

SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK

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FREQUENTLY we hear praise of Mr. A's or Mr. B's Shylock, and we discuss warmly the merits of each actor's interpretation of the character. Yet, despite superficial differences, all these modern Shylocks have been cast in the same mould. Every modern Shylock is meant to arouse our pity; he is not so much a comic as a tragic figure, more sinned against than sinning; he is the embodiment of the age-long martyrdom of his race, and when he seems revengeful, he is merely expressing the inevitable result of such suffering. In a word, modern Shylocks reflect our humanitarianism and our feeling that it is not British to caricature cruelly a whole race. Now, so long as we remember that Mr. A's Shylock or Mr. B's Shylock is the creation of a contemporary of ours, little harm is done; but if we think that because we see Shylock in that light, Shakespeare saw him likewise, we are making an unwarranted assumption. Moreover, when we go further, and draw conclusions concerning Shakespeare's character and his conception of comedy from such an assumption, we are most uncritical students of Elizabethan drama. It may, therefore, be of interest and value to attempt to see how Shakespeare and his contemporaries viewed Shylock.

Though Jews had been officially expelled from England in the time of Edward I, there were many in Elizabethan London. They were, as elsewhere in Europe, despised. Thomas Coryate, a contemporary of Shakespeare, thought it not impertinent to accost a Rabbi in the street and urge him to change his religion. Moreover, there was an outburst of anti-Semitism in London in 1594: Lopez, a Portuguese of Jewish descent, was accused of attempting to poison Queen Elizabeth and Don Antonio of Portugal. The trial and execution—he was hanged, drawn and quartered—aroused great public feeling. It may be added that Lopez was very probably innocent. Now, a philosopher might have risen above such common prejudices against Jews, but it is most improbable that a dramatist dependent on the suffrage of these same Londoners—a dramatist who very likely punned on the words *Lopez*, *Lupez* (a variant), *Lupus*, and *Wolf* (IV, i, 134)—would dare, even if he felt such emotion, to set forth a Jew as a semi-tragic figure.

When we turn to the stage to study the Elizabethan attitude toward the Jew, we see hatred and prejudice. In 1579, Stephen Gosson refers to a play *The Jew* as representing "the greediness of worldly chusers, and *bloody mindes of Usurers*". (One objection to Jews was, as the reader of *The Merchant of Venice* knows, that they took usury.) Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (ca. 1590) shows the Jew as a person delighting in, and boasting of, the most abominable crimes. Nor was it odd for the Christian governors of Malta to require the Jews to hand over half of their wealth to the State and to become Christians, or, in case they refused to be converted, to surrender all their wealth. Stage traditions are not easily broken: witness our stage conception of English colonels, American "drummers", and so on. Therefore, when the first audiences went to see a new play *The Merchant of Venice*, they expected most surely to see the conventional stage Jew: had they not found him, they would very likely have wrecked the theatre, especially as this play is usually dated after the Lopez trial and execution. Let us take a few minor examples of the traditional attitude from the play. Antonio, a good Elizabethan Christian, did not hesitate to spit on Shylock on the Rialto. What was a more fitting way to show that Jessica had truly become a Christian than for her to rob her father's house before leaving it? To rob a Christian was, to the Elizabethan, one thing; to take from a Jew was quite another. Shakespeare's greatness consisted as little in his breaking with stage tradition and popular prejudice as in the invention of new plots; he could put new wine into old bottles.

When we examine the structure of *The Merchant of Venice*, we see that the recent interpretation of Shylock is scarcely tenable. A dramatist is at a considerable disadvantage as compared with a novelist: there is no calling back of the spoken word, there is no pausing on the part of the auditor to reflect on a subtle or elusive phrase, an impression must be made quickly, surely, and uncompromisingly. The novelist has leisure to unfold his material; the dramatist has none. Hence, in a play first impressions are most important. Very frequently Shakespeare gives an important character a soliloquy in the first act to make sure that the audience can make no mistake about this person. An excellent example is to be found in *Henry IV, Part I*; Shakespeare is so fearful that we may have taken the wrong impression of Prince Hal's character that, employing a most primitive and unrealistic technique, he has Hal tell us why he is acting so. Let us now note Shylock's first appearance in *The Merchant of Venice*. Of course, the make-up, the gestures, and the voice of the actor would tell much; but lest we

should not have caught the character of Shylock clearly, we have the usual soliloquy, so useful to Shakespeare for underlining his points:

How like a fawning publican he looks!
 I hate him 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.
 If I can catch him once upon the hip,
 I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
 He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
 Even there where merchants most do congregate,
 On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
 Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
 If I forgive him!

Here we have all the conventional characteristics of the stage Jew: his hatred of Christians, his love of usury, his desire for revenge. Shakespeare is leaving no doubts in the minds of his audience: he, dramatist to the London populace, is on the side of the angels.

A dramatist must not endanger the effect that he wishes to make; indeed, a drama is something like a telephone line when a long distance call is expected: all local traffic must be kept off the line. When Shakespeare wants us to feel the isolation of Desdemona before the murder, he has her sing the pathetic "Willow Song" and engage in a heartbreaking dialogue with Emilia. Now, let us consider Shylock's grief at the loss of Jessica and part of his fortune. If we were intended to feel pity for him, we should not first have a parody of his grief by Solanio (II, viii). Plainly that scene is merely to arouse our expectations and to prepare us for a rarely comic scene; and to keep us in suspense for this promised fun, Shakespeare gives us first a scene in Belmont. That this is the true interpretation of Shakespeare's purpose is shown by the fact that after Solanio and Salerio have baited Shylock in their own Christian way, Tubal, another Jew, takes their place on the stage. This part of the scene (III, i, 75ff) is interesting technically, for it shows Shakespeare closer to the formula of, let us say, Molière; here Shylock is almost like an automaton set in motion by the pulling of the strings by Tubal. Every remark that Tubal makes is intended by Shakespeare to bring out the ridiculous or the callous side of Shylock. To Prof. E. E. Stoll (*Shakespeare Studies*) we are indebted for bringing out the full humour of part of this scene: that speech of Shylock's beginning "Why, there, there, there," (lines 77ff.) This speech has often been interpreted as unadulterated grief, but, as Prof. Stoll shows, a comic Jew could by pauses and

shifting of his voice make each expression of grief uproariously funny: "I would my daughter were dead at my foot—and the jewels in her ear! would she were hears'd at my foot—and the ducats in her coffin." The passage is usually punctuated internally with commas, but dashes indicate the comic possibilities more clearly.

When we come to the trial scene, we again see that a false emphasis by modern actors has destroyed the true comic spirit of the scene. A trick that is almost as old as time is often employed in life and literature. Let there be a boaster, a glutton, a liar—always we like to lead him on in the thought that he is attaining his goal, only to snatch victory from him at the moment of seeming fulfilment. The comedy is increased, of course, if the dramatist can make the descent from the climax of the deception as involved as the ascent, and can make the exposure complete. Shakespeare was familiar with this comic device. In *Love's Labour's Lost* Biron exposes his friends' weaknesses in turn, only to have his own weakness exposed just after he has proclaimed himself above such. Parolles (*All's Well That Ends Well*) is led on to implicate himself more and more deeply, only to be exposed at the right moment. Perhaps the greatest and the most misunderstood use of this device is in the lying of Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part I*; so far have we moderns got from the true spirit of comedy into a maze of psychology that we imagine Falstaff is lying without expecting to be believed! The trial scene is a parallel. In the spirit of comedy Shylock is led on to the moment when he is almost about to cut off the pound of flesh; then suddenly the situation is completely reversed, and we find Gratiano pointing the comedy of the situation by using the very words of Shylock. So rich in creative imagination was Shakespeare that he was usually impatient of wringing the last drop of comedy out of a situation, but here we see him meeting Ben Jonson and Molière on their own ground. And his reward has been to be misunderstood!

One last point is to be drawn from the play itself. If Shylock is the central figure, why is he dropped so completely from the last act? In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare had to meet the difficulty of a leading character who threatened to die before the closing act, and he overcame the difficulty admirably. Surely if this play were a tragi-comedy with Shylock in the tragic rôle, Shakespeare would have found a way to bring him before us in the closing scenes. The lesson is obvious: Shylock was never intended to be the protagonist; he was only the "Big Bad Wolf", whose business was to make the course of true love run roughly for a time. We may shudder and weep; the Elizabethans were wiser

in the lore of their stage: they may have shivered for a time, as a child shivers at her father playing the wolf in his fur coat, but they knew that although for the moment the dramatist preferred to hide it, the pot of boiling water was already on the fire.

We have noted the pre-Shakespearean tradition and its influence on Shakespeare and his audience. Let us take a glimpse at a tradition of some years later. When the London theatres opened again after the Restoration (1660), there were still old actors who remembered the pre-Commonwealth stage. Thomas Jordan was one of these. In 1664 he described the correct make-up of Shylock, doubtless drawing his tradition from Shakespeare's day:

His beard was red; his face was made
Not much unlike the witches';
His habit was a Jewish gown
That would defend all weather;
His chin turned up, his nose hung down
And both ends met together.

To make such a character win the sympathy of a naturally hostile audience would require a greater actor, one feels, than has ever trod the English, or any other, stage. Surely that description should be the last nail in the coffin of a recent and false interpretation.

It is not difficult to see how the changed interpretation arose. Between the Elizabethans and us intervened the 18th century, in which modern humanitarianism and sentimentalism had a common origin in the doctrine of the innate goodness of man. We have become more humane, but at the expense of the true spirit of comedy. The late Sir James Barrie, for example, could not have written in his "April weather" style, with its mixture of smiles and tears, in the days of Elizabeth. Then, too, the growth of realism in drama displaced the old comic conventions with new ones, and so we were blinded to effects that Shakespeare was making. Our emphasis on character instead of on plot, and on psychology, has also played havoc with the interpretation of older comedy. The "star system" in our theatres has made the part of Shylock a rich one for an actor who wants to outshine the rest of the company. Lastly, we might mention our vanity and "bardolatry", as Mr. Bernard Shaw has called it, as playing their parts: Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist; therefore, he must be a contemporary and feel just as we ourselves do.

This desire to make of Shakespeare a modern, a contemporary of ourselves, has of late given a new turn to the interpretation of Shylock. Certain scholars and critics will grant most of what we

have been saying about the Elizabethan audience and tradition of comedy; yet they will not relegate the great Shakespeare to the limitations of the Elizabethan age. So has arisen the theory of Shakespeare's writing on two planes. If the term means anything, it means that Shakespeare wrote on the surface for the "groundlings", the illiterate and insensitive Elizabethans who stood in the pit of the theatre, but at the same time conveyed a deeper—and more modern—meaning to those in his audience who were as sensitive as he. It is a pretty theory, but it is open to certain objections. Were the finer souls to be found among the aristocracy, perhaps Essex, Rutland and Southampton, of whom we have heard so much of late in Shakespearean biography? Have we any proof of this superiority of some of Shakespeare's contemporaries? The theory might be more convincing if Shakespeare had written his plays to be read; but unfortunately for the theory, Shakespeare wrote for the stage, and was annoyingly indifferent to the possibilities of publication. Since *The Merchant of Venice* was written for the stage, where, as we have seen, Shylock was made up as a hugely comic figure and very probably had voice and gestures in keeping, it would seem too great a task for any actor to give the groundlings a comic character, and the select few in the tiers a deeper and more poignant embodiment of the wrongs of a race. There is no place for a half-way house; let us admit frankly that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare looked on Jews and wrote of them as an Elizabethan.