. Many critics respond as if Portia were a free agent throughout the trial scene, a clever ad libber who makes up the rules as she goes along—and is thus responsible for them. She is not. In fact, s/he must simply be applying the law as explained to her by Bellario. (How or why he agreed to take part in this pretense remains unbroached.) At one point, Shylock, stunned, asks, “Is that the law?” And she replies, “Thyself shalt see the act.” There may be a double meaning here, one of which is: You are about to see it when the law acts on you. The primary meaning, however, is: I can show you the act (legislation) right here—probably holding out a document. Unless the salvagers imagine that she is pulling a Joe McCarthy—“I hold in my hand the names of . . .” and the paper is blank—then Portia is not exercising her discretion, for good or ill: rather Balthazar simply explains the law as it is.

*Shylock
hoisted on
own petard,
not Portia's
hypocrisy.*

“There is no power in Venice/ Can alter a decree established. . . . It cannot be,” Balthazar pronounces, to Shylock’s initial glee: “A Daniel come to judgment! Yes, a Daniel!” But the principle is impersonal and cuts both ways: when *he* stands athwart the law, nothing therein can abrogate the penalty. It cannot be. Even if Portia wanted to show mercy to Shylock—whatever, at this stage, that might mean—Balthazar has no legal authority to do so. Mercy in this Venice is the prerogative not of the judiciary, but of the executive, of the Duke, and despite the claims of some critics that Shylock is forced to beg for mercy, just the opposite is true:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit

I pardon thy life before thou ask it,

says the Duke. In her *propre personne*, if not in her Balthazar persona, the Portia who praises and commends mercy in her famous speech must be sincere in urging this virtue and this

course of action: "We do pray for mercy/ And that same prayer doth teach us all to render/ The deeds of mercy." What motive would she have for urging Shylock to drop his suit (since she knows all along that Antonio stands in no real danger) except the desire to see him act mercifully, magnanimously? He does not, opts instead for the full force and rigor of the law, at which point Portia *must* act as Balthazar, the agent of that law, and follow it to its prescribed end. Shylock is hoist on his own petard, not on Portia's hypocrisy.

Neitzsche remarked in *The Dawn* that Christianity had spread "the art of reading badly." Heaven knows (so to speak) that's true; but almost all ideologies contribute to the art of reading badly, and philosemitism has certainly contributed to some very bad readings of *The Merchant of Venice* and Portia's role in it. In a particularly errant example, Harold Bloom claims "her quality of mercy cheerfully tricks Shylock out of his life's savings in order to enrich her friends," just as earlier he asserts that she "contemptuously sentences Morocco and Aragon to celibate existences." Neither claim is true. In his voluminous reading Bloom never seems to have encountered the adage, A man is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts. Or if he has, he ignored it. The "contemptuously" of the second claim stems from Bloom's own adverbially overactive imagination, but the celibacy imposed on losing suitors in the casket lottery was part of her father's will. As for her "cheerfully" tricking Shylock for her friend's profit, that constitutes about as misleading a reading of what actually occurs as is possible to commit. Once Shylock initiates the legal process—which Portia argues so strongly against his doing—his fate is sealed: not by him, not by her, by the law. There is no trickery here, could be no trickery—and to see it so entails a determined effort to distort. But Portia has become *bête noire* to a host of critics, one of whom calls her Shakespeare's most odious heroine, no wile or duplicity beneath her.

The animus against Portia—indeed, against the whole idea of *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy—really stems from Antonio's imposing the condition that Shylock convert to Christianity. Otherwise, in keeping with the comic ethos, the penalties imposed on him are light, considering that the maximum was death. The half of his wealth that the state could take is re-

duced to a fine; and the other half that should go to Antonio, Antonio places in trust, for Shylock to use during his lifetime but to go to Lorenzo and Jessica at his death. Shylock's cry, "You take my life/ When you do take the means whereby I live"—a cry echoed by many a commentator lamenting the Venetians' cruelty—is uttered before he hears the lenient terms, Antonio's doing, of the penalty. He will, then, be out the amount of the fine, unspecified, (and the 3,000 ducats of the loan), but hardly headed for the poor house. (True, as a Christian he may not now practice his old vocation, usury, but neither he nor anyone else gives voice to that consideration.)

"I am content,"
says Shylock;
not so the
salvagers.

Imagine that Shylock was only a mean-spirited old money lender, of indeterminate and unimportant ethnic provenance, whose daughter elopes with the young friend of one of his debtors, with which debtor he has the same pound-of-flesh agreement. The debtor cannot pay and the mean-spirited old money lender, seeking vengeance, is about to extract his forfeit when . . . some *Thalia ex machina* arrives to save the day. The mean-spirited old money lender is fined for unapproved lending practices and sentenced to sensitivity training. What modern audience could have any problem with that scenario? (Some might consider the sensitivity training excessive.) No, the explosive element for modern audiences is single, clear: "that for this favor/ He presently become a Christian." This condition constitutes no part of the legal penalty (and figures, as noted, not at all in Shakespeare's source *Il Pecorone*), and concerns Portia only in that she asks Antonio what mercy he can render Shylock. The great mitigation of the financial penalties is one part of that mercy; the insistence on conversion is the other. The vilification of Antonio, of Portia, of all Venice stems almost wholly from that line and a half. "I am content," says Shylock; not so the salvagers.

In 1681 Nahum Tate adapted *King Lear* for his time. The erstwhile tragedy was given a happy ending: Lear and Cordelia survive, Cordelia becomes queen and marries Edgar: "Then there are Gods," the Tate Cordelia declares, "and Vertue is their Care." Edgar, no less emphatic, gets the play's last word: "Truth and Vertue shall at last succeed." This *Lear* replaced Shakespeare's for most of the eighteenth century. In 1818

Dr. Thomas Bowdler published his *Family Shakespeare*, an edition excising everything from the plays, he explained, that a gentleman could not read aloud in the company of ladies: no old black rams tugging your white ewes here. Dr. Bowdler yielded us a very useful verb: to bowdlerize. We laugh now at these radical distortions of Shakespeare, attempts to soften up texts too tough for the sensibilities of ages less sophisticated than ours. But with *The Merchant of Venice*, the distortions, even more in productions than in criticism, have been no less egregious.

Salvagist critics will not—cannot—allow Act V of the play to be truly comic, else the Venetian corruption and racism, to the existence of which they are so deeply committed, would appear triumphant. Reversing Tate’s stratagem of turning tragedy into comedy, they seek to turn comedy into tragedy. Directors do so by employing a more assertive version of Bowdler’s method: where he only removed, to make the plays safe for the virtuous, they both subtract and add. “I am content” can hardly be allowed to represent Shylock’s true feelings. His next and final lines—

I pray you give me leave to go from hence.

I am not well. Send the deed after me

And I will sign it—

certainly convey a somber tone, but hardly the wrenching outrage or despair that modern readers feel he must feel. So we have addenda to supply what Shakespeare didn’t: Olivier’s off-stage howl of grief, for instance, or chords of the kaddish welling up in the background. Edwin Booth, in the nineteenth century, “uttered a groan, staggered backward, gave a despairing look, and collapsed.” (This amount of ham suggests that the conversion was instantaneous.) Perhaps the most extreme excrescence, also pioneered in the nineteenth century, is to have Shylock commit suicide on stage—like an aside, witnessed by the audience but not the cast—with the knife that he had meant to use on Antonio: a martyr to his faith, better dead than converted. About the only thing left for an innovative *regiethater* director would be to have the shadow of a giant swastika steal over the stage in the penalty phase of the court scene and strains of “The Horst Wessel Song” waft up from the canals below.

*Bowdler
outdone by
Merchant’s
salvagers.*

More
sweetness
in Act V
than salvagers
can swallow.

However achieved, for the salvagers Shylock's fate in Act IV must cast a pall over Act V, else looms the distinct danger that an audience might smile a lot or even laugh sometime at the merry goings on at Belmont. The surest way to prevent this happening would be to follow those nineteenth century productions, like some of Irving's, and simply omit Act V altogether: no better way to bowdlerize the play into *The Tragedy of Shylock*. But most directors won't and critics can't go so far as to pretend that Act V doesn't exist; but they can and do "problematize" it, stress the (as they see it) fatuousness and fecklessness of the characters, damp down as much of the charm and high spirits of Belmont as "reading against the grain" will allow. Critics of an earlier generation relished the poetry and music of the first part of the act and the wit and gamesmanship of the last. Mark Van Doren, for instance, writes: "the fifth act soars upon recovered wings. The sweet wind, the sweet moonlight, the sweet soul of Jessica melt into one singing whole with the sweet touches, the sweet harmony, the sweet power of music." That's rather more sweetness than our aesthetically glucose-intolerant age can swallow; but the salvagers are nevertheless faced with one of the loveliest and most charming scenes in Shakespeare at the beginning of Act V, what, if the drama were an opera, would be a bel canto love duet for Jessica and Lorenzo: "In such a night as this." (In fact, Berlioz did lift much of this exchange for the great love duet of Dido and Aeneas in *Les Troyens*.) Their recital of love affairs from classical mythology segues into a playful exchange:

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 her.

Jessica: I would out-night you, did nobody come;
But hark I hear the footing of a man.

Only someone ideologically hellbent on denying the comic in *The Merchant* could fail to see the good fun, the teasing humor,

and—yes—the sweetness of this duet. It and even moreso Lorenzo's apostrophes to the moonlight and to music are the most lyrical and the most beautiful passages in the play.

But sweetness and moonlight and music ill suit the salvagers' agenda, which would portray the whole Belmont contingent, Shylock's antagonists, as a rotten crowd. Keep your eye on Jessica, I earlier advised, to gauge the honesty of any production or interpretation: not always an easy task, however, as her scenes, including this one, are often radically truncated or even cut entirely in performance. Cinematic bowdlerization "disappears" this scene altogether in the three most easily available versions of the play—the Olivier 1973 production, Trevor Nunn's 2001 PBS version, and the Michael Radford-Al Pacino 2004 film—a tactic which might well be preferable to those productions staged to make the couple appear disillusioned with and alienated from each other. One director, for instance, placed them on opposite sides of the stage, turned away from each other, "as if looking out to sea, showing that their relationship had soured by then."

This scene, which does nothing to further the plot, must be thematic. Coming as it does just after the trial scene, it sets the tone for the play's resolution, and its poetry of love and moonlight and music is hardly the stuff of wracking tragedy or even of a problem comedy. If this were the best that Shakespeare could do to cast Jessica and Lorenzo and Belmont itself in a bad light, then he is hardly the playwright he's reputed to be. On the other hand, if the purpose is to sound a note of reconciliation of ancient prejudices, the exact reversal of *Romeo and Juliet* where young love is destroyed by old hatreds, then as Francois-Victor Hugo put it long ago "the terrible drama unfolds itself into a delicious comedy. . . . The oaths of hate, the shrieks of rage, the imprecations which have resounded through the ages of bitter generations die away in a splendid night, amid the balmy shadows of tropical flowers and under intoxicating bowers of oranges and laurels in a duet of kisses." One today would not risk his rhetoric, but the insight is apt.

For those who will have *The Merchant of Venice* a play about racial prejudice, an anti-Semitic play, Jessica, as I've suggested, poses a problem. Having her happy with her gentile husband and welcome among the Christians at Belmont hardly con-

Questions of character irrelevant where racial issues are concerned.

stitutes a tableau of hateful ethnic discrimination. So the salvagers must somehow subvert that comic scenario. One way has been to attack her character—and Lorenzo’s—as if that had any bearing on her DNA. We’ve seen already that Heine thought he belonged in prison, and Jessica has fared no better, denounced as an ingrate, a traitor, an apostate, a conniving bitch—and, cruelest of all, by Harold Bloom—a spoiled Jewish princess. True, a case can be made that their behavior in stealing from Shylock is reprehensible, even criminal, although that kind of conduct toward the *senex iratus* has never weighed very heavily in comedy, nor does it here. The consequence of Jessica’s and Lorenzo’s absconding with Shylock’s ducats is—to get a lot more of them. Thalia keeps books her own way. In any event, questions of character are irrelevant where the racial issue is concerned. Jessica could be as debauched as Jezebel or chaste as Lucrece, in either case with the same genes and still welcome at Belmont. Lorenzo may be a playboy and a spendthrift, but he still loves and marries a Jewish girl—with the help and approval of his friends.

What the salvagers want most, however, is a Jessica miserable, regretful of her choice, penitent. The text offers no such figure, of course, so it remains for the critic where he can and the director where the critic can’t to produce one. That Jessica is “snubbed” at Belmont, specifically by that racist Portia, has emerged as fact in much recent criticism, although the basis for this inference is only that Portia does not welcome her specifically. But she specifically welcomes no one individually. “By your leave,” Bassanio says, “I bid my friends and countrymen,/ Sweet Portia, welcome.” “So do I, my lord,” she replies, “They are entirely welcome.” This is a snub? Only twenty-five lines are spoken from the arrival of these friends to the revelation in the letter of Antonio’s crisis, whereupon, of course, everyone’s attention turns to weightier matters than polite greetings. Nothing here indicates the slightest coolness of Portia toward Jessica, and, in fact, Gratiano—supposedly the most virulently anti-Semitic character in the play—charges Nerissa, “cheer yonder stranger; bid her welcome.” Unless Nerissa ignores him entirely, some stage business—unobtrusive, so as not to distract from the reading of Antonio’s letter—would show her making Jessica welcome at Belmont, hardly the sort

of greeting to engender alienation and remorse.

In only one other scene do Jessica and Portia directly interact, where Portia and Nerissa leave Belmont ostensibly for a convent “to live in prayer and contemplation” while their husbands are away. Portia puts Lorenzo and Jessica in charge in her absence:

My people do already know my mind,
And will acknowledge you and Jessica
In place of Lord Bassanio and myself.

Jessica wishes “your ladyship all heart’s content,” and Portia is “well pleased/ To wish it back on you. Fare you well, Jessica.” If some critics find this snubbing, they need to get out more. But, in truth, this exchange hardly ever figures in the salvagers’ discussions; and much less so another shortly after, when Lorenzo asks, “How dost thou like Lord Bassanio’s wife?” and Jessica replies,

Past all expressing. It is very meet
The Lord Bassanio live an upright life,
For, having such a blessing in his lady,
He finds the joys of heaven here on earth . . .
for the poor rude world
Hath not her fellow.

Lorenzo’s joking comeback—“Even such a husband/ Hast thou of me as she is for a wife”—sets off some banter in the same key that shows them easy with each other, having fun, without a twinge of remorse. These exchanges—usually cut now in performance—Shakespeare seems almost to have included precisely to preclude the interpretation of Jessica as an outsider at Belmont, unassimilated into the comedy played out by her (now) fellow Christians. He shows her very much happy and at home.

The salvaging directors distort Jessica’s role even more than do the critics, not only by what they cut, but by what they add. Some examples: In a highly regarded 1994 production in Leeds, Shylock and Jessica “were victims of pervasive racism: Jessica was pointedly ignored at Belmont and then spat on by Bassanio when she told of her father’s plan to execute his bond.” In the 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company production “Jessica was snubbed by Portia, ignored by Lorenzo once her fortune was his, and left alone at the end of the play.” In Ellis Rabb’s

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unfortunate 1973 New York production Jessica is manhandled by Venetian rowdies, her blouse torn off, in Act II and slapped across the face by a drunken Lorenzo in Act V. From about the 1960s, the play having been discovered to have a homosexual subtext, the directorial cliché became leaving Antonio alone on stage at the end, his love for Bassanio cleverly trumped by Portia's stratagems, the only person with no bedmate for the night. The novelty of that interpretation having largely worn off, Jessica has become the favorite odd man out (so to speak), the isolate left all alone as the lights dim.

In the Olivier production she mopes excessively throughout—all the banter indicated above, of course, cut—hardly the good-time girl who would spend 80 ducats in one night in Genoa. When only she and Antonio remain on the villa steps at film's end, he gives her a long pitying look and leaves her reading tearfully the deed of property that Shylock has signed. Strains of the kaddish well up, lights dim. A lump should rise in the audience's collective throat, presumably. In Nunn's production—surely the most depressing ever conceived—Jessica is a basket case, all cringes and twitches and random *cris de coeur*, late-stage Ophelia her closest literary analogue. Not left alone on stage, but in the bleakest dawn this side of Ingmar Bergman, surrounded by a universally gloomy and equally Bergmanesque cast, Jessica falls to her knees, upon seeing the deed that will make her and her husband rich, and, seemingly unhinged, begins to keen a plaintive song in Hebrew, not, for once, the kaddish. The others look on, disturbed, guilt ridden, silent. The end. Michael Radford's much better 2004 film is, however, just as blatant in its invented denouement for Jessica. In his talk-over commentary on the DVD, he states explicitly, "the play has ended but the film hasn't ended." Shakespeare's last words spoken, Radford includes first a pantomime of a bewildered Shylock standing outside the synagogue as the doors literally close to him; next Jessica in the dawn running along a path—away from Belmont?—stopping to look, brows furrowed, at some men shooting fish in the lagoon with bows and arrows. Radford voices extreme satisfaction with himself for having caught this Carpaccio moment, although what shooting fish in the lagoon is meant to suggest—maybe now it's only fish on Friday for Shylock?—remains unaddressed.

Finally the film's last shot: Jessica looks down at the turquoise ring on her finger. Her mother's ring! She hadn't sold it for a monkey after all! What did Shakespeare know! Blood is thicker than holy water! Harold Bloom owes *this* Jessica an apology. William Empson once wrote of one of J. Dover Wilson's concocted stage directions for his edition of *2 Henry IV*, "It must be about the most farcical struggle against the obvious intention of an author that a modern scholarly editor has ever put up." I would like to adapt that judgment, *mutatis mutandis*, to the salvagers of *The Merchant* who contort Jessica, clearly against the text, into a tragedienne.

*Salvagers'
Jessica bears
no relation to
Shakespeare's.*

At the end of Shakespeare's play, Jessica is headed to bed with Lorenzo; it is only the salvagers' pseudo-Jessica who stands, alone, forlorn on a darkening stage.

"I am content." Almost no one these days thinks Shylock really means it. That doubt stems from our belief that no real-life Jew at that time under those circumstances could possibly have been "content" with a coerced conversion to Christianity. But Shylock exists in a play, not the real world, and is subject to other criteria than verisimilitude. Drama, particularly Elizabethan drama, depends on conventions: put on a disguise and not even your own father—or, in Portia's case, your own husband—will recognize you. Conventions transcend reality—and skepticism—with a tacitly agreed on dramatic illusion. The sudden conversion served as one of these conventions for Shakespeare, conversion without or even against psychological probability.

We noted earlier the example of the evil Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*, heading to Arden Forest to put his own brother to the sword,

When, meeting with an old religious man,
After some question with him, was converted
Both from his enterprise and from the world,
His crown bequeathing to his banish'd brother.

Conversions don't come much more instantaneous than that, a necessary given for the play's happy ending. Even in tragedy, in *King Lear* Shakespeare has the thoroughly black-hearted Edmund, author of so much evil, dying, decide spontaneously, "Some good I mean to do/ Despite of mine own nature" and

*Conversion a
desideratum
for play's
happy ending.*

try to save Lear and Cordelia. These sudden, uncharacteristic shifts in course represent not psychological probabilities, but dramatic conventions. Little more than a century after *The Merchant of Venice*, the librettist for Handel's opera *Rinaldo*, based on Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, has the Saracen king of Jerusalem Argante and his sorceress lover Armida, queen of Damascus, defeated by the Crusaders, suddenly see the light and convert to Christianity. This resolution has nothing to do with history—the First Crusade's capture of Jerusalem led to unspeakable carnage—nor even, in this particular, with Tasso's epic. The significance of the conversion of Argante and Armida, Muslims, to the Christian faith is not really religious or even political, but a kind of dramatic rightness, a means of effecting a happy ending and a robust chorus announcing the moral: "Evil malice is defeated by virtue alone." Shylock's conversion, then, can be interpreted, in this sense, as a comic conversion: if not a necessity, still a desideratum for the play's happy ending.

To say that Shylock's conversion is a comic convention need not suggest any lack of seriousness to its content. Antonio saves his immortal soul, even if by auctorial fiat. To generations tutored to see the play as the martyrdom of Shylock, Antonio's stipulation seems only a cruel punishment; but view *The Merchant* in a Christian context—the context of its own time—as a comedy of mercy triumphing over vengeance and both Antonio's stipulation and Shylock's "I am content" become integral elements of its reconciliatory texture. Its integrity granted, the conversion would signal the rehabilitation of Shylock, however he is viewed: construe him as malevolent as you will, the power of Grace in redeeming so wicked a creature is manifested; or interpret him as an essentially good man forced astray by ill treatment, the conversion marks a new beginning of righteousness for him, a life course correction. Go and sin no more—while the young lovers, having done good, repair to Belmont for all the deserved pleasures that await them there. This would be the Christian *Merchant of Venice*.

The truth, however—and the best recent criticism reflects it—is that ambiguity and internal contradiction characterize *The*

Merchant of Venice, an almost modernist polyphony of voices and values. An old but probably correct interpretation, coming back into fashion, holds that Shakespeare created in Shylock a figure too powerful and too sympathetic for the part he was meant to play: in only five scenes, but with the most vivid and memorable language of anyone, he dominates the play and becomes the role the star wants. The internal or textual antinomies are compounded by external factors, the evolution of militant Christianity into sentimental humanitarianism, the rise of racial anti-Semitism, and, of course, the Holocaust. What seems to have become the prevailing reading is well put by Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All* (2004):

The Merchant of Venice is a deeply disturbing play, whose interpreters over time have sought to purge it of its most dangerous and disturbing energies. It is a play in which the question of intention, of what Shakespeare may have intended, is relevant but not recoverable, and finally not determinative. . . . Meaning is disseminated here—it will not be contained. And this is an index of the play’s enormous theatrical and emotional power. . . . The play—any play, but especially a strong one—is the sum of all its meanings, all the intentions, conscious and unconscious, including some that the author never intended.

This view, while generously ecumenical, is perhaps too promiscuous. While we cannot, true, recover Shakespeare’s full intention, can we not at least assume that he “intended” the play he wrote—and not all the subtractions from and additions to wrought by later hands? We would not now accept George Granville’s revisions or Dr. Bowdler’s excisions as part of a “developing meaning” of *The Merchant*; and the stage history, some very recent, is rife with ludicrous business now considered not an expansion of the meaning of the play, but disfiguring distortion. Consider Stratford’s 2011 production that displaces the play to present-day Las Vegas, with Shylock as a casino owner, Lancelot Gabbo an Elvis impersonator (complete with tunes), the casket scenes played as a tv game show “Destiny,” and Jessica and Lorenzo eloping disguised as Batman and Robin: can a production of such uncompromising vulgarity really be seen as part of *The Merchant’s* “developing meaning”?

If one can cut away, in big tendentiously selected chunks, half a play (as Olivier did, for instance, in his film of *Henry V*)

then it can be made to “mean” just about whatever one wills. Recently the art historian Ingrid Rowland, discussing Giandomenico Tiepolo’s drawing “A Spring Shower” (which she mistakenly attributes to his more famous father Giambattista) depicting seven people and a dog, all seen from behind, strolling in the rain, claims what it “really means . . . is anyone’s guess but Tiepolo’s . . . but there is a particular elusive beauty to insoluble puzzles, as well as a freedom to interpret them just as we wish, no matter what the artist himself had in mind.” Adapted, this attitude, quite typical of our postmodernist sensibility, captures the prevailing critical and theatrical approach to *The Merchant*, but the art critic would not feel justified in erasing one or more figures in the scherzo, in rearranging them, in turning some to face the viewer, in adding some additional figures of his own; yet analogous vandalism is commonplace in interpreting Shakespeare. Here, then, I would endorse the affirmation of another critic in another context: “the primacy of the text is not negotiable.” A century and more, however, of diminishing, distorting or deleting the Christian-comic dimensions of *The Merchant of Venice* has produced, not surprisingly, today’s gimpy Martyrdom of Shylock.

Mark Twain once advised: First get your facts straight and then distort them all you want. That’s the spirit in which I offer this defense of a Christian reading of *The Merchant*: not that such a view is soon likely to prevail again, in the criticism or on the stage, but that as we go about distorting it to suit changing audiences, we first get our facts straight—and the facts here are the full text and what we know of Shakespeare’s age. Something like a conflict among the contending forces in the play, the current orthodoxy, cannot be fairly enacted if the Christians are cut off at the knees and their sword arm tied behind their back.