



# Shylock and the Jewish Question (Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies)

*Professor Martin D. Yaffe*

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"Yaffe provides a wide-ranging and probing reflection on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in early modern thought. His innovative approach to the problem of Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock can stand for the originality of his book as a whole... Yaffe's interpretations are likely to prove controversial, but they are always thought-provoking." -- Virginia Quarterly Review

Much attention has been paid to the place of Shylock in the history of anti-Semitism. Most scholars have agreed with Harold Bloom that Shakespeare's famous villain is drawn with a "murderous anti-Semitism" and that Shakespeare uncritically mirrors the rife anti-Semitism of his times. While others see only gross caricature in *The Merchant of Venice*, however, Martin Yaffe finds a subtle analysis of the Jew's place in a largely Christian society. In *Shylock and the Jewish Question*, Yaffe challenges the widespread assumption that Shakespeare is, in the final analysis, unfriendly to Jews. He finds that Shakespeare's consideration of Judaism in *The Merchant of Venice* provides an important contrast to Marlowe's virulent *The Jew of Malta*. In many ways, he argues, Shakespeare's play is even more accepting than Francis Bacon's notably inclusive *New Atlantis* or the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza's argument for tolerance in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

"Although Yaffe focuses on the Jewish question, his study is a lead-in to a study of the rise of liberal democracy, the development of religious toleration, the relation of church and state, and the inter-relation between politics, economics and religion -- all of these being vital in history's evolution towards modernity." -- Serge Liberman, *Australian Jewish News*

"In a critique that promises to refuel scholarly controversy over the portrait of Shylock... Yaffe's retrospective approach to its political philosophy suggests interesting possibilities for contrasting popular anti-Semitic culture and the more tolerant, enlightened statesmanship of the seventeenth-century." -- Frances Barasch, *Shakespeare Bulletin*

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