

that Studs is not a simple victim of a hostile environment." Farrell's Chicago, Butler says, "drew more from Sherwood Anderson's lyrical stories than it did from [Theodore] Dreiser's naturalistic novels."

Unraveling Shylock

"Who Is Shylock?" by Robert Alter, in *Commentary* (July 1993), American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

The Merchant of Venice may not be Shakespeare's best comedy, but historically it has been his most popular. Not only has it been produced thousands of times on both sides of the Atlantic, it was the first of Shakespeare's plays to be performed in Armenian, the first entirely in Chinese, and the first by a Japanese Kabuki troupe. Why all this should be is a bit of a puzzle. There are livelier (*The Taming of the Shrew*), funnier (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and lyrically richer (*Twelfth Night*) plays, yet *Merchant* seems to have a special appeal. Its source, suggests Alter, a Berkeley professor of comparative literature, lies in the play's most famous—or infamous—character, Shylock.

Although Shylock is neither the merchant of the title nor the romantic lead, he is usually regarded as the play's central character. There are really two Shylocks, says Alter, who draws extensively from John Gross's recently published *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*. The first, dominant in productions until the 19th century, feeds on the worst anti-Semitic fantasies: the greedy, cold-hearted, and unmerciful Jew—"the very devil incarnation," as his servant Launcelot Gobbo says. In

the early 19th century, however, a sympathetic Shylock emerged. Victorian actor Henry Irving called Shylock "the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used." Since the 1920s, however, both Shylocks have been presented on stage. But while Shylock's position in the plot relies on one of these two readings, Alter suggests, the ultimate power of the play has always resided in the "explosively unstable" character of Shylock, in the interplay between his two roles. There is "something about the transgression of boundaries," he writes, "that gives the play its peculiar fascination."

Shakespeare the 16th-century Englishman may have cast Shylock as a stereotypical Jew of his day—"the archetypal alien in the mind of Christian Europe"—but Shakespeare the dramatist could not help giving Shylock a considerable degree of humanity. As the audience tries to define itself against the Jew, then, it meets with an undeniably sympathetic figure—a man betrayed by a heartless daughter and persecuted by a merciless society. The most famous testament to this perspective is, of course, the "Hath not a Jew eyes" soliloquy.

Yet Shylock's negative characteristics are inescapable, and if an audience connects with his human anguish, it may just as well connect with his human cruelty; "Hath not a Jew eyes," after all, ends with a promise of revenge. Christian audiences, Alter says, are invited to "a kind of out-of-self experience. If the looming, sinister other embodies all the hateful qualities that Christian culture would like to think are alien to it, there are also brief but powerful intimations . . . that the self may harbor the fearsome attributes it habitually projects on the other."



Shakespeare's Shylock, here depicted in 1785, prepares to extract his "pound of flesh."