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# Shakespeare's Shylock

WARREN D. SMITH

**T**HE common assumption that Shakespeare's Shylock was created to compete with Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, in pandering to a wave of anti-Semitism greeting the arraignment and execution for treason in 1594 of Elizabeth's Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, becomes untenable upon examination. The evidence seems to indicate that through Shylock Shakespeare is really not satirizing Jews as such but is attempting to depict a usurer, by vocation a villain, who hypocritically conceals his evil designs behind the mask of a religion he himself does not believe in. Prejudice against Jews as we know it today is not at all an issue in *The Merchant of Venice*. Indeed, if there really was a public upsurge of anti-Semitism in England in 1594—and the only evidence seems to be the revival of Marlowe's play and the composition, perhaps two years later, of Shakespeare's—it could hardly have been directed against overt Jews living in the community at the time, for despite the assertions of Sidney Lee,<sup>1</sup> Lucien Wolf,<sup>2</sup> Michel Poirier,<sup>3</sup> and John Bakeless<sup>4</sup> to the contrary, there had been no such beings residing in England since the expulsion under Edward I. All four writers are actually referring, as Wolf inadvertently admits, to the New Christians, some of whom possibly were Marranos (or "secret Jews"), who were the descendants of the fifteenth-century converts of Portugal and who settled in England without opposition about 1540. That Lopez himself was a professed Christian, though born a Portuguese Jew, is attested to by the contemporary authority of one of his most outspoken enemies, Sir Francis Bacon.<sup>5</sup> And according to the exhaustive researches of J. L. Cardozo,<sup>6</sup> there is no evidence whatever of a single practicing Jew living in England from the expulsion in 1290 to the readmission of the Jews by Cromwell in 1655. The enactments against heresy, applicable, of course, to unbelieving Jews as well as to other heretics, remained in full vigor until 1650. Jews in England are not mentioned by the Elizabethan voyagers who make numerous observations concerning foreign Jews abroad, and in all Elizabethan drama there is not one instance of an English Jew.

<sup>1</sup> "The Original Shylock", *The Gentleman's Magazine*, CCXLVI (February, 1880), 186, 187, and 190.

<sup>2</sup> "Jews in Elizabethan England", *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society*, XI (1928), 2, 4, 19, and 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Christopher Marlowe* (1951), pp. 153 and 154.

<sup>4</sup> *Christopher Marlowe* (1937), pp. 178-179, and *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe* (1942), I, 343.

<sup>5</sup> "A True report of the Detestable Treason, Intended by Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Physician Attending upon the Person of the Queen's Majesty", in James Spedding, ed., *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon* (1861), I, 278.

<sup>6</sup> *The Contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan Drama* (1925).

At least two Elizabethans, Coke<sup>7</sup> and Prynne,<sup>8</sup> attest to the absence of Jews from the land since the 1290 expulsion, and a third, Phillip Stubbes,<sup>9</sup> in his attack against the English preoccupation with May-games, refers to the "Jewes" as a foreign nationality, along with the "Turcks" and the "Sarinsins". According to Cardozo (p. 22), the records of the five reigns (1413-1485) from Henry V to Richard III are silent with regard to Jews. And equally significant to me is the evidence I have discovered in John Stow's *Annales*. Though from the year 1067 to the year 1287 Stow alludes to the activities of Jews in England on twelve different occasions,<sup>10</sup> his final reference<sup>11</sup> is to their expulsion by King Edward I in 1290 (p. 204). And though under the year 1594 (p. 768) the chronicler gives an even more than usual lengthy reference to the execution of "Rodericke Lopez", nowhere does he mention that Lopez is a Jew. That the somewhat discursive Stow should be totally silent about Jews from 1290 on would seem to indicate there were no post-expulsion Jews in England to write about.

The particular brand of anti-Jewish prejudice exhibited in *The Merchant of Venice* by minor characters like Launcelot Gobbo and Gratiano can be explained by the fact that the absence of a living target in England did not preclude all bias against Jews at the time of the composition of the play. An anti-Semitism based purely upon religious rather than ethnic group prejudice was an emotion familiar enough to Englishmen for the duration of the expulsion. Such widely read literary works as the *Cursor Mundi* (composed about the time of the 1290 expulsion), Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale", North's *Diall of Princes*, Lyly's *Euphues*, and Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveler* contain invectives against the Jews as the killers of Christ; and medieval drama, together with medieval art, linked the Jew with the devil. In the miracle plays Judas was on several occasions played as a bloody-minded usurer, and the morning-star of the Reformation, Martin Luther, preached several sermons against the Jews. Chief Justice Coke compared Lopez at the trial to Judas (after he realized the defendant had Jewish ancestry), and though Queen Elizabeth delayed the execution of her Christianized physician for several weeks and after his death showed her favor by bequeathing land to his survivors, on at least two occasions<sup>12</sup> she employed the term *Jew*, as did many another Elizabethan, as an unfavorable epithet. The Jew could be forgotten in post-expulsion England as an undesirable neighbor but never as the slayer of Jesus Christ.

But Shylock would have provoked the antipathy of the Elizabethan audience not so much because he was a Jew as because he was a usurer. On the authority of Aristotle, the Bible, and the Church, usury, it is well known, was condemned by the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as both unnatural and irre-

<sup>7</sup> Cardozo, pp. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Cardozo, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Phillip Stubbe's Anatomy of the Abuses in England* [1583] (1877-1879), I, 149-150.

<sup>10</sup> Anno. 1067, p. 103; Anno. 1190, p. 159; Anno. 1210, p. 168; Anno. 1223, p. 179; Anno. 1231, p. 182; Anno. 1235, p. 183; Anno. 1255, p. 190; Anno. 1258, p. 191; Anno. 1262, p. 192; Anno. 1274, p. 200; Anno. 1282, p. 202; and Anno. 1287, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> There is actually one further reference, to a Jew who was converted and who received a pension from the King, under Anno. 1391, p. 306.

<sup>12</sup> See J. E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth* (1934), pp. 50 and 93.

ligious. The Inquisition declared it to be a heresy. Though lending money for interest was officially sanctioned by Henry VIII (in 1536) and, after being prohibited by Edward VI (in 1552), by Queen Elizabeth (in 1570), at an interest rate of ten per cent, it was never accepted by the English public as either a lawful or a moral vocation. The invective of Stubbes, who condemns usury as worse than thievery or murder (*Anatomy of Abuses*, I, 125-127), is representative of the prevalent attitude. Nashe<sup>13</sup> and an early admirer of *The Merchant of Venice*, Francis Meres,<sup>14</sup> are equally vituperative, and the Elizabethan clergy<sup>15</sup> preached vehement sermons against usury despite its legality. That to the Elizabethan dramatist and audience the usurer was by definition a villain is demonstrated in the more than sixty plays from 1553 to the closing of the theaters examined by Stonex<sup>16</sup> though, interestingly enough, most of the usurers in the dramas are not, like Shylock, Jews.

Then why did Shakespeare decide to make Shylock a Jew as well as a usurer? Either that the usurer in the source is Jewish or that Shylock as a Jew would be more of a villain is, I believe, only part of the answer. For though Stubbes (*Anatomy*, I, 127) and Thomas Wilson<sup>17</sup> have the grace to condemn usurers as worse than Jews, early in the Middle Ages the Jew became closely associated with the wicked profession of usury in the public mind. And little wonder since usury for Jews was encouraged by both the Church and the State.<sup>18</sup> According to Trachtenberg, in the twelfth century the words *Jew* and *usurer* had become almost synonymous. So that a reappraisal of what Shakespeare was attempting to accomplish in his portrayal of Shylock demands that three historical factors be kept in view: (1) that there were no practising Jews in England to be satirized at the time of the composition of *The Merchant of Venice* and that "New" Christians were as acceptable to Elizabethans as other Christians; (2) that nonetheless a kind of anti-Semitism, purely religious rather than ethnic, based on condemning the Jew as an unbeliever and the slayer of Christ, was an active bias; and (3) that the usurer was by definition a villain in the public mind and the term *Jew* was frequently made equivalent to *usurer*. Most pertinent is what ties all three factors together: the interesting fact that in 1290 the Jews were expelled from England, as some Elizabethans should have recalled, on two counts—as unbelievers and as usurers.

Thus on two historical condemnations, as both an unbeliever and a usurer, Shylock is branded a villain upon his first appearance in the play. The pound of flesh episode is merely a demonstration of the innate evil in the man, or, possibly more important, the trap with which to ensnare the inventor. But anti-Semitism as we know it today, prejudice against personal traits called "Jewishness", is not present in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock, in contrast to his daughter (who willingly turns Christian for Lorenzo), is a stubborn infidel; Shylock, again in contrast to his daughter (who on her first appearance gives

<sup>13</sup> See Bakeless, *Tragicall History of Christopher Marlowe*, I, 375.

<sup>14</sup> See Cardozo, pp. 315-316.

<sup>15</sup> See Burton A. Milligan, "Some Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Satire against Money Lenders", *SAB*, XXII (January, 1947), 38, and Rudolf Kirk, ed., *Joseph Hall's Heaven upon Earth* (1606), ed. 1948, pp. 129 and 130.

<sup>16</sup> A. B. Stonex, "The Usurer in the Elizabethan Drama", *PMLA*, XXXI (1916), 190-191.

<sup>17</sup> See Cardozo, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (1943), pp. 188-189.

Launcelot a ducat and is lavish in bestowing her dowry on Lorenzo as well as in giving away a valuable ring for a monkey), is a miser. It is only poetic justice, then, fitting the spirit of comedy, that at the end of his performance the Jew is made to undergo two transformations for the good of his soul: he is converted to Christianity and is forced to give up usury when his wealth is taken from him. Small wonder his name is not mentioned in Act V: since he is no longer a villain, no longer either an unbeliever or a usurer, there is no reason to express animus against him. But it should be emphasized that though the fact that Shylock is a Jew may have been held against him by the Elizabethan audience, throughout the first four acts he is never made the victim of anti-Semitic prejudice by the other major characters in the play. He claims he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian", but his assertion that Antonio mistreats him because "I am a Jew" has no foundation in the text. 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. As Romeo and Juliet condemn the stars for what is actually the evil emanating from the family feud, as Hamlet mistakenly blames his difficulties on the fact that "the time is out of joint", as Lear excuses his own inordinate pride by attacking the pride of Cordelia and Kent, so Shylock, though not so innocently, attempts to excuse his own villainy by emphasizing what the Christians in the play do not emphasize, the fact that he is a Jew.

But being a villain, Shylock is not nearly so blind to reality as are the tragic protagonists. On his first entrance he offers the obtrusively weak rationalization of usury as "well-won thrift", calling on what he must have realized was a completely irrelevant analogy from the Bible of Jacob's behavior towards Laban to defend his own nefarious profession. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" is the appropriate remark of Antonio. But though Antonio and Bassanio reveal their awareness of Shylock's real deficiencies in this scene, there is no indication of anti-Semitism. In addressing Shylock Antonio uses a term of respect, "sir" (I. iii. 80),<sup>19</sup> instead of "sirrah". Bassanio gives Shylock an earnest invitation to supper, which the latter refuses on the spurious ground that he is a devout Jew and therefore will not eat pork. Later he is perfectly willing to "feed upon the prodigal Christian" despite the ominous dream of money-bags he has experienced the previous night. In the lengthy aside delivered on the entrance of Antonio, Shylock gives the audience what he later refuses to confess to the Duke and Portia in Act IV, the real reasons why he hates Antonio: "for he is a Christian"—"But more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (I. iii. 43-47). In the court scene we hear of neither of these reasons from Shylock. Instead we are treated to a barrage of rationalizations about the pound of flesh which he seeks from the heart of Antonio: it is Shylock's "humour", nothing more than a "lodg'd hate and a certain loathing / I bear Antonio"; what if his house is troubled with a rat and he chooses to give ten thousand ducats to have it banned; if the Venetians will not free their slaves and marry them to their heirs, then Shylock cannot be expected to free Antonio; he has taken

<sup>19</sup> Quotations and line markings are from George Lyman Kittredge, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (1936).

an oath in "heaven" to have the pound of flesh; and so on. Not a word is spoken about Antonio's being a Christian nor about the merchant's discouraging habit of lending money without interest.

After the Jacob-Laban controversy between Shylock and Antonio, which is an argument purely about usury with no anti-Semitism entering into it, Shylock again uses his religion as a guise for his villainy. He complains that the Christian merchant has often berated him upon the Rialto and "spet upon my Jewish gaberdine", calling him "misbeliever, cutthroat dog", which leads the Jew to ask defiantly, "Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Antonio's rejoinder—"I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too"—has frequently been criticized as jarring in its anti-Semitism. But as a representative hero of the times, who himself lends out money gratis, Antonio would be expected by the audience to mistreat a usurer, whether he was also an unbeliever or not. Again, with the plaintive—"For suffrance is the badge of all our tribe"—Shylock uses his religion as a mask, for though sufferance may be typical of the oppressed Jewish people as a whole, it is not a characteristic of the speaker, who at the very moment is plotting vengeance against Antonio. That the vengeance is not really against Antonio's alleged expressions of anti-Semitism but his enmity to usury Shylock slips into admitting, when he says that the merchant has berated him "All for use of that which is mine own", the "All" being a dead giveaway. Antonio is fully alive to the real issue because he says, "If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not / As to thy friends—for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?" That Antonio's animus against Shylock has all along been based upon his dislike of usury is demonstrated in the merchant's favorable reaction to the Jew's offer of a loan without interest.

The next time we see Shylock we have already been introduced to his daughter. Though in all previous discussions the dramatic function of Jessica has been hurriedly glossed over, to me a reminder of it is necessary to a clear understanding of what the dramatist is attempting to accomplish. Like another Jew in the play, she is very evidently a foil character to her villainous father. As he is covetous, she is generous; as he is anti-Christian, she is pro-Christian; as he blames his suffering on being a Jew, she blames hers, much more honestly, on Shylock's having made their house a hell. No one in the play holds her being a Jewess against Jessica. Yet commentators have taken Jessica severely to task for stealing her father's ducats and jewels (actually the dowry owed to her) and for eloping with a Christian against her father's will. Surely to an audience who had everything against usurers and nothing against New Christians, her giving the ducats and jewels to her future husband would be, in contrast to the behavior of her miserly father, an act of commendable generosity, and her turning Christian for Lorenzo would be a saving grace. The same audience doubtless experienced keen satisfaction later in the play when her father is forced, under penalty of death, himself to give away all his wealth and to turn Christian. The Christians in Venice treat Jessica as an equal, and Portia and Nerissa in Belmont welcome her as a sister. The dramatist gives her a beautiful poetic scene with Lorenzo to open the final act, and she is treated as one of three heroines at the end of the play. Her presence in the play

is ample proof that the plot is not aimed at Jews as such (there were none in England to satirize) but rather at a villainous usurer who hides behind what he calls his religion to carry out his nefarious schemes.

For though Shylock is perfectly willing to use the Jewish faith as a cloak, he is not presented by the dramatist as a truly religious Jew. Not only does he willingly go to sup with the Christians after having told Bassanio he would not "smell pork" nor "eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into", but on one or two other occasions he reveals how little he really reveres the Jewish religion. When he learns from Tubal that Antonio has lost all his argosies, Shylock names the synagogue as the place to plot his vengeance on the undone merchant. He tells his compatriot the truth about why he wants the life of Antonio: "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit; for, were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will." In short, the synagogue, the place reserved for holy worship, is to be misused as headquarters for a scheme of vengeful murder concocted to eliminate the chief impediment to Shylock's sinful usury. Later, in the court scene, the Jew blasphemes that "by our holy Sabbath" he has sworn to have Antonio's life though he is more than willing to discard the oath made "in heaven" as soon as he realizes he is in danger of losing his property and his life. Finally, after the elopement of Jessica, Shylock has the nerve to cry out to Tubal: "Why, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankford! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now" (III. i. 87-89). He rates the centuries of suffering by the Jews below the personal loss of two thousand ducats.

Yet much sympathy has been expended on Shylock for the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech which he delivers in the first scene of Act III. Though a few unsentimental commentators have declared the passage to be nothing more than an avowal of vengeance,<sup>20</sup> the majority opinion has sentimentalized it to the exalted plane of an impassioned appeal to humanity, an example of magnificent martyrdom, a moment of tragic pathos, a defense of a whole race, a trenchant appeal for tolerance.<sup>21</sup> If the speech had originally been intended to scale such heights, then surely Shakespeare, in accord with his usual custom, would have cast it in poetic verse rather than in prose. Taking all the other evidence into consideration, I think it evident the passage is meant to be a specious piece of rationalizing on the part of the speaker, possibly the most obtrusive example in the play of the use of religion as a cloak for villainy. That Shylock himself is perfectly aware of the real reason for Antonio's hatred is revealed in the wording of his own introduction to the speech: "He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'ed me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, . . . thwarted my bargains, . . .", yet he has the temerity to add,

<sup>20</sup> See E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* (1942), pp. 268-269, 324, and 326; Norman Nathan, "Three Notes on *The Merchant of Venice*", *SAB*, XXIII (October, 1948), 156; John Palmer, *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (1949), p. 79; Sidney Warhaft, "Anti-Semitism in the Merchant of Venice", *The Manitoba Arts Review*, X (Winter, 1956), 11-12; and Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, I, 455.

<sup>21</sup> See, respectively, Hardin Craig, *An Interpretation of Shakespeare* (1948), pp. 118-119; Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, n.d., p. 226; Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, second series (1930), p. 98; Brander Matthews, *Shakespeare as a Playwright* (1913), p. 150; and Thomas M. Parrott, *Shakespearean Comedy* (1949), p. 143.

"and what's his reason? I am a Jew." As Shylock proceeds to point out, of course a Jew has eyes, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions—but, more pertinent, so does a villainous usurer. Certainly a Jew is 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 summer and winter as a Christian is—but, again, so is a villainous usurer. The passage is irrelevant to the real issue and specious in essence: it proves nothing beyond the obvious fact that evil men are human. Based on the false premise—"[because] I am a Jew"—it must have been greeted with ridicule by the Elizabethan audience for the patent rationalization it really is. For both Shylock and Antonio are vividly aware of the real issue between them throughout the play. In the first scene in which he appears, as we have noted above, the Jew had said, "I hate him . . . more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice." In the same scene he had addressed Antonio with the complaint: "In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances." In the first scene of Act III he says to Solanio and Salerio, after hearing of Antonio's losses, "Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian cursy. Let him look to his bond." In the third scene Shylock admonishes Antonio's jailer with the words: "Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy. / This is the fool that lent out money gratis. / Jailer, look to him." And after the exit of Shylock, Antonio himself reiterates to the jailer the real reason the Jew seeks his life: "I oft deliver'd from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me. / Therefore he hates me."

I think it can safely be concluded that Shakespeare's Shylock is a villain throughout the four acts in which he appears. To the Elizabethan audience, with their traditional religious bias against Jews, his birth may have been enough to arouse suspicion of his motives. But to the dramatist, surely, he was above all a hypocrite who concealed his innate evil behind the mask of a religion he himself did not believe in.

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