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Kathleen Ferda

Carroll College

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WHICH IS THE MERCHANT HERE? AND WHICH THE JEW?

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English
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Which Is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?

By

Kathleen D. Ferda

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English of Carroll College.

Mr. Henry E. Burgess, M.A.; Professor, Chairman, Department of English

Dr. John E. Semmens, Ph. D.; Associate Professor, Department of English

Rev. Humphrey J. Courtney, Ph. D.; Professor, Head, Department of Classical Language
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The Merchant of Venice is perhaps one of the most controversial plays that Shakespeare ever wrote. Though written more than three hundred fifty years ago, it has received more divergent interpretations than any of Shakespeare's plays with the possible exception of Hamlet. These divergences arise chiefly from the uncertainties resting upon and within the Character of Shylock. Interpretations of Shylock have varied widely according to the various explanations which actors and critics have given his character.

These divergent interpretations have given rise to three clearly defined conceptions of the role. The first is the conception of Shylock as a grotesquely comic figure. In this interpretation Shylock is viewed as a senile, meddling old fool, made fun of by all who surround him. Because of his senility he often talks and mutters to himself, providing much humor throughout the play. He is the nosey old man who tries to be important and enter into the active, merry world of the younger generation, who, in turn, laugh at his antics and attempts. He is never treated or taken seriously until his attack upon Antonio's life. After Portia's rescue of Antonio, Shylock is sent off, once again harmless and comic.

The second interpretation paints Shylock much as Christopher Marlowe portrayed Barrabus in The Jew of Malta. He is treated unsympathetically as the embodiment of cruelty and malice. Shylock is greedy and merciless, caring only for himself, his revenge and his money. He is not human, possessing only animal instincts and passions. He reigns supreme as a malignant and vengeful villain. This is the Shylock who gave his name its conventional meaning.
More recently, sympathetic interpretations of Shylock have appeared in which the Jew appears as the wronged hero—as much sinned against as sinning. Though he makes an attempt upon Antonio's life, he is done greater wrongs by the Christians. Throughout his whole life, throughout most of the existence of his race, Jews have been treated as less than human. They have been kicked, spat upon, made fun of, discriminated against and even killed for living the only life left open to them by their Christian brothers. In his revenge upon Antonio, Shylock is then the patriarchal avenger of an oppressed race. But even in his revenge he is wronged, for all of his possessions, both spiritual and material, are denied him because he has tried to avenge the wrongs done him.

It may be the privilege of actors and critics to find in Shakespeare's play whatever meaning each most desires; but the exercise of this privilege must not obscure the fact that beneath all other meanings lies Shakespeare's own intention. It is with this intention only that I am here concerned.

Shakespeare's characters are presented as real people. There is a certain depth within his main characters which give them an individuality far beyond any "type" one may see portrayed within the character. Though a character may be a "type", he is often more than just this. It is for this very reason that no one who has seen Shylock on stage or read of him on the printed page forgets him. Shakespeare was a poet as well as a playwright. The genius of the poet transforms the play into more than just a play. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare's works are still alive and meaningful today while the works of many other playwrights of his day are no longer remembered. Shakespeare's plays contain both a "without" and a "within". The "without" is obvious—the plots and actions of the play coupled with whatever interpretations an actor or critic
gives a character. The "within" is the artist's intention. One must look beneath the surface to discover it. The intention of the artist can be found within the play itself—in its very lines and words. Here is where the poetic genius of Shakespeare shines triumphant. A deeper meaning can be discovered which allows one to know Shakespeare's intention.

It is my contention that this play is, in reality, a tragedy centered around the character of Shylock. This was as Shakespeare intended it to be. Though Shylock is wrong in his method of seeking revenge, he is also wronged. Though the Christians deal out justice, they are tragic in that they cannot temper it with Christ-like mercy. They are unable to look beyond their stereotyped idea of a Jew to see the human being that lies beneath the branding gaberdine.

The play, then, is much more serious than the mere plots would suggest. The plots themselves were hardly original. All were familiar to the Elizabethan audience. They had viewed them before in the older plays. Shakespeare used these plays as sources on which to draw for his plots and characters. His chief authority for The Merchant of Venice obviously was the story of Gianetto which is found in a collection entitled Il Pecorone, by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, published in Milan in 1558.

In the Italian story a young merchant named Gianetto comes with a richly laden ship to a harbor near the castle of Belmont. Here dwells a rich and beautiful young widow who has many suitors. She is prepared to surrender her land and fortune on one condition which no one thus far has succeeded in fulfilling. She challenges the hopeful suitor, at nightfall, to share her bed and make her his own; but at the same time she gives him a drink containing a sleeping potion which plunges him into deep unconsciousness from the moment his head touches the
pillow. Thus, at daybreak the suitor has forfeited his ship and cargo to the lady and is sent on his way, shamed and without his riches.

This misfortune befalls Gianetto, but he is so much in love that he returns to Venice and persuades Ansaldo, his foster-father, to furnish another ship for him. But his second visit to Belmont is no more successful than the first. In order that Gianetto may make a third attempt, Ansaldo is forced to borrow ten thousand ducats from a Jew upon the same conditions as those occurring in The Merchant of Venice. By following the advice of a friendly waiting-woman, Gianetto this time escapes the dangerous potion, becomes a happy bridegroom, and in his state of bliss forgets his foster-father's obligation to the Jew. He is not reminded of it until the very day it falls due. His wife then insists that he start to Venice immediately, equipped with one hundred thousand ducats. She herself follows dressed as a young lawyer of great reputation from Bologna. The Jew rejects everything proposed to him for the deliverance of Ansaldo, even the one hundred thousand ducats. The trial scene proceeds just as in Shakespeare's play; like Portia, Gianetto's wife delivers judgment, the Jew receives no money and dares not shed a drop of Ansaldo's blood. Gianetto offers his one hundred thousand ducats to the young lawyer to show his gratitude, but she asks only for the ring which Gianetto's young wife had given him. The tale ends with the same gayety and sportiveness which gives Shakespeare his fifth act.

Shakespeare found the conditions imposed by the fair lady of Belmont in Il Pecorone unsuitable for his play, so he looked about and found another in the Ceste Romanorum, in the tale of the three caskets of gold, silver and lead. Here it is a young female who makes the choice
in order to win the Emperor's son. The inscription on the golden casket promises that whoever chooses it shall find what he deserves. The girl rightly rejects this; it was found to contain dead men's bones. The inscription on the silver casket promises to whoever chooses it what his nature craves. It contained earth and worms, but it too is rejected. Finally the girl chooses the leaden casket which promises to give what God has decreed; this casket proves to be full of jewels.

In Shakespeare's play, Portia, in accordance with her father's will, makes her suitors choose between the three caskets of which the humblest contains her portrait.

Since it can readily be seen that the plots are hardly original, Shakespeare's great genius and value then lies in the depth and seriousness which he has imparted to his characters. In order to see beyond the mere "without" one must examine the "within".

The social world of Venice centers around pleasure. It is a gilded world of luxury, leisure, idle talk, frivolity, romance, and music. Most of the scenes of The Merchant of Venice leave us with an impression of bright costumes, romantic love, and witty conversations filled with much bantering and gayety. But what is beneath all this careless ease? On what does it rest for a foundation? The answer is on money—money or the trade and commerce which bring riches and the inheritance which passes it along.

Portia is made rich through inheritance; Antonio becomes rich from the profits his trade brings him; Bassanio gains his fortune first by sponging off his good friend and later through marriage to the wealthy heiress. Shylock's wealth comes through usury—from the interest he charges on the money he lends.

But even deeper than the money on which lies the social world of
Venice, lies something even worse—exclusiveness; it brings with it its dear friend hypocrisy, and they seem to say that the excluded object or person is less real or right than those who do the excluding.

In varying degrees some of the people of Belmont and Venice reveal an uneasiness and discontent, an unexplained sense of something wrong. This note is found in the very first words of several of the leading characters.

In the first line of the play Antonio says:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.  
(I, i, 1)

Portia's first words are:

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.  
(I, ii, 1-2)

Our house is hell; ....  
(II, iii, 2)

announces Jessica in her opening speech. We wonder what cruel thing Shylock has done until she goes on to say that the hell she refers to is tediousness. Melancholy, weariness, tedium. A coincidence? Over and over the characters in the play give the impression of trying to fill every bit of time with some distraction or amusement or often just words—anything so they will not have to think. Bassanio enters greeting Solanio and Salerio:

Good signiors both, when shall we laugh? Say, when?  
(I, i, 6)

And Gratiano after a reference to Antonio's appearance begins:

Let me play the fool!  
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,  
And let my liver rather heat with wine  
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.  
(I, i, 79-82)

Thus, Gratiano's cure for care is merriment and talk. He speaks "an infinite deal of nothing,"
But what is the trouble with all these people? Why must they keep from thinking? What is it they are hiding and fear to face? Perhaps one could venture to say that it is their own unconscious. It is that nagging little voice in the back of the mind that keeps saying that all is not right with their merry world. Underneath lies hypocrisy and sham. Perhaps merriment and talk can drown this too truthful voice.

Now Shylock is a representative of both the foundations of the social world--of money because he himself is a moneylender, and of exclusiveness because he is the excluded one. The Venetian world makes him their scapegoat. This foreigner represents the foreign part of them. They project on him that which they wish to put out of their own minds as too disturbing.

In the character of Shylock Shakespeare puts before us a picture of the Jewish people.

After the destruction of the Jewish state by the Romans, Jewish communities established themselves with success in remote centers and corners of the ancient and medieval world. They were held together by God, faith, and tradition. These scattered communities flourished wherever they sprang up, and the richer they became, the more they provoked the outside world. Because of their spiritual differences and their sharper material bases the Jews remained foreigners within Medieval Europe.

The Middle Ages was the period of the Christianisation of Europe. The church had no difficulties in fitting Jews into her picture of the world. She saw these people as witnesses to post-Jewish truths. They were scattered as punishment for their lack of the true faith and

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their crime against the Savior. However, they were not excluded from the final act of grace on Judgment Day. Until that time they were viewed as belonging to the devil or as being the devil incarnated.

In the secular world Jews held varying statuses and occupations, depending upon how the country they were settled in viewed them. Not all countries viewed them or treated them in the same manner. In one country a Jew could hold a high and respected position while in the next he was forced to hide and travel by night. Thus there came to be a limitless variety of relationships among the Jews themselves as well as with native populations. This led to the inaccurate picture pieced together by medieval Christianity that whatever one Jew does is done by the whole of Judaism.

The Jew was a stranger and clung to a strange faith; he was without grace which only the church could dispense. He was a wanderer without the honor that comes when one is firmly established in a place or business. Fanatacism and superstition began to dance about him, and he became equated with the devil. It did not occur to the Christians that these "murderers" of Christ worshipped the same God as they. All they knew was that these "devils" had settled, industrious and rich, in the very heart of Christendom. The myth of the Jew was created.

This concept of Jews in turn led to persecutions of every imaginable type to the Jewish people. It was the beginning of a warfare that lasted hundreds of years. Jews were seized with restlessness and fear. Not only their life and property, but also their faith and honor were constantly threatened. They were prevented by the feudal economy and the guild organizations from settling anywhere and from following any of the basic occupations. Jews resorted to certain types of work not done by Christians
becoming second-hand dealers, moneylenders, and pawnbrokers. They became despised pedlars in a small way and hated creditors on a big scale.

Jew-baiting became a medieval institution, and Jews were granted no protection by sovereigns. Their position was very uncertain, and this led them to invest in securities such as money and jewels that could be easily carried away in the event of persecution.

The English of medieval times were no more friendly towards the Jews than were their contemporaries on the continent. From the reign of William the Conqueror until two hundred years later the English and Scottish people were full of violence, and wherever war and disorder reigned, the number of Jewish victims was high.

English kings and princes, just as the rulers on the continent, accorded Jews rights and privileges which they later took away from them together with the fruits of their labor and often with freedom and life itself. Jews were taxed exceedingly and accused of every kind of misdeed including murder. Legends concerning the "murderer" Jews grew up and were spread. The Jews were persecuted and massacred and finally driven out—banished entirely from the country in 1790. They were debarred from entering again until the second half of the seventeenth century.

During Shakespeare's time, the morality play became popular. In these plays the current legendary conception of the "devil" Jew was popularized. It was this legendary conception that justified the crimes of Marlowe's Jew, Barrabus, as a matter of course.

Though Shakespeare may have drawn upon the character of Jews of the earlier plays for the source of his characterization of Shylock, it is doubtful that they would have stimulated him to write the play. But contemporary history may have provided him with a figure which prompted him to write The Merchant of Venice. This was the physician-in-ordinary
to Queen Elizabeth I, Roger Lopez.

In 1580 there was no heir to the throne of Portugal. Don Antonio, son of a Portuguese prince and an aristocratic Jewess, had been crowned and hailed by his people. King Philip II of Spain also claimed the throne and defeated Antonio, forcing him to flee.

In 1558, the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Antonio came to London where as an enemy of Philip he was welcomed. Elizabeth intended to use him as a pawn in her post-war maneuvers against Philip. A certain Dr. Roger Lopez was appointed to be Antonio's interpreter and advisor during his stay in London. In this position Lopez served as a go-between for the Queen. He had political knowledge as well as a knowledge of several languages; he knew the continent and had excellent connections there.

The Earl of Essex kept alive public interest concerning Antonio. He and his friends had the public opinion of London under their control. In 1589 Lopez helped him persuade Elizabeth to equip an expedition to Portugal on behalf of Don Antonio. In spite of Essex's heroic deeds, the expedition failed.

King Philip concerned himself with political details. He entered into a correspondence with Lopez, and between them there were negotiations about the price for poisoning Elizabeth. Lopez demanded payment in advance, and Philip refused. But in order to assure him of his special favor, Philip sent a valuable ring to Lopez. Lopez, in turn, offered it to the Queen without concealing its origin. She would not accept it. Lopez hinted at what Philip had in mind, and for this confidence he once more enjoyed the Queen's unlimited confidence.

Later, Lopez informed the Queen of a new attempt by Essex to find proof of Spain's preparations for war. Essex became furious with Lopez.
and began a public campaign against him. Essex and his friends called him "Jew" and stirred up scandals against him. Later, Essex placed friends of Lopez upon the rack forcing them to reveal that Lopez wrote secret letters to Spain and the continent. Even the Queen was horrified at this news, and Lopez was thrown into the tower. Here he collapsed, and to escape the rack, he confessed to his supposed intention of poisoning the Queen. In late January, 1594, he was imprisoned. A month later his trial began.

Essex succeeded in being appointed president of the court to try Lopez. Lopez was accused of high treason in the form of a plot against the life of the Queen. Lopez repeated his confession in court and was condemned to death. Throughout the whole affair Essex made sure to emphasize that the defendant was a Jew.

Lopez was executed in June at Tyburn where he was hanged. When he attempted to speak to the crowd, he was shouted down by them because he was a Jew. As the rope was thrown around his neck he cried out that he loved the Queen more than Jesus.

Elizabeth herself seems to have been far from convinced of his guilt. Whether or not he was guilty is not of concern here. If he was a traitor in the service of Philip, he was also a traitor of the Jews, for Philip and Spain were their sworn enemies.

What is important is that being the Jew of London in the public eye he was bound to focus on himself and stir up again all the prejudices against Jews.

The London public found Lopez guilty, and Essex kept the case before them in order to keep attention on himself as the savior of the Queen and thus the country. In the wave of hatred against Jews which spread throughout the city, Christopher Marlowe's _Jew of Malta_ was again revived and popularized. It is not difficult to assume that Shakespeare seized this
opportunity to present a suitable play.

Today one can reconstruct the details of Shylock's background and attempt to show what type of man he must have been had he actually lived.

Venetian Jewery in Shakespeare's day and long after was divided into three "nations"? Among these were the Ponentines comprising refugees from Spain and Portugal, and the Levantines consisting of Turkish subjects from the Near East. More prominent than these, however, was the Nazione Tedesca, or German Nation, the oldest and most numerous. There is no doubt that Shylock must have belonged to this nation, for he is a moneylender, and it was only the Nazione Tedesca which was allowed to practice this occupation. Both the Levantines and the Ponentines were rigorously restricted by law to commerce. The Nazione Tedesca were tolerated in Venice only on the condition of maintaining the essential moneylending establishments in which no Christian was allowed to engage. And for doing this, the only profession allowed him, Shylock was scorned and hated.

The fact that Shylock belonged to the German Nation does not mean that he was intended to be of German birth, for the Nazione Tedesca was the oldest of Jewish communities in Venice, dating back from Shakespeare's day, for a full century. It is obvious that Shakespeare did not consider him a foreigner since there is no indication of impediments or difficulties in Shylock's speech. It is true, however, that Shylock is not a citizen. Shakespeare makes this fact plain:

It is enacted in the Laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien
That, by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen, (IV, i, 346-49)

Legally, Shylock was an alien, whether born in Venice or not. Again the excluded one.

Jews were further separated by the dress they were forced to wear. In Venice, in the sixteenth century, Jews were required to wear a red bonnet of some sort. This "badge" Shylock wore was probably a hat covered with crimson cloth, lined and edged with black. His Jewish gaberdine was probably some sort of "praying shawl". So over and over in this wealthy Venetian world, Shylock is hated and excluded, and the others go about their merry and busy ways trying to avoid any human relationship with the undesirable Jew.

Bassanio is a good example of the Venetian world and its people who are caught up in their own concerns. He has posed and lived as a wealthy person. He admits this to Antonio:

*Tis not unknown to you Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance;*  
(I, i, 122-75)

He goes on to admit that his chief concern is to be rid of his debts. He explains a "plot" to clear himself of them:

...; But my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts.

... I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.  
(I, i, 197-34)

In Belmont is a lady richly left;  
(I, i, 161)

He further states that she is fair, but note which thought came first—the money. And all he asks of Antonio is money to win the fortune and fair lady. Antonio willingly complies to abet Bassanio's deception and aid in the plot.
And most ironic is the scene in which Bassanio stands in front of the golden casket and says:

Therefore thou gaudy gold,
Hard fool for Midas, I will none of thee.

(III, ii, 101-2)

--none except the bit from Antonio to start him out and a bit from a certain lady "richly left" whose fortune can pay off his debts and provide him with future "swelling port".

And Antonio--why is he so sad?

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

(I, i, 1-7)

Salerio and Salanio note his changed appearance. They suggest perhaps he is anxious over his argosies. But Antonio says no:

My ventures are not in one bottom trusted

Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

(I, i, 42-5)

Why, then you are in love.

(I, i, 46)

ventures Salanio. But Antonio brushes that aside too. Could this sadness be his unconscious fighting to free itself? Possibly, but it is suppressed, for along comes Bassanio and his plot to win a fortune. And since Antonio loves his dear friend, he agrees to aid him. Perhaps this merry adventure will take the nagging melancholy away for a while. So:

Try what my credit can in Venice do.

(I, i, 180)

Bassanio contracts Shylock for the lending of three thousand ducats for three months for which Antonio shall be bound. Shylock
considers this carefully:

Three thousand ducats—well.  

(I, iii, 1)

Then:

For three months—well.  

(I, iii, 3)

Finally he summarizes:

Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.  

(I, iii, 8)

This is Shylock the business machine, calculating, making mental notes. Antonio's financial condition is a solvent one—he has argosies upon the seven seas. Still, Shylock cannot help but go on to criticize:

But ships are but boards, sailors but men;  
There be land rats and water rats, land thieves and water thieves—I mean pirates; and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks . . .  

(I, iii, 19-22)

Some would interpret this as Shylock's having deliberately counted on bankruptcy, but this is ridiculous. Most likely Shylock is just daydreaming. He knows of Antonio's many argosies; therefore, he agrees to lend the money:

... I think I may take his bond.  

(I, iii, 23-4)

At this Antonio himself arrives on the scene. He is versed as to the business proposition and comments that it is his practice never to lend or borrow where interest is charged, but for Bassanio he would break a custom.

Shylock is astonished at this willingness to back the loan, for he knows Antonio hates the taking of interest:

Methoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow  
Upon advantage.  

(I, iii, 64-5)
Antonio admits that this is not his customary habit.

When Jacob graz'd his Uncle Laban's sheep—

(I, iii, 66)

begins Shylock, and Antonio responds:

And what of him? Did he take interest?

(I, iii, 70)

Shylock continues:

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

(I, iii, 71-7)

This is just Shylock's point. Note, he says not "directly" interest. He is not using the example as an argument to defend usury; rather, he says there is more than one way of taking interest. Even Jacob knew there was more than one trick to the trade. Shylock tells Antonio to look again. Profits from merchandise are really the same as interest, only the former is in a more subtle disguise.

Antonio does not understand Shylock's example. He says that such an instance turns against Shylock and does nothing to justify the exacting of interest. Ewes and rams are not gold and silver:

This was a venture, sir, that Jacob serv'd for;

(I, iii, 86)

Yes, it was a venture, but what are Antonio's argosies? Antonio misses the significance of his own words, and he goes on:

Mark you this Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul, producing holy witness,
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

(I, iii, 91-7)

It is ironical that these words should come from the goodly gentleman who, in a few moments, will spit out his hatred.

Meanwhile, Shylock considers the rate he should charge:
Three thousand ducats—'tis a good round sum. Three months from twelve—then, let me see, the rate—
(I, iii, 98-9)

Antonio interrupts Shylock's calculating with the demand of whether they shall be indebted to him.

Shylock does not trouble to contain himself. The merchant has exasperated him afresh. Shylock hates him because he is a Christian. He hates him because he lends money without interest and thus cheapens the rate of interest. He hates him because this man who is ready to bind over his fortune and life for his friend has made a habit of baiting Jews and sneering at them as usurers, though usury is the only livelihood allowed these despised people.

Shylock reminds Antonio of the numberless times the merchant has berated him on the Rialto—how he spat upon his gaberdine and beard and spurned him with his foot as one would kick a dog. But now Antonio needs his help:

What should I say to you? Should I not say "Hath a dog money? Is it possible A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" or Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness, Say this: "Fair sir, you spet on me Wednesday last; You spurn'd me on such a day; another time You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies I'll lend you thus much moneys?"

(I, iii, 115-24)

Antonio is stung by the Jew's words and the justice contained within them. Yet he sees no reason to reproach himself for his treatment of Shylock. He coldly replies that he is likely to call him names again and to spit on him and kick him. Friends do not ask or give interest: if Shylock wishes to lend the money, let him lend it as to an enemy. Then should Antonio fail to meet the loan on the set day, the penalty may be
exacted with a better face.

Why, look you, how you storm!  (I, iii, 132)

cries Shylock. The tables are now turned—the relationship is reversed and Shylock has the upper hand. Antonio belittles himself through his uncontrollable anger while Shylock keeps his self-control. Shylock goes on to make an offer to forget the past, to be friends with Antonio and supply his wants as a friend would without taking a penny's interest:

... This is kind I offer.  (I, iii, 137)

he urges. He then suggests they go to the notary to seal the bond and "in merry sport", as a jest, insert a clause declaring that if payment is not duly made, Antonio shall forfeit an equal pound of his flesh to be cut off and taken from whatever part of his body it pleases Shylock.

Bassanio is totally against this, but Antonio assures him that his ships will be in a month before the bond is due. Besides, what could Shylock gain from a pound of flesh?

Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond.  (I, ii, 166)

Now why would Shylock offer Antonio a loan of three thousand ducats without interest? An easy answer is to assume it was for revenge. Didn't Shylock himself say so when Antonio first entered the scene?

If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
... Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!  (I, ii, 41-7)

It couldn't be plainer. The Jew has plotted to trick Antonio into signing a bond which will cost him his life. Shylock foresees that the rich Antonio's ships will all be wrecked; Antonio will be bankrupt and
unable to pay on the appointed day the bond falls due.

However, the text gives no reason for assuming this idea. There is no way Shylock could have known all that would happen. Certainly he did not know which direction the conversation would go or even that Antonio would appear. And Antonio has argosies on the seven seas. Shylock knows that they all will fail? Preposterous.

Shylock's offer to be friends and take no interest was probably as much a surprise to him as it was to Antonio and Bassanio, for he had been pondering on the rate of interest to charge just a few lines before.

What caused Shylock to make this apparently uncharacteristic move? Could he be trying to buy the merchant's favor or buy off his insults? Perhaps he is trying to humiliate Antonio by putting him under an obligation to the Jew whom he scorned. Could it be an unconscious desire to kill the one who hates him? Or could it be just as Shylock claims—a desire to become friends and wipe out the past?

Probably it was all of these. Shylock is a man, and as such he possesses the human faculties of instinct, reason and imagination. These three faculties are often at cross-purposes in a man. Shakespeare knew the human mind and how it works. He knew that there is no one man. There are several Shylocks, and each of the reasons mentioned above could be tugging at him and causing him to act.

Antonio, the man who has always treated him as a cur, approaches him as a human being. Underneath his leaden shell Shylock has human feelings and potentialities for good. Deep inside he wishes to be included, and he speaks of friendship. The better part of Shylock comes to the fore. At the same time, the conscious part of Shylock is at work. Here before him is also the man whom he hates for all the injustices which have been heaped upon him and his race. Antonio
has supplied an opening for revenge. Friends never lend at interest he says. Here is Shylock's chance to humble the haughty Christian by compelling him to accept a loan on an outward basis of friendship. This act will humiliate Antonio, for he will be under obligation to his hated enemy. Shylock can then exact a sweet revenge. But he cannot let his reversal of a lifetime practice be suspected. It must be covered under the pretense of a jest. Hence, the "merry bond".

After the agreement Shylock's clownish servant, Launcelot, makes it plain to Bassanio that he is eager to leave the service of the Jew and take service with him. Shylock discovers this when he arrives at home. The Christians have taken his servant, but since he has some liking for the good-natured clown he does not become angry. He is probably hurt by Launcelot's wishing to leave him and tells Launcelot that things may not be as good as they were at his old home:

Well, thou shalt see, thy eyes shall be thy judge,
The difference of old Shylock and Bassanio--
What, Jessica! -- Thou shalt not gormandize
As thou has done with me--What, Jessica! --
And sleep and snore and rend apparel out. --

(II, v, 1-5)

However, he cannot go on thus. Both he and Launcelot may discover how he really feels, so to cover up he says that he is satisfied to part with Launcelot:

. . . Drones hive not with me;
Therefore I part with him, and part with him
To one that I would have him help waste
His borrowed purse . . . .

(II, v, 47-50)

So Launcelot takes leave of Shylock, and Shylock, who is bid forth to Bassanio's supper party, leaves his house in care of Jessica, his daughter. He bids her to keep his house locked and not to hang out the casements to gaze on "Christian fools with varnished faces."
Jessica, in her father's absence, has arranged to elope with her lover, Lorenzo, one of Bassanio's friends. She disguises herself as a page and provides for herself and her bridegroom by gathering a quantity of money and jewels from her father's chests. As the pretty thief descends from the casements, Gratiano comments in approval:

Now, by my hood, a Gentile, and no Jew!

(II, vii, 51)

The oath "by my hood" insinuates there is something dark about the whole matter. Which is it—her dashing air, or her hard heart which allows her to do this—-that entitles her to be called a Gentile rather than a Jew?

Thus, Shylock's only child and a large share of his wealth are stolen away from him in the night by a Christian with the help of Christians.

Shylock's discovery of this tragedy changes him from the man we once knew into a savage, beast-like creature. Even Antonio's devil-may-care friends, Salerio and Salanio, recognize this. They are held and overwhelmed by the passion of Shylock:

I never heard a passion so confus'd,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.
"My daughter! Oh, my ducats! Oh, my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! Oh, my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! My ducats, and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!
And jewels--two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats!"

(II, viii, 12-22)

The passion of Shylock has overwhelmed him until we no longer see the man. It is a "passion so confus'd" that the end result is frightening. Shylock is so hurt by his daughter's desertion that he cannot even think straight. All he knows is that he loved her, and
she has rebelled against him. He is alone now, and he cries out like an idiot, making no sense in his speech.

Later, Salerio and Salanio meet Shylock on the street. He no longer speaks in confused words, but he is a changed man. He is not the Jew who bowed submissively to the Christians and wiped the spit from his beard. No, Shylock is through with all that. All he now wants is revenge—revenge which was triggered by his daughter's rebellion.

My own flesh and blood to rebel!  
(III, i, 30)
The Christians do not even take this seriously at first. They heap another insult on Shylock and purposely misinterpret his meaning:

Out upon it, old carrion! Rebel it at these years?  
(III, i, 31)

Shylock's answer shows us clearly his intention and where his thoughts are:

I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.  
(III, i, 32)

His daughter has much to do with the final, bloodthirsty intention of the father. Furthermore, Shylock knows that Antonio has had some losses. He is bankrupt and scarce show his face on the Rialto for fear of his creditors.

Let him look to his bond!  
(III, i, 43)

repeats Shylock.

The astonished Salerio cannot contain his surprise at the seriousness and ferocity of the Jew:

Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?  
(III, i, 44-45)

The answer he receives is hardly what he expected to hear. Rather, his question triggers what is perhaps Shylock's most famous speech:
To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I 'will better the instruction.

(III, i, 46-64)

A moment later when Tubal mentions Antonio's bad luck, Shylock is joyed with the news, but his confused thoughts are still in Genoa, the place where Shylock has been trying to trace his daughter. Tubal must keep whipping his thoughts back to Antonio and the approaching day the bond falls due. Tubal yanks Shylock's mind back and forth from Antonio to Jessica and Jessica to Antonio, forging a link between the rebellion of his daughter and the forfeiture of the bond. However, the worst he gets from Shylock is, "I'll torture him." Shylock says nothing of killing Antonio.

Later, the goodness in Shylock again is aroused when Tubal mentions the ring which Jessica has traded for a monkey. It is the ring his wife, Leah, had given him when he was a batchelor, and Shylock is cut by the loss of it.

... Thou torturest me, Tubal... 

(III, i, 105)

Shylock cries, and if he tortures Antonio, it is because of the tortures he has suffered from Antonio, Jessica, and Tubal. Tubal
urges Shylock on to revenge. There is a malicious "Shylock" in this play, but most have pointed a finger at the wrong man.

Tubal. But Antonio is certainly undone.  
(Ill, i, 108)

Thus stirred up, Shylock sends Tubal for an officer. While Tubal is gone Shylock meets the jailer with Antonio; enraged at seeing his enemy at large, Shylock directly threatens him:

Thou call'dst me dog before thou had'st cause;  
But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs.

(Ill, ii, 67)

Shylock now recognizes that the animal in him has the upper hand. Antonio called him a dog, and Shylock will take him at his word.

Antonio begs Shylock to hear him, but Shylock's repetition illustrates his irrational state:

I'll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak.  
I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more.  
I'll not be made a soft and dull-ey'd fool,  
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield  
To Christian intercessors. Follow not.  
I'll have no speaking; I will have my bond.

(Ill, iii, 12-17)

Shylock feels he must insist on no word from Antonio. He fears that his better side may again come up and cause him to relent if a reasonable word from Antonio is spoken. His inner resistance must be kept strong at all costs lest his kinder side emerge.

This supreme effort which Shylock must make to keep his kindlier feelings down illustrates that he has in him sympathetic and humane feelings. He has an inner goodness despite the leaden exterior.

Shylock and Antonio do not meet again until the trial in the fourth act of the play. This act is the most important one regarding the discovering of Shakespeare's true intentions.
When Shylock enters the courtroom his state of mind is as determined as ever, but he is in a more rational state than was the confused man crying in the streets or the maddened one threatening Antonio. Shylock is no longer unwilling to listen; he hears the kindly words of the Duke. "I know you will show mercy, Shylock," he seems to say and hopes Shylock will relent:

We all expect a gentle answer Jew. (IV, i, 34)

But Shylock has sworn an oath to his God of Abraham, the God of justice:

And by our holy Sabbath I have sworn
To have the due forfeit of my bond. (IV, i, 36-7)

In answer to their unspoken question he responds:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that!
But say it is my humour, is it answered?
(IV, i, 40-43)

Shylock recognizes again the various forces tugging at him, driving him to commit the very offenses which have been committed against him. He knows too that he cannot pinpoint an answer, but he recognizes the fear of cats, pigs, and bagpipes is an irrational fear; at the same time, this fear is a symbol of something deeper. It is like the forces within him:

What if my house is troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it ban'd? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some are mad if they behold a cat,
And others, when the bagpipe sings i' th' nose;
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rend'red
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a woolen bagpipe—but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend himself, being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?

(IV, i, 44-62)

Antonio recognizes the futility of opposing Shylock's passion.

He tells the others:

I pray you think you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bait his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf;
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops and to make no noise
When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
You may as well do anything most hard
As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—
His Jewish heart.

(IV, i, 70-80)

The metaphors Antonio uses show that Antonio knows he is no longer dealing with the ordinary Shylock, the one he went to in order to borrow money.

Shylock's hatred comes from more than the individual wrongs Antonio dealt him. His obsession is revenge—not so much for individual wrongs, but revenge for the physical and spiritual suffering and outrage which his tribe have born in every land for untold centuries. Shylock carries the revenge for these injustices. "He seems the depository of the vengeance of his race." 3

Bassanio then tries offering Shylock double the price of the

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bond, but Shylock answers:

If every ducat in six thousand ducats  
Were in six parts, and every part a ducat,  
I would not draw them, I would have my bond.

(IV, i, 85-7)

Avarice was not a characteristic of Shylock. True, he had money, but the appreciation of money is not avarice. If Shylock were so in love with money, wouldn't he have taken the offer? He has just been offered thirty-six thousand ducats—a high price for revenge. But Shylock cares not for the money; revenge is the essential thing. He keeps his hate within the law as he believes:

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?  
(IV, i, 89)

Just as the Christians keep slaves because they have purchased them, and thus, they are theirs, so too is Shylock's bond his.

Then Portia enters. She is generally viewed as the perfect, lovely witty, wealthy, and gracious lady from Belmont. She is the gentle Christian in contrast to the harsh and vile Jew, Shylock.

But I would bid the reader keep in mind some arresting words spoken by the good Bassanio:

So may the outward shows be least themselves;  
The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.  
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt  
But, being season'd with a gracious voice,  
Obscures the show of evil?  

(III, ii, 73-77)

Let's take a closer look at the gracious Portia. Concerning her exterior Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt. She is golden and shines forth with goodness. Her praises have been echoed by thousands of readers and spectators. They are fascinated by her brilliance and charm. Yet Portia, too, is not precisely all that she seems to be. The heiress with all her wit, wealth, and beauty does not come through
all the admiration untouched. She is the darling of her sophisticated society, and she takes herself at their estimate. She never modestly disagrees with or protests the generous compliments of her suitors; she assents to them without a word. In the first scene in which she appears she mocks several of her suitors unmercifully; it never seems to occur to her that any man would not desire her. Beyond this, she even loads the dice in direct violation of her father's will so that Bassanio would make no mistake. And she revels in excitement all the while he chooses. The caskets are a game to her—a release from her "weary world".

After Bassanio's "lucky" choice of the casket, he tells her of Antonio's plight and the role he has played in it. Of course, the good wife sends him off to save his friend, but the minute he is gone she develops a plan of action. It will be an exciting game. She and Nerissa laugh with glee at the trick they shall play on their husbands and all the fun they will have doing it.

Ner. Shall they see us?
Port. They shall, Nerissa, but in such habit
That they shall think we are accomplished
With what we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered like young men,
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man and boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a manly stride; and speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth; and tell quaint lies,
How honorable ladies sought my love
Which I denying, they fell sick and died—
I could do not withal! Then I'll repent,
And wish, for all that, that I had not kill'd them.
And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,
That men shall swear I have discontinued school
Above a twelvemonth; I have within my mind
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks,
Which I will practise.

(III, iv, 59-78)

It sounds so exciting that Portia can hardly wait to play her role.
as the actress. She enters the courtroom as Balthasar, a young and learned doctor of laws from Rome, recommended by the distinguished Bellario. She has probably never seen a lawbook, but the hasty instructions from her uncle and his letter of recommendation get her into the court as an accomplished scholar and jurist.

The Duke tells her:

You are welcome; take your place.
Are you acquainted with the difference
That holds this present question in the court?
(IV, i, 168-70)

Portia responds:

I am informed thoroughly of the cause.
Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?
(IV, i, 171-2)

Merchant and Jew. The noble trader of Venice and the despised usurer. They appear to stand in opposition. Yet, which is which?

It is interesting to note that on July 22, 1598, James Roberts entered in the Stationer's Register The Merchant of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce. Even in Shakespeare's own day the public was puzzled by the title of the play and had substituted for or added to Shakespeare's title another more expressive of what seemed to be its central character.4

Introduction and identifications over, Portia, disguised as the young lawyer, says to Shylock:

Of a strange nature is the suit you follow;
Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.
(IV, i, 175-77)

How this must have raised Shylock's hopes. The actress appears to be favorable toward his case; he is within the law. But his hopes must be raised to a high level so that his downfall will be even more dramatic.

4 Goddard, p. 90.
Do you confess the bond?  

(IV, i, 178)

Portia asks Antonio, and he replies that he does.

Port. Then must the Jew be merciful.  

(IV, i, 180)

Shylock immediately seizes the offending word.

On what compulsion must I? Tell me that?  

(IV, i, 181)

Shylock knows that must and mercy are two contradictory terms having nothing to do with each other. No law can force a man to be merciful. Portia is caught; she momentarily drops her role to respond with the truth. She seems to say that Shylock is right; she was wrong:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd;  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest—  
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest . . .  

(IV, i, 182-6)

The golden interior of Portia opens, and she delivers one of the most beautiful and memorable of speeches. However, the young lawyer soon remembers her role and drops from words of compassion to words of legality:

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 here.  

(IV, i, 200-3)

In these few words she undoes all of the beautiful ones uttered before it. She seems to tell Shylock that he should show mercy, but she is always sure to assure him that the law is on his side:

There is no power in Venice  
Can alter a decree established.  

(IV, i, 216-17)

Why this bond is forfeit;
And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
Nearest the merchant's heart ... (IV, i, 228-31)

It is she who tells Antonio to lay bare his bosom. It is she who asks if there is a balance to weigh the flesh. She is engulfed in her star role, and she relishes in it stretching every nerve to the breaking point, allowing Antonio to undergo his last agony to a final farewell.

Bassanio finally breaks in at this point and with noble sincerity says:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you. (IV, i 280-5)

All the "angelic" Portia can do at this very solemn moment is turn his words into a jest.

Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make the offer. (IV, i, 286-7)

She then as easily turns to Shylock and grants him the sentence:

A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine.
The law allows it, and the court awards it. (IV, i, 300-1)

At this point she has Antonio and Bassanio on the highest pinnacles of agony, and Shylock sits on the verge of triumph. All the while Portia knows what the final outcome will be, but this is her scene so suspense must be at its highest for her to emerge the champion and savior. Now that everything is set for the maximum effect, she can drop the bomb:
Tarry a little; there is something else. This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; The words expressly are "a pound of flesh." Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; But in the cutting it if thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate Unto the state of Venice.  

(IV, i, 303-10)

We can almost see Shylock loosen the grasp on his knife as he unbelievingly gasps:

Is that the law?  

(IV, i, 312)

Portia answers:

Thyself shalt see the act;  
For, as thou urgest justice, be assur'd  
Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st.  

(IV, i, 314-15)

Shylock knows, it is impossible not to shed a drop of blood, and he is now willing to accept the offer of thrice the bond. Bassanio even produces the money, but Portia will have none of it. This is her scene:

The Jew shall have all justice. Soft! no haste.  
He shall have nothing but the penalty.  

(IV, i, 319-20)

No longer is there any talk of mercy from the divine and merciful Portia. It is justice right down to the letter of the law. She wants the pleasure of tormenting Shylock.

Shylock is cheated of his vengeance, and he hears his enemies resume their baiting of him. He mutters:

Give me my principal and let me go.  

(IV, i, 334)

Bassanio is again ready to give him the lesser sum, but Portia will allow only one thing:

He shall have merely justice and his bond.  

(IV, i, 337)
Shylock is now ready to leave the court with nothing, but Portia, the same one who spoke so eloquently of mercy, has one more card up her sleeve. The law has yet another hold on Shylock. By terms of the bond, he has indirectly attempted the life of a Venetian citizen. Therefore, his goods are forfeit, half to his enemy who owes him, and half to the State, and his life is dependent upon the mercy of the Duke. Portia shows no compassion and motions Shylock to his knees:

Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke.

(IV, i, 361)

This beggar's mercy bears no resemblance to the mercy which falls as the gentle rain from heaven. Ironically it is the Duke who shows mercy:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.

(IV, i, 366-7)

He further reduces the State's share of Shylock's property to a fine. Shylock is not heartened. His hopeless words reflect his state:

Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house. You take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

(IV, i, 372-5)

Portia then asks Antonio what "mercy" he can render. Antonio will only take half of his part in Shylock's fortune, and will hold it in trust for Shylock's son-in-law, Lorenzo, who lately stole his daughter away. Lorenzo's name must have stung Shylock, to be sure. Antonio further stipulates that for this "favour" Shylock bequeathe all of which he dies possessed to Lorenzo and Jessica; to show his gratitude for all these mercies, Shylock must further become a Christian. The stricken Shylock murmurs assent. The Christians thus rendered their "mercy", but they forgot that mercy does not come in parts; it is wholehearted
and is not strained. Nor do they seem to realize that a court decree cannot make a Christian.

Shylock is beaten and broken. He bows in his shameful gaberdine that he will no longer have to wear as a Christian. He asks leave to go; the deed may be sent after him to be signed:

I am not well. (IV, i, 393)

These few words are full of meaning. Truly, he is not well. Such "justice" is enough to make one physically ill aside from being not well because everything that ever had any meaning to him has been taken away. The sick society has exacted its sick justice. The Christians have temporarily alleviated the melancholy, weariness, and tedium of their world. They have solved the problem of the moment—Antonio's life was saved. But they failed in solving the larger problem of relating to a human being as a human being and not a dog Jew. Such an act would have meant facing reality and solving meaningful problems; games and adventures are more fun and not nearly as difficult. The Christians lapse back into their false world of gayety and talk where again they will not have to think. Society as a whole is not well.

Dismissed, Shylock leaves the courtroom, alone. He is probably lonelier than he has ever been in his tortured life as a Jew.

Where was the mercy with the quality of gentle rain from heaven? True, they granted Shylock his life, and they even left him some means to support it. But what good was that if they took away his faith? A Christian cannot be a moneylender. They had taken his lovely Jessica away, and now they cut him off from his people and the God of his fathers. He, who had always been despised and rejected by them as a Jew, was condemned to live doubly as an outcast, a deserter of his own faith and
race. Both he and the society which allowed such an injustice are to be pitied.

Shylock disappears with the end of the fourth act in order that no discord may mar the harmony of the concluding scenes. The Christians can go back to their care-free, leisurely world.

In the majority of Shakespeare's plays the climactic scene appears in the third act. The Merchant of Venice deviates from the norm; the high point in this play occurs in the fourth act. This act is the most important one for discovering Shakespeare's intention. Everything of importance culminates here. The resolution of Antonio's problem of staying alive is solved, but nothing else is worked out. This too is different. Shakespeare usually allows the problems in a play to resolve themselves; the larger problem presented here seems too difficult for Shakespeare to cope with, and it is left unresolved. It is left with us as it is. Perhaps no answer is better, for it can set us thinking on the same problem still existing in our society today.

If this is so, one may then ask why the fifth act? If Shakespeare's intention was to draw our attention to the injustices of society, why the happy ending?

It must be remembered that Shakespeare wrote this play for a crowd. This crowd had just seen the hanging and quartering of a Jew, Roger Lopez, a short time before. Prejudices against Jews were once more running high. A play such as this would be popular, but to present a Jew too sympathetically would not. A happy fifth act would make the play seem comic, and the Jew would appear to be a vile villain to the average theatregoer. It would please a crowd which consisted
of people of all classes and races—the noble and rich, the rising merchant class, and the rowdy, bustling, booing mob of groundlings who stood in the pit. The putting of the Jew in his place would have delighted them. They could laugh and jeer at him along with the Christians in the play and cheer when he was put down. Or they could become enthralled with the tender love story in the rest of the play. The fifth act keeps the play entertaining by washing out all the images of pain and gloom in its general impression. It erases any earlier, painful impression for both the characters in the play and the theatregoers. Everything turned out right after all. The crowd received its demand for a happy ending. Thus, Shakespeare succeeded in pleasing the public. But he had himself to satisfy too. He saw wrongs in his society which bothered him, but which he could not present openly to it. An open presentation would not have been very safe at this time. Therefore, the setting is in Venice, the play itself is disguised as a comedy, and Shakespeare can safely continue to write. The hard facts of truth are still there for those who wish to delve beneath the surface and find them. Those who are bright enough or brave enough will discover the meaning that lies there. They will not only see the bright, false exterior but also the truth-telling interior. Shakespeare himself gives clues enough for one to look further for the play's meanings:

O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!  
(I, iii, 97)

All that glisters is not gold—  
(II, vii, 65)

So may the outward shows be least themselves;  
The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.  
(III, ii, 73-4)

Such realizations make people reflect and think. One can see
that Shakespeare is hinting for one to look past that which is "without" and discover his real intention hidden "within". Upon a close examination of the play one discovers that the outward show is hardly the true one. The Christians are Christian in name only. They have wronged Shylock in all they have done to him. They have restricted him to a trade and way of life, and then have scorned, kicked, spat upon and hated him for being their "creation". When he rebelled, refusing to be a dog any longer, they took away everything he had left except his life. Without the things that made his life meaningful, he had no real life. Thus, they took away his life too. They took away all that was rightfully his because he refused to be subservient to them—he wished to be a man, wished to live as a human being, free to choose and make his own decisions.

Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?

(IV, i, 172)
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