

You could give Hippolyta's lines a rather minimal interpretation, stressing that she herself distrusts "fancy's images," but that seems to me a woe-ful reading. For Theseus, poetry is a furor, and the poet a trickster; Hippolyta opens to a greater resonance, to transfiguration that affects more than one mind at once. The lovers are her metaphor for the Shakespearean audience, and it is ourselves, therefore, who grow into "something of great constancy," and so are re-formed, strangely and admirably. Hippolyta's majestic gravity is an implicit rebuke to Theseus's scoffing at the poet's "fine frenzy." Critics rightly have expanded their apprehension of Shakespeare's "story of the night" beyond the *Dream*, marvelous as the play is. "No, I assure you, the wall is down that parted their fathers" is Bottom's final resonance in the play, and transcends Theseus's patronizing understanding. "The best in this kind are but shadows," Theseus says of all plays and playing—and while we might accept this from Macbeth, we cannot accept it from the dull Duke of Athens. Puck, in the Epilogue, only seems to agree with Theseus when he chants that "we shadows" are "but a dream," since the dream is this great play itself. The poet who dreamed Bottom was about to achieve a great dream of reality, Sir John Falstaff, who would have no interest in humoring Theseus.

6 Shakespeare: The Invention
of the Human (1998)
—Harold Bloom

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work. Yet every time I have taught the play, many of my most sensitive and intelligent students become very unhappy when I begin with that observation. Nor do they accept my statements that Shylock is a comic villain and that Portia would cease to be sympathetic if Shylock were allowed to be a figure of overwhelming pathos. That Shakespeare himself was personally anti-Semitic we reasonably can doubt, but Shylock is one of those Shakespearean figures who seem to break clean away from their plays' confines. There is an extraordinary energy in Shylock's prose and poetry, a force both cognitive and passionate, which palpably is in excess of the play's comic requirements. More even than Marlowe's Barabas, Jew of Malta, Shylock is a villain both farcical and scary, though time has worn away both qualities. Shakespeare's England did not exactly have a Jewish "problem" or "question" in our later modern terms; only about a hundred or two hundred Jews, presumably most of them converts to Christianity, lived in London. The Jews had been more or less expelled from England in 1290, three centuries before, and were not to be more or less readmitted until Cromwell made his revolution. The unfortunate Dr. Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's physician, was hanged, drawn, and quartered (possibly with Shakespeare among the mob looking on), having been more or less framed by the Earl of Essex and so

perhaps falsely accused of a plot to poison the Queen. A Portuguese *converso*, whom Shakespeare may have known, poor Lopez lives on as a shadowy provocation to the highly successful revival of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* in 1593–94, and presumably to Shakespeare's eventual overcoming of Marlowe in *The Merchant of Venice*, perhaps in 1596–97.

Shakespeare's comedy is Portia's play, and not Shylock's, though some audiences now find it difficult to reach that conclusion. Antonio, the title's merchant, is the good Christian of the play, who manifests his piety by cursing and spitting at Shylock. For many among us now, that is at least an irony, but clearly it was no irony for Shakespeare's audiences. I have never seen *The Merchant of Venice* staged with Shylock as comic villain, but that is certainly how the play should be performed. Shylock would be very bad news indeed if he were not funny; since he doesn't provoke us to laughter, we play him for pathos, as he has been played since the early nineteenth century, except in Germany and Austria under the Nazis, and in Japan. I am afraid that we tend to make *The Merchant of Venice* incoherent by portraying Shylock as being largely sympathetic. Yet I myself am puzzled as to what it would cost (and not only ethically) to recover the play's coherence. Probably it would cost us Shakespeare's actual Shylock, who cannot have been quite what Shakespeare intended, if indeed we can recover such an intention. If I were a director, I would instruct my Shylock to act like a hallucinatory bogeyman, a walking nightmare flamboyant with a big false nose and a bright red wig, that is to say, to look like Marlowe's Barabas. We can imagine the surrealistic effect of such a figure when he begins to speak with the nervous intensity, the realistic energy of Shylock, who is so much of a personality as to at least rival his handful of lively precursors in Shakespeare: Faulconbridge the Bastard in *King John*, Mercutio and the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Bottom the Weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But these characters all fit their roles, even if we can conceive of them as personalities outside of their plays. Shylock simply does not fit his role; he is the wrong Jew in the right play.

I suggest that to understand the gap between the human that Shakespeare invents and the role that as playmaker he condemns Shylock to act, we regard the Jew of Venice as a reaction formation or ironic swerve away

from Marlowe's Jew of Malta. All that Shylock and Barabas have in common is that both are supposed to be not Jews, but *the Jew*. Shakespeare's grim Puritan and Marlowe's ferocious Machiavel are so antithetical to each other that I have always wanted a mischievous director slyly to transfer crucial declarations between them. How disconcertingly splendid it would be to have Shylock suddenly burst out with Barabas's most outrageous parody of Jewish wickedness:

As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights,
And kill sick people groaning under walls;
Sometimes I go about and poison wells.

That is the superb cartoon that Shakespeare parodied again in Aaron the Moor of *Titus Andronicus*, and such savage zest cannot be repeated by Shylock, who is not a phantasmagoria, even when he behaves like one. The counterstroke would be to have Barabas cry out, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" which may or may not be poignant when delivered by Shylock but certainly would destroy Barabas's antic irreality. Shakespeare, finished at last with Marlowe, contrasts against the cartoon Barabas Shylock's realistic mimesis, which is so overwhelming that it cannot be accommodated as a stage Jew. Yet Shakespeare wants it both ways, at once to push Marlowe aside, and also to so out-Marlowe Marlowe as to make our flesh creep. The stunning persuasiveness of Shylock's personality heightens our apprehension of watching a stage Jew slice off and weigh a pound of the good Antonio's flesh—"to bait fish withal." If the audience has a surrogate in this drama, it would appear to be Gratiano, whose anti-Semitic vulgarity reminds me of Julius Streicher, Hitler's favorite newspaper editor. The last two centuries of stage tradition have made Shylock a hero-villain, but the text cannot sustain such an interpretation. Since Shylock is a murderous villain, then Gratiano, though a touch crude, must be taken as a good fellow, cheerful and robust in his anti-Semitism, a kind of Pat Buchanan of Renaissance Venice.

Shakespearean skeptical irony, so pervasive elsewhere in *The Merchant of Venice*, perhaps goes into relative suspension whenever Shylock speaks.

Shylock's prose is Shakespeare's best before Falstaff's; Shylock's verse hews to the vernacular more than any in Shakespeare before Hamlet's. The bitter eloquence of Shylock so impresses us that it is always a surprise to be told how small a part of the play is spoken by him: only 360 lines and sentences. His utterances manifest a spirit so potent, malign, and negative as to be unforgettable. Yet it is spirit, albeit the spirit of resentment and revenge. I doubt that Shakespeare knew enough about the post-biblical history of the Jews to have meditated upon it, and therefore Shylock cannot be said to embody Jewish history, except for the unhappy truth that Shakespeare's power has converted much of later Jewish history into Shylock. It would have been better for the Jews, if not for most of *The Merchant of Venice's* audiences, had Shylock been a character less conspicuously alive. What spurred Shakespeare to that liveliness, as I've already intimated, was the contest with Marlowe's Barabas. But what is it that provoked Shakespeare's inventiveness?

Perhaps it is the wicked small boy in me that so delights in Barabas, Marlowe certainly delighted in his Jew, who is as close to aspects of Marlowe's temperament as Shylock is distant from Shakespeare's, if Falstaff is as much the Shakespearean norm as I take him to be. Barabas, of course, is no more Jewish than the play's Christians are Christian or its Muslims Muslim. Shakespeare disturbs me because his influence has been so universal that Shylock seems Jewish to many audiences, though the figure they see has been converted into one of heroic pathos. When we think of the Jew in post-biblical literature, George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, Dickens's Fagin, and Joyce's half-Jewish Poldy, among others, come to mind only *after* we brood upon Shylock. No one, except the incessantly anti-Semitic T. S. Eliot, has tended to think of Barabas as a truly Jewish character. Barabas is a kind of wicked bottle imp or Jew-in-the-box; he is always jumping out at us, the audience. We can't help enjoying him, since his outrageousness is so cartoon-like. But I will return to Barabas later, in the context of Shakespeare's revision of Marlowe for his own rather different purposes.

We finally have a lucid and sound study of *The Merchant of Venice* in *Shakespeare and the Jews*, by James Shapiro (1996), whose "Conclusion" is worthy of much meditation:

I have tried to show that much of the play's vitality can be attributed to the ways in which it scrapes against a bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual, and religious difference of others. I can think of no other literary work that does so as unrelentingly and as honestly. To avert our gaze from what the play reveals about the relationship between cultural myths and peoples' identities will not make irrational and exclusionary attitudes disappear. Indeed, these darker impulses remain so elusive, so hard to identify in the normal course of things, that only in instances like productions of this play do we get to glimpse these cultural faultlines. This is why censoring the play is *always* more dangerous than staging it.

"Censoring," of course, is usually not the issue, except in Nazi Germany and in Israel, as Shapiro shows. What baffles us is how to stage a romantic comedy that rather blithely includes a forced Jewish conversion to Christianity, on penalty of death. When Shylock brokenly intones, "I am content," few of our audiences are going to be content, unless you can conjure up a cheerfully anti-Semitic audience somewhere. *King Lear* is a pagan play for a Christian audience, some scholars like to say. *The Merchant of Venice* is a Christian play for a Christian audience, according to Northrop Frye. I don't think that Shakespeare wrote Christian plays, or un-Christian ones either, and as I have written earlier, my sense of the endlessly perspectivizing Shakespeare would exclude the possibility that he was personally either anti-Semitic or philo-Semitic, which is also Shapiro's conclusion. It is difficult for me not to assent to Graham Bradshaw's fine contention that Shakespeare's "creative interiorization of Shylock" makes unlikely any views that see the Jewish merchant as being entirely a comic villain or only a figure of tragic pathos. What drives me back to a state of critical unhappiness is Shakespeare's disconcerting addition to the pound-of-flesh story: the forced conversion. It is Shakespeare's own invention, and I never find it dramatically persuasive that Shylock should consent to it. Portia may have broken Shylock, but she has not pulverized him, and it is no longer Shylock who stumbles off stage, soon to be a new Christian, or a false Christian, or whatever. Why did Shakespeare allow Antonio this final turn of the torturer's screw?

Had Shylock grown too large for the play, in Shakespeare's wary intuition, so that he needed to be removed, as Mercutio and Lear's Fool and Lady Macbeth are exiled? This seems dubious to me, if only because Shakespeare has waited too long in the play to exile Shylock. "He should have converted hereafter," we are likely to mutter, knowing that there would have been no such time. It is not like Shakespeare to blunder into a theatrical coup that makes even a comic villain behave with dramatic inconsistency. Malvolio, in a madman's cell, maintains his integrity, but Shylock, hemmed in by enemies, is not permitted to do so. Once I believed this to be a relatively rare Shakespearean error; now I suspect otherwise. Shakespeare needs the conversion, not so much to reduce Shylock as to take the audience off to Belmont without a Jewish shadow hovering in the ecstatic if gently ironic final act.

There is nothing lyrical about Shylock, and no place for him in Belmont. But what was Shakespeare to do with Shylock? Hanging, drawing, and quartering, or similar open-air entertainment, would be a poor prelude to Belmont. We cannot know precisely what Shakespeare the man thought of actual Jewish individual "conversions," but he was unlikely to be less skeptical of them than were almost all his contemporaries. It had been more than a century since the Spanish Expulsion of the Jews, a debacle partly caused by Christian awareness of massive Jewish recalcitrance and tendency to dissimulate when compelled to convert. Shapiro views Shylock's conversion as an answer to English Protestant anxieties, which contained the expectation of a mass conversion of the Jews, which would help confirm the Reformation's rightness. The relevance of such a Christian fantasy to *The Merchant of Venice* seems to me quite tenuous, since the Belmont joys of Act V are deliciously secular, nor is Shylock's forced conversion in any way a possible harbinger of a messianic age. We feel that Shakespeare intended an idiosyncratic end for Shylock, more as punishment than as redemption, and there may be the clue. Forced conversions on an individual basis were very rare phenomena, as Shapiro's researches confirm. Shakespeare, with Marlowe's Barabas in mind, does not give Shylock the option of declaring, "I will be no convertite," as Barabas does. His destroying Shylock's consistency as a character helps further to distin-

guish him from the unyielding Barabas, and helps also to augment the nihilistic element that is subtly present in the play. No one in *The Merchant of Venice* is what he or she seems to be—not Portia, Antonio, Bassanio, or Jessica—and can Shakespeare allow only Shylock to maintain a consistent stance? Who in this comedy can have his or her bond? A Sixth Act would dissolve Belmont into moonlight wiped away like mud. Shylock accepts conversion because the Venice of this play, like the Vienna of *Measure for Measure*, is too equivocal for any consistency to prevail. It is *The Merchant of Venice's* finest irony that the alien Shylock is never more Venetian than when he sells himself out. What is his motive? Do we misread his "I am content" when we fail to hear a terrible irony in it? Has Shylock perhaps learned so much from Christian justice that he is prepared to move his struggle to a more inward mode of resistance?

We can only surmise, in this comedy set in a city of psychic dark corners. Despite the Belmont fifth act, *The Merchant of Venice* may be Shakespeare's first "dark comedy" or "problem play," forerunner of *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*, with their equivocal groupings of Helena, Bertram, and Parolles; Pandarus, Thersites, and Ulysses; Duke Vincentio, Isabella, and Lucio. Antonio, as so many critics observe, is Shylock's mirror image, bonded with him in mutual hatred, and no more cheerful than Shylock is. Portia, the play's center, is far more complex and shadowed than ever I have seen her played as being. Herself a sophisticated ironist, she settles happily for the glittering gold digger Bassanio, contemptuously sentences poor Morocco and Aragon to celibate existences, and is delighted with her Belmont and her Venice alike. More even than the vicious Gratiano, she incarnates the "anything goes" spirit of Venice, and her quality of mercy cheerfully tricks Shylock out of his life's savings in order to enrich her friends. Our directors go on instructing our actresses to play Portia as if she was Rosalind, which is a malfeasance. Bradshaw finds a touch of Henry James worldliness in Portia, but we would render her better by invoking Noël Coward or Cole Porter. I am not proposing that someone give us *The Merchant of Venice* as the first anti-Semitic musical comedy, but I do suggest that Portia, who knows better, consistently is delighted to fail all her own finely wrought self-awareness.

Her moral fiber is Jamesian, but her sense of the high life wryly allows her to settle for Bassanio and tricksterism. She is rather wonderful bad news, a slummer by joyous choice. Yes, she has the wit to flatten Shylock, Jew and alien, but her city, Venice, is completely on her side, and the obsessed Shylock is entirely on his own. He gets about what he deserves, except for that gratuitous forced conversion, which Portia happily endorses, but which is Antonio's idea, and not hers. She is at worst a happy hypocrite, far too intelligent not to see that she is not exactly dispensing Christian mercy, except by Venetian standards. Antonio is quite another matter; he is ironically the play's best Christian, a champion spitter-at and kicker-of Jews. If one is Jewish, one is hardly his intended audience, let alone his contemplated critic, even if one does not wish a pound of his Pauline heart or of his Venetian privates.

In this endlessly ironic play, the melancholy Antonio finishes with little except regained riches and his triumphant anti-Semitism to cheer him. Indeed, his sexual fate is precisely that of the Princes of Morocco and Aragon, perpetual celibacy, since Bassanio will be otherwise engaged in servicing Portia. Still, Antonio is at Belmont, surrounded by three pairs of lovers, while his enemy Shylock is in Venice, doubtless receiving instruction in Catholicism. Christian comedy triumphs, Jewish villainy is thwarted, and everything is for the best, if only Shylock's voice and presence would stop reverberating, which they never have and never will, four centuries after Shakespeare composed, and in the centuries to come. Had Hitler won the Second World War and gone on to add ten million more Jews to his achievement of six million Jewish corpses, then Shylock would have ceased to reverberate, but his unhappy persistence will extend as long as the history of the Jews, in which he has played an inglorious part, hardly one that Shakespeare ever could have contemplated. Early modern anti-Semitism was not pretty; the good Antonio and the loud Gratiano will stand as poor Shylock's godfathers at the baptismal font, though Gratiano would rather hang him, and Antonio is not at all likely to stop kicking and spitting, Venetian Christianity being what it was and is. Shakespeare, we can assume, was Shakespeare's most gifted critic, and he would have been aware that Shylock, comic or not, was a grander achievement than Anto-

nio could be. Still, Antonio is a dark matter, and requires some contemplation if his adversary Shylock is to be properly perspectivized.

Antonio lives for Bassanio and indeed is willing to die for him, and mortgages his pound of flesh to Shylock solely so that Bassanio can deck his good looks out in order to wive it wealthily in Belmont. Bassanio is not a bad fellow, but no one would want to try the project of distinguishing between Bassanio and Lorenzo, two Venetian playboys in search of heiresses. It is true that all Shakespeare's heroines are condemned to marry down, but if you compare Portia's Bassanio to Rosalind's Orlando, obviously you will prefer the amiable young wrestler of *As You Like It* to the sincere fortune hunter of *The Merchant of Venice*. Notoriously, Portia's play, and Portia herself, and her friends, are all about money. Belmont is delightful, and obviously very expensive, and Portia, while wiser than Jessica, Nerissa, Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Bassanio, requires no loftier company than these well-dressed sophisticates. I never know what critics think they are talking about when they find transcendent virtues in Portia's Belmont. John Middleton Murry, admirable interpreter of Keats and of Blake, wrote a lesser study, *Shakespeare* (1936), in which he affirmed that "*The Merchant of Venice* is not a problem play; it is a fairy story." I murmur, when I read this, that I don't expect fairy stories to be anti-Semitic, though of course there are a few. More to the point is that Portia and her friends, in Act V, are not exactly partying in a pumpkin, or in a gingerbread house, but in a great hall, being serenaded by musicians, with a trumpet sounding at each fresh arrival. Once the pretty matter of the rings has been gotten through, thus reassuring Portia that she has priority over Antonio in Bassanio's affections, the only crucial question is whether to stay up partying until dawn or go to bed and get on with it. Everyone is a lot fresher than they were going to be four centuries later in *La Dolce Vita*, but basically they are the same set.

Antonio, though he is there in Belmont, will go to bed alone, presumably comforted by his altruism, his piety, and his triumph over Shylock. Bassanio, we have to assume, is bisexual, but Antonio clearly is not, and his homoeroticism is perhaps less relevant than his sadomasochism, the doom-eagerness that could allow him to make so mad a contract with Shylock.

If the comedy has a hero, to rival Portia as heroine, it has to be Antonio, and not the lightweight Bassanio, charming and harmless fellow. But I've never met anyone who much likes Antonio, quite aside from his compulsive tendency to kick and spit at passing Jews. We want for Shylock's antagonist a somewhat more engaging merchant of Venice, who has something other than his Christianity to recommend him. Leslie Fiedler once wrote that Antonio was a "projection of the author's private distress," which counts as interesting guesswork but no more. Various critics have found Antonio to be a gull, a Christ figure, a self-victimizer, and much else, and clearly he is rather an ambiguous character. But all that makes him vivid and memorable is the quality of the mutual hatred he shares with Shylock. As a hater, he is outclassed by Shylock, but then he achieves a certain stature by coming up with the idea of the forced conversion. That, and the notorious pound of flesh near his heart, are what matter about him, and one has to question whether Shakespeare, for whatever reason, failed to do enough with the interior Antonio.

However problematic, *The Merchant of Venice* essentially is a romantic comedy, and pathos is alien to it, as alien as Shylock the Jew. I myself find little pathos in Shylock, and am not moved by his "Hath not a Jew" litany, since what he is saying there is now of possible interest only to wavering skinheads and similar sociopaths. Perhaps it was a revelation for Shakespeare's audience, but it had better not be such for any audience now. Shylock matters where he is most formidable, as when he faces the Duke of Venice, and insists that he will have his bond. Let us dismiss the notion, Northrop Frye's weakest, that Shylock speaks for the Old Testament and Portia for the merciful New Covenant. Frye was a great critic but not when he mixed criticism with being a Low Church clergyman, just as T. S. Eliot's criticism did not benefit from his High Church proclivities. Deuteronomy forbids what Shylock seeks to do, and may God (and democracy) save me from Portia's mercy! Portia is dangerously theatrical, and not just when she is cross-dressing. She shares this trait with her lover, Bassanio, and with her rival, Antonio. Shylock oddly is not at all theatrical, dramatically superb as he is until his unlikely conversion. His menace and his now-lost comic force depend upon the contrast between his monomaniacal sincer-

ity and the engaging frivolity of Portia's Venetian smart set. To reduce him to contemporary theatrical terms, Shylock would be an Arthur Miller protagonist displaced into a Cole Porter musical, Willy Loman wandering about in *Kiss Me Kate*.

Shakespeare specialized in such displaced spirits, and in this one regard Shylock has affinities with a strikingly varied company that includes Malvolio, Caliban, Lear's Fool, Barnardine, and even an aspect of Falstaff. Malvolio, in a play by Ben Jonson, almost would be Jonson, but in *Twelfth Night*, his displacement makes him the comic butt. I assume that Shylock began in *The Merchant of Venice* as a similar comic figure, in Shakespeare's design, but Shylock kindled Shakespeare's imagination and became enlarged beyond comedy, though into menace rather than pathos. The stimulus for Shylock's metamorphosis had to be Marlowe's Barabas, who had been haunting Shakespeare since his beginnings as a dramatist.

Shylock is an anti-Barabas, turned inward, as much a deep psyche as Barabas is a cartoon. Shakespeare's imitations of Barabas, Aaron the Moor and Richard III, do homage to Marlowe, but Shylock exposes Barabas as a mere caricature, however brilliant and ferocious. "I'll show you the Jew," Shakespeare says in reply to Marlowe, and so, alas, he has, to the everlasting harm of the actual Jewish people. This is hardly to say that Shylock is a valid representation of a Jew, let alone the Jew, but it does acknowledge the scandalous authority of Shakespeare in world culture, an authority that just this once is more of a sorrow than it is a benefit. *The Jew of Malta* is still a lively romp, much admired by T. S. Eliot, though I suspect for the wrong reasons, since Eliot doubtless treasured it as an anti-Semitic farce, which it is not. Its Christians and Muslims come off far worse than Barabas, since they would be just as wicked if they could but lack Barabas's genius for evil. Marlowe's Jew is simply Christopher Marlowe gone all out into lunatic zest and diabolic energy, overturning all values and sending up everything and everyone. A great holiday from reality, *The Jew of Malta* exalts active evil over passive good, and can be called the *Ubu Roi* of its time, the first Pataphysical drama. In his stage directions, Jarry remarked: "The action takes place nowhere—that is to say, in Poland," perhaps the first of modern Polish jokes. In the same spirit, Marlowe's action (such as it is)

takes place in Malta—that is to say, nowhere. Marlowe had no literary or historical sources for *The Jew of Malta*, which could take place almost anywhere in the Mediterranean, in any one of several centuries, but only after Machiavel, who wonderfully steps forward in the play's prologue, to urge our acclaim of Barabas. Like his master, Machiavel, Marlowe's Jew is obsessed with "policy"—that is, with principles that undo Christ. The demoniac Barabas, madly exulting in his wickedness, has nothing in common with the bitter Shylock, whose revenge focuses so narrowly upon Antonio.

Shakespeare works assiduously to exclude any Marlovian element from Shylock, but that inevitably entails a journey to the Shylockian interior. Barabas is free of all inwardness; Shylock, in recoil, is so concentrated in his inward power that he reduces Portia and her friends, and even Antonio, to what can look like exercises in irony. The phenomenon of a "real" person entrapped in a play, surrounded by speaking shadows, is strongest in *Hamlet*, evidently by design. Yet the aesthetic experiment of the Pirandello-like mode, perfected in *Hamlet*, is first ventured in *The Merchant of Venice*, where the ontological weight of Shylock, from his first appearance through his last, places him as a representation of reality far distaining every other character in the play. Shylock, equivocal as he must be, is our best clue for tracing the process by which Shakespeare outdid Marlowe, and in doing so invented or reinvented the human.

Barabas is exuberant, but he is a monster, not a man. Shakespeare's obsessed Shylock is compulsive enough in his hatred of Antonio so that he would have performed monstrously, but for Portia, yet Shylock is no monster but an overwhelming persuasion of a possible human being. Shylock matters most not just in the historical world of anti-Semitism, but also in the inner world of Shakespeare's development, because no previous figure in the plays has anything like Shylock's strength, complexity, and vital potential. Shylock's pathos can be termed his *potentia*, his possible largeness on the scale of being. That so resourceful a spirit should have reduced itself to a lust for weighing out a pound of Antonio's flesh upon a literal scale is the most terrible of Shakespeare's ironies in this comedy of ironies.

There remains Shylock's largest puzzle, at least for me: Is he the first radical Shakespearean instance of Hobgoblin run off with the garland of

Apollo? Is Shylock of the literary race of Falstaff and of Dickens's Pickwick, the tribe in which Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Hamlet share with Falstaff the highest eminence? Can Shakespeare be said to have lost control of Shylock? Nothing after all sounds odder than to call Shylock a comic villain, like the zestful Barabas, even though *The Merchant of Venice*, however shaded, is still a comedy, and the Jewish moneylender is certainly its villain. In refusing to create another Aaron the Moor or Richard III, both imitations of Barabas, Shakespeare molded Shylock into someone rich and strange, in several senses. Barabas's principal affect is self-delight, a joy provoked by his own triumphant and antic villainy. Aaron and Richard Crookback also enjoy themselves to the highest degree, but Shylock takes little pleasure in himself or anything else, despite his pride in his self-identity. Critics frequently mark the sadness that is common to Antonio and to Shylock, an involuntary link between good haters of each other. Though the sadness be mutual, the causes are very different; Antonio, whatever his relations with Bassanio may have been, must lose him to Portia, while Shylock evidently has long mourned his wife Leah, mother of the insufferable Jessica, the Venetian Jewish princess who gets what she deserves in her playboy, Lorenzo. Shakespeare does not clarify Shylock's relationship to his thieving daughter, but he is certainly better off without her, and is accurate enough in grieving equally for his ducats and their appropriator.

We adore Barabas, Aaron, and even Richard III because their asides make us their accomplices. Shakespeare, to prevent this, never allows us to be alone with Shylock. Barabas dissembles, and consciously always gives a performance; Shylock is massively, frighteningly sincere and single-minded. He never acts a part: he *is* Shylock. Though this endows him with immense expressive force, it also makes him dreadfully vulnerable, and inevitably metamorphoses him into the play's scapegoat. He is capable of shattering irony, particularly in his speeches to the Duke, but the comedy's largest irony makes him its victim. Portia is the privileged ironist of *The Merchant of Venice*, but she becomes a brutal ironist at Shylock's expense, though not as brutal as the good Antonio, who offers Shylock a choice between a pauper's execution and a Christian's survival as a retired

moneylender, since a converted Shylock by definition cannot engage in a purely Jewish business.

Shakespeare, rather more subtly than Marlowe, shows that though the Christians (except for Gratiano) are more refined than Shylock, they are hardly more merciful. Portia is a great charmer, but then Bassanio, Lorenzo, Nerissa, and Jessica are also charming, if rather emptier than Portia. Shylock is a candidate for the least charming character in all of Shakespeare, yet he fascinates us, and for reasons that transcend his transparent villainy. His language, an extraordinary instrument, had to impress Shakespeare as a dramatic breakthrough for the poet-playwright. We do not encounter Shylock until Act I, Scene iii, after we already know Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia, and we first hear Shylock speaking a virtuoso prose culminating in his refusal of Bassanio's civil invitation to dinner:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the
Nazarite conjured the devil into: 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.

[I.iii.29--33]

The reference to the Gospel of Mark, like the one to Luke when Shylock sees Antonio coming, provides the odd detail that Shakespeare's Jew has read the enemy Scripture. And indeed Shylock is a formidable polemicist against Christianity, particularly against what passes for Christian ethics in Venice. Less inflammatory than Marlowe's Jew, Shylock is at least as stubbornly loyal to his people as Barabas is, making his consent to the final, forced conversion almost absurdly inconsistent. His first speech in verse, a rare aside, invokes an archaic enmity, reaching back far beyond Antonio and Shylock:

If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
(Even there where merchants most do congregate)

On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest: cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!

[I.iii.41-47]

Shylock asserts his identity as *the Jew*, inheritor of the persecuted pride of fifteen centuries, in lines that burn with a terrifying spiritual rancor, and that are animated by what must be called a formidable spiritual intelligence. I greatly regret agreeing with the resentful legions of cultural materialists and cultural poetics, all of whom have a particular grudge against the criticism of E.M.W. Tillyard, but no one ever has been more mistaken on Shylock than Tillyard, who allowed himself to speak of Shylock's "spiritual stupidity," and of Antonio's "disinterested kindness." That was in 1965, but it never seems too late in the day for English anti-Semitism to manifest itself. Disinterested kicking and spitting we can set aside; Shylock's spirit is diseased, distorted by hatred, however justified, but Shylock's intelligence, in any sphere, is unquestionable. He would not be so dreadfully dangerous as he is were he not a psychologist of some genius, a precursor of the great critic Iago, and of the superb nihilist Edmund in *King Lear*.

Shylock's companion in hatred is Antonio, whose anti-Semitism, though appropriate to the play's Venice, nevertheless is more viciously intense than anyone else's, even Gratiano's. Homosexual anti-Semitism is now too peculiar a malady for us to understand; from Proust onward the situations of Jews and homosexuals have tended to converge, symbolically and sometimes literally, as in Nazi Germany. Venice and Belmont alike float upon money, and Antonio's attempt to distinguish between his mercantilism and Shylock's usury persuades nobody. The merchant and the Jew perform a murderous dance of masochist and sadist, murderess and murderer, and the question of which is the merchant and which the Jew is resolved only by the unbelievable conversion. Antonio wins and has nothing except money; Shylock loses (and deserves to lose) and has nothing, not even an identity. We cannot interpret his "I am content" because we cannot get out of our ears his two greatest speeches, each directed against

Venice—the “gaping pig” rhapsody and the oration on Venetian slavery. Neither speech is necessary for comic completion, and neither is an exercise in pathos. Shakespeare drives his creation to its limit, as if to discover just what kind of character he has limned in Shylock, a night piece that was his best until he revised Hamlet from another wily trickster to a new kind of man.

The transformation of Shylock from a comic villain to a heroic villain (rather than a hero-villain, like Barabas) shows Shakespeare working without precedents, and for dramatic motives very difficult to surmise. Shylock always has been a great role: one thinks of Macklin, Kean, and Irving, though there does not appear to have been an overwhelming performance in our own time. I could never come to terms with Olivier’s suave philo-Semitic Shylock, who seemed to emanate from Freud’s Vienna and not at all from Shakespeare’s Venice. The top hat and black tie had replaced the Jewish gaberdine, and the powerful speeches of menace were modulated into civilization and its discontents. Though the effect of this was quietly and persuasively unrealistic, the context for Shylock’s passionate nihilism seemed withdrawn when the shocking lines came forth:

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 humour, —is it answer’d?
 What if my house be troubled with a rat,
 And I be pleas’d to give ten thousand ducats
 To have it ban’d? 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’t’h’ nose,
 Cannot contain their urine—for affection
 [] 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 rend’red
 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 can I give no reason, nor I will not,
 More than a lodg’d hate, and a certain loathing
 I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
 A losing suit against him!—are you answered?

[IV.i.40–62]

The missing word is something like “master,” and since Shylock’s “affection” primarily means an innate antipathy, while his “passion” means any authentic feeling, he thus portrays himself, quite ironically, as being unable to govern his own will. But Shakespeare’s irony goes against Shylock, since Shylock is playing the Christian’s game, and cannot win at it: “A lodg’d hate, and a certain loathing” is an excellent definition of anti-Semitism, and Shylock, out of control, has become what he beheld in Antonio, a Jewish terrorist responding to incessant anti-Jewish provocations. But the images of Shylock’s speech are more memorable than is his defense of his own vagaries. Antonio’s anti-Shylockism and Shylock’s anti-Antonioism are parallel instances to the madness of those who lose control when they encounter a gaping pig, become insane at seeing a harmless necessary cat, or involuntarily urinate when the bagpipe sings. What Shylock defiantly celebrates is compulsiveness for its own sake, or traumatic caprice. As a negative psychologist, Shakespeare’s Jew prepares us for the abysses of the will in greater Shakespearean villains to come, but Shakespeare has divested Shylock of the grandeur of negative transcendence that will inform Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth. It is the “gaping pig” speech, more than the wounded cry “I will have my bond,” that exposes Shylock’s emptying-out of his self.

We know next to nothing about the dynamics of Shakespeare’s personal relationships, if any, to the great roles he composed. The pattern of the Falstaff–Hal ambivalence seems not unlike the ambivalence sketched in the Sonnets, while the image of Shakespeare’s son Hamnet Shakespeare may

in some still unknown way contribute to the enigmas of Prince Hamlet. It is scarcely conceivable that Shylock was any kind of a personal burden to Shakespeare, who essentially belongs to his age, just this once, in regard to the Jews. Since he is not Marlowe, writing a bloody farce, Shakespeare is either vicious or ignorant (or both) when he has Shylock urge Tubal to meet him at the synagogue in order to work out the details for the judicial murder of Antonio. Still, both the viciousness and the ignorance were generic, which does not make them more forgivable. The plot required a Jew, Marlowe's Jew lingered on the stage, and Shakespeare needed to fight free of Marlowe. I surmise that Shakespeare's pride at having done just that increased his dramatic investment in Shylock, and helps account for the most astonishing speech in the play. When the Duke asks: "How shalt thou hope for mercy rend'ring none?" Shylock replies with preternatural power, invoking the ultimate foundation for the Venetian state economy, which is the ownership of slaves:

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 burthens? let their beds
 Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
 Be season'd with such viandes? 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.89–103]

It is all too easy to get this speech wrong, as some recent Marxist critics have done. Shylock has no sympathy for the slaves, and he seems quite

unaware of the irony his citation of the slaves evokes, since as a Jew he annually celebrates the Passover, with its opening reminder that his ancestors were slaves in Egypt until God liberated them. It is never wise to assume that Shakespeare did not know anything that was available in or near his world; his curiosity was unappeasable, his energy for information boundless. Shylock really does *mean* his ghastly parallel: one pound of Antonio's flesh is enslaved to him, and he will have his bond. What startles and delights us is Shylock's shrewd indictment of Christian hypocrisy, which he makes earlier in the play, but not with this shocking force. The Venetian slaves, like all slaves, are so many pounds of flesh, no more, no less. And in the context of Gingrich–Clinton America, the satire still works: our pious reformers of Welfare are determined to see that the descendants of our slaves do not lie down in beds as soft as theirs, and season their palates with such viands, let alone marry the heirs of the Contract with America. Yet Shylock does not care about his own fiercest point; he is, alas, not a prophet, just a would-be torturer and murderer. It is Shakespeare, exploiting the role of Shylock, who slyly provides the material for moral prophecy, which no one in this comedy is prepared or enabled to make.

Shylock, then, is a field of force larger than Shylock himself can encompass, and Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, as in the later *Measure for Measure*, severely qualifies his comedy by opening onto vistas that comedy rarely can accommodate. Unfortunately, Shakespeare's intimations do not alleviate the savagery of his portrait of the Jew, nor can we suppose they were meant to, for Shakespeare's own audience anyway. The Holocaust made and makes *The Merchant of Venice* unplayable, at least in what appear to be its own terms. With some relief, I turn to the question of what Shylock did for Shakespeare the poet-playwright. The surprising answer is that by completing his emancipation from Marlowe, Shylock made it possible to go on to *Henry IV, Part One*, with its two characters who surpass even Shylock in ambivalence: Prince Hal, and the height of Shakespeare's invention of the human, Sir John Falstaff.

Shakespeare's sense of ambivalence is not Freud's, though clearly Freud, himself so ambivalent about Shakespeare, founds his account of ambivalence upon materials initially supplied by Shakespeare. Primal ambivalence, whether in Shakespeare or in Freud, need not result from social over-

determinations. The antipathy between Antonio and Shylock transcends Jew baiting; Gratiano is an instance of that Christian sport, but Antonio cannot be let off so easily. His ambivalence, like Shylock's, is murderous, and unlike Shylock's, it is successful, for Antonio does end Shylock the Jew, and gives us Shylock the New Christian. Freudian ambivalence is simultaneous love and hatred directed toward the same person; Shakespearean ambivalence, subtler and more frightening, diverts self-hatred into hatred of the other, and associates the other with lost possibilities of the self. Hamlet, whatever his protestations, is truly not interested in revenge, since no one could be more aware that in revenge all persons blend into one another. To chop down Claudius is to become old Hamlet, the ghostly father and not the intellectual prince. It is horrible to say it, but the broken New Christian Shylock is preferable to a successful butcher of a Shylock, had Portia not thwarted him. What would be left for Shylock after hacking up Antonio? What is left for Antonio after crushing Shylock? In Shakespearean ambivalence, there can be no victories.

A. P. Rossiter, in his *Angel with Horns* (posthumously published in 1961), said that ambivalence was peculiarly the dialectic of Shakespeare's history plays, defining Shakespearean ambivalence as one mode of irony or another. Irony is indeed so pervasive in Shakespeare, in every genre, that no comprehensive account of it is possible. What in *The Merchant of Venice* is not ironical, including the Belmont celebration of Act V? The coexistence in Venice of Antonio and of Shylock is an unbearable irony, an ambivalence so acute that it must be ended, either by the barbarous mutilation of Antonio or the barbarous Christian revenge upon Shylock, who evidently is scarcely to be allowed time for instruction before he is baptized. Butchery or baptism is a nice dialectic: the merchant of Venice survives, but the Jew of Venice is immolated, since as a Christian he cannot continue to be a moneylender. Shakespeare's one law is change, and neither Shylock nor Antonio can change. Antonio darkens further and Shylock breaks, but then he is one man against a city.

I end by repeating that it would have been better for the last four centuries of the Jewish people had Shakespeare never written this play. So shadowed and equivocal is *The Merchant of Venice*, though, that I cannot be

certain that there is any way to perform it now and recover Shakespeare's own art of representing Shylock. Shylock is going to go on making us uncomfortable, enlightened Jew and enlightened Christian, and so I close by wondering if Shylock did not cause Shakespeare more discomfort than we now apprehend. Malvolio is horribly treated, but that appears to be a theatrical in-joke directed against Ben Jonson. Parolles deserves exposure, but the humiliation displayed is withering. Lucio, whose caustic sanity gives us something against which to perspectivize the madneses of *Measure for Measure*, is compelled by the dubious Duke to marry a whore, for having dared to tell the truth about the Duke of dark corners. Shylock surpasses all these in the outrage visited upon him, and Antonio's turn of the screw, calling for instant conversion, is Shakespeare's own invention, and no part of the pound-of-flesh tradition. Antonio's revenge is one thing, and Shakespeare's quite another. The playwright, capacious soul, would be aware that the gratuitous outrage of a forced conversion to Venetian Christianity surpasses all boundaries of decency. Shylock's revenge upon Shakespeare is that the Jew's dramatic consistency is destroyed when he accepts Christianity rather than death.

Shakespeare thus demeans Shylock, but who can believe Shylock's "I am content"? I remember once observing that Shylock's agreeing 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 can see Falstaff as a monk than Shylock as a Christian. Contemplate Shylock at Christian prayer, or confessing to a priest. It will not do; Shakespeare was up to mischief, but you have to be an anti-Semitic scholar, Old Historicist or New, to appreciate fully the ambition of such mischief.