

The Merchant of Venice and Christian Conscience

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AND CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

The history of the interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice*, both on the stage and in critical comment, and of the reactions it has evoked in its readers or viewers, is surely unique in the Shakespeare canon. Interpretations of *Hamlet* are numberless, but the contentions expend themselves within the intellectual realm. *The Merchant of Venice* reaches down into deep emotional levels, involving commitments and shrouded reticences of the soul. When conscience and the play come together, a drama takes place. Sigurd Burckhardt has clearly perceived the problem, without exploring it. "Audiences," he writes, "persist in feeling distressed by Shylock's final treatment, and no amount of historical explanation helps them over their unease." We cannot join unreservedly in the joyful harmonies of the last act. "Shylock spooks in the background, an unappeased ghost."¹

My purpose is to explore the phenomenology of this "unease" as an episode in cultural history, to penetrate to its deep causes. I shall try to delineate the various ways in which the troubled conscience of Christians has avoided, expressed or allayed its

¹ S. Burckhardt, "*The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond*," *ELH* 29 (1962), p. 239.

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malaise. My aim is not to attribute intentions to the dramatist; but there is no way to avoid considering such attributions.

I

Five general categories of attitude toward the question of Shylock and Jews in *The Merchant of Venice* are discernible. Each contains a diversity of approaches, but centers on a basic outlook, except perhaps the first, which is to ignore the problem. We may say that by viewers and critics from the Elizabethan age until the nineteenth century it was "ignored" in the sense that it was not perceived. If there were individuals who were repelled by Shakespeare's picture of the Jew we do not know of them; in any case, we have no solid reasons to think that it was for them that he wrote his play. The reason is obvious. A powerful tradition, inherited through the Christian centuries, formed an image of a creature who, for his own deserts and with God's blessing, was to be mocked, degraded, reviled.²

The nineteenth century, it is well known, was a period of re-evaluation of Shylock and of Shakespeare's putative intentions. Awareness of the problem as it poses itself to the modern Christian became acute. In the twentieth century the debates were to grow more and more intense, the interpretations more diverse, innovative and resourceful. Yet many studies in which one would have expected to find this issue treated avoid it (and sometimes the play itself).³ In some cases, avoidance is due to valid motives of critical perspective. However, a negative may

² For Elizabethans, see among other accounts, J.W. Hales, "Shakespeare and the Jews," *EHR*, 9 (1894), pp. 652-61, and Raymond M. Alden, *Shakespeare* (New York: 1922), p. 212: "The Elizabethan audience despised him [Shylock], and were quite untroubled... By the same token, they had no fear that Antonio, in his treatment of the Jew, did not quite exhibit the spirit becoming to a Christian." Most commentators agree that Shakespeare, desiring to write a successful play and perhaps prompted by his own company to the topical theme (topical because of the Lopez affair and Marlowe's success), fed his audience's prejudices. Whether he had hidden deeper intentions is an unanswerable element in the controversy.

³ e.g., Thomas Lounsbury, George Saintsbury, Charles H. Gray, George Gordon (who is, however, overtly hostile to Shylock as a Jew), Judd Brown, Camille Looten, Tyrone Guthrie, G.W. Knight, Robert G. Hunter, Peter Alexander, Terence Hawkes, W.W. Lawrence, Ralph Berry, L.S. Champion.

be quite as significant as a positive. Since one can no longer say that the issue is ignored because it is not discerned, in other instances silence may be the very manifestation of *mauvaise conscience* instead of mere lack of *conscience*.⁴

The remaining four categories of outlook can be summarized as follows: prejudice avowal, prejudice denial, prejudice approval, displacement. It is with these that we shall deal in the following pages.

Our second category, then, is defined by avowal of Shakespeare's prejudice, commented on in sundry ways.

The theme of the play is simple and obvious: the noble Christian against the base Jew. Antonio's "uncompromising hatred of what (according to the spirit of the times) ought to be hated" is part of the perfection of this "most ideal of characters."⁵ In an earlier book Moulton, while expressing the same views, fell into a significant confusion. Shylock is bloodthirsty, brutal, sordid, mean; still, the treatment he receives arouses our indignation. One wonders how such a person *deserves* to be treated!⁶ At all events, Shakespeare capitalized on the feeling that a Jew's sufferings were "food for mirth," wrote Hamilton Mabie. Shylock was "misshapen of those who fed his avarice", but he was "the embodiment of his race."⁷ Quiller-Couch, modifying in 1944 an earlier view, declared that a good artist would have opposed Christian charity to "the peculiar cruelty of a Jew." Instead, Shakespeare "missed the point" by making the intended victim just as heartless as Shylock.⁸ How much easier for the modern reader if the Christian characters were unambiguously good! Put somewhat differently: "Shakespeare's major ethical theme is Christian mercy against pagan retaliation." It follows that there is much "in the play which condemns and ridicules him [Shylock] simply because he is a Jew, and we

⁴ I use the French word which combines "conscience" and "consciousness."

⁵ Richard G. Moulton, *The Moral System of Shakespeare* (New York: 1903), pp. 313-317.

⁶ *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (Oxford: 1885), pp. 47-84.

⁷ H.W. Mabie, *William Shakespeare, Poet, Dramatist, and Man* (New York: 1912), pp. 252-254.

⁸ *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (Cambridge: 1944), pp. 70-88. Cf. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Davis Wilson, eds., *The MV* (Cambridge; 1926). pp. XIV-XVII.

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should not try to explain it away." So writes Brents Stirling. Shylock is persecuted, but this does not justify his hatred and reprisal; and Christian mercy recreates harmony in the fifth act.⁹ One wonders how "mercy" and "persecution" fit together and about Shylock's place in this harmonious world.¹⁰

We may include in the second category a variation which emphasizes historical change. Thus Henry W. Simon admits Shakespeare's prejudice, but argues that history has in a real sense mutated the play itself, because of the changes in those who read and see it. But for Shakespeare, Shylock's defeat is accurately rendered by Gratiano's gibes. For us today, Shylock has an unintended tragic grandeur.¹¹

H. B. Charlton's important study bears comparison with Simon's analysis. Writing also at the onset of World War II, he forthrightly disapproves Shakespeare's "bitter hatred of Jews," no different from that of the mob. "He planned a *Merchant of Venice* to let the Jew dog have it." For this the text is sufficient evidence. The additions to the traditional plot (e.g., Jessica, Lancelot, the forced conversion) are callous and cruel. Nevertheless, Shakespeare unwittingly created a sequence of events destructive to prejudice, though not in the minds of Elizabethans.¹²

The major difference between Simon and Charlton is that Simon attributes the change in attitudes to historical evolution, while Charlton sees Shakespeare as the humane genius who was propelled beyond his prejudices and intentions.

A third attitude stands in sharp contrast with the kind of views that characterize the second; denial of prejudice on the part of

⁹ Brents Sterling, ed., *MV* (Baltimore: 1969), pp. 211-212.

¹⁰ Other adherents to this generalized attitude include A. Dimock, "The Conspiracy of Dr. Lopez," *EHR*, 9 (1894), pp. 440-72; H.L. Withers, ed., *MV* (Boston: 1899), pp. XVIII-XIX; Louis Teeter, "Scholarship and The Art of Criticism," *ELH*, 5 (1938), 104; David Galloway, *Shakespeare* (Toronto: 1961), pp. 34-35; W. Moelwyn-Merchant, ed., *MV* (London: 1967), pp. 26-27 (according to whom, apparently, Shakespeare puts Shylock and Antonio on a par, as flawed by racial antipathies).

¹¹ H.W. Simon, ed., *MV* (New York: 1940), pp. XXIV-XXVI.

¹² H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Comedy* (New York: 1940), pp. 123-40. Charlton states that Jessica is obtuse to the moral significance of her actions (p. 156). But the question is whether this is so in the value system of this joyous play. He points out that Portia is blind to Shylock's motives and state of mind. But again the nub lies elsewhere: should one try to understand the agony of a Jew?

Shakespeare. This attitude often—but not always—involves interpretation of Shylock in a more favorable, sometimes heroic light. In addition to the changes in stage interpretations, Hazlitt's well-known defense of Shylock and Heine's oft-repeated account of his experience on seeing *The Merchant of Venice* were important influences leading in this new direction.

A number of critics are concerned primarily with removing the stain from Shakespeare's image without, however, wishing to transform Shylock too much. Coleridge saw no prejudice on Shakespeare's part. An oppressed person will be vindictive.¹³ In the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, Harold Ford declared that the play is, quite simply and clearly, "a powerful indictment of a Christless Christianity." The villains are Bassanio, a roué, Lorenzo, a thief, Jessica, desecrator of home and religion. It follows that the play is "one of the greatest satires in the language or literature of the world." Unfortunately for the categories posited in this article, Ford does not follow the expected logic and palliate Shylock's opprobrium. His opinion of that personage falls instead into our next category: "He is a Hebrew of the Hebrews... his rapacity is characteristic of the Jewish race... True to the principles of Judaism, he worships the strict letter of the law", *lex talionis*.¹⁴

We can here refer to only a few of the critics who deny that Shakespeare was prejudiced. Both Nielson and Kittredge, for instance, cannot believe that Shakespeare, who made Shylock so intensely human a figure, was attacking the Jewish people.¹⁵

¹³ H.T. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor (London and New York, 1960), I, p. 55, 200.

¹⁴ Harold Ford, *Shakespeare, His Ethical Teaching* (London, n.d.), pp. 83-90. A similar view was expressed by J. Cumming Walters ("The Jew that Shakespeare Drew," *Manchester Quarterly*, 24 (1905) pp. 124-39). Walters soothes the conscience of Christians by making Shakespeare even-handed and ironical, but he is avowedly embarrassed that Shakespeare should have written such a play.

¹⁵ W.A. Nielson and C.J. Hill, eds., *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1942), p. 116. G.L. Kittredge, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Boston: 1936) p. 238. Nielson claims that it was the seduction of Jessica that made Shylock vengeful. He does not note that this deed is not presented, nor was taken by the Christians in the play, as an injury. H.R. Walley's takes up, in modified form, Kittredge's untenable argument that Shakespeare was no more attacking the Jews in *MV* than he was attacking the Moors, Spaniards, Italians, Viennese or Danes in other plays. ("Shakespeare's Portrayal of Shylock," in *Essays in Dramatic Literature*, ed. Hardin Craig, Princeton, 1935, pp. 213-242).

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G.B. Harrison finds Shakespeare to have been evenhanded. But all depends on the times, he explains. For the Elizabethan, there was surprise that Shylock was let off so lightly. For moderns, he is "the only man of worth in a worthless society."¹⁶ Several critics are carried away to an extreme, and see *The Merchant of Venice* as a lesson in tolerance.¹⁷

In the most recent study of the play Lawrence Danson admits that Shakespeare "bedevils our efforts as readers, audience, actors or critics." He is neither for Shylock nor against him; but he justifies Shakespeare. Shylock is condemnable, but redeemable through Christianity. From the rabid rantings of Stoll (whom we shall meet in our fourth group), Danson quotes only an anodyne passage and approves "his no-nonsense approach" as welcome relief from the Romantic view of Shylock. He adds, however, that neither view of Shylock is entirely satisfying. We should reach to him with sympathy, to be sure; yet the treatment accorded him is proper, and we "find in the harmonies of the fifth act the play's appropriate conclusion." It is the New Testament doctrine: "Israel's unbelief will allow God to show his free mercy to the Jews when in time their unbelief shall pass away... The casting away of the Jews was the reconciling of the rest of the world."¹⁸

It is possible to go one step further in exculpating Shakespeare. The first serious attempt to conceptualize Shylock as tragic may well have been Richard Hole's little-known essay written in 1796. His ingenious transposition of the situation in *The Merchant of Venice* into a fancied Jewish republic, with Antonio as the accused alien, is most engaging, and even includes an "article" by Nathan Ben Boaz, drama critic of the imaginary *Jersalem Daily Advertiser*.¹⁹

¹⁶ G.B. Harrison, ed., Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (New York: 1948), p. 582.

¹⁷ M.A. Eaton, ed., *MV* (Boston, 1909), p. 8; Brainerd Kellogg, ed., *MV* (New York: 1895); Charles Porter and H.A. Clarke, eds., *MV* (New York: 1903), pp. XXVII f.; A.T. Cadoux, *Shakespearean Selves. An Essay in Ethics* (London: 1938), p. 55.

¹⁸ Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven and London: 1978), pp. 126-69.

¹⁹ "An Apology for the Conduct and Character of Shylock," by T.O., in *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen, at Exeter* (London: 1796), pp. 552-73. Hole's

For Ten Brink (1895), Shylock must unquestionably be taken as a tragic protagonist. He hates Antonio because he is a Christian, high-minded and humane. His punishment is “poetic justice” and only his forced conversion makes “our feelings justly rebel.” Yet—yet there is “something unsatisfying” about the “comic solution and a tragic character.”²⁰ Ten Brink is obviously struggling with the characteristic “unease.” Since he accepts Shylock as “one of Shakespeare’s perfect creations,” he consequently accepts the validity of the portrait. A character in a play, I suggest, cannot be only “stage-villain,” as some have contended; he must bear the stamp of authenticity, be credible, not violate experience or expectations, in order to be successful, else he becomes farcical; and whatever Shylock is he is more than that. Reality and art are not the same, but they are surely mimetically related for the reader-observer.

Even more original is H.C. Goddard’s use of modern psychoanalysis. The characters in the play, he contends, are trying to “elude their own Unconscious,” by projecting on Shylock what they have dismissed from their consciousness as too disturbing—for instance, Antonio’s pursuit of money. “Antonio catches his own reflection in Shylock’s face.” The clue is Portia’s question: “which is the merchant here and which the Jew?”²¹

No one has gone as far as Goddard in rehabilitating Shylock. His scheme, whether or not one accepts it, underlines the malaise caused by what seems to him the sophistry and hypocrisy of the Christian characters, of which they are indeed unaware.

piece was roundly condemned in *The Monthly Review* and *The British Critic*, but praised in *The Universal Magazine*.

²⁰ Bernhard Ten Brink, *Five Lectures on Shakespeare*, (London: 1895), pp. 185-93. It suffices to mention that in 1906 Walter Raleigh, the editor of the *Arden Shakespeare*, also counted Shylock a tragic figure and condemned the last act for its heartless frivolity. Later, John Shackford found the tragic element in Shylock’s being treated “as a Jewish *thing*, outside the pale of humanity.” He absolves Shakespeare on the supposition of ironic intent. (“The Bond of Kindness: Shylock’s Humanity.” *The University of Kansas City Review*, (1954), pp. 85-91. See also Horace B. Bridges’ *Our Fellow Shakespeare* (Chicago: 1925), pp. 75-99.

²¹ Another clue is Gratiano’s line, “Now, by my Lord, a gentile and no Jew.” (I suggest instead that he means only that since Jessica is gulling a Jew, she is a Gentile—which still leaves the question of intent open.) Goddard proposes a Shylock at war with his own “repressed virtues.” (H.C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: 1951), pp. 81-116.

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However, attribution of all this to Shakespeare's purpose is unconvincing. At the end of the trial scene, Goddard says, "a thrill of vicarious revenge runs down the spine of every person in the theater... Why are we blind to the ignominy of identifying with the most brutal and vulgar character in the play?" (p. 109). This comment is in accord with part of my own explanations to follow.

In sum, all the writers in this third group, each in his own way and with his own emphasis and interpretations, sometimes with the indignation of toleration and humanitarianism, sometimes at grips with unavowed prejudices, are struggling with a text, striving to make it more responsive to modern feelings. Some go so far as to defend the stature of Shylock, prompted to evil by age-old wrongs, a heroic victim doomed to defeat by the Christians' possession of power. For those who go so far—and most do not—the play becomes a covert chastisement, a more or less surreptitious pro-Semitic message, intended or not. Shakespeare was ahead of his time, but either did not know it or dared not show it clearly. He is more or less cleared of tarnish, and a catharsis of the disturbed conscience is more or less achieved. But even those who would weight the balance more equably on Shylock's side usually do not accept this reversal which, in their view, stands history and the text on their heads.

Two critics may be taken as a conceptual bridge to our fourth category. Charles W. Thomas, a Victorian, also takes the Christians to task, both those in the play and those who enjoy Shylock's misfortunes. According to the "rules of human life and human nature," Shylock is justified. At the same time, Thomas defends his portrayal as true, and as typical. He is "the prophesy of the past, the sum of the present, and the whole of the future. Every word, act, movement and expression of Shylock clearly says: 'I am a Jew.'" Avarice, rapacity, hate, heartlessness, malice, malignity and revenge—these are ingrained in the race. But are the Gentiles any better?²²

T.M. Parrott wrote some fifty years later. His remarks are so confused that *mauvaise conscience* becomes evident. In a period of fierce anti-Semitism he says Shakespeare "put into the mouth of

²² C.W. Thomas, "Shakespeare and Shylock," *Shakespeariana*, July 1890, pp. 139-50.

the hated Jew the strongest plea yet uttered for racial tolerance.” Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Shylock is typical of his race: “greed of gain,” reliance on the letter of the law (as contrasted with Christian forgiveness)—such traits “mark him as a Jew. But he is *a* Jew, not *the* Jew.” For Christians, money is only a means to promote the good life. Yes, there is a tinge of anti-Semitism, Parrott concedes, but no race-hatred. Parrott is wiggling like a fish caught on a hook. He is unhappy and ill at ease.²³

The fourth category of attitude is strikingly antithetical to what we have seen in the third. We are now dealing with those who would destroy the nineteenth century notion that we should feel sympathy for Shylock. There is none of Thomas’ effort to distribute blame on both sides, none of Parrott’s discomfort. Not all of these writers are, by any means, prompted by prejudice, open or concealed; but some of them clearly are. The common element is that Shakespeare’s towering creation of Shylock is to be applauded for its veracity—either because it is the true portrayal of Shylock as *the* Jew, or because Shakespeare succeeded in creating a stage villain who is a villain inasmuch as he embodies Jewish qualities and is credible as such. The writers in this category are again so numerous that we shall comment on only the most interesting. We can, however, quote some typical phrases.

Shylock’s punishment is “so agreeable a sacrifice to justice, that it conveys inexpressible satisfaction to every feeling mind... This is the Jew that Shakespeare drew.”²⁴ Shylock is “the well struck image of the Jewish character in general.”²⁵ For Shylock, moral words have been emptied of “any human or moral content,” while Antonio “fights for the cause of disinterested generosity.” The antithesis is clearly Jew-Christian, for this critic.²⁶ Shylock’s plea for tolerance is a villain’s justification of an

²³ T.M. Parrot, ed., *Twenty-three plays and the Sonnets* (New York: 1949), pp. 134-44.

²⁴ Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor or Critical Companion* (1770) in J. Wilders, *The MV, A Casebook* (London: 1969), pp. 23-26.

²⁵ Herman Ulrici, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Art* (1839), in *ibid.*, pp. 30-33.

²⁶ E.D. Pettet, “*The MV* and the Problem of Usury” *ibid.*, pp. 105-112. The same is true of Sir Edmund Chamber’s introduction to *Red Letter Shakespeare* (1925), rpt. in *Shakespeare: A Survey* (1948), pp. 112-115.

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inhuman purpose. But the play is not anti-Jewish: "There are only two slurs on Jews in general." Shylock is a Jew only when he is inhumanly cruel; he is merely a usurer when he makes money. Moreover, if the Christians "lack the full measure of charity," the fault is his, for bringing out the worst in them.²⁷ Another sees no redeeming features in Shylock, no evil ones in the Christians. They transform money into "generous and vital things"; his relations with people are negative and destructive. In Portia "the virtues characteristic of the Christian in the comedy" are completely realized and her generosity has "the essentially Christian quality."²⁸

Some critics have been more blunt. For Schlegel, Shylock typifies "the Jew." He is the symbol of the history of his unfortunate nation.²⁹ Adam and Charles Black contend that the subject of the play is a race. "The Hebrew character" is marked by destructiveness, vengefulness, selfishness, hate and avarice. It is not that Jews hate Christians particularly; it is rather an *odium generis humani*. Shakespeare explicitly identifies Shylock with "the entire Hebrew family" ("The curse never fell upon our nation until now."); Shakespeare's only error lies in his excessive magnanimity, in his classing Jews with the higher races.³⁰ In Shylock, wrote a Christian Reverend, "we see that the Jew is much the same at home as in the Rialto; that, let him be where he will, it is his nature to snarl and bite." All in all, Shakespeare's portrait evidences great "liberal-mindedness towards the Jews."³¹ As Antonio is the paradigm of the Christian, so Shylock "is not only Shylock, he is a Jew... the personification, in Shakespeare's intention, of the evil side of the Jewish nation." To take his goods was just. However, to make him a Christian was unfair to Christianity.³² Shakespeare, writes another, "has

²⁷ J.R. Brown, ed., *MV* (London and Cambridge, Mass 1955), p. XXXIX.

²⁸ Anne Barton, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: 1974), pp. 251-52. Barton, describing the "virtues" as Christian, does not say forthrightly that the vices are Jewish; perhaps she does not mean that.

²⁹ A.W. Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808), in Augustus Ralli, *A History of Shakespearean Criticism* (London: 1895), I, p. 119.

³⁰ *New Exegesis of Shakespeare* (Edinburgh: 1859), pp. 229-49. An anonymous review can be found in *The North British Review*, 31 (1859), pp. 253-63.

³¹ Rev. H.N. Hudson, ed., *MV* (Boston: 1879), pp. 60-75.

³² Stopford Brooke, *On Ten Plays of Shakespeare* (London: 1905), pp. 136-40.

been most temperate and most tolerant and true to life in his delineation of the Jew.”³³ Shylock is the embodiment of Jewish qualities: “intellect... insatiable avarice... servile and repulsive politeness.”³⁴ Shylock is “a real man and a real Jew... a masterly piece of racial delineation.” In fact, Shakespeare adopted a “kindly understanding and tolerant attitude toward the persecuted race.”³⁵

According to J.W. Hales (*op. cit.*), Shakespeare’s aim was to fight against prejudice. But Hales goes on to praise the accuracy of the portrait of Shylock, every feature of which is amply illustrated in “those wonderful documents in which the Hebrew people in all its strengths and all its weaknesses so fully and plainly reveals itself—“duplicity, remorseless greed, inexorable spirit of revenge.” The strength is “intellectual power.” Intellectual power put at the service of viciousness, such is the clear intimation. Shakespeare’s virtue is to have explained *why* Shylock is “a fiend in human shape” and to have taught Christians to be more humane to such as he. More than once, Hales becomes entangled in his argument; he purports opposition to Jew-hating, but describes Antonio as gentle and lovable *and* a rabid Jew-hater. Perhaps what is most evident is Hales’ *mauvaise conscience*.

Granville-Barker, advising us to take the play as a fairy tale, reassures us that there is no more a Semitic problem in it than there is a “colour question” in *Othello*—thus assuming the false parallel. Despite this reassurance, a bit later on he tells us about the bond: “to us there is now all Jewry crouched and threatening there, an ageless force behind it.” At the end of the trial, Shylock “stands stripped, once more the sordid Jew that they spit upon...” Is the punishment to be approved? The reply: “Something of the villainy the Jew taught them the Christians will now execute.”³⁶ All villainy, then, springs from the Jew, even though perpetrated by Christians.

³³ Morton Luce, *A Handbook to the Works of William Shakespeare* (London: 1906), p. 204.

³⁴ L.L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: 1919; rpt New York, 1948), pp. 88-94.

³⁵ Cumberland Clark, *Shakespeare and National Character* (London: 1932), p. 202. See also: M.C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry*, (London: 1951) in Wilders, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-41.

³⁶ Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* Second Series (London: 1935), pp. 92-106.

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A place apart must be reserved for E.E. Stoll. His two pieces on the subject, written some twenty-five years apart, have been influential and widely quoted. They disclose a revealing progression from barely muffled vituperation to the strident. Writing in 1911, Stoll laid his emphasis on proving that Shylock was designed as a comic figure whose griefs “excite no commiseration,” only gibes and jeers.³⁷ And that intention is all that matters, else an author “is every reader, not himself.” Macready’s and Irving’s addition of “Hebraic picturesqueness and pathos” should not mislead us. And if Shakespeare twice seems to follow Shylock’s pleadings with some sympathy, “too much has been made of this.” The pleas end in a way that alienates the audience. Shylock, Stoll constantly insinuates, is not *a* Jew, but *the* Jew: “Like all Jews, he fights, in argument or lawsuits at least, to the last ditch.” He goes on to argue that “hatred of Jews is at bottom a racial and social, not a religious prejudice,” and that Shakespeare reflected the prejudices “of his race.”³⁸ Stoll offers an answer to Shylock’s question: “What’s his reason?” “Steadily the Jewishness of Shylock is kept before us... he loses his name in his nationality,” and not only at the end, but throughout. Shakespeare, too, would have replied that the reason was the “essential Jewish vileness.” There is nothing pathetic about this “whining, fawning hypocrite;” his dignity is only external. A few pathetic lines—yes. But “the pathos is a pretence, the laughter alone is real.” Stoll concludes: “As we have done with many another monster in history, literature, or holy writ, we have tamed the ‘Jew dog,’ and drawn his ‘fangs’... he no longer grins or bites.” We, too, should shudder and laugh at Shylock, “except at popular performances, where racial antipathy is rather to be allayed than fomented.”

Stoll’s follow-up was written in different circumstances, at the height of the Nazi movement and of pro-Nazi agitation in the United States.³⁹ The attitudes that underlay the first article are

³⁷ E.E. Stoll, “Shylock,” *JEGP*, 10 (1911), pp. 236-79; rpt. in his *Shakespeare Studies* (New York: 1927), pp. 237-240. Stoll was a professor of English literature at Western Reserve University.

³⁸ The emphasis on race is interesting, at a time when the doctrines of Gobineau, Drumont and H.S. Chamberlain were being spread.

³⁹ E.E. Stoll, “Shakespeare’s Jew,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 8 (1939), pp. 139-54.

now pronounced, even in details. Shylock's manner of speech is "a sinuous, insidious rhythm." The "Oriental wraps and muffles his purpose up," in accord with the crafty and devious ways "of them that wear the gaberdine." All of Shylock's reasons for hating Antonio reflect only on himself, not on Antonio. When he says he will get the money at once, he forgets what he had said about borrowing from Tubal. "Tubal was a blind, afterwards not unknown to Little Moses, Isaac of York, and Fagin." Shylock's hypocrisy becomes even more obvious.

"How he cringes and fawns, and, as he appeals to the patriarch [Jacob], plays the innocent!" His sardonic intonation is Hebraic. "How he sneers, and jeers, and 'rubs it in' as he hisses out his ironical inquiry, bowing and looking up!" When he loses Jessica, "he falls into an Oriental wailing." His avarice is hurt. His insistence on the last jot and tittle of the law is "in keeping with the Jewish mind and temper as we know them both in the Scriptures and in present-day intercourse... A stiff-necked people who worshipped the law, when they were not breaking it... And so, with no tenderness or indulgence, Shylock is presented here... It is old-fashioned, school-boy justice that here prevails... Money is gone, all is gone."

In conclusion, Stoll now claims that Shylock is "by no means the Jew in general," but that he is certainly the Jew as found in the Old Testament. Then he adds: "Something of that is to be found in the utterance of the Jew today when not too much in converse with the Gentiles; and some of Shylock's intonations are more like those of the Jew of the Ghetto or the Judengasse than anything I recognize in the Bible... the wheedling, reproachful utterance." And Stoll describes it—together with the gestures.

It is not my intention to comment on this release of pent-up venom.

This kind of interpretation has fallen into general disfavor since the second World War. However, a new wrinkle in the general attitude embodied in our fourth category was introduced in 1964 by Warren D. Smith.⁴⁰ His theme goes beyond its innocuous initial statement; the dramatist was not satirizing Jews, but a particular villainous usurer. We are then told that since

⁴⁰ "Shakespeare's Shylock" *SQ*, 15 (1964), pp. 193-99.

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there were only covert Jews living in England, the prejudice in the play (Gobbo, Gratiano alone are mentioned) was purely religious, not ethnic. Assuming acceptance of this hypothetical artificial distinction, Smith goes on to argue consequently (though not very consequently) that the audience's antipathy toward Shylock arose from his being a usurer, not a Jew, although the two denominations were inevitably associated in their minds. The play offers no evidence of prejudice against "personal traits called 'Jewishness'." It follows from the premise, according to Smith, that Shylock's "assertion that Antonio mistreats him because 'I am a Jew' has no foundation in the text." Why, then, does Shylock make such an utterly unfounded accusation? With his reply to this question, Smith reaches his real point. He has discovered an intention of Shakespeare's hitherto unsuspected. The poet was trying to show how Jews use the pretext of anti-Semitism to cover their own evil-doing and their own prejudices against Christians. "What Shakespeare is really trying to do through Shylock is to depict a character who rationalizes his villainy, as a usurer, by projecting his own ethnic group prejudice onto the shoulders of his innocent opponents... [Shylock] attempts to excuse his own villainy by emphasizing what the Christians in the play do not emphasize, the fact that he is a Jew."⁴¹ Aside from the spurious basis for the last assertion, it is obvious that Smith has unwittingly lost his original thesis and that Shakespeare was really aiming his play at Jews after all, and not at usurers, though on a different basis. It would be difficult to go further than Smith in the ingenious pursuit of ways to inculcate Shylock, and what he supposedly stands for, in order to exculpate Shakespeare and to discharge inner feelings of unease and guilt.⁴²

⁴¹ Shylock's great speech was intended as "a specious piece of rationalizing... the most obtrusive example in the play of the use of religion as a cloak for villainy."

⁴² An interesting subject, but one we cannot treat here, is Shylock's fortunes in France. Ignored until the second half of the nineteenth-century, he was ardently displayed as the archetypal Jew as anti-Semitism rose in sweeping waves until it climaxed in the Dreyfus Affair, when mobs clamored in the streets for the blood of Jews. Victor Hugo—to cite just one example—wrote: "Shylock est la juiverie... toute sa nation... et c'est parce qu'il résume toute une race, telle que l'oppression l'a fait, que Shylock est grand." *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: 1937), "Ph' sophie," II, p. 124. Pierre Messiaen, in his introduction to his new

Whatever Shakespeare's intentions may have been (an undecidable question that is not the subject of this article), it is beyond doubt that he has provided nourishing food for deep-seated Christian hostility and hatred toward Jews. It is only fair to add that, willy-nilly, he has afforded the occasion for other Christians to protest against these manifestations and has led them to make prodigious, sometimes wild efforts to reinterpret the play—one may say, both for the honor of Christianity and for Shakespeare's honor.

Efforts to take the Jew-Christian controversy off center-stage, to find another focus of meaning, lead us to constitute a fifth and final group of recent critics, at whom we shall glance very briefly.

There are the economic interpretations. A Marxist, A.A. Smirnov, sees the antagonism as a class conflict between two elements of the exploitative bourgeoisie.⁴³ Several other, non-Marxist interpretations are more cogently argued.⁴⁴

Two critics, Coghill and Kermode, see the theme as mercy and love superseding justice as values.⁴⁵ For Midgeley, "...it is not of much importance that Shylock is a Jew... The important thing is that he is a Jew in a Gentile society, that all he is and all he holds dear is alien to the society in which he has to live."⁴⁶ Moody takes issue with Kermode: "The promised supersession of justice by love and mercy does not come about." The play's meaning is irony directed against the Christians, who "succeed in the world by not practicing their ideals of love and mercy." Their end is profit and pleasure. But to take the tragic view of

translation of the play, reveals himself as Stoll's twin: Shakespeare, because of his recognition of Shylock as the summary of his race and the opprobrium he has heaped on him, is a good Christian. Shakespeare, *Les Comédies* (Paris: 1961), pp. 625-31.

⁴³ A.A. Smirnov, *Shakespeare, A Marxist Interpretation* (New York: 1936), pp. 29-35.

⁴⁴ Two of these are Arthur Sewall's *Character and Society in Shakespeare* (Oxford: 1951) and C.L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959) in Wilders, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-92.

⁴⁵ Nevill Coghill, "The Theme of *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Shakespeare Criticism 1935-1960* (London: 1963), Frank Kermode, "Some Themes in the *Merchant of Venice*." Both are in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Merchant of Venice* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1970), pp. 108-113, 97-100.

⁴⁶ Graham Midgeley, "The *Merchant of Venice*: A Reconsideration", *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), pp. 119-33.

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Shylock would precisely destroy the ironic intent. Since Shakespeare's standard is "enlightened human feeling," and Shylock's defeat is a reversal of the right order of things, the play is not comic, but ironic: attractive appearance, underlying inhumanity on both sides.⁴⁷

Despite attempts to find a new approach to *The Merchant of Venice*, the problem of this investigation will not, as one critic has said, go away, nor will it leave the center of the stage. The play puts Jews and Christians in a death struggle, and whatever else it is about, it is about that. Moody's commentary rejoins our opening quotation from Burckhardt. The Christian audience, he writes, finds itself enveloped and involved. They have been "attracted to the happily amoral Christians, accepted them at face value, and rejoiced in their good fortune." Their happiness "depends on the breaking of Shylock, and the forgetting that he has been broken." This is "an image of the way we live." The play, he concludes, is "disturbing," because we remain satisfied at the end, with our "cosy amorality," so different from "what we would like to think we aspire to."

II

The data we have examined constitute a remarkable phenomenology of inner doubt, searching, indignation and defensiveness, of aggressiveness as well, probably unparalleled in the annals of literary criticism. At the very least, they confirm Burckhardt's remark about the "unease" flowing from *The Merchant of Venice*. Beyond unease, the panorama of reactions—approving, indignant, ashamed or half-ashamed—the ingenuity and at times almost desperate resourcefulness of the exegetical searching and wriggling, the infusion of deeply felt emotions, testify to profound moral conflict in the conscience of Christians. Sometimes admitted, more often it is disguised or self-protectively unrecognized. The exception is of course the committed anti-Semite (the word is appropriate now), who rejoices at the play, finds in it an outlet for his emotions and a means to vent his spleen.

⁴⁷ A.D. Moody, "An Ironic Comedy," in Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice* (London: 1964), rpt. in Barnet, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-108. Whether we classify Moody in the third or fifth order of attitudes is a matter of choice.

For the rest, one finds no other instances in the Shakespeare canon, despite the contentious and unresolved issues of the “problem plays,” of a continuing, often strident and angry denial that what is there is really there—and I do not mean this univocally. I shall not be injecting myself into the substance of the controversy if I indicate one or two facts as seemingly incontrovertible starting points. The text does show that Shylock was a victim of Christian attitudes and behavior, however we may judge him or them. I am referring not to the causes of his motivation and behavior (an arguable point, depending on the reader’s own attitude, assumptions and interpretation), but to the action of the play. The fact that the actions are performed as a reaction to Shylock’s villainy does not change their character or supply a viable excuse in *Christian* terms. The text does not, at least in its surface texture, evidence any disapproval of these attitudes and behavior. It does not suggest a change of behavior. It is also a fact—however we may interpret it—that not one Christian character has a favorable word, or evidences a scintilla of understanding. The Christians are condemned only through Jewish eyes, and those words are turned to mockery and villainy. The last act is conclusive, as it is a conclusion; the alternative is to interpret the entire play as irony, one concealed from readers and audiences for two or three centuries.

The search for exculpations and palliatives, even inversions, is a phenomenon of more than passing interest. It is, I suggest, a paradigm of Christian *mauvaise conscience* about attitudes and behavior towards the Jew, as evidenced in history and the existential actualities of the individual conscience, no matter how suppressed or concealed to oneself. The critical history we have reviewed provides ample justification for this finding. Of peculiar interest also is the frequency, greater than the citations in this paper, with which disparagement of the Jew is accompanied by the admission of his (presumed) intellectual superiority, an admission that provides a cover of objectivity and fairness, but may also express a hidden fear or envy.

The purpose of the concluding remarks of this paper is to suggest what may be the roots of this play’s obvious power to disturb the Christian conscience. Without departing from the text itself, we shall have to probe beneath its surface structure

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to the deeper underlay of ethical implications which suffuses and vitalizes it, and gives it the perplexing power to disquiet tranquillity.

In all the interpretations we have examined, except those in the fifth category, the structure of the play is phrased or understood as a duality: Christian against Jew, or the Christian ethos in struggle with the Jewish ethos.⁴⁸ Without any doubt, this conflict is dominant in the play. However, this reading is a limited one, as the critics in our fifth category (those who see another focus of meaning) affirm; but I suggest that it is so for reasons quite different from theirs. The dualistic formulation encapsulates the surface structure accurately enough; it fails to reach what we may call the infrastructure. I suggest that three elements are present and in play, in the form of assumptions that govern the ethical and interpersonal infrastructure. It is their triadic relationship and conflict, and not merely the Jew-bating or the malignant portrait of Shylock, that creates the complex, almost baffling moral problem. These three elements are (1) the assumed Judaic ethos (2) the assumed Christian ethos (3) the behavior of Christians. No antithetical combination of any two of these elements provides an adequate explanation of a subtle and complex experience; not (1) and (2), the most common solution; not (2) and (3); not (1) and (3). Only the dynamic interaction of all three explains the phenomenology of the unease with which Christian consciences have been wrestling.

It is surely significant that no Jew experiences "unease," bad conscience or ambivalence on reading or seeing *The Merchant of Venice*.⁴⁹ He cannot identify with Shylock, except with his

⁴⁸ It will perhaps not be useless to recall the definition of ethos: "The dispositions, character or attitude peculiar to a specific people, culture or group that distinguishes it from other peoples or groups; fundamental values or spirit; mores." (American Heritage Dictionary.)

⁴⁹ The history of Jewish criticism of *The Merchant of Venice* would make an interesting psychological study, but is not part of this paper. Such writings are consequently excluded from this treatment. This may be the place to repeat D.L. Hobman's remark: "A recent inquiry among elementary school children revealed that Shylock still represents their first immediate reaction to any mention of the word Jew... Nevertheless, to Jewish readers, Shylock, with his un-Jewish lack of response to the appeal of human suffering, remains unrecognizable as one of themselves." "The Jew in Gentile Fiction," *The Contemporary Review*, 97 (1940), p. 97.

protests against injustice and mistreatment. He feels no guilt because of Shylock, since he does not accept him as "The Jew". While some might reply that this is further proof of the Jew's radical viciousness, I suggest that the reason—essential to understanding the play's moral enigma—is that the Jewish reader-spectator is involved in two of the three ethical elements, the Jew-Christian feud, precisely, i.e., (1) and (3); and that, rightly or wrongly, he naturally takes his own side and condemns the antagonists'. The Christian, on the other hand, cannot extricate himself from the triadic relationship, and this, rather than dichotomous collision, is the source of his "unease."

The first element, then is the Judaic ethos. The evidence indisputably shows that throughout the critical history it has been very widely accepted that Shylock either was intended to be taken as a paradigm of that ethos, or that in fact he is. The valuation of justice above mercy, vindictiveness (the law of talion), directed especially against Christians (whence pitiless usury, trickery, plotting, ritual murder, poisoning of wells), a fanatical worship of the letter of the law as the basis of conduct—such are alleged to be the essentials of the Judaic ethos. Such they are in Christian legend and in *The Merchant of Venice*—consequently, and properly so, in its commentators, as we have seen many times in the course of this paper. It is epitomized in Roland Frye's summation: Shylock's characterization is "clearly developed in terms of the Old Testament legalism which the New Testament repudiates."⁵⁰

In fact, this conception of Judaic ethics is a travesty. The Jewish reader-spectator correctly rejects it.⁵¹ Quite naturally, he also rejects the conception of Shylock as the model of the Jew, as also a travesty whose tonalities and substance are those of caricature. To be sure, the latter point may be argued,

⁵⁰ Roland M. Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton: 1963), p. 208.

⁵¹ Exposition of the Hebraic ethos can be found in the following: George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1927); Claude Montefiore and Herbert Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: 1938, rpt. Meridian Books, 1963); M.R. Konvitz, *Judaism and Human Rights*: (New York: 1972). Here it is sufficient to realize that we are dealing with a legend that is fictitious and malevolent; that this legend has been instrumental in founding the traditional image of the Jew, embodied in *The Merchant of Venice*, the image which to Christians has often justified their conduct.

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according to one's viewpoint. What concerns us, however, is that the two conceptions (ethos and model) are inseparable, historically and in the play. It is because the Jew is that kind of creature, living according to that kind of code, that Christians treat him as they do, and feel entitled to do so without a trace of compunction, without feeling that they are violating their own code. When you have to deal with cruel, accursed, menacing creatures, you are not obliged to accord them the same fully human status as your own, to which they have no right to lay claim. This underlying, unspoken attitude is a constant; and it is written everywhere in the words of the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is against this mis-reading, against their "reading him out" of the human kind, that Shylock makes his protest. And the futility of his reasoning and pleading, the outrage inflicted on his dignity, pride, religion and family do indeed make him act less than a human being. But his behavior is clearly accepted by the other characters as a norm, not a consequence, and no thought of responsibility is acknowledged or entertained by them. We have seen that modern critics dispute the point.

We have seen, too, that some Christian readers, recognizing more or less dimly that mercy is a human quality, as frequent among Jews as among Christian readers (or if one prefers, as infrequent, as the world of *The Merchant of Venice* testifies), have been troubled or indignant. This cause of unease, however, applies only to a minority, and even then one suspects that it may derive from a recognition of the rejected paradigm of the Jew as internalized within themselves. It is however a fact that Shakespeare, by excising the quality of mercy from his Jew, inferentially designates him as an *Untermensch*, whatever his intellectual powers, and so outside the boundaries within which Christian commandments apply.⁵²

We come now to the second ethical component, which is better known. It can best be introduced by a quotation of which I unhappily do not have the source.⁵³

⁵² It is worth noting that for Henry Adams, for Drumont, Daudet, Mauras—the list is long—the Jew is the "poisoner" (Adams' word), endowed with intellectual talents and arrogance, therefore the more dangerous.

⁵³ It was found among ancient notes from college years.

I was writing about *The Merchant of Venice*, you will recall, which is the finest analysis I know of the relation of Christianity to Judaism; the poet is fair, as he always is, but he is ruthless... the two faiths are closely allied, in fact one is the daughter of the other... there is right on both sides, but the last word is Unity, a tragic Christian Unity in which Christian *faith* destroys and then assimilates Jewish *legalism*, the Gospel of the New Testament dissolving the law of the Old... There is a recalcitrant element in the happy outcome of his [Shakespeare's] Christian love affair, the residual Judaism in the beaten but probably unbowed and certainly irreducible Shylock.

A smug and unquestioned assumption of moral and theological superiority lies at the heart of the Christian attitude. It is the counterpart or rather the completion of the first element of our triad. However, it is entirely dependent on another element, or more exactly, identical with it. This element is the elected self-image of the Christian as the bearer of the words of Christ, *with which he identifies himself*—not necessarily in practice, but in essence. For he *is* a Christian. This identification, like most of our comforting rationalizations, goes largely unrecognized. It is assumed by the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia's appeal for mercy "accords with long-established theological doctrines," it "questions the worth of justice without mercy."⁵⁴ "Portia makes such a plea as St. Paul made to his compatriots."⁵⁵ Such opinions are encountered frequently. And they are quite correct. The appeal is to Christian ethical doctrine—or more exactly, to the ethical doctrine of Christ; it is justified by that noble doctrine. And if Christians lived in accordance with it, they would indeed be correct in their assumption of superiority. We do not have to go as far as Nietzsche's famous quip: "The last Christian died upon the Cross."

And here is the third component in the dynamics of the ethical drama: the code of ethics by which the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* (and other Christians?) actually live. This reality bears little detectable relation to the Christian ideal

⁵⁴ Roland M. Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁵⁵ C.L. Barber, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-89. L. Danson renews and develops further the same ideas (*loc. cit.*).

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with which they associate themselves. This failure, as discerning critics have pointed out in detail, is found first of all in general attitudes and behavior. They make exception for Antonio, the Christian model in the play, whose love for a friend touches upon the highest level of Christian martyrdom. But if Antonio is the model Christian, then that model includes reviling and spitting on other human beings. If *The Merchant of Venice* is a festive play, a large part of the sport is the delightful game of Jew-baiting, with the unparalleled comfort of releasing one's sadistic instincts with full moral and religious authorization. Such a release upon other Christians would be sinful or even criminal. The fact that they have to appeal for help to a despised, inferior being is a stimulus to further retaliation.

Hazlitt was one of the first to glimpse these facts, and it aroused indignation in him. Several other critics have followed in his steps, notably Shackford and also John Palmer.

But the ideal Christian ethics (the second component) is in other ways useful. When Portia pleads with Shylock, she conveniently (and temporarily) lays aside the real code and appeals to the ideal code (mercy, love). This is disquieting to many Christian readers, and for a reason they have not often perceived. If the appeal is (as is said) based on the Christian ideal of ethics, why propose it to a Jew, with his supposedly antithetical ethos? If, on the other hand, it is based on the common humanity shared by the brotherhood of man, why do they not treat Shylock as a brother, with all the dignity of a man? An excellent example of *mauvaise foi* is to be found, in this regard, in Jagannath Chakravorty's ingenuous remark: "On the worldly plane, he is the victim of his own bloodthirstiness."⁵⁶ What is implied is that the Jew should be passive and turn the other cheek, or live up to the ideal Christian code; but there is no such expectation of the Christians.

And then there is the flourish of Christian mercy after Shylock has been ground into the dust. Goddard tries to explain the incredible self-blindness of this scene (hypocrisy, being intentional and aware of itself, is too harsh a word) by postulating two Portias, one on the conscious level and one on the uncon-

⁵⁶ *The Idea of Revenge in Shakespeare* (Calcutta: 1969), p. 255.

scious level (p. 110). Aside from the primary question, whether there are two Portias (are there two Christians in every Christian, and if so, why not two Jews in every Jew?), and the further question, which is the “true one” (Goddard’s phrase), there is admittedly only a simulacrum of Christian charity in the Duke’s not ordering Shylock to be executed. In fact, it is the Duke who is operating on the supposed Judaic morality of legal technicalities, though he has just condemned Shylock for doing that—that is, for not acting as a Christian ought to act, on the principle of mercy rather than law. This may be considered “poetic justice.” But is it not also the law of talion, disguised or watered down with a show of Christian clemency? An easy way, indeed, to display the superiority of Christian over Jew, all the more hollow because as he *speaks* Christian love, he deals out Christian cruelty, degrading another person as no Christian should do, at least according to the *ideal* Christian code.

The awareness of these discrepancies, contradictions and shams is therefore a major source of malaise in the conscience of modern Christians. This, too, is why the forced conversion rubs so hard. Shylock’s christening, writes Munro, “was surely not meant, in Elizabethan times, as some moderns have resentfully stated, to punish him further” (*op. cit.*, p. 420). The favor which is thus conferred on Shylock, of saving his soul in the next world, destroys him as a man in this world. It effectively denies him the status of a subject—with his own privileged experience, emotion, and will. Is it not the essence of the ideal Christian ethos to recognize the equal status of every other person as person or subject? The “Golden Rule” can have no other meaning.

To be fair, there is no doubt that the pure Christian doctrine, rebelling against the dominance of the Law in the Old Testament, emphasized charity, forgiveness and humility more than the ancient Hebrews had done, though their religion and ethics had evolved greatly since the days of the Pentateuch. And to be sure, most Jews, in any age, have not come near to living up to the ethics of their own religion. This is true of all peoples and religions. But there is a significant difference. It lies, first, in the immense and unparalleled disparity between the two Christian codes, as a consequence of the lofty idealism of Christ’s

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message. It lies, second, in the fact that Jews, as Richard Hole intimated long ago, have not been in a position in which they could mistreat Christians because *their* behavior did not live up to the Judaic ideals. To make the same point in another fashion: it may well be that Shylock is as bad a Jew as Antonio's set are bad Christians. However, that is irrelevant within the context of the play. Shylock is not presented as a *bad* Jew, and no other Jewish standard better than his is assumed to exist. Similarly, the Christians are to all appearance presented simply as Christians, and the duplex character of their ethics is nowhere marked in the play, but only in the minds of some modern readers and in dubious attribution of their reading to Shakespeare.

The incongruity of the two Christian ethical modes has, as we have noted, been discerned by a number of critics. None, however, has perceived its place in the triadic relationship which is essential to understanding the "unease" and the *mauvaise conscience* that characterize so much of the modern history of the play's reception. Some who realize the discrepancy between profession and practice assert that the play is irony, satire, or morality, and attribute such an intention to Shakespeare. Goddard would have him trying to tell us that the real fiends are the Christians. If that were so, it is unlikely, as I have suggested, that it would have taken two hundred or more years for a few readers to comprehend his purpose. That such an intention is *not* clearly perceivable is precisely the factor that heightens (if it does not to a large degree bring about) the malaise and the consequent rationalizations or even *mauvaise foi* of some of the interpreters. Again, it is difficult for us today to believe that a genius like Shakespeare, with his profound and creative intellect, was not himself aware of the disparity between profession and practice. This further heightens the unease, for we cannot then elude the possibility (probability? certainty?) that he was willing to accept it as a norm of behavior towards a special category of human beings. This sharpens the feeling (usually unavowed) of the sensitized modern reader that *he, too* is implicated, as a Christian. More or less, unless he belongs to the cohorts of group four, he is aware of distortions in the portrait of the Jew, of the dubious "Christian" qua-

lity of the play's Christians and of himself. If Shakespeare had clearly denounced the contradiction however indirectly, then the guilty feelings of complicity would be excluded by the normal process of separating the self from a wrong in others by putting ourselves on the side of the "good guys" who condemn it. But I repeat that nowhere in the play has anyone found a word or a gesture—let us not say of sympathy, but of understanding—for Shylock, or a word against his tormentors, nothing that would authorize the assumption of superiority to the supposed Judaic ethos, in order that from this standpoint (which is that of the play) the actual behavior of Christians might in some small way be justified—except when they conveniently and incongruously ask the archetypal Jew to act like a suppositious archetypal Christian.

Again, it may be hard to believe that Shakespeare's genius did not perceive that he was working in three ethical modes. But we must not project our own (seemingly self-evident and necessary) outlook on the mentality of an earlier age. Then we go quickly from possibilities to probabilities, thence to certainties. The only certainties are the phenomenology of the text and the climate of the time. These substantiate only a dual mode of designed meaning (the surface structure): Christian and Jew, the one superior to the other, his triumph the triumph of right and the prompting to the victory celebration in the last act.

Why has *The Merchant of Venice* troubled the conscience of Christians? Because the structural duality does not correspond to the triadic infrastructure. It is for this reason that the play makes them ask, precisely because the play does not ask—whatever Shakespeare may have intended and whether or not they hear the question—whether they are Christian Christians. Have they not shared and identified with their brothers? Are they not guilty of empathically enjoying what their congeners in the drama enjoy? Are they perhaps implicated in the guilt of the characters by their own thoughts and feelings, in their own lives? (We are joyous at the end, writes Northrop Frye, "but we cannot forget the man. There is no way of reconciling these two things."⁵⁷) Do they intuit the hollow confirmation of

⁵⁷ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective. The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York and London: 1965), p. 104.

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the ideal self-image at the end of the trial, the false expunging of persecution and injustice which turns them into justice and mercy? Have they not partaken of the assumption of superiority? The characters of the play envelop them, and they cannot escape their cloak.

Shakespeare's intentions—I must repeat once more—are unknown and ultimately unknowable. I have not tried to penetrate the shrouded sanctuary of his soul. Whether or not (as is possible or arguably, plausible), he was only imitating a dramatic stereotype without injecting any personal emotion or prejudice, or even if (as some say) he was secretly and subtly attempting to reprove prejudice, is irrelevant to the history I have treated and to the argument of this paper. The fact remains that the semiology of anti-Semitism, "the Christian disease," is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, embedded in its texture. Its reflections are in the conscience of Christians, which Shakespeare's comedy, by its very character as comedy, has so deeply disturbed.

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