

John Mahon et al ed
The Merchant
of Venice:
New Critical
Essays —

Shylock is Content
A Study in Salvation

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Late in act 4, scene 1 of Shakespeare's provocative play *The Merchant of Venice*, its most problematic and controversial character, Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, finds himself in a peripety, a reversal of circumstance and fortune. He believes he has successfully conspired against the merchant Antonio's life by demanding the penalty agreed upon in a loan that Antonio has failed to repay in the contracted time period. That penalty is a pound of flesh from the area closest to Antonio's heart. This penalty will surely result in Antonio's death, but Shylock has insisted on that penalty alone, and has refused generous and highly profitable alternatives. When Portia, posing as Balthazar, turns the tables on him, essentially finding him guilty of conspiracy to commit murder, Shylock finds his own life threatened by the state. The state proves less bloodthirsty than Shylock. The Duke pardons his life. Antonio foregoes the monetary penalty he could exact from Shylock, stipulating three conditions: Shylock must let Antonio manage half of his estate on behalf of Jessica and Lorenzo, he must become a Christian, and he must will the rest of his estate to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death. Shylock agrees to these provisions, stating: "I am content" (4.1.394).¹

Never have directors, actors, or audiences believed him. In every production of the play that I have seen or about which I have heard or read, Shylock's line has been perceived as constrained, forced out of him. But suppose that perception is mistaken. Suppose Shylock means what he says, and really is content. Suppose the words are freely uttered and reflect Shylock's actual state of mind and soul at the time he speaks them. Is such a reading possible? Does it *work* in the play? I would like to suggest that this reading of the line more thoroughly accounts for and accommodates the other details of the play than any of the readings that have so far prevailed, and makes apparent a depth and richness in the play that is otherwise lost.

I concede that the thesis stated above represents not just a minority perspective, but a virtually unique one. Before developing it, it seems only fair to provide a quick summary of the perspectives that have prevailed over the years. The play does not seem to have been very popular in Shakespeare's lifetime, or through the rest of the seventeenth century, and through part of the eighteenth century it was supplanted by a version that made Shylock a stereotypical villain. Even when Shakespeare's text was restored, however, Shylock was seen as the villain. The role seems to have been played by an actor wearing a red wig, thus signaling the audience that Shylock was a stock character, a Vice figure to be mocked and scorned (Alter 29). Since the Romantic era he has increasingly been seen in a more sympathetic light, as a man, to borrow a phrase from *King Lear*, "more sinned against than sinning." Some productions have even presented him as approaching the status of tragic hero. This shift in the perception of Shylock has been amply documented in numerous sources, and textual cases have been made for portrayals at both ends of the spectrum.

One making a case for the portrayal of Shylock as a stock villain would point to his deadly, or at very least malicious, intentions towards Antonio even before Antonio appears on stage: his exaggerated miserliness except when given an opportunity to shed Antonio's blood; his rejection by his daughter, Jessica; his hatred of music; his obvious intention to carry out the penalty of the contract rather than accept far more than the originally contracted price in payment; even his gratuitous cruelty in whetting his knife on the sole of his shoe during the trial scene. These textual details and others testify to Shylock's villainy, and many details indicate murderous intent on his part. So, the view that Shylock is a straightforward villain is capable of defense, and he has frequently been played in this manner down through the years.

At the other end of the spectrum is the more recent and now dominant view that Shylock is to be viewed with at least some degree of sympathy. This perspective does not, by and large, deny Shylock's behavior and intentions. Rather, it views his deeds and intentions as provoked and therefore justified by the treatment he has received over the years by the Christians among whom he has lived. One version of this perspective sees Shakespeare as intending to portray Shylock as vicious only because of the treatment he has received, and therefore credits Shakespeare with writing a dark condemnation of Christian hypocrisy. A more extreme version of this view is that Shakespeare intended to write a play portraying Shylock as a simple and contemptible villain, and unwittingly revealed the prejudice and anti-Semitism present in himself and in his time, thereby producing an even darker condemnation of Christian hypocrisy. These views conclude that, whatever Shakespeare's intentions, the play must now be read and experienced as one in which Shylock has ample grounds for his anger and murderous intent, having been driven to rage by a vicious, cruel society that hypocritically calls itself Christian.

These perspectives, too, have textual justification. Antonio freely admits to having spat upon and kicked Shylock in the past, and admits to a willingness to do so again whether or not Shylock agrees to lend him money. Lorenzo has no compunction about making off with Shylock's wealth as well as with his daughter. Salerio and Solanio take obvious and excessive delight in baiting Shylock, and are pleased at his discomfiture. Shylock is frequently addressed disparagingly as "Jew," and sometimes even as a devil. This perspective gives weight to the argument for Shylock's humanity found in the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. Without doubt this perspective can indeed point to a good deal of Christian hypocrisy in the play.

Of course, one's perspective on Shylock's character influences one's views concerning the other characters in the play. If Shylock is a villain, then Antonio must be the opposite, and Portia must be praised for preserving Antonio's life and thwarting Shylock's malevolent scheme. On the other hand, if Shylock is a victim of Christian hypocrisy, then Antonio, the man who has spat upon him, looks like a more malignant force, and Portia begins to look like the archetype of Christian hypocrisy. Naturally the details of the play can be interpreted variously depending on the perspective from which they are viewed.

The recent trend has been to interpret the actions of Portia and the other Christians in a bitterly negative light. Leslie Fiedler sees Portia as carrying out "in a ritual of Jew-baiting not only her own anti-Semitism, but that of all the other characters in the play" (66). He sees her as motivated by hedonism rather than Christian principles (87), claims that "the truth of the play is revenge and retribution," (96), and asserts that "mercy is the weapon with which Shylock is clubbed over the head" (100). Finally, he has this description of Portia's behavior during the trial scene: "Feeling her claws in Shylock's flesh, she drives them deeper and deeper in order to exact her own pound of flesh" (101). In short, Fiedler finds Portia guilty of carrying out on a figurative level the plan that Shylock only hopes to carry out on the physical one.

Fiedler has plenty of company in his condemnation of Portia and the action of the play. Just a few examples will suffice to reveal the general tenor of this vein of critical commentary. A *New York Times* editorial described Portia as "the playgirl of the Western World," and considered her "quality of mercy" speech as "the ultimate hypocrisy" (Danson 4). Another critic contends that in the trial scene "The Christians out-Shylock Shylock as the letter of the law defeats the letter of the law in ways oblivious to its spirit and destructive of the human spirit" (Lyon 107) due to "the cruel hypocrisy of Portia's excessive justice" (Lyon 116). Harold Goddard contends that Portia, during the trial scene, tortures all parties, friend and foe alike, for no better reason than to create "a spectacle, a dramatic triumph with herself at the center" (35), and concludes that "Shylock's conviction that Christianity and revenge are synonyms is confirmed" (35). Thus this view renders a negative

judgment of the characters, the action, and the play itself, in reaction against the more traditional view that the play is a comedy that ends in harmony as good triumphs over evil.

Though the traditional and more recent views of the play differ in most respects, both, interestingly enough, find a significant point of agreement: that Shylock is not telling the truth when he says "I am content." Both see these words as forced from his mouth to save his life now that he has been so thoroughly defeated and destroyed. The traditional perspective reads this line as indicative of Shylock's final, well deserved defeat, his surrender, and hence the victory of Portia and company. The more recent perspective hears the line as the final evidence of Shylock's utter destruction at the hands of vicious Christians. Critics have uniformly seen Shylock's conversion as "forced" (Engle 36; Alter 32). Most have seen him as "a broken man" (Cohen). Those who do not see him as absolutely broken tend to claim that the words "I am content" come out of "a profound weariness" (Danson 168). Even critics not particularly inclined to defend Shylock note that an actor playing the role of Shylock is justified in saying the line in question "as despairingly or angrily as he can" (Kerrigan 134). The mildest claim that I have been able to find with respect to Shylock's agreement to Antonio's terms is that he submits only to preserve his wealth (Hamill 241). Virtually no reading sees the words as freely uttered and reflective of Shylock's actual state of mind and soul. Nonetheless, that is precisely my claim. Shylock speaks the truth when he says he is content. The words not only do not signal his destruction, they proclaim his salvation.

As a preliminary step in justifying my reading of the line in question, let us back up a bit to consider some pertinent details of Shylock's behavior and character early in the play, moving as quickly as possible to the trial scene of 4.1. Shylock has certainly been abused in the past; he argues that Antonio has mistreated him, and Antonio makes no attempt to deny Shylock's allegations that Antonio has called "me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine" (1.3.111-12). In responding, Antonio admits to the truth of all of Shylock's charges. Moreover, he volunteers that he is likely to treat him so again, and warns that Shylock should not misunderstand his request for a loan: Shylock is to consider Antonio his enemy, and to keep this thought in mind as he loans him money. If Antonio does not repay the loan on time, he can "exact the penalty" (1.3.137) with a clear conscience. Antonio holds Shylock in contempt and thinks himself secure in his superiority.

For his part, even before Antonio's entrance Shylock has informed the audience that he hates Antonio and yearns to revenge himself for past wrongs, saying, "If I can catch him once upon the hip, / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (1.3.46-47). When Shylock offers to lend Antonio the money without interest, but with the "merry sport" (145) of a "pound of flesh" penalty for lack of payment, Antonio takes the offer as a generous

one, and accepts it in that spirit. Antonio is so sure of his financial situation that he does not fear the penalty; rather, he actually sees Shylock as having made a "Christian" gesture by providing a loan without interest. Nevertheless, the reader should not share Antonio's delusion. Whatever it might mean to "feed fat" his grudge (the phrase does take on suggestive overtones when we consider that the "merry sport" Shylock refers to would present Shylock with a pound of Antonio's flesh), Shylock means no good to Antonio, even if it is not certain at this point that he means to take Antonio's life. He has provided himself with a clause that he knows is unlikely to be invoked, but one that, if it does come to be invoked, can at the very least make Antonio squirm.

As the play continues, however, his mood darkens as he suffers at the hands of "Christians." His daughter runs away, taking treasure that belongs to Shylock. Christians, friends of Antonio, aid her. Christians like Salerio and Solanio delight in Shylock's discomfiture and publicly mock his pain. Having lost money through Jessica's flight, he learns that he is in danger of losing even more through Antonio's reverses, and whatever his intention previously, his thoughts toward Antonio certainly become bloody. 3.1, if it does not necessarily show us the moment in which Shylock's intentions turn to bloody revenge, at the very least shows that his intentions are now murderous, and that he justifies these intentions by referring to the treatment he has received.

After mocking and denouncing Shylock, Salerio has the poor judgment to ask whether Shylock knows if Antonio has suffered any reverses at sea. Of course, Shylock has heard stories that would indicate that he will lose not just the money that Jessica has run off with, but also the money he has loaned to Antonio, and he warns, three times, "Let him look to his bond" (3.1.47). Salerio is shocked to hear that Shylock intends to hold Antonio to the bond, noting that the flesh that is forfeit is not "good for" (52) anything, but Shylock responds that it will provide him with revenge. He justifies himself by repeating in essence the charges he lodged against Antonio in 1.3, claiming that all of the offenses against him stem from the fact that he is a Jew. It is possible to argue that the abuse of Shylock has been based instead on his occupation of usurer, and has been aggravated by Shylock's abrasive and bitter character, but we need not resolve that question here. Suffice it to say that Shylock feels a powerful anger not only against Antonio but against the Christians of Venice, that his anger can be justified by the treatment he has received, and that he finds himself in a position to gratify that anger against one particular Venetian, and indeed against the one Venetian he hates most, Antonio.

Shylock argues convincingly that he is a man like other men, feeling all of the same emotions that other men, notably Christians, feel, and claims that he has learned from Christians how to behave. He claims that Christians have taught him the efficacy of revenge, and he vows now to "execute" (3.1.72) the villainy that he has been taught. Shylock's words at the end of this speech

are of great importance in understanding the later trial scene, for he makes "Christian" behavior responsible for his own behavior. Having been taught to seek revenge, he does so. Having never been treated with compassion, having never experienced mercy, he has never *learned* to be merciful, and so he is incapable of exhibiting compassion. It is this consciousness that Shylock brings to the trial scene.

Before proceeding to that scene, one final preparatory stipulation must be made about Portia's role in that scene. Though not all audiences and critics have perceived it, it is crucial to understand that Portia enters the trial scene with the knowledge that can save Antonio. The logic of the play completely breaks down if we envision her as rushing to the courtroom without a foolproof plan to save Antonio, simply trusting to her wits. With Bassanio's dearest friend's life at risk, such a cavalier attitude would be inappropriate in the extreme, even within the confines of a comedy. Portia could not have so blithely replaced Bellario in court. Moreover, on this point the textual evidence is clear. Portia comes to court with Bellario's legal expertise, and we can see the proof in the law books that she uses late in the scene to confirm the penalty for directly and indirectly conspiring against the life of Antonio. The books are not simply props, and when Portia takes them up she immediately opens them to the statute that frees Antonio and damns Shylock. She could at any point bring the issue to a close by simply opening those books and pointing to the pertinent law, as she does very late in the scene, giving the Duke grounds to arrest Shylock immediately, preventing him from carrying out the penalty for forfeit of the bond.

The question then arises, why does Portia take so long to bring forth those books? Why does she allow everyone in court to linger so long in the belief that Antonio has no recourse within the law? Goddard has argued that Portia draws out the scene to indulge her ego and to torture Shylock (33). A more justified claim might be that she does so in order that Shylock's intention, directly and indirectly, to take Antonio's life, may be amply demonstrated to the court (Engle 35). While this last claim has real force, the scene unfolds as it does primarily because Portia wishes to provide mercy to Shylock, and wishes to teach him, and the rest of the court, the need for mercy. Furthermore, she succeeds.

The scene takes place in a Venetian court of justice, and justices are indeed present, but from the first moments of the scene the Duke himself presides, and from his first words we see that he is inclined toward Antonio and against Shylock. Before Shylock makes his appearance, the Duke expresses his sorrow for Antonio, and contends that he knows Shylock to be

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy. (4.1.4-6)

Accurate though the Duke's assessment may be, however, he speaks differently once Shylock is present to hear what he has to say. Having just stated his belief that Shylock is incapable of mercy, he tells him that he and the rest of the city believe that Shylock is only feigning his malice, intending to keep up the act until the last moment, at which point he will demonstrate his mercy. Interestingly, though Bassanio is present and ready and willing to pay off the debt at many times its value, the Duke tells Shylock that he expects Shylock not only to "loose the forfeiture" (23), but to "Forgive a moiety of the principal" (26) as well. One can be forgiven if one hears a note of threat in the Duke's closing line: "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew!" (34). The Duke, having made the audience aware of Shylock's lack of pity, addresses him in such a way that he can pretend to believe in Shylock's kindly intentions while pressuring him to relent.

Shylock refuses to be intimidated. He defends the legality of his contract, and points out persuasively that if the people of Venice can presume to hold contracts that make human beings their property, then he can surely lay claim to a pound of flesh. What he wants, he maintains, is justice, and much has been made of this claim, but his stated concern for justice is no more honest than the Duke's stated belief that Shylock will be merciful. Shylock wants revenge, and he sees the letter of the law as providing him with the opportunity to take that revenge with impunity, and revenge not only against Antonio, but against all of the Christians of Venice, who have aligned themselves with Antonio and against Shylock. He believes that he can make Antonio's friends and the Duke himself watch helplessly as he publicly torments Antonio, as Shylock himself has been publicly tormented.

Into this hotbed of hate steps Portia, disguised as Balthazar, coming to Venice "furnished with" (157) Bellario's learned opinion in the matter. After being introduced to the litigants, Portia asks whether Antonio admits to the bond. When he does so, she turns to Shylock, stating "Then must the Jew be merciful" (182). It is clear in the context, that is, in her subsequent lines, that what she means is that what this situation *needs* is mercy from Shylock. Shylock, however, hears her words differently, as kindred in spirit to the Duke's earlier "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew." He thinks she is saying he must be forced to be merciful, but Portia is quick to set him straight, with her famous speech on mercy, which demands close examination.

She turns to him and notes that

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (184-87)

Responding to Shylock's misperception, she tells him that mercy cannot be forced, but must be given freely; when it is so given it has healing, restorative

powers both for the one who gives and for the one who receives. It functions like rain, nurturing, feeding, making things grow, bringing life. Portia steps entirely outside of the mindset of the men in court, all of whom are interested in forcing, pushing, constraining to get their will, reminding Shylock and everyone in court that the very rain that sustains life cannot be constrained, but is received as a blessing.

She goes on to note that "'Tis mightiest in the mightiest" (188), and makes reference to the power of the "throned monarch," "his crown," "His sceptre," "the force of temporal power," and "the dread and fear of kings" (189–92), but points out that mercy is "above this sceptered sway" (193). She is talking to Shylock, who seems to wield the power of "justice" in this situation, but her words have a broader application and a larger audience as well. Her words pertain readily to the Duke, since he is the only "monarch" present. They can also be applied to the Christians present, since the dominance of their religion has given them *de facto* power over nonbelievers like Shylock.

Portia tells Shylock and her larger audience that mercy "is an attribute to God himself" (195), and warns him against his often-asserted claim of justice, because

... in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. (199–202)

Knowing already that Shylock's trust in the law is unwise, she reminds him that justice is not the best thing, and that all human beings need something more than justice. What Portia tries to teach him is true Christian charity, but Shylock's memories of abuse from Christians and the intensity of his thirst for revenge make him deaf to her plea.

Portia concludes the speech on a less elevated note, reminding Shylock of the specific case being considered:

I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (202–205)

It might be and has been argued that Portia deliberately and cruelly undermines the thrust of her argument by suggesting to Shylock that he will win his case if he persists in pressing it and rejecting mercy, but that argument misunderstands the point of the speech, which is that the greatness of mercy shines most clearly when it is exercised by those with the power to inflict harm, by those who have justice on their side and reject it for something

higher and better. It is not Portia's intention to overwhelm Shylock with oratorical power that blinds him to the legal strength of his case; rather she wishes him to choose mercy because it is best for everyone. We must remember that Portia can end the trial at any moment because of the legal evidence that she already possesses that can turn Shylock from accuser to accused. She is not trying to save Antonio throughout the scene, or at least she is not trying to save his life; she is trying to save Shylock, and the souls of Antonio and the Christians of Venice. Imagine for a moment what good feeling Shylock would have generated had he been touched by Portia's speech and exercised mercy. Had he done so, the legal case against him would have disappeared, and Portia would have had no occasion to open those books and level her charge against him. How could anyone argue that Shylock conspired against the life of Antonio, when, of his own free will, he granted Antonio his life? Rebuffed in her first attempt, Portia continues her efforts to save Shylock, though for a very long time he is deaf to her pleas. It proves fortunate for Shylock that others in the court do listen to her message of mercy and heed it.

But Shylock, having learned only cruelty and revenge from his encounters with Christians, is untouched by Portia's words, responding "My deeds upon my head!" (206), deliberately and directly rejecting the principle of mercy in favor of a strict and unrelenting justice. Portia, of course, knows that Bassanio is present in court and willing to pay any kind of financial price Shylock might name. He states his willingness to pay ten times the borrowed sum, and pleads that if that price does not suffice, it is clear that "malice bears down truth" (214). Surely malice does bear down mercy and reason at this point, but Bassanio would have the Duke "Wrest once the law to your authority" (215), denying Shylock's pursuit of the penalty for nonpayment of his debt by pure power rather than by justice. Portia quite correctly rejects this alternative, noting that one cannot just play at justice, accepting it when one approves the result, and twisting it when one does not. At the risk of excessive repetition, let us note again that Portia can make her case against Shylock whenever she wants to; if she wanted to catch him and torture him, what better time to break out the law books than this time? "My deeds upon my head!" almost demands the response: "So be it. You have conspired against Antonio's life, and now your life is forfeit. Your deeds demand death." Yet Portia still does not turn to those books.

Instead, she casts about for a better resolution, bidding him to show mercy, twice reminding him that he can profit greatly even on a simple financial level, by relenting. She asks him to "bid me tear the bond" (234), and again we must pause to consider her motivation. What happens if Shylock does tell Portia to tear up the bond? If he does so, again, the case that Portia knows can be made against Shylock disappears. It is precisely that bond and Shylock's insistence that the terms of the bond be carried through that comprise the case against him. Portia is asking Shylock to destroy the case

against him, but the desire for revenge still burns too hotly within him, and he cannot hear her.

He makes a maddeningly literalist response to each of her attempts to prod him in the direction of mercy. He insists that he cut Antonio's breast, the area closest to the heart, because the terms of the contract stipulate that it be done so. He rejects Portia's appeal that he provide a doctor, claiming that there is no such provision in the contract. Her comment that it "'Twere good you do so much for charity" (261) is met by rejection because "'tis not in the bond" (262). Shylock's insistence on the strict terms of the bond provides Portia with an opportunity to hammer home a lesson on the nature of justice, that message that she had stated earlier, that in the course of justice no man finds salvation. She shows him that he has erred in placing his faith in justice. She demonstrates that justice can not only strip him of his revenge, prevent him from accepting the threefold payment of the debt previously offered, deny him even the return of the original loan, and prevent him from leaving the site of his defeat, but also put him under sentence of death. The tables turned, she notes that he has placed himself at the mercy of the Duke, whom Shylock scorned as the scene opened.

The Duke demonstrates that if Shylock was not able to respond to the pull of Portia's speech on mercy, the Duke was. Shylock has given the Duke an opportunity to take revenge in his turn upon the man he has described as a "stony adversary, an inhuman wretch" (4), the man who has demeaned his court with his thirst for revenge, insisted that he will answer for his deeds, and claimed that he wants only justice. In an extraordinary display of mercy, the Duke grants Shylock his life before Shylock has even requested it. He even goes so far as to suggest that if Shylock behaves in a humble manner, he will refrain from claiming half of Shylock's wealth, but will settle for a fine instead. Portia points out that the Duke has it within his power to reduce his claims upon Shylock, but that he cannot impose any restrictions on Antonio's claim: Antonio is entitled to half of Shylock's wealth.

Before Antonio gets a chance to speak, Shylock rejects the Duke's proposed mercy, no doubt sure that Antonio, the man who has spat upon him in the past, will not miss this opportunity to torment him. He cries out

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that:
You take my house when you take the prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live. (374-77)

The speech is significant in several respects. First, it shows that a mere seventeen lines before the speech in which he says "I am content," Shylock is unrepentant and unredeemed. He is still defiant after he has received the mercy of the Duke, and he is not at all hesitant to say so. Why should we

think, then, that he is lying when he does come to say "I am content"? What justifies us in thinking that Shylock is not content when he claims to be, strange though it may seem to us? But if we accept the possibility of his contentment, what explains it? What happens between the time of his defiant speech daring the Duke to take his life, and his claim of contentment?

Only two things happen: Shylock's enemy Antonio is asked by Portia "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (378), and Antonio responds. If Shylock does not perceive Antonio's speech as merciful, why would his tone change so dramatically? Shylock's "I am content" cannot be understood as the final surrender of a beaten man, for nothing in Antonio's speech can be seen as worsening his fate. Yes, a twentieth-century audience can claim that a forced conversion is worse than death, but Shylock has just shown that he is willing to lose his life, so it cannot reasonably be argued that he is now willing to face any humiliation to preserve his life. No, something must happen to Shylock to dampen his defiance. Having told us earlier that Christians have taught him how to behave, and have taught him that revenge is to be sought upon one's enemies, Shylock discovers that he has more learning to do, because perhaps his primary and most profound teacher, Antonio, shows that he has learned a few things himself.

Portia's question to Antonio is pointed and direct: "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (378). Antonio has been a man willing to spit upon and kick Shylock because of his occupation, and since he has done so he has been forced to bare his breast to a knife, expecting to die, so what can be expected from him? If we expect him to exact revenge for his suffering, we are just expecting him to behave towards Shylock as he has in the past. Yet Antonio's actual response is not at all what we expect. Perhaps his own closeness to death, his own experience of humiliation at the hands of his enemy, has taught him a lesson. More likely, he too has heard Portia's speech on mercy not only with his ears but with his heart and soul as well, and has been touched by it. After all, both the Duke and Antonio profess to be Christians, and so Portia's speech should speak directly to them. Shylock has told us already that he has learned how to behave from men such as Antonio, and now he sees and hears an Antonio unlike the man he has known.

Antonio takes seriously Portia's question about what mercy he can render Shylock, and provides an answer that Shylock can and does accept as merciful. Before Antonio can respond, Gratiano breaks in with a response along the lines of what Shylock must expect: "A halter gratis! Nothing else, for God sake" (379). We recognize the irony of Gratiano's claim that Shylock should be hanged for God's sake, but surely that is just the kind of response that Shylock's dealings with Christians have led him to expect. This time, however, the Christian who has been his primary enemy responds in a new way.

Before Antonio speaks, Shylock has been granted his life, but one-half of his goods have been awarded to Antonio. The Duke has already conditionally

allowed that the other half, in law forfeit to the state, be retained by Shylock, minus a fine, but Shylock has seemingly thought such terms punishing enough that he mocks them and dares the Duke to take his life. In order for Shylock actually to be content with Antonio's mercy, and to agree to accept it, it would seem that he must find something of value in Antonio's words. He must see Antonio's mercy as genuine. With this point in mind, I suggest that when Antonio says

So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods, (4.1.380-81)

he is requesting that the Duke release Shylock even from the need to pay a fine. So, Antonio begs that Shylock be allowed to keep *all* of the money forfeit to the state. For his part, Antonio refuses to take *any* of Shylock's property as his own personal wealth, but will instead become trustee of one half of the estate, using it in behalf of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and her husband Lorenzo. All of this leads Antonio to say, in anticipation of Shylock, "I am content" (382). Critics do not seem to notice the generosity of such an act by a man who still thinks he has lost all of his ships and wealth. What people do notice are the "[t]wo things provided more" (386) that Antonio requires: that Shylock make Jessica and Lorenzo his heirs when he dies, and that Shylock become a Christian.²

That last condition has aroused the wrath of contemporary audiences, but it defies logic to contend that this stipulation is one last outrageous bit of hypocrisy meant to further torment Shylock. Granted that conversion is a matter of the soul and cannot be forced; granted that no one in the court is in a position to know whether Shylock's conversion will touch his soul or not; granted that we are right in this day and age to leave religious belief to the individual and his conscience; granted that today such a stipulation must seem wrong. Even so, it is a strange and contrary reading to insist that Antonio's provision amounts to some kind of cruelty against Shylock. Antonio is a Christian himself, and so he is asking Shylock to be like him, to join his community. Certainly a Christian of that age would have seen such a conversion as opening up the possibility of salvation to Shylock, not further torture.

More to the point, though, how would Shylock hear Antonio's words? When all of his experience would lead him to expect the same kind of scorn and torment that he has received from Christians throughout his life, when he has done everything possible to *deserve* hatred and vicious treatment, a miracle takes place. Portia's speech about the quality of mercy has dropped down upon the Venetian court like a gentle rain indeed, like God's grace. It has caused mercy and forgiveness to grow in the hearts of two men whose treatment of Shylock had previously been anything but Christian. It has caused them to take the first step, to be better than they have been. The last thing Shy-

lock could ever have expected from Antonio is what he received; it covers over his wrath and defiance. Quietly, freely, he agrees to Antonio's terms.

And so Shylock speaks the truth when he says he is content. Short moments later, overwhelmed by the experience, he departs, never to be seen again in the play, but he does not depart as Laurence Olivier played him, with a final despairing cry of pain. He leaves in silence. As he says, he is not well, but he is on the road to health. The diseases of anger and lust for revenge have been removed, and tragedy has been averted, not only for Antonio, but also for all present, and Shylock too is included in the greater harmony of the play's message.

The healing force of mercy continues in the grand resolution of act 5. Bassanio, having vowed in 3.2 that he would die before giving up the ring given to him by Portia, having accepted the ring as the very sign of his marriage contract, having agreed that Portia could justly denounce him if he ever parted with the ring, finds himself held accountable for having given that ring away. The vows he made so comfortably and confidently seem to damn him, if the strict letter of the law is observed. But Bassanio is fortunate, for Portia is his judge, and she is not interested in strict justice. Antonio intercedes for Bassanio, begging mercy as Portia begged mercy for Antonio. Earlier in the play Antonio was willing to bind his body for Bassanio; now he is willing to bind his very soul, and it is fitting that he is willing to hold his soul forfeit to Portia, for it was Portia who restored it to him. The ring is given again; the marriage is intact. Harmonious music dominates the scene, for mercy rules.

Shylock's contentment allows the play as a whole to achieve the harmony discussed and displayed in act 5, and that is perhaps the most compelling argument in its favor. If Shylock is not content at the end of the trial scene, then the harmony of act 5 is a lie, and a vicious one at that. When has Shakespeare ever treated his audience in such a manner? Knowing so well the greatness of Shakespeare's soul, demonstrated in play after play, do we not owe him the most charitable reading we can provide? Has not Shakespeare throughout his career shown us how well he understands the worth and weight of mercy? Is it not better, when it is defensible textually, to choose the interpretation most in keeping with the spirit of the body of his work, rather than one which denies that spirit?

Notes

1. All quotations from the play come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1974).
2. In the introduction to his edition of the play, W. Moelwyn Merchant notes that Antonio proposes a different disposition for each half of the penalty. The court is first asked "To quit the fine for one half of his goods." "To quit for" is a curious grammatical use: if "quit" retains its meaning of "settling" or "quittance" (in Hamlet's sense a "quietus" or final settlement), it would seem that Shylock has

even the fine remitted. For the second half of Shylock's goods, which might have been awarded Antonio as the aggrieved party, Antonio renounces any claim he might have to possess it himself but asks for it "in use," a legal provision to secure the inheritance for Jessica and Lorenzo. [In a detailed note on line 380, Merchant explains that "in use" is a legal term, "the device of a 'a conveyancer to a user,' whereby an estate intended for inheritance by a second person (Jessica in this instance) is made over to a third person (Antonio) for security of the inheritance. In full legal terms, Antonio would be declared seised of half Shylock's estate to the use of Lorenzo and Jessica after Shylock's death." (202)] These provisions in turn reflect upon the demand that Shylock become a Christian, for Coryat, whose *Crudities* were published in 1611 after his tour in Italy and stay in Venice, describes the sardonic treatment of the baptized Jews: "all their good are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity" in order that this renunciation of their wealth may "disclog their souls and consciences." From this material humiliation Shylock is released. (Merchant 30-31)

Merchant also notes that, in claiming that "You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live," Shylock may be quoting from Ecclesiasticus 34.23: "Who so robbeth his neighbor of his living, doth as great sin as though he slew him to death." (Editors of the play have noted that Portia may also be alluding to Ecclesiasticus [35.20] in her reference to mercy dropping "as the gentle rain from heaven" [185].)

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Isolation to Communion

A Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*

MARYELLEN KEEFE, O.S.U.

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

ISAIAH 55: 1-2

In her introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Katherine Maus recognizes the controversy generated by this play's implied questions: "Is it anti-Semitic? Does it criticize anti-Semitism? Does it merely represent anti-Semitism without either condemnation or endorsement?" (1081). Although evidence can be summoned to support any of these views, I would argue that the unusual frequency of alimentary imagery points to the broader context of "human nature," within which Shakespeare acts as God-like judge aware of all his characters' foibles and faults. Too large a person and playwright to focus narrowly on any one stereotype, Shakespeare rather provides, through the lens of Shylock's character, a glimpse at the universal human condition. Like Shylock, all the characters are flawed, as are all the readers and/or spectators.

The alimentary images seasoning Shakespeare's dialogue throughout the play betray a hint of similar Scriptural images that, unlike Portia's direct lesson on the importance of mercy, imply Shakespeare's familiar underlying theme—the impotence of material creatures to satisfy the longings of the human heart. Accordingly, *The Merchant* ends with Jessica and Lorenzo's prepared welcome for Portia, Bassanio, Nerissa, and Gratiano—sinner and sinned against. The festive setting complete with music may seem an appropriate one for the mutual reconciliation represented by the restoration of both couples' wedding rings. A delayed marriage celebration, in effect, the