In the first sentence of his essay on the play, Shakespeare studies guru Harold Bloom loudly states: “One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy ‘The Merchant of Venice’ is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work.”

He goes on to say that “Shylock is a comic villain and that Portia would cease to be sympathetic if Shylock were allowed to be a figure of overwhelming pathos.

There is an extraordinary energy in Shylock’s prose and poetry, a force both cognitive and passionate, which palpably is in excess of the play’s comic requirements.....Shylock is a villain both farcical and scary, though time has worn away both qualities.”

The truth of the matter is that historically-speaking, Venice was a hotbed of anti-Semitism at the end of the 16th century when Shakespeare wrote the play. BUT, London was not. Bloom continues with “Shakespeare’s England did not exactly have a Jewish ‘problem’ or ‘question’ [at the time] with only one or two hundred Jews, presumably most of them converts to Christianity, living in London.”

At least three questions arise.

First, how could Shylock possibly have withstood the abusive world all around him every moment of every day...except when someone wanted to borrow money like Antonio for Bassanio?
Second, when virtually painted into a corner at the end of the trial, is it not almost impossible to understand his heart-and-mind rending process to utter the most haunting line of the play: “I am content” – in converting to the Christianity he SO hated throughout the play.

Third, was the deal proffered by the Duke and Antonio a fair one!

"A COMIC VILLAIN"

"The Merchant of Venice" is a play about revenge, justice, deception and friendship.

Shylock “the Jew” is a usurer lending money at unreasonably high rates of interest....unlike Christians who loan and borrow as friends.

Shylock is both villain and victim.

“The coexistence in Venice of Antonio and of Shylock is an unbearable irony, an ambivalence so acute that it must be ended either by the barbarous mutilation of Antonio or the barbarous Christian revenge upon Shylock.

Butchery or baptism is a nice dialectic: the ‘merchant’ of Venice survives, but the Jew of Venice is immolated since as a Christian he cannot continue to be a moneylender. Shakespeare’s one law is change, and neither Shylock nor Antonio can change. Antonio darkens further and Shylock breaks, but then he is one man against a city.” (Harold Bloom)

So, the profound question: where lies the comedy to make Shylock a “comic villain”???

CHANGE?

Will Shylock change?

Again, opinions from Mr Bloom:

“Shakespeare thus demeans Shylock, but who can believe Shylock’s ‘I am content’? ...Shylock’s agreeing to become a Christian is more absurd than would be the conversion of Coriolanus to the popular party, or Cleopatra’s consent to
become a vestal virgin at Rome. We sooner can see Falstaff as a monk than Shylock as a Christian. Contemplate Shylock at Christian prayer, or confessing to a priest. It will not do; Shakespeare was up to mischief, but you have to be an anti-Semitic scholar, Old Historicist or New, to appreciate fully the ambition of such mischief.”

What’s your take on Shylock’s future????

Now, consider some of these quotes from a collection of Shakespeare scholars...

1. “IT MAY BE THAT JESSICA’S MOTHER WAS UNFAITHFUL AND THAT JESSICA IS NOT TRULY THE DAUGHTER OF SHYLOCK.”

In studying Shylock’s daughter Jessica, her attitudes and actions in the play, this wry suggestion interpolated by the fool, Launcelot Gobo, rings an odd but possible note?

2. “ANTONIO MAY VERY EASILY BE MEANT BY SHAKESPEARE TO REPRESENT THE NOBILITY OF HOMOSEXUAL LOVE, SOMETHING HE HINTS AT IN SEVERAL PLAYS (“Two Gentlemen of Verona”, “Coriolanus”, “Twelfth Night”) WITHOUT QUITE DARING TO BE SPECIFIC ABOUT IT.

If such is the case then Antonio’s loss at the end of the play ironically echoes to some degree Shylock’s loss.


Agree? Disagree? Surprised at her transition from Portia the key-holder to Portia the brainy barrister?

4. “I END BY REPEATING THAT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER FOR THE LAST FOUR CENTURIES OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAD SHAKESPEARE NEVER WRITTEN THIS PLAY.”

Significant statement. Could Shakespeare have not found another story with which to continue the long battle for popularity with Christopher Marlowe than to try to slightly more humanize
Marlowe’s similar theme in his play of 1590, “The Jew of Malta”, in which “his” Jew is given an unrepentant and horrible death???

There seem to me several levels of payback weaving themselves through the undercurrent of the play.

Payback for “hate-full” religious criticism?

Payback which rears it ugly head when pride and pomposity loose to risk and chance with all but the last of Portia’s suitors?

Payback for Antonio at the center of the action as clearly agreed upon in the bond?

Payback for mistreating one’s daughter?

And, above all, payback for blind vengeance gone wrong?