# Antisemitism in English Literature: The Shakespeare Case

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**Theology and Literature (3) - Jack Opie, an Australian playwright, examines The Merchant of Venice and other references to Jews in Shakespeare's play.**

## Symposium:

THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE (3)

## Antisemitism in English Literature

The Shakespeare Case

### "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?"

**by Jack Opie**

George Orwell has included Chaucer and Shakespeare with others as authors of passages which "if written now would be stigmatised as antisemitism". In last year's *Gesher* I provided evidence that Chaucer was in fact satirising an insidious, sanctimonious form of antisemitism, albeit obliquely.

Orwell erred, I believe, in including Chaucer - but what of Shakespeare, whom so many of us love "this side idolatry"? When I was young a Jewish friend shocked me by flatly labelling him antisemitic. "Not our Will, surely" was my reaction, and with the insouciance of youth put the matter out of my mind. Years later, when carrying out research for what you are reading now, I found no shortage of fellow apologists, both Jewish and Christian. "There were no Jews in England at the time", said one. "It's doubtful that Shakespeare would ever have met a Jew", said another. And constant reference to that resounding affirmation of our common humanity - "If you prick us, do we not bleed?", which many a Jewish actor has recited with relish. To top it off, Norrie Epstein (1993) says that noted scholar Sam Schoenbaum found The Merchant of Venice "the most popular play in Israel."

Why then Orwell's concern?

Orwell of course has a point. Antisemitic passages appear in at least three of Shakespeare's plays -- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Macbeth*, and most famously in *The Merchant of Venice*. The first two instances are brief. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Launce, the clownish servant of Proteus, says that his dog Crab is so lacking in sympathy it would not weep when even "a Jew would have wept to have seen our parting" (11,3). Later, (11,5) Launce asks his opposite number Speed to go with him to the alehouse, and "if not, thou art an Hebrew, a Jew, and not worth the name of a Christian", only a Christian, of course, possessing the charity required to help another Christian endure a drinking session. Mindless stereotyping, this – little more than name-calling, but still hurtful, and perhaps capable of influencing the foolish. In *Macbeth* (IV,4) the witches include "Liver of blaspheming Jew" in their hellish recipe. But who are they to talk about blasphemy? In the context of the Shakespearian canon the above instances are minor; without Shylock the question of Shakespeare's antisemitism might never have arisen.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the issue is central. The Jews in the play are the wealthy moneylender Shylock, his daughter Jessica, and his wealthy friend Tubal. None are likeable. Jessica is disloyal and ruthless, stealing her father's money and a ring her dead mother had given him. Tubal fans Shylock's desire for revenge. As for Shylock himself, Shakespeare is most explicit in having him say:

I hate him for he is a Christian;

But more for that in low simplicity

He lends our money gratis, and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

Might Shakespeare have met Jews in England? Quite possibly. According to *The Oxford Companion to British History* (1997), despite the general expulsion of 1290, "In Elizabeth's reign there were Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the country though they practised their religion with circumspection."

In what follows, some familiarity with *The Merchant of Venice* will be assumed. The play is extraordinarily difficult, controversial and perplexing. Lyon (1988) puts it well:

Many aspects of the play have proved contentious: its attitude to Shylock and the Christians; the kinds of interrelations it creates between its two worlds, and its three plots; its possible endorsement of, or divergence from, Elizabethan views of Jews and usury; its status as comedy, or tragedy, or problem play; its claim to artistic coherence – all have provoked lively disagreement.

Few if any of the scholarly commentaries deny that the presentation of Shylock's character is antisemitic – indeed the opposite view is insupportable – but with these commentaries as with the persons I spoke about above there is a curious tendency to minimise the nasty matters. There are exceptions.

Amongst the critics, Speaight (1977) makes no bones about it. Referring to the trial and execution in 1594 of Queen Elizabeth's personal physician Dr Lopez, a Portuguese Jew, Speaight wrote that a "wave of antisemitism swept the country which Marlowe's colossal caricature did much to flatter."

(In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, the climax of the play sees the villainous title character Barabas boiled alive, presumably to the universal delight of the audience.) Speaight goes on: "*The Merchant of Venice*, written two years later, flattered it only slightly less. There can be no doubt that Shakespeare intended Shylock to be the villain of the piece . ... [He had] not a single likeable characteristic. He is ruthless, avaricious, vindictive, and his thrift is hardly to be distinguished from parsimony. Both his daughter and his servants detest him." But Speaight does not condemn the play for this, and speaks ultimately of "the tragedy of Shylock" in positive terms. Norrie Epstein (1993) likewise acknowledges the antisemitic elements, and our tendency to gloss over them, yet likewise finds the play marvellously rich, with "two views of every character and situation". Not so Arnold Wesker, a modern Jewish playwright, who considered the work so antisemitic that, in response, he wrote *The Merchant*, a piece much kinder to Shylock.

Why such a general acceptance, given the blatant antisemitism? It is not explanation enough to recite "If you prick us .. " – for in this very speech Shylock vows revenge. Nor is it enough to point out that Shakespeare also made fair game of the French (including Joan of Arc), the Spanish and to a lesser extent the Irish, Scots and Welsh. Samuel Johnson deplored these tendencies: "He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose . ... it is always a writer's duty to make the world better".

As *The Merchant of Venice* progresses, tragedy takes over from comedy and melodrama in what seems an unplanned way. It is as if Shakespeare had gone sour on the play – it was a bit silly anyway, what with the selection of a marriage partner through the device of the three caskets, the tired point about the rings, the absurd business about the pound of flesh, the unconvincing legal quibble, the disguises and cross-dressing, the shallowness of the whole pack of Christians, and the pallid paradise of Belmont. Some argue too that the play had been mutilated by the censors, who cut the sub-plot dealing with the arguably homosexual Antonio, who nevertheless remained the title character. To top it off, Shylock was out of hand – too powerful for his part (shades of Mercutio, and this one can't be killed off early!) All right then, let's go with Shylock!

Thus, through Shylock, Shakespeare gives his message – we are all equal in God's sight – "Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?". But therefore we equally can be evil too, and here Shakespeare really puts us all in our place, with Shylock's words:

You have among you many a purchas'd slave,

Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,

You use in abject and in slavish parts,

Because you bought them; shall I say to you

'Let them be free, marry them to your heirs –

Why sweat they under burdens? – let their beds

Be made as soft as yours ...'

Though aimed at the Christians – and it should be noted that in Shakespeare's time the English were active abroad as slave traders – Shylock's (or Shakespeare's) charge might also have applied to Jews, who had owned or trafficked in slaves from Biblical times, and from the 4th Century CE had been prohibited from buying Christian slaves.

Shylock's development has been the subject of much comment. H. B. Charlton (1949, as given by Lyon 1988) posits the antisemitic Shakespeare setting out to pander to prejudices common to himself and his audiences but finding, in spite of himself, that his characteristic powers and intuitions lead to a humanised Shylock: 'His Shylock is a composite production of Shakespeare the Jew-hater, and of Shakespeare the dramatist.' Cohen (1980) offers a slightly kinder interpretation:

It is as though *The Merchant of Venice* is an antisemitic play written by an author who is not an antisemite - but an author who has been willing to use the cruel stereotypes of that ideology for mercenary and artistic purposes.

But as Lyon points out, both views seem to diminish Shakespeare as naive and inspirational – a great artist almost in spite of himself. Is he not rather the genius who 'habitually confers inner life on the characters he finds in his sources and who ... characteristically compounds the complexities of these sources' – '*cultivating* difficulty in a spirit of exploration'? Nuttall (1983) points to Shakespeare's tendency 'to take an archetype or a stereotype and then work, so to speak, against it, without ever overthrowing it.'

Shakespeare will not let us rest even here. The subversive counter-thesis is itself too easy. We may now begin to see that he is perhaps the least sentimental dramatist who ever lived. We begin to understand what is meant by holding the mirror up to nature.

Lyon concludes: '*The Merchant of Venice* perhaps represents a moment of integrity too questioning and insufficiently artful to contain multifarious truths within the coherence and consolation of art.'

If we accept, as most seem to, that Shakespeare used antisemitism to acceptable ends, we are led to the question: when and under what conditions might the use of antisemitism be acceptable, and when not?

The work of the composer Richard Wagner is of interest here. Did its value to the Nazis spring essentially from its anti-Semitism or from its boosting of pro-German nationalism? In his writings Wagner attacked Jewish composers initially on musical and later on "racial" grounds; but what of his operas, where his influence has been much more powerful and widespread? If Michael Portello, former British Conservative MP and defence Minister (*Australian Financial Review*, Friday 3 September 1999) is correct, Wagner's operas, though containing unflattering Jewish caricatures (not always obvious to outsiders, it should be added) are not particularly anti-Semitic compared with the works of many others. One can certainly include Shakespeare among these others. Yet Wagner's art leads to division, hatred, and the Holocaust; Shakespeare's to sharing, understanding and acceptance.

What are the necessary conditions of the work itself which allow serious antisemitic applications? Does it depend on who writes it? Is material written by Jews themselves more or less damaging? Some of the finest of Jewish humour involves self-criticism, and Jewish comedians sometimes broadcast this to the wider community, perhaps ill-advisedly. In Australia during the 1930s, Roy Rene – "Mo" – made much use of Jewish stereotypes, and has been strongly criticised for it. The issue was particularly heated in Germany between the World Wars. In *Berlin Cabaret* (1993), Peter Jelavich comments as follows:

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The Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith ... the largest organisation that defended the legal rights of German Jews, regularly protested against Jewish comedians who told Jewish jokes on stage.

In April 22, 1926,

Several hundred people listened to speakers representing Jewish youth groups, Jewish women's organisations, and the association of Jewish war veterans. All of them attacked the cabarets' employment of Jewish dialect humour and parodies of Jewish religious practices. ... the exaggerated caricature of certain forms of Jewish speech and practice by Jews themselves only played into the hands of antisemites ...

For demographic and other reasons, the impact of antisemitic material has varied greatly. Marlowe's obscene caricature in *The Jew of Malta* led to nothing, if only because there were few Jewish targets in England. Against this, the Nazis were able to use Richard Wagner's much milder caricatures, coupled with his powerful appeals to German nationalism, to terrible effect. And Jews themselves, it seems, might inadvertently contribute material just as damaging.

Our quest, through the Council of Christians and Jews, is towards greater understanding between peoples. Though his Shylock is hardly more admirable than Marlowe's Barabas, Shakespeare, by his courage, honesty and insight in confronting the most vital issues of human co-existence, serves, as few others could, to show us the way.

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