

## *Shakespeare and the Jews*

THERE is one sentence in the Rev. Arthur Dimock's interesting article on the 'Conspiracy of Dr. Lopez' against which I wish, with all courtesy, to make a protest. It runs thus :

One can but regret that the supreme genius of Shakespeare should ever have been used to incite hatred and suspicion so unjust against a race who possessed as many virtues and as few vices as the majority of the Christians of the time, and in spite of the treatment they generally received.

Now with all the latter part of this sentence I am, I hope it need not be said, in hearty sympathy ; but the earlier words surely need very considerable qualification. I propose in this paper to consider how far such a statement is to be allowed as that Shakespeare's genius was used for such a purpose as that described by Mr. Dimock with such laudable disgust. Certainly if the object or if the effect of the 'Merchant of Venice' is 'to incite hatred and suspicion' of the Jews, then, at least so far as that play is concerned, Shakespeare forfeits his claim to be ranked amongst the great humanisers of English and of the world's literature. He becomes so far the poet of the groundlings. The supposed child of light is, in fact, a child of darkness, a bigot, or at the best a merely conventional person who shouts the shout of the mob, and if it is 'HEP !' makes no objection, but gives that infamous cry a full and far-heard utterance. Shakespeare meant, no doubt, to produce successful and popular dramas ; beyond question he had an eye to financial profits ; material prosperity was by no means a thing he despised or neglected. Also, it may be stoutly maintained that he is not, nor ever set himself up to be, a formal and professional teacher ; that he was no schoolmaster who regarded it as his province to lesson and instruct his age, and impress on its mind excellent morals of the old copybook style ; that he was no 'heated pulpit,' overflowing with texts and truisms ; but yet, though a keen and shrewd man of business, and though not a pedant or a preacher, he was assuredly no mere slave of filthy lucre, and no less assuredly he was in a certain sense in his own way a great evangelist. And to think of him as a mercenary, ready to serve in the army of the Philistines, if the pay was high

enough, is surely to do him a grievous injustice, is to misread him, and to make it impossible to understand the imperial position he holds in the literary realm. And what is it but to discrown and degrade him to say that he used his genius 'to incite hatred and suspicion' against a certain race? Such language might perhaps aptly apply to the author of 'The Jew of Malta.'

Barabas [writes Charles Lamb in a well-known passage] is a mere monster, brought in with a large painted nose, to please the rabble. He kills in sport, poisons whole nunneries, invents infernal machines. He is just such an exhibition as a century or two earlier might have been played before the Londoners *by the royal command*, when a general pillage and massacre of the Hebrews had been previously resolved on.

Marlowe did little or nothing to mitigate the ferocious bigotry of the Elizabethan age in this respect. Rather he fanned and inflamed it. But can it be said of Shakespeare that he was in this matter even as his brilliant contemporary—no more enlightened, no more humane, no more human? When Shakespeare, closely familiar as he assuredly was with Marlowe's portrait of the Jew, resolved himself to try his hand at the same subject, did he propose to produce a sort of replica, or at all events to produce another monster to put side by side with Marlowe's hideous creation? Surely he might well think that mankind was sufficiently caricatured by one such piece of work. What we venture to suggest is that Marlowe's play, which undoubtedly influenced him, influenced him in the direction of antagonism rather than of sympathy. It was 'a stepping-stone to higher things.' Commanding attention by its power and its popularity, it excited in Shakespeare deep and curious questionings. He took counsel with the human heart within him as to whether such a brute in the shape of a man was in fact conceivable or possible; and he made a study of the Jew for himself, the result being Shylock. How wholly different is Shylock from Barabas, and how profoundly Shakespeare did in fact modify in his picture the vulgar conception of the Jew then current, and, what is of the highest importance, how he suggested an explanation of features that were undeniably morose and callous, and thus, so far from inciting hatred and suspicion, actually instilled a reconsideration of the popular verdict—these points I hope to illustrate so far as may be in the space now at my disposal.

But first let a few words be said as to Shakespeare's personal knowledge of the Jewish race—as to where and how he acquainted himself with it and its characteristics. It used to be stated that he could not have met and observed Jews in London—that they could not have 'sat' to him in the flesh there at all events—and the lifelikeness of his portraiture was explained by the conjecture that he must have travelled abroad and studied in foreign countries

a people then proscribed and prohibited in his own. So late as 1878 Elze maintained that it was in Venice Shakespeare encountered the prototype of Shylock. But considerable evidence has been by this time collected to show that, forbidden or not, Jews were not so scarce in the Elizabethan streets as was once supposed. Long ago the elder Disraeli in his 'Genius of Judaism' wrote—

My researches might show that they [the Jews] were not then [in the reigns of Elizabeth and the first two Stuarts] unknown in this country. Had there been no Jews in England, would that luminary of the law Sir Edward Coke have needed to inveigh against the Jews as 'infidels and Turks,' delivering them all alike to the devil? Stigmatised and infamous persons, '*perpetui inimici*,' says Littleton, 'and not admissible as witnesses.'

Possibly these researches, unhappily not published, would have given us the very results, or some of them, which Mr. Sidney Lee put out in his valuable article in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' in February 1880. I quote one of the most decisive, a little late in date, but yet quite satisfactory for the purpose before us. In a rare tract published in 1625, entitled 'The Wandering Jew telling Fortunes to Englishmen' (reprinted in Halliwell's [afterwards Halliwell-Phillipps] 'Book of Characters,' 1857), occurs the statement that 'a Store of Jewes we have in England; a few in Court; many i' th' Citty, more in the Countrey.' Mr. Lee's discoveries have been supplemented by Mr. Lucien Wolf in a paper read at the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition in 1887, dealing with the 'Middle Age of Anglo-Jewish History, 1290-1656.' One of Mr. Wolf's notices I will here cite, because it furnishes what is, I think, a not hitherto observed illustration of a phrase in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth.'

In 1581 a Jew of Prague, in Bohemia, one Joachim Gaunz—perhaps a connexion of the famous Hebrew chronicler David Ganz—came to England with an invention for making copper, vitriol, and copperas, and the smelting of copper and lead ores, and was permitted to make experiments at the copper mines near Keswick, in Cumberland. Gaunz seems to have remained some years in England; for in 1589 we find him in custody at Bristol on a charge of blasphemy. It appears that he had been in the habit of discussing theological questions with a certain Jeremy Pierce, and he had very much shocked that pious gentleman by endeavouring to prove to him that 'there was but one God, who [=and he] had neither wife nor child.' The blasphemy got wind, and a Christian minister named Richard Curteys seized an opportunity of interrogating the infidel before witnesses, when he exclaimed, 'What needeth the Almighty to have a son? Is he not Almighty?' Upon this evidence Gaunz was apprehended and sent to London for trial. The circumstance is interesting as another indication that conforming Jews visited England at this period as well as converts. In his examination before the magistrates Gaunz explicitly stated that he was a Jew, that he had been trained in Talmudic teaching, and had never been baptised.

It can scarcely be doubted that when the third witch in 'Macbeth' mentions 'liver of blaspheming Jew' amongst the ingredients to be added to 'our cauldron, to 'make the gruel thick and slab,' the memories of the Globe audience would revert to Joachim Gaunz and his audaciously expressed contempt of a cherished Christian dogma.

Conspicuous amongst the London Jews of Shakespeare's time was Dr. Lopez, as has been so fully shown by Mr. Lee, and in yet further detail by Mr. Dimock. With him it is almost certain that Shakespeare was brought into personal contact. For we know that at one time, however bitter their enmity after the summer of 1593, Lopez medically attended the earl of Essex; and we know that the earl of Southampton was a close and faithful friend of the earl of Essex; and lastly we know that Shakespeare in 1593 was on terms of intimacy with the earl of Southampton. Thus it is hardly possible that Shakespeare should not in private life have met the notorious Portuguese doctor. Certainly elsewhere he must often have encountered him—in Wood Street, where Lopez at one time resided; near Mountjoy's Inn, Holborn, where he afterwards had a house, given him by a wealthy patient, haply crossing the street to visit 'Mistress Allington, a lady of good repute,' living 'hard by Gray's Inn on the field side.' And Mr. Lee did excellent service in calling attention to a certain connexion between Lopez and Shylock.<sup>1</sup> But it is going too far to identify Lopez and Shylock, to assert, as Mr. Wolf asserts, that Lopez

'sat for one of the most striking portraits created by the greatest bard of all time,'

and very much too far to assert that

'it was in order to pander to their [the public's] prejudices in this respect [i.e. in respect of Lopez's guilt, of which the public was firmly convinced, and wrongly according to Mr. Wolf] that Shakespeare wrote the "Merchant of Venice."'

To speak of Shylock as a photograph or a mere image of Lopez does but scant justice to Shakespeare's artistic method. Shakespeare's portraits are not the reflections of individual men whom he had interviewed and perused; they are distinct and separate creations, springing from the large knowledge of men and manners he had amassed as he moved up and down in the society of his time; they are independent compositions, whose various material he had gathered here and there and everywhere. Other members of the Hebrew race besides the unfortunate physician who perished at Tyburn so miserably and amidst such execrations in June 1594

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Lee very plausibly suggests that when Shakespeare makes Portia speak of being 'on the rack' as a position

'Where men enforced do speak anything, there may be an allusion to Lopez and what he confessed to avoid the rack, as he afterwards declared. But he does not note, as also might well be done, that the allusion, if it is one, is sympathetic, i.e. is in Lopez's favour.

were certainly present in his mind when he conceived and embodied Shylock. And it should not be forgotten that he was assisted in drawing that immortal figure by other means than contemporary society supplied. He was assisted also, and largely, by literature, especially, not to refer to Chaucer and other later writers, by the Bible. We cannot but think that, after all, Shakespeare in his study of the Jewish nationality owed more to the pictures and the specimens of the Jewish nature and genius given so frankly and faithfully in the Old and the New Testaments than to any other source. There is scarcely a feature in Shylock's character that cannot be amply illustrated by those wonderful documents in which the Hebrew people in all its strength and all its weakness so fully and plainly reveals itself. The fervid patriotism, the ready duplicity, the remorseless greed, the abundant intellectual power, the inexorable spirit of revenge, even the deep domestic affectionateness—all these are elements present in that strange compound Shylock, some of them, indeed, less in evidence than others, but all present in him in a greater or less degree. And how easy to point out each one, or signs of each one, in the stories of the Bible. Unhappily the circumstances of the time did not permit Shakespeare to represent the Jew at his best. It may be confidently stated that Shakespeare never knew him so personally. It was not till nearly two centuries after the appearance of Shylock that such a figure as Nathan the Wise could possibly take a place in European literature. But in his Biblical studies Shakespeare had seen the Jew at his best as well as at his worst; and he was not unmindful of what was best, although what was worst naturally became prominent in the 'Merchant of Venice.' It may be plausibly believed that Shakespeare made a special study of the Bible, with a view to an accurate rendering of the Jewish character, or certain aspects of it. Again and again as one reads the 'Merchant' one catches echoes of those scriptures; one is reminded of phrases and situations that occur there. Shylock standing in the Venetian court of justice unrelenting and wolf-like, receiving Portia's praise of mercy with a defiant contempt of such gracious considerations—

My deeds upon my head ! I crave the law,  
The penalty and forfeit of my bond—

how exactly he recalls the scene at Jerusalem when, according to St. Matthew's account of that appalling day, Pilate having washed his hands before the multitude, and declared himself 'innocent of the blood of this just person,' all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us, and on our children.' There is the same terrible self-sufficiency, the same obstinate recklessness, the same stiffness of neck and hardness of heart. And other such parallelisms might easily be discovered. 'There is,' says Schlegel,

'a light touch of Judaism in everything Shylock says or does.' What I now suggest is that it was from the Bible yet more than from any personal contact that Shakespeare derived his knowledge of the Jew and his ways.

Moreover, we are prevented from pressing too closely the connexion between Lopez and Shylock by the fact that for some years before the Jew had attracted Elizabethan playwrights. It is well known that as early as 1579 there was a play current called 'The Jew,' described by Gosson 'as representing the greediness of worldly choosers and bloody minds of usurers'—a description that makes it as good as certain that the said play was the basis of Shakespeare's comedy, as it combined the same two plots as are found combined in the 'Merchant of Venice.' Then somewhere about 1590, certainly after 1588, was first performed the 'Jew of Malta;' and this became a standard play, as we learn from Henslow's Diary, which informs us that it was acted some twenty-five times in 1592-6, and again in 1601. Thus before Lopez's treason—the treason with which at least he was generally credited—reviving or intensifying the unpopularity of the Jews, gave Shakespeare, as probably enough it did, a new impulse to the study of that marvellous people, there were already incentives in that direction.

But it is time we turned to the special question that now concerns us, viz. whether Shakespeare did merely add his voice to the chorus of detestation with which the Hebrews were at that time commonly greeted—whether he used his genius 'to incite hatred and suspicion' of a race, already profoundly hated and suspected, already 'down' and friendless. Now it would be absurd to say that in his portrait of Shylock he does not paint a very dreadful and forbidding person; but perhaps we may decline to pronounce him devoid of all nobler capabilities and sympathies. At a superficial glance one may perceive only a fiend in human shape; and perhaps Elizabethan audiences, furious with prejudice and bigotry, saw only what was devilish in the wretched being they derided and loathed. But a careful and thoughtful spectator must even then have seen something else; for assuredly something else is to be seen. And in later times, as we read the play in a better light, and not with eyes jaundiced and purblind, this something else more and more commands our interest and attention; and we discover that not less in the 'Merchant of Venice' than in others of his works Shakespeare makes for humanity and tolerance—that he is no rabid partisan—that he bears ever in mind how, in the language of the Hebrew Scriptures he knew so well, God 'in the beginning' had said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,' and how, accordingly, God had 'created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.' In fact, the 'Merchant of Venice' has done its part in



showing so-called Christians 'a more excellent way' with regard to the Hebrew section of their fellow-creatures; it has done its part in spreading the gospel of humanity—the gospel of goodwill between man and man. Certainly never again can Shylock be 'a comic character,' to whatever extent he may have seemed so to the Elizabethan in his benightedness. Now and for the future we behold and shall behold him with shame and confusion of face. He is the victim of coarse and gross religionists, the offspring of a pseudo-Christian fanaticism, a fellow-creature direfully and tragically demoralised and degraded, but yet a fellow-creature, God-made, man-marred.<sup>2</sup>

I will not now dwell on the several indications given in the play of a nature that is not merely sordid and wholly addicted to usury. Shylock's spite against Antonio arises, as has often been remarked, not only from personal grounds. Even in their commercial ideas the men are opposed to each other, and represent two extremes. Nor is Shylock by any means insensible of the scorn with which Antonio regards his nation—'our sacred nation'—quite apart from himself. That scorn rankles deep and fiercely in his soul. Nor is it fair to insist that Shylock valued the ring he had from Leah when he was a bachelor only because of its turquoise. It may be difficult to imagine Shylock as a young ardent lover, beaming and hopeful, when Leah plights him her troth; but such a difficulty is not so entirely unusual even amongst 'Christian' husbands. To many a man in advanced life his love letters would form strange reading enough, and his young self, if he could see him, would be quite unrecognisable. And there are other indications that Shylock is not a pure and unadulterated brute. But, not now to discuss these, what we wish to emphasise is this: that Shakespeare, while representing with sufficient frankness the monstrosity of the Jew, addresses himself to the explanation of that monstrosity. Largely accepting the vulgar notion that the Jew was a monster, he at once asked himself how he became so.<sup>3</sup> And the result of his inquiry was that the Jew had been made so by so-called Christian treatment and outrage. In point of fact does not the 'Merchant of Venice' expose with surprising truth and boldness the insolence of the Christian as well as—I do not say no less than—the greed and venom of the Jew?

Shakespeare fully exhibited Shylock's hardness of heart. The Jew stood unmoved in the Venetian law court amidst all the appeals for indulgence and remission—

Nec magis . . . . . movetur

Quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes—

<sup>2</sup> Comp. *As you like it*, act i. sc. i. 85: 'Marry, sir, I am helping you to mar that which God made, a poor unworthy brother of yours with idleness.'

<sup>3</sup> Comp. *King Lear*, act iii. sc. vi.: 'Then let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?'

not 'touched with human gentleness and love.' And well might his debtor protest against any further waste of time on such efforts.

I pray you, think you question with the Jew.  
 You may as well go stand upon the beach,  
 And bid the main flood bate his usual height;  
 You may as well use question with the wolf,  
 Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;  
 You may as well forbid the mountain pines  
 To wag their high tops and to make no noise,  
 When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;  
 You may as well do anything most hard  
 As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—  
 His Jewish heart. Therefore I do beseech you  
 Make no more offers, use no further means,  
 But with all brief and plain conveniency  
 Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will.

How preposterous it would have seemed to Antonio at that moment when Shylock was bent on his death, if he had been informed and could have discerned that he, Antonio himself, and his fellow-Christians so called were largely responsible for the existence of that horrible being who stood there thirsting for his life's blood. Yet this is the frightful fact that Shakespeare dares to suggest. Cruelty begets cruelty. "Τῆς βίης τίκτει ὕβριν. Hatred and scorn bring forth hatred and scorn. Those 'soft and tender hearts which nature confesses she gave man when she gave him tears' may be petrified by ill-usage and tyranny. Briefly, in a most grave and important sense Shylock was a monument of protracted persecution and outrage. The fountain of tears had long been frozen up by 'Christian' calumny and spite and wrong.

This was the profound suggestion that Shakespeare made as to the Jewish character or temper as then generally viewed and accepted. Possibly, or indeed probably, its full significance was not at once generally perceived, however great its influence with a generation better fitted for its apprehension. 'A knavish speech,' says Hamlet, 'sleeps in a foolish ear.' So also does a wise speech, and the Elizabethan mob may in its folly have applauded what exposed and condemned itself. But certainly in the 'Merchant of Venice' wisdom was justified of her child, the author; and Mr. Irving, in his well-known rendering of the character in question, faithfully follows and interprets that author's text. Certainly in that play the plain truth was presented to all who could understand; and the intelligent at all events, in a greater or less degree, sooner or later realised that much that was execrable in the Jewish type was the product of a bastard Christianity.

For observe that it is Antonio himself who is peculiarly offen-



sive in his demeanour towards Shylock; and Antonio is one of the gentlest and lovablest of all the men in Shakespeare's theatre. And the thought cannot but arise, if even Antonio, a refined and most tender-hearted gentleman, behaves so to the Jew, how will the common herd behave?—a thought answered by the performances of Salanio, Salerio, Graziano. No doubt the gentleness of Antonio was heightened for artistic reasons. The contrast to Shylock he presents in the law courts and everywhere is absolute. 'A kinder gentleman treads not the earth,' says Salario; and he goes on to give a truly touching account of the leave-taking of the two friends, and how Antonio,

his eye being big with tears,  
Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,  
And with affection wondrous sensible  
He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.

Salanio cannot find an epithet worthy of him; he speaks of the good Antonio, the honest Antonio. 'Oh that I had a title good enough to keep his name company!' Bassanio describes him as

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,  
The best conditioned and unwearied spirit  
In doing courtesies, and one in whom  
The ancient Roman honour more appears  
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

Lorenzo says to Portia, when she has generously consented to her 'lord's' going to do what he may to rescue Antonio from his misfortunes—

But if you knew to whom you show this honour,  
How true a gentleman you send relief,  
How dear a lover of my lord your husband,  
I know you would be prouder of the work  
Than customary bounty can enforce you.

Thus a special stress is laid on Antonio's kindness and goodness. He is the pink of courtesy, the soul of benevolence, the spirit of self-sacrifice, in his own social circle. And yet this gentle Antonio has for the Jew only words of insult and acts of insolence. Could anything be more suggestive and significant? In the following passage, which, however well known, must be here quoted to bring home the point now being urged, where Shylock catalogues the shameful contumelies he has suffered even from the gentle Antonio, surely our sympathy is rather with the Jew than with the Christian.

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft  
In the Rialto you have rated me  
About my moneys and my usances;  
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,

For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.  
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
 And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
 And all for use of that which is mine own.  
 Well, then, it now appears you need my help :  
 Go to, then ; you come to me, and you say,  
 ' Shylock, we would have moneys ; ' you say so :  
 You that did void your rheum upon my beard,  
 And foot me, as you spurn a stranger cur  
 Over your threshold ; moneys is your suit.  
 What should I say to you ? Should I not say,  
 ' Hath a dog money ? Is it possible  
 A cur can lend three thousand ducats ? ' Or  
 Shall I bend low, and in a bondsman's key,  
 With bated breath and whispering humbleness,  
 Say this :  
 ' Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last ;  
 You spurned me such a day ; another time  
 You called me " dog ; " and for these courtesies  
 I'll lend you thus much moneys ' ?

And what does the gentle Antonio answer to this deplorable record ?  
 What does he answer, he who amongst Christians was

The best conditioned and unwearied spirit  
 In doing courtesies ?

Untouched by shame or remorse, all he has to say is that he shall  
 probably enough repeat the gross indignities he has heaped on the  
 wretched Israelite !

I am as like to call thee so again,  
 To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

May we not exclaim, as further on in the same scene Shylock  
 exclaims—

O father Abram, what these Christians are ?

No wonder, then, Shylock was something of a monster. What  
 else could he be ? No wonder his bosom was a very furnace of  
 hatred. In another well-known passage he reiterates the injuries  
 and mischiefs Antonio has done him. It is a passage white-hot  
 with passion and fury.

If you wrong us shall we not revenge ?——If a Jew wrong a Christian  
 what is his humility ? [*i.e.* how does the Christian humble himself ? Does  
 he turn the other cheek to be smitten, in accordance with the Sermon  
 on the Mount (Matt. vi. 89) ?] Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew,  
 what should his sufferance be by Christian example ? Why, revenge.  
 The villany you teach me I will execute ; and it shall go hard but I will  
 better the instruction.

JOHN W. HALES.