SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK: A RE-EVALUATION

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SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK: A RE-EVALUATION

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CHAPTER I

THE JEW IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE:
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Shakespeare's Shylock is one of the most controversial of all literary characters. His stage history, which spans four centuries, has been a constantly changing role because of the great divergence of opinion among actors and critics. These concepts have been greatly influenced by the ethos of the period in which they were formed. Moral values and modes of thinking constantly change: it is a far cry from Elizabethan times to the twentieth century. A modern audience could hardly experience the same emotions as the Elizabethans did upon viewing Shylock. Although the character of Shylock has attracted the theater's greatest figures and intrigued the most profound Shakespearean scholars, there is still no consensus as to his interpretation and he remains an enigmatic figure.

This paper will be a study designed to clarify Shylock's position by seeing him in the proper historical perspective. It will examine briefly the role of the Jew in history and in literature prior to Shakespeare. The historical account will reveal the long record of discrimination and persecution to which the Jewish race was subjected throughout the centuries everywhere. It will point out the salient fact that the Jew
occupied the unique and paradoxical position of being needed and at the same time being unwanted. The historical survey will further reveal that in all likelihood there were no living models for Shakespeare's Shylock since there is no authentic record of unconverted Jews in England in Shakespeare's time.

A review of the Jew in literature before Shylock will be in two categories: first, the earlier literature consisting largely of ballads and mystery plays in which the Jew is treated as a comic villain; second, the secular drama contemporary with Shakespeare, in which the Jew is almost without exception a villain. This survey will indicate possible but suppositional direct influences on Shylock from previous literature.

Sections of the paper will be devoted to Shylock from the point of view of actors and critics, and an analysis of Shylock as seen in the play will be given.

Finally, the conclusion drawn from this study will be that in the light of historical perspective, critical opinion, and analysis of the play itself, Shylock cannot be classified in any single category. Rather, he is a complex character, a villain certainly, but with comic and human overtones, and the immortal creation of Shakespeare's genius.

As stated earlier, this study will begin with the historical background of the character. The first step is to establish the status of the Jew in the society in which he lived.
The role of the Jew in European society presents a sombre picture. Throughout the Middle Ages the Jews labored under social, economic, civil, political, and religious disadvantages, which were observed in varying degrees in nearly all Christian countries. Finally, near the end of the medieval period the Jews were thrust out altogether from the general life of European society. In effect, the Jews found themselves shunted into a category separate and distinct from other elements of society.

From the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the Jews received exceptional treatment everywhere. Of necessity they became accustomed to sudden and sweeping changes in their relations to government. For centuries they were subject to legislation different from that of the dominant Christian masses. These disabling laws converted them into second-class citizens.

Driven, helpless, from land to land, they nevertheless became loyal and integral parts of many nations. More accurately, they became, as one critic phrases it, "citizens of the world." Religious, moral, and intellectual incompatibility


4Marcus, p. ix.
made assimilation impossible and they remained a unique people, "aliens" or "foreigners" in their own countries.  

The Jews were never liked; at best they were only tolerated, at worst hated. By 1179 the Christian masses believed that the Jews hated them and there was increasing conviction of this.  In return, hatred of the Jew was more than a matter of conjecture as late as the sixteenth century. Consequently, reviling the Jews became a part of the social convention of the times. They were "taunted" with their Jewishness, made to feel excluded and inferior. They became the butt of jibes and insulting epithets, "Godkillers," "blasphemers," "infidels," the "unfaithful" (Christians being the "faithful"), the "men- farious sect." In effect they became the human scapegoats for all the sins of mankind. The antipathy to the Jews before the sixteenth century was one of fear and suspicion; the later antipathy during the era of the ghetto from the sixteenth century on, when Europe knew less about the Jews than at any other time, was one of contempt.

Other human groups subjected to reproaches have not been expelled, nor have efforts been made to exterminate them. The


8Abrahams, p. 85.
Jews' fate was otherwise. By the end of the sixteenth century they had been expelled from nearly all Christian countries. The Jews suffered and survived a persecution of a thousand years — the expulsions, murders, and martyrdoms of the period of the Crusades. They survived the shame of the ghetto, the degradation of the yellow badge and the gaberdine. These persecutions, and others like them, were renewed on every pretext in most of Europe for centuries. During this long interval the Jews lived in an almost constant state of alarm. Persecution was never continuous, but there was always danger and insecurity. The Jews, in effect, were always living in "sufferance."

The common conception of the Jew which evolved in medieval times was by latter-day standards unrealistic. It was not the concept of a human being but of a demon created by myth. It is not an exaggeration to say that Jews were hardly looked upon as human until after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which broke up the Holy Roman Empire and thereby brought on a period of toleration of all creeds. The Jew could rarely retaliate; he could only submit. It is an apt generalization to say that the Jews were what the times made them.

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9 Ludwig: Lewisohn, Israel (New York, 1925), p. 32.  
11 Bevan, p. 120.  
12 Ibid., p. 17.  
13 Benton, p. 58.  
No other institution of society played a more crucial part in determining and fostering attitudes toward the Jews than the Medieval Church. In fact, the role of the Jew in European society was largely determined by the attitude of the Christian church towards the Jew. The general policy of the church in the Middle Ages was anti-Semitic; its intent was to create barriers, to make the Jews a separate class of pariahs. To this end, almost every church council passed rigorous laws against the Jews, and papal bulls denounced them. Various anti-Jewish bulls ostracizing the Jews were issued from the fifteenth century to the French Revolution.\(^{15}\)

One at least was even earlier: in the thirteenth century Honorius IV issued a bull demanding an end of friendship between Christians and Jews.\(^{16}\)

Paradoxically, the basic principle in relations between Catholicism and Judaism was tolerance. Consequently, the papacy alternated between protecting the Jews from violence and repressing them for insolence.\(^{17}\) The church frequently issued decrees in defense of the Jews. A series of these bulls appeared from about 1120 to the fifteenth century. The continuous stream of these papal decrees indicates that they were not effective in coping with prejudice. These bulls threatened Christians with excommunication if they converted

\(^{15}\)Abrahams, pp. 399, 408-409.


\(^{17}\)Benton, p. 55.
Jews forcibly, practiced violence against them, robbed them, attacked them at their devotions, desecrated their cemeteries, or dug up and carried off their dead. The list of offenses is important, because it reflects the treatment of the medieval Jew.

A typical, stereotyped protective bull was issued by Gregory X in 1272. It contained two significant features: (1) It provided that the testimony of a Christian against a Jew must be confirmed by a Jew; (2) It vigorously denounced the ritual murder charge. (This refutation of the blood accusation was repeated by various popes until the time of Clement XIII in 1763.)

In the meantime, the popes had become more powerful as a result of the Crusades, and papal influence reached its zenith during the Middle Ages under Innocent III (1198-1216), who became the most implacable enemy of the Jews. His pontificate marks a turning point in the history of the Jews in Europe and the beginning of a period of social and political decline for the Jews, particularly in western and central Europe. Under his baneful influence the degradation began when he called the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Like his predecessors, his object was not to destroy but merely to tolerate Jewry. There was no really new legislation; older decrees

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18 Marcus, p. 137.

were merely expanded or enforced. The general tendency of his legislation was to segregate the Jews socially more than ever, especially in the matter of dress.\textsuperscript{20}

Several decrees were issued at this council. Of most serious effect was the one requiring that Jews (and Saracens) wear a distinctive badge.\textsuperscript{21} The avowed reason was to prevent marriage or concubinage between Christians and non-believers. This was repeated in many subsequent bulls to prevent these two supposed evils and to prevent conversion to Judaism as a consequence of intermarriage. Details of size, color, and character of the badge were left to the local governments. Everywhere, yellow became the most common color. In Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the badge was the horn hat or the \textit{Judenhut}, a hideous hat with a pointed top, usually red, and a brim which was sometimes twisted into a pair of horns. Though the shape of the badge was not uniform, a circular mark was the most common. This was variously interpreted as representing a coin, the Host (which the Jews did not accept), or a full moon -- the antithesis to the Crescent of Islam.\textsuperscript{22} Although enforcement of the wearing of the badge varied from time to time in countries according to the ruling powers, it was common in Europe from the mid-thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20}Marcus, p. 137. \textsuperscript{21}Doubnov, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{22}Abrahams, pp. 93, 296-298.
\textsuperscript{23}Bevan, p. 121.
\end{flushright}
In Spain, Italy, and southern France the Jews resisted this decree strenuously\(^2\) and successfully. They were able also to buy personal exemptions.\(^2\) In Spain, but rarely elsewhere, Jews could discard the badge on journeys because Moors, Jews, and Spaniards had lived so long in toleration and on terms of equality. In Spain and in Italy the Jews were able to postpone the effect of the papal edict for two centuries. As a consequence, the worst effects of wearing the badge came after the sixteenth century.

The badge branded the Jews as a pariah class and made them the targets of the meanest insults. It added to the general sense of insecurity among the Jews. They could no longer go quietly unnoticed about their business. It isolated the Jew, disfigured his character, and became the prelude to Paul IV's ghettos of the sixteenth century.\(^2\)

Isolation of the Jews was not the only aim of the church in its policies. While the church labored to isolate the Jews, it also was trying to convert them. Throughout the Middle Ages the church was persistent in its attempts to convert the Jews, even to the extent of forced conversion. After conversion it had no further interest in the Jews, except to see that they did not become "apostate."\(^2\) It was the primary duty of the Spanish Inquisition to watch the converted

\(^{24}\)Abrahams, p. 287. \(^{25}\)Ibid., pp. 300-301. \(^{26}\)Ibid., pp. 305-306. \(^{27}\)Bevan, p. 106.
Jews, or "Marranos," to see that they did not return secretly to their old customs.

The chief agents of the church in its efforts to convert the Jews were the Dominican friars. Since the Dominicans were pre-eminent in combatting heretics, among whom the Jews were classed, they became the bitterest enemies of the Jews. In England, for instance, Edward I gave the Dominicans permission to Christianize the "infidels." A royal edict in 1279 compelled all Jews to hear sermons against Judaism preached by the Dominicans. In 1282 another royal edict forbade Jews to "contradict" or laugh at these "missionaries."

Not in England alone but also in other countries efforts were made to compel Jews to hear conversionist sermons. The custom of compulsory attendance at sermons was intensified in the fifteenth century. In 1415 Benedict XIII issued a bull decreeing that all Jews above twelve years old hear sermons. The listeners' ears were searched for cotton.

At a time when the mob was easily inflamed by the word "blasphemy," public disputation arose over charges made by Jewish converts that the Talmud and other rabbinic books contained blasphemous teachings. These public debates were originated by converted Jews, who were always more zealous against their fellow Jews than regular Christians were.

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28 Abrahams, p. 416. 29 Doubnov, p. 100. 30 Ibid., pp. 119-120. 31 Adler, p. 300. 32 Doubnov, p. 120. 33 Abrahams, p. 418. 34 Ibid., p. 416.
As a thinly disguised method of persecution, the Jews were forced to debate with opponents who were also their judges.\(^{35}\)

The public debates began in the thirteenth century. At this time the aid of the Dominican friars was invoked to examine the Talmud and other Hebrew books for blasphemy.\(^{36}\) The result of these activities was the mutilation of Jewish books. In 1239 Donin, a Jewish convert, obtained a papal bull authorizing the burning of the Talmud.\(^{37}\) In the year 1242 throughout France thousands of volumes of the Talmud were collected and publicly burned.\(^{38}\)

The theological controversies continued into the sixteenth century with increasing bitterness. The movement developed into a conflict between the Dominican friars and the humanists, represented by the scholar, Johann Reuchlin, who defended the Hebrew books. The Dominicans succeeded in 1509 in getting an edict passed in Germany to destroy all Jewish books except the Bible.\(^{39}\) At the same time, as a result of efforts of the Inquisition, thousands of books were burned at Rome. The struggle between Reuchlin and the Dominicans brought ill repute to the Catholic church and eventually brought some degree of toleration and emancipation to the Jews.\(^{40}\)

\(^{35}\) Marcus, p. 422.  
\(^{36}\) Bevan, pp. 265, 294, 297.  
\(^{37}\) Abrahams, p. 416.  
\(^{38}\) Doubnov, p. 103.  
\(^{39}\) Ibid., pp. 220-221.  
\(^{40}\) Marcus, pp. 159, 170.
Up to this point the major role of the church in fostering dislike or hatred of the Jews has been emphasized. However, it should not be supposed that the church was the only agency causing antipathy towards the Jews. European society generally forced the Jew into occupations that tended to increase antagonism towards Jews. This antagonism tended to further isolate them and set them apart.

The Jews were originally farmers. For centuries agriculture had been their favorite occupation. Accordingly, when they settled in western Europe, they were attracted to agriculture as an opportunity to pioneer. They introduced new crops and refined techniques. The best example of their skill as agrarians was found in Spain, where they reclaimed the soil from centuries of neglect. But their services were appreciated only until the local population acquired their techniques.\(^4\)\(^1\)

In the Christian world at first there was no tax on Jewish land holdings; Jews did not pay church tithes in the early Middle Ages, but the church began a drive to collect taxes on land. It succeeded in part when in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed imposts on Jewish lands previously held by Christians. Some Jews became discouraged with farming, since it was difficult to prove that land had never been owned by a Christian.\(^4\)\(^2\) In addition, the feudal system had no place for the Jews. They were incompatible with its

\(^{41}\)Baron, pp. 161, 163.

\(^{42}\)Ibid., pp. 153-154, 156.
hierarchy, because the Jews could not take a Christian oath or be masters over peons and dependent nobles.\textsuperscript{43}

In most places at one time or another Jews were restricted from owning land. In England, for example, in 1269, the Jews were disqualified by law from holding land\textsuperscript{44} and during the resettlement (\textit{circa} 1656) Jews could not own land or buildings.\textsuperscript{45} They were eventually ousted from land holdings everywhere under the feudal system even when not disbarred by law.\textsuperscript{46}

Because of the difficulties encountered in the holding of land, the Jews finally gave up farming. Roughly between the years 500 and 1200 they were transformed from an agrarian to a mercantile class.\textsuperscript{47} They became the only great merchants before the Italian republics became commercial. Until the Crusades they took the lead in international commerce. They traveled from land to land and learned the needs of the populace and the products of a country. They became familiar figures everywhere at inland commercial centers and seaports.\textsuperscript{48} After the Crusades they were gradually barred from commercial undertakings and restricted to trade in money.\textsuperscript{49} The mercantile

\textsuperscript{43}Adler, p. 178.


\textsuperscript{46}Baron, p. 164.\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 150.

\textsuperscript{48}Abrahams, pp. 213-214.\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 225.
cities of northern Europe excluded them from their cities and banned them from international commerce. More and more they were forced to turn to money lending.

The opposition of the medieval guilds barred Jews from certain handicrafts, for which they had a natural affinity. Though contemptuous of unskilled labor, they esteemed manual labor and liked handicrafts. There were Jewish artisans everywhere, especially in Spain, where nearly all the artisans were Jews. Unfortunately, the Jews were opposed by the guild system. Generally they were denied membership in the merchant and craft guilds. England excluded them from the guilds in 1066 and they were still barred from artisan guilds under Henry II (1154-1189). This opposition of the medieval guilds, felt in all occupations, drove the Jews to abandon handicrafts for retail trade in second-hand goods and peddling. They were slowly alienated almost altogether from handicrafts and commerce.

Another avenue was closed to the Jews when they were refused positions in government. As a rule almost everywhere Jews were barred from public office. A notable exception was

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51 Abrahams, pp. 227-228. 52 Landman, p. 110.
54 Abrahams, p. 225.
Spain, where Jewish doctors sometimes attained high positions in government, first as royal physicians, then as rabbi statesmen. In England from the earliest settlement of the Jews in 1066 they had no part in government, national or local. This disbarment was made more official in 1215 when the Fourth Lateran Council barred Jews from public office. The expressed reason was that blasphemers should not have authority over Christians. This echoed previous church councils which forbade Jews to hold offices that allowed them to impose penalties on Christians. The papal decree was effective and the Jews turned to other work.

Generally the Jews were not permitted to enter or engage in the basic professions — medicine, law, the church. However, they were exceptionally skilled in medicine. In Italy and Spain the Jewish physicians were unrivalled, except by the Moors. The church intervened as usual. In England in 1288 the Synod of Exeter proscribed the practice of medicine by the Jews. The church resented the influence of the doctors over the minds of the patients and made constant efforts to suppress them. It barred Jews from medicine even in Spain; but kings, clergy, even popes disobeyed its decrees. Nearly every court and bishopric had a Jewish doctor until the Christian universities

55 Abrahams, p. 234.  
56 Landman, p. 110.  
57 Marcus, pp. 139-140.  
58 Abrahams, p. 234.  
59 Landman, p. 112.
began to teach scientific medicine and train Christian physicians to replace them.  

Finally, the Jews, barred for centuries from other occupations -- agriculture, commerce, handicrafts, public office, and the professions, turned to money lending. The effect of all this proscription was that the church and society had forced them to become usurers. Here for a time at least they had a relatively clear field. Although church law forbade lending money at interest, it regarded usury as a necessary economic evil and condoned the practice among Jews, who were not under canon law. Popes even sold indulgences to Jews to permit them to practice usury.  

The Jews were hated for lending money and for charging excessive interest. Yet there were other money-lenders: monasteries, tax collectors, and merchants. The rates of the Jewish lenders were not always the highest. For example, in 1430 Jewish bankers were invited to locate in Florence, Italy, provided they would reduce the rate to the legal twenty per cent. Christians were charging thirty-three per cent.  

Even when their rates were usurious, the Jews were not always to blame. Often they were forced by the rapacity of the governments to charge excessive interest. This occurred

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60 Abrahams, pp. 234-241, passim.  
61 Ibid., p. 240.  
62 Roth, p. 6.  
63 Freedman, p. 7.  
64 Doubnov, p. 137.  
65 Abrahams, p. 242.
in France, where heavy taxation by the kings determined the rates,\textsuperscript{66} and also in England, where the kings assessed the rates according to the needs of the royal treasury. As the royal appetites grew, Jews had to increase their demands. As a result the people became more and more hostile to the Jews.\textsuperscript{67} This hostility became so great in England that in 1275 the Statute of Jewry was passed which forbade the Jews to lend money.\textsuperscript{68} England then began to patronize the new Italian banking houses, the wealthy Caorsini, and in 1290 expelled the Jews.\textsuperscript{69}

Thus far it has been shown that the medieval church and European society in general were largely to blame for the plight of the Jew in the Middle Ages. But this is an oversimplification. The devotion of the Jews to Judaism caused them to be looked upon with suspicion and led to further isolation and ostracization.

There were certain irreconcilable differences between Christians and Jews when it came to the vital matter of religion. Although they were at times drawn together by religion, as in France and Germany in the thirteenth century, they were always at variance over dogma.\textsuperscript{70} The two essential principles of Judaism were the unity of God, which implied the rejection

\textsuperscript{66}Doubnov, p. 124. \hfill \textsuperscript{67}Freedman, pp. 7-8.  
\textsuperscript{68}Adler, p. 95. \hfill \textsuperscript{69}Lelyveld, p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{70}Abrahams, p. 421.
of Christ, and obedience to the Divine Will. Christian theology on the other hand included belief in the Trinity, the sacraments, and salvation by faith. The Jews were repelled by the Christian theology, while the Christians resented the rejection of their beliefs by the Jews. Furthermore, their strict dietary laws prevented the Jews from dining with Christians. Jews were not permitted to drink wine or eat food prepared by Christians. In the fifteenth century the church forbade Christians to eat with Jews. In addition to these restrictions Jewish religion forbade Jews to take part in any social activity which required recognition of the Christian religion or the taking of an oath.

In view of these and other differences it is understandable that the Jew could not be socially acceptable to Christians during the Middle Ages. Perhaps it would have been otherwise if the Jews had not been so tenacious of their religion. Although there were some converts, variously known as "secret," crypto-Jews, or Marranos as in Spain, under no circumstances would most Jews renounce Judaism. They considered apostasy the greatest indignity and often killed members of their families to avoid the disgrace of baptism. Self-immolation was common during the Dark Ages. The Jews could have saved themselves at any time by submitting to baptism. That only a small number did so is proof of their sincerity and devotion.

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Under the circumstances the Jew could only remain aloof. His aloofness created a sense of uniqueness that branded the Jew as a quasi-alien and made him the object of suspicion in case of crime or misfortune. As a result, accusations of all types were leveled at the Jews throughout the Middle Ages. The most common charge was that the Jew was anti-social. He was also said to be "Godless" and "fanatically religious." Another charge was that the Jews had black, putrid blood, which gave them a disgusting odor that could be removed by baptism. This "Jewish stench" required Christian blood to remove it in some bizarre circumstances.

The church and the aristocracy accused the Jews of being sorcerers and poisoners. The charge of sorcery arose from the aloofness and superior knowledge of the Jews, particularly in languages and medical science. Jewish physicians were preeminent during the Middle Ages, and the medieval mind linked medicine with magic. The other accusation (that the Jews were poisoners) stemmed largely from the occurrence of the Black Death, which swept over Europe in 1348-49. The mortality rate was lower among the Jews because of their more temperate habits and better patient care through their knowledge of medicine. This afforded an excuse for the rumor that the...
Jews brought on the plague by poisoning the water wells.  

It was said that they had an international conspiracy to poison all sources of water supply used by Christians. Through fear of the plague and jealousy and resentment of the Jews, huge massacres of Jews resulted. Over two hundred Jewish communities were destroyed in Germany for supposedly spreading the plague.

Perhaps the most absurd charge was that of the desecration of the Host in Catholic countries where belief in transubstantiation was common. It was rumored that the Jews, who hated Christ, were re-crucifying him by sticking knives and needles into the consecrated wafers and making them bleed. Jews who could be forced to confess were martyred.

The most terrible accusation and the one that excited the most hatred was that of ritual murder -- the accusation that Jews seized, tortured, and killed Christian children during Passover to obtain blood to mix with the unleavened bread and ritual wine. This charge was instigated by the fanatical mendicant friars and the medieval poets of France and Germany. In view of the Jewish horror of eating blood,

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82 Marcus, pp. 44-45.
83 Doubnov, p. 131.
84 Finkelstein, p. 233.
85 Marcus, p. 155.
86 Ibid., p. 121.
87 Abrahams, p. 407.
the charge was utterly absurd. Horror of eating blood was so
great that Jewish laws forbade retaining blood of the animal
in meat served on the table. The charge was never taken
seriously by the popes or the educated classes. Instead, it
was frequently denied by the papacy though often supported by
local church authorities.

The earliest recorded historical accusation of ritual
murder was that of William of Norwich in 1144 -- the first of
a long series of such charges. The superstitious Christian
populace accused the Jews of torturing, crucifying and bury-
ing the child, then using his blood for the Passover feast.
According to a later version of the story the Jews used the
blood in baking unleavened bread. Actually William's family
had hastily buried him during an epileptic seizure, and any
connection with the Jews is mere speculation. Nevertheless,
massacres of the Jews followed.

An interesting explanation of ritual murder was proposed
by a fanatical monk named Theobald, a converted Jew and there-
fore a bitter enemy of his race. The Jews, he theorized, had
been exiled from Palestine for rejecting Christ and could not
return without shedding human blood. They took revenge by
secretly crucifying Christian children and determined by lots
what locality would furnish the next victim. In 1144 Norwich
drew the lot and William was taken.

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88Levinger, p. 123. 89Marcus, p. 121.
90Baron, pp. 135-136. 91Marcus, p. 125.
Other supposed cases of ritual murder followed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In 1168 the mutilated body of Child Harold was found at Gloucester. All English Jewry was blamed for his death. A similar fate befell St. Robert, the holy boy, at Bury St. Edmonds in 1181. There were similar stories at Bristol in 1183 and at Winchester in 1192 -- all in England.92

The first account of ritual murder on the continent occurred during the Passover at Blois, France, in 1171. The child victim was said to have been crucified and thrown into the Loire. The charge was based upon the flimsiest evidence: a servant had seen a body thrown into the river.93 Although no body was ever recovered for this supposed crime, an entire Jewish community was condemned to die.94 All of the accusations just described and many others like them increased the gulf between Christians and Jews, and as a result further restrictions were imposed upon the hapless Jews.

There were, of course, many petty restrictions which further isolated the Jew. The final step in the isolation of the Jew was the ghetto. Long before this institution was made compulsory, Jews had voluntarily congregated in a separate Jewish quarter95 which contained a synagogue and a private cemetery. Here they had an almost autonomous state and lived

92Baron, p. 136. 93Marcus, p. 128. 94Baron, p. 138. 95Abrahams, p. 62.
a communal life which centered on the synagogue. This was their haven where they found solace and strength in religion. This Jewish quarter became an enforced ghetto when in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council Innocent III ordained that Jews must live in a restricted area shut in by walls and gates that were locked at night. At first the motive was to protect the Jews; later the purpose was to segregate the Jews so that Christians could avoid contamination from them.96

The ghetto decree was not strictly enforced everywhere until 1555, when Paul IV issued the bull "Cum Nimis Absurdum."97 The institution of the ghetto prevailed from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.98 These were the drear-iest centuries in Jewish history and during this period the Jews lost much of their cultural and intellectual supremacy.

Conditions in the ghettos were deplorable. They were located in the dirtiest, unhealthiest part of the cities.99 The streets were narrow, and the ghettos were overcrowded and unsanitary. In the Ghetto of Rome, which was established in 1556, at one time 10,000 Jews were crowded into less than one-half square mile.100 The ghetto was one of the greatest injuries ever inflicted on a large number of people. It became a permanent barrier between the Christians and Jews and made isolation and ostracism of the Jews complete and final.

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96 Bevan, pp. 120, 122.  
97 Roth, p. xi.  
98 Landman, p. 597.  
99 Levinger, p. 137.  
100 Abrahams, p. 68.
Even this cursory recounting of the dismal history of the Jews in Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance is sufficient to demonstrate several things of prime importance. It shows for one thing the prevailing and increasing antipathy between Jew and Christian. It shows also the increasing alienation and isolation of the Jew from the mainstream of European life. As a consequence of these two things, one hardly expects to find a sympathetic portrayal of the Jew in literature.
CHAPTER II

THE JEW IN LITERATURE BEFORE SHAKESPEARE

In view of the history of the medieval Jew it is perhaps surprising to find the Jew in literature at all. In pre-Shakespearean literature Jewish characters appear chiefly in medieval ballads, medieval romances and in Biblical plays. Many of these contain folk elements, especially the ballads. As might be expected, most of these delineations of the Jew are unsympathetic, but not universally so.¹

One of the most famous of all ballads relating to Jews is "The Wandering Jew of the Percy Ballad" or simply "The Wandering Jew," which is founded on a mythological figure.² According to Jacob Cardozo the Wandering Jew is not a Jew at all but an Englishman. In relating his fortunes to Englishmen, the Wandering Jew tells how, while in Venice, he encountered an Italian Jew named Orlotto, who resembled him greatly. Orlotto persuaded him to adopt Jewish garments and the Orlotto name, whereafter the two men were taken for sworn brothers throughout Venice.³


²Edgar Rosenberg, From Shylock to Svengali - Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction (Stanford, 1960), p. 188.

Hermann Sinsheimer, who classifies the Wandering Jew with Shylock as one of "the only two Jewish characters of significance in European literature," disagrees somewhat with Cardozo about the nationality of the character. He says that he must have been a Jew, for his real prototype was a Jew, the prophet Elijah, who was also always wandering.4

Although the ballad appears in several countries, the "character" of the Wandering Jew is of English origin. A Christianized version of the ballad appeared in the legendary lore of Italy and Spain in the fourteenth century during the Jewish persecutions resulting from the Great Plague of the fourteenth century. Again in the sixteenth century another version has the Wandering Jew seen in a church in Hamburg, Germany, where he was heard to sigh every time he heard the name Jesus. Here he was called Ahavser, probably from the Biblical King Ahasuerus. He identified himself as the cobbler who had been unkind to Christ as he passed his shop on the way to Golgotha. This legendary cobbler had prevented Christ from resting in front of his shop. His punishment for this was to wander eternally, sighing and groaning.5 The English ballad puts a merciful ending to the wanderings. In it the Wandering Jew becomes a Christian convert and adopts the name of Joseph, father of Jesus; thereby he ends the curse.6

4Hermann Sinsheimer, Shylock, the History of a Character (London, 1947), p. 117.
5Ibid., p. 116.
6Ibid., p. 119.
Less famous but more apropos is the ballad "Gernutus the Jew" or "Gernutus" found in Percy's Reliques of Ancient Poetry. In this ballad the Jew Gernutus is a usurer -- wily, greedy, cruel, and bloody. In view of the tradition which it establishes, the ballad is worthy of extensive summary.

In part one Gernutus, a cruel Jew of Venice, lives on usury, but his greed is never satisfied. His life is like a "barrow hogge" that is worthless until slain. He can not "sleep in rest" for fear of thieves. He is parsimonious with his wife, and he schemes how to deceive the poor. A famous merchant borrows 100 crowns from Gernutus for twelve months and a day, promising to pay whatever the Jew demands. Gernutus refuses any interest and exacts instead as a "merry jest" a pound of flesh in forfeiture of the bond. The unsuspecting merchant agrees. When his ships at sea fail to come in on time, the merchant begs Gernutus to "bear" with him; Gernutus agrees but after the day is past, he has a sergeant put the merchant in prison and he sues him. The merchant's friends come weeping to the judgment.

In part two, although the merchant's friends offer payment in crowns (beginning with 500 and increasing finally to 10,000), Gernutus is adamant in his demand for "flesh" only. The judge then offers him 100 crowns to take the flesh from such a place as would not be fatal. When Gernutus chooses the right side, his cruelty grieves all present. As the bloody Jew is about to strike the blow with his whetted knife,
the judge warns him to spill "no drop of blood" on penalty of being hanged like a murderer, and also to take no more or less by a mite on pain of "present" death by the same manner. Frantically the mad Gernutus agrees to accept 10,000 crowns, and, that refused, 100; but the judge decrees that he should take "a pound of flesh or cancel the bond." Gernutus, after calling the judge "cruel" and accusing him of standing against him, bids the company farewell with a "gripping, grieved mind." The ballad ends on a religious note with moralizing and a prayer.

Another ballad which contains some of the same motifs is "The Northern Lord" in which the Jew is also a super-villain, feared and dreaded by his debtor-victim as cruel, vengeful, and bloodthirsty. Parts one and two can be summarized very briefly.

In part one a noble knight, suitor to a "fair" maid whose father demands as a price "her weight in gold," obtains a loan for the amount from a wealthy Jew by signing a bond to pay with "ounces" of his own flesh if he defaults. As the date of the bond approaches, the knight worries increasingly because he dreads the "cruel" Jew. His lady persuades him to escape across the ocean.

In part two at the German court, where they take refuge, a Dutch lord wagers "a ton of gold" he can seduce the bride and obtain her diamond ring as proof of her infidelity. When spurned, he bribes the chambermaid to steal the ring. The
English knight upon seeing the ring goes home and throws his wife into the "moate," where he leaves her. Soon afterwards the Lady, disguised as an English knight in green armor, rides into the Emperor's court to free her husband, who has been condemned to die for her supposed murder.

In part three at the green knight's request the Emperor grants a new trial, at which the dishonest maid discloses the treachery of the Dutch lord. The court withholds sentence for a day since the lady may be alive. The Dutch lord has to pay a ton of gold to the English knight, but he vengefully writes the Jew of his whereabouts. The Jew crosses the ocean "intent" on being satisfied. As soon as he fixes "his greedy eyes" upon the knight, he cries in wrath, "I have your hand and seal . . . I'll have flesh instead of gold." When the green knight asks to see the deed, the Jew produces it, saying, "I resolve to have my due . . . that's all I crave." The poor distressed knight is brought into the presence of the bloody-minded Jew, who thinks he will get revenged and "cut his flesh from every limb." But the knight in green tells him that only flesh is his due and warns him that if he spills a drop of blood, he will lose his head. Speechless, the Jew soon goes his way.

In part four the father-in-law comes, bent on slaying his daughter's supposed murderer, and the husband is brought from the prison to the place of execution. The lady, who has changed from green armor to queenly dress, appears. She is
recognized by husband and father, and the Emperor proclaims joy throughout the empire.

Perhaps the most famous of all the medieval ballads is "Sir Hugh of Lincoln" or "The Jew's Daughter," in which the agent of Jewish perfidy is a female. The crafty and cruel murderess laughs mockingly at her little victim. She is heathenish, not Jewish, almost a witch.

Better known to most readers than this ballad from Percy's Reliques is the version of the story given in Chaucer's Prioress's Tale. It is certainly not accidental and is probably quite significant that the story is placed by Chaucer in the mouth of a Prioress. The main outline of the ballad is as follows.

In "Mirry-land Towne" (probably Milan, which the Dutch called "Meylandt") through which runs the Pa (evidently the Po though the Adige runs through Milan), it is raining and ten boys are playing ball. The Jew's daughter, coming out, asks a young boy to come in and dine. When he refuses unless his nine playfellows also come, she lures him in with a red and white apple. With a small pen knife she kills him. After dressing him like a swine, she laughingly bids him to go out to play with his friends. Then she rolls him in a cake of lead and throws him into a deep well. When his mother, Lady Helen, arriving home from mass, misses her son, she goes immediately to the Jews' quarter while they are all asleep. Upon calling her son's name, she is directed to the well,
where kneeling she calls him again. This time he answers. He tells her to go home and bring a winding sheet. He informs her that they will meet "at the bank of Mirry-land towne."

The conclusion, which apparently is missing, probably parallels Chaucer's story. Chaucer's version is much more elaborate and sophisticated. In Chaucer the role of the Jew is much more elaborate and sophisticated. He plays the double role of usurer and mutilator, making him an arch-villain. Chaucer's version incorporates the legend that the Jews cut out a child's tongue. It is the classic literary expression of the ritual murder legend. The story was also the subject of a miracle play performed in London in 1316. The embellishments and additions in Chaucer's version are apparent in the summary that follows.

In a large city of Asia a hateful Jewry exists among the Christians. It is maintained by a lord for the purposes of usury. At the farther end of the street, which is open at both ends, there is a school for Christians, which a little boy, age seven, a widow's son attends. He already knows to kneel and say "Ave Maria" before the image of Christ's mother, and when he hears the pupils sing "O Alma Redemptoris" in

7 Rosenberg, p. 88.
8 Sinsheimer, p. 41.
9 F. N. Robinson, editor, Chaucer's Complete Works (Boston, 1933), p. 841.
Latin, he is fascinated. He learns from an older fellow what it means and persuades the older boy to teach him the song. After he learns the song, to the neglect of his primer, he sings it twice a day going to and from school. Throughout the Jewish quarter he sings daily until Satan, who "has his wasp nest in the Jew's heart" agitates the Jews to conspire against the boy. They hire a "cursed" homicidal Jew, who cuts the boy's throat and casts him into a pit. After a night of anxious waiting, the widow goes at daybreak to the school and elsewhere in search of her missing son. Learning that he was last seen in the Jewish quarter, she finally seeks him there. Although she "begs and prays piteously to every Jew in the place" whether her child is there, they say "Nay." But through the grace of Christ she understands that her son was cast into a pit beside her. Then the martyred boy, lying upright, begins to sing loudly "Alma Redemptoris." The provost, summoned by the Christians who came to marvel, has the Jews bound, and all who knew of the murder are drawn by wild horses and hanged. The child, still singing "Alma Redemptoris," is taken to the nearest abbey. His mother, swooning at the bier, can hardly be taken away. After the mass when the abbott sprinkles cold water on the child before burial, he sings "O Alma Redemptoris." Asked the cause, he tells the abbott that Christ's mother has bidden him to sing the song in his death. He thinks that she placed a grain under his tongue and he must sing until it is removed, after
which she promised not to forsake him. When the monk removes the grain, the child dies. He is buried in a tomb of marble stones.

Contemporary with this tale is the Middle English dramatic fragment the Croxton Play of the Sacrament of the Croxton Play (circa 1461). There are five Jewish characters, a main villain and four conspirators. The play is based on the desecration of the Host, the basic story being the same found in the ballad "Sir Huich of Lincoln." This play, though classified as a non-cycle mystery play, is secular; the theme is historical, and the characters are neither Biblical nor apocryphal. The play does not follow in its dénouement what might be normally expected: instead the Jews, converted by a miracle, are baptized, not burned in the usual manner.  

It goes without saying that the mystery play by its very nature contains in many instances material which has to do with Jews, at least incidentally. Between the dates 1560 and 1580 Cardozo lists typical examples of this type of play: Two Sins of King David, Godly Queen Hester, Jacob and Esau, Abraham's Sacrifice, and Suzanna. The "Jewishness" of these plays is not of particular significance, and they and others like them fall outside the province of this study.

For the purpose of this study the most important development in the cycle plays was the emergence of the Jewish

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10 Coleman, p. ix.

11 Cardozo, p. 69.
character who evolves from Judas. He usually appears in the
guise of a Judas-like character with a large nose, red hair,
and beard.  

Throughout medieval times the traits of Biblical characters, whether evil or good, were often highly
exaggerated in legendary lore.  

The character of Judas especially, who betrayed Christ, took on mythic proportions.
He was represented as supremely evil, guilty of all the evils
of earth and hell. In order to satisfy the popular taste he
was relegated to the realm of Devils and sometimes was repre-
sented as the Devil himself.

The Judas legends extended to all nations and were
drawn from three sources -- Christian, Jewish, and pagan
lore. In the minds of many, Judas became the archetypal Jew.
Judas "the Jew" came to represent Judaism. In the miracle
plays, as already indicated, he had red hair and a red beard.
He rode in a cart for criminals in the processions following
religious plays. More often than not he was hanged, drowned,
or burned in effigy. Especially the bargain of thirty pieces
of silver was exploited in diverse ways on the stage. Judas
sometimes assayed each coin in the fashion of the moneylenders
of the Middle Ages. His avarice came to be stressed as much
as his cruelty and disloyalty.

There are a number of these Judas-characters in English
drama. Sinsheimer cites as among the more prominent plays of

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12 Rosenberg, p. 22.

13 Sinsheimer, p. 114.
this type the Judas play written in the early sixteenth century, printed in the appendix to the Towneley Mysteries. An English Judas poem refers to Judas as "that vile creature."

Because of their special importance and influence it should be noted that both Dante and Boccaccio treated the Jew in literature in the thirteenth century. In the Divine Comedy usurers are placed in the seventh circle of hell, with pouch suspended from neck, on hot sand under falling flames, scratching like insect-bitten dogs. The Jew is pictured favorably in the Decameron in the second and third stories. However, Boccaccio deals with the converted Jew. These stories are worth citing in some detail because they give evidence that certain traits of the Jew in literature had become solidified by this time. Abraham of the second story could almost symbolize the Jewish devotion to religion, and Melchizedek of the third shows the Jewish ingenuity or "cunningness."

In the second story a wealthy merchant of Paris, Jehannot de Chevigny, an honest and upright man, trades extensively with Abraham, a rich Jewish friend of like character. Jehannot, concerned that so fine a man should be damned for his faith, constantly urges him to become a Christian. Abraham, being learned in Hebraic law, believes only in Judaism. However, after many arguments Abraham gives in to Jehannot's importunities but insists on going to Rome to witness the life of

\[14\] Sinsheimer, p. 115.
the pope and cardinals. He will become a Christian if he is convinced that their faith is better than his. Jehannot, worried because he is aware of the filthy life of the clergy in the court at Rome, tries unsuccessfully to deter Abraham. Abraham is welcomed with honor by the Jews in the court of Rome. He observes the habits of the pope and all the members of his papal court and finds them all guilty of lechery, gluttony, avarice, and other enormities. When Abraham returns to Paris, Jehannot, having no hope of his conversion, nevertheless asks his opinion of the papal court. Abraham calls the court rotten, but even though it seems to Abraham they are all doing their utmost to ruin the Christian faith, yet the Christian religion continually grows and prospers. It is evident to Abraham that the Holy Spirit guides it. For this reason Abraham determines to become a Christian. The delighted merchant accompanies him to his baptism and gives him the name Jean. Jean learns the Christian faith and is renowned for holy living.

In the third story Saladin, the Sultan of Babylon, finding himself in urgent need of a large sum of money, summons Melchizedek, a wealthy Jewish moneylender of Alexandria. Knowing from the Jew's miserliness that he will never willingly accommodate him, Saladin, though opposed to violence, schemes to find some plausible excuse to use force. After remarking on Melchizedek's reputation for great knowledge of godly matters, Saladin asks him which of the three laws he
considers the true one -- the Hebrew, the Saracen, or the Christian. Suspecting the question is a trap to get him to make some statement that might furnish grounds for a law suit, Melchizedek wisely avoids a direct answer. Instead he relates a parable to the Sultan.

A certain rich man had a beautiful ring, his most prized possession, which he was to leave to one of his sons. Whichever inherited the ring would be his heir and as such would become the head of the family. For generations this custom was followed until finally the rare and valuable ring came into the possession of a man whose three sons were equally handsome, good, and obedient. Each pleaded for the ring, but since the father loved all equally well, he could not choose a successor. Then he secretly had a goldsmith make two matching rings hardly distinguishable from the original. When the man was dying he secretly gave each son a ring. After his death each wanted to receive the inheritance and occupy the place of honor, and each produced his ring as proof of his right. The rings upon examination were identical, and the question of the heir was left unresolved.

This parable finished, Melchizedek answers the Sultan's question by comparing the three laws to the three rings. Each race believes its own law the true one, but the question of which is right remains unsettled. Seeing that the Jew has skillfully avoided the snare set for him, the Sultan openly explains his needs and confesses what he planned to do if the
Jew did not answer prudently. Melchizedek then lets him have the money, which is afterwards repaid, and the Sultan gives him gifts and rewards him.

It can be seen from this résumé of certain representative examples of medieval and Renaissance literature in which Jews play an important part that by the time of Shakespeare most of the tradition of the Jew in literature had long since become solidified. It is not the mere fact that the Jew appeared that is important; that is hardly surprising. It is important that at least by the second half of the sixteenth century a tradition with respect to traits and characteristics had become established. A point to be made here, and one that will be emphasized later in this study, is that Shakespeare could hardly have avoided knowing about and writing in the general climate of this tradition.
CHAPTER III

THE JEW IN LITERATURE CONTEMPORARY WITH SHAKESPEARE

Contrary to what one might expect, the Golden Age of Elizabeth, Shakespeare's own time, gives little evidence that the Jew was of particular importance in the literature of the time. In fact, it may safely be said that there was only a sprinkling of Jews in literature in Shakespeare's time. According to Cardozo, an insignificant number of plays of the Elizabethan period have Jewish characters. Of 1500 plays in the Tudor-Stuart period from Elizabeth to the Restoration only twelve have Jewish characters. Since three of these are lost, there are only nine authentic extant Jewish plays, including the Merchant of Venice, all of which are printed in English, except Machiavellus, which is in Latin manuscript form.1 Five of the nine plays were written after Shakespeare's play and two of the five after his death. The three which antedate the Merchant of Venice are The Three Ladies of London, 1584, by Robert Wilson; The Jew of Malta, 1588, by Marlowe; and Selimus, 1594, by Robert Greene.

One of the lost plays is The Jew mentioned in Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, 1579, as having been "showne at the Bull." The theme is "the greedinessse of worldly chusers and

1Cardozo, pp. 66-70, passim.
the bloody minds of usurers." It evidently wove the casket and pound of flesh stories into one.

Another of the lost plays is Thomas Dekker's *Josef, the Jew of Venice* dated between 1492 and 1494. From what can be determined about the play, it seems to have resembled closely the *Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew*. It was customary in Elizabethan times for traveling English players to tour Germany, and it is from extant bills found in Germany that the plot can be reconstructed. One manuscript was written by a student, Christopher Bluemel. The title of the manuscript is *Der Jud von Venedig*, or *The Jew of Venice*. The play was presented in several places in Germany under different but similar titles. The Jew, whose name was Barrabas, later changed his name to Josef. The setting is in Cyprus and Venice.

Barrabas, the Jew tries to prevent expulsion of the Jews from Cyprus by order of the Prince. Unsuccessful, he swears he will get revenge. When the Prince goes to Venice, Barrabas, disguised by a large patch on his eye, impersonates a soldier and accompanies the Prince as a servant. Barrabas disappears at once in Venice and re-appears on the stage as "the Jew in his glory." In a soliloquy he tells the Christians the

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2 Coleman, p. 24.


4 Sinsheimer, p. 58.
futility of trying to annihilate the Jews. He says that he is richer than ever before. He now calls himself Josef.\(^5\)

Meantime, two love affairs similar to those in the *Merchant of Venice* develop between the Prince and Ancilita, daughter of the Council of Venice, and also between the Prince's servant Picklehering and Ancilita's maid-servant Franciscina. Ancilita feigns illness as an excuse to send for the Prince as a doctor. The Prince, who needs a doctor's garb but has lost all his money gambling, borrows 2000 ducats from Josef and signs a bond very similar to the one Antonio signs with Shylock. Josef resolves to cut the Prince with a poisoned knife if he cannot take a pound of flesh. The dénouement is the same as in Shakespeare's play. Ancilita acts as judge, and after claim to repayment of the loan is denied, the Duke of Venice has Josef "thrashed and thrown out of court."\(^6\) The love affairs are disentangled and the two engagements are announced. The Prince receives money from Cyprus, and an alliance is made between Venice and Turkey against the Turks.

Bluemel's play is probably only a skeleton of Dekker's. Josef has elements of Marlowe's Jew and Shakespeare's. There are obviously other striking similarities between Dekker's missing play and Shakespeare's. On the basis of available

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 59.
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 60.
evidence the relationship between Dekker's play and the "Jew" plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare cannot be determined.

Of more particular interest to this study are the three extant plays involving prominent Jews. Even though the degree of influence of these plays on Shakespeare remains speculative, it is safe to assume that these plays, all coming as they do just a few years prior to *The Merchant of Venice*, acted as a stimulus to Shakespeare and probably influenced him in certain particulars.

William Wilson's morality play, *The Three Ladies of London*, was first performed in 1584. It was the first truly secular play portraying a Jewish character. In one respect it was startlingly unique: it was imbued with what Coleman calls philo-Semitism. There is a complete reversal of characters, Christian and Jew. The protagonist Gerontus, an honorable Jew, is the hero while his antagonist, the dishonest Christian merchant Mercadore, is the villain. The Jew shows Christian mercy to his debtor, while the Christian practices deceit and is prepared to commit perjury. Gerontus would rather lose all his money than cause a man to abjure his religious faith.

Gerontus is an ambiguous character. Just how Wilson came by his concept of this character is not known. Since he is

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8 Coleman, p. vii.
10 Cardozo, p. 80.
benevolent, not avaricious, he is not patterned after the bloody usurer of tradition. It is obvious that Wilson's Jew was not influential on other dramatists. His benign Jew stands almost alone. In spite of his uniqueness, his character and his behavior in the plot are worthy of detailed attention. It is within the realm of reason to suggest that some of the more humane aspects of Shakespeare's Shylock, which have so exercised the critics, have been suggested by the character of Gerontus.

The three ladies are not real women but allegorical characters named Lucre, Love, and Conscience. There are other allegorical characters including Usury, who appropriately comes from Venice, where Lucre's grandmother properly lives. Lucre's servants originate "from Jewry," which includes Italy and Turkey.

Although the scenes from the play are predominantly allegorical, there are some realistic ones. In one of the latter, the action is shifted from London to the Levant in furtherance of Lady Lucre's plans. She sends Mercadore, a London, formerly a Venetian, merchant in her service to the Orient to purchase luxuries of every description, though by an act of Parliament it is illegal to import them.

In Turkey, Mercadore meets a Jewish friend Gerontus, who has evidently settled in that country, and brings up the matter of an old debt. Several years earlier, Gerontus had loaned Mercadore 2000 ducats for three months and after the
expiration of that time another 1000. Before the total sum was due, Mercadore left Turkey without meeting his obligation. Gerontus remarks reproachfully that some Christians have no conscience in the matter of breaking their word and not paying debts on time, whereas if the Jews acted in like manner they would not be trusted by their own brothers.

Although Gerontus has learned from Mercadore what his mission is and should know that Mercadore has money at hand, he naively gives Mercadore a few days of grace. When Mercadore again defaults, Gerontus threatens a lawsuit. This threat does not frighten Mercadore, who knows a legal loophole: he can clear the debt by becoming a Muslim. He openly expresses his intention to do so and, as he leaves the Jew, insults him with a curse and the epithet "drunken Jew." Mercadore informs the audience that Lady Lucre, his mistress, told him to cheat the Jew for love of her.

Gerontus and Mercadore meet next at the trial scene, which is in contrast to that in the Merchant of Venice. Mercadore is already attired in Turkish dress. When Gerontus pleads his case, the judge explains that according to Turkish law a man who abjures his religion and his country to adopt Islam is released from all his debts.

Mercadore repeats his wish to become a Turk. As he is about to take the accustomed oath with his hand on a book (probably the Koran), Gerontus offers to accept first the principal, then half the principal. Mercadore refuses both
offers, avowing that he is surfeited with Christendom. The conscience-stricken Jew then forgives the entire debt rather than be the agent of another man's perjury. The deceitful merchant then tells the judge that he was only pretending and that he would not forsake Christ on any account. He thanks Gerontus warmly, and the latter says he does not regret his magnanimity and observes that he would not want to be guilty of acting like Mercadore, whom he advises hereafter to pay his debts promptly and thereby keep a good reputation. In the end Mercadore, after cheating the Jew and making a mockery of the court, is triumphant. He says his mistress will smile at how he cheated the "filthy Jew."

The trial scene is evidence that the Jew could be favorably portrayed to Elizabethan audiences. However, he is tagged with the epithet "filthy" even when good. The scene satirizes the extremely low reputation of Christian merchants rather than implies the high reputation of the Jew.11

Much more in the tradition of the stage Jew as he has evolved from medieval times is Christopher Marlowe's Barrabas. The Jew of Malta was first produced in 1591 with Edward Alleyn as the first Barrabas, the most despicable of all stage Jews, whose Biblical prototype was Judas. After holding the stage four years, it was revived twenty times after the Lopez trial in 1594.12 Barrabas is greedy, cruel, and wily and incorporates

11 Sinsheimer, pp. 48-51. 12 Ibid., p. 51.
all the evils attributed to Jews. A Spaniard who uses Latin phrases, he formerly served Emperor Charles V as a "war engineer," whose duty was "killing Christians." At one time he had been a physician in Italy where, as he boasts, he increased business for the grave-diggers. Barrabas is a true Machiavellian monster, and very fittingly the ghost of Machiavelli speaks the prologue. He is a superman who obeys no laws.

Barrabas is a great and immensely wealthy merchant whose ships, business ventures, and merchandise are all over the world. He stands at the head of the Jewish community. As the play opens he is a "royal merchant" with money and jewels in widely separated cities. His heavily laden ships have just returned from all quarters of the globe. In his house are enormous quantities of precious stones and pearls.

The setting is the politically and commercially important island of Malta, hub of three continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe) and gateway between the Orient and the Occident.

Malta, governed by the Knights of St. John, is a tributary of Turkey. Selim Galymath, the Sultan's son, arrives by ship to collect forcibly the tribute, which is ten years in arrears.

Ferneze, the governor of the island, applies to the Jews to extort from them an exorbitant sum. Ferneze names three conditions: (1) Jews will pay all of the tribute, (2) Each will lay down half of his fortune or become a Christian, (3) Those refusing Christianity will forfeit all their possessions.

Barrabas refuses to become Christian, and he says he will not
lightly part with half his fortune. When Ferneze threatens him with the third condition, Barrabas says he will pay half. His offer is too late, and all his fortune is forfeited. Barrabas, nonetheless, saves some treasures in his house.

To recover his fortune, but with revenge uppermost in his mind, Barrabas begins a series of horrible, even inconceivable, crimes, until he falls into the snare prepared for others. He becomes a murderer, a wholesale poisoner. He victimizes all he meets -- nuns, friars, knights, a courtesan, even his own daughter when she becomes a Christian. He strangles a monk and poisons the entire nunnery.

Barrabas has an only daughter, Abigail, whom he sacrifices to his revengeful plots by using her as a tool for his crimes. Abigail loves a Christian, Don Mathias, whom she is thinking of marrying. Barrabas objects to him more because he is poor than because he is a Christian. Ferneze's son, Don Lodowick, also wishes to marry Abigail. Since Barrabas's feeling for revenge is boundless, with the help of his too obedient daughter he manages to get the suitors to kill each other. Abigail enters the convent in her father's house, and after confessing her crimes and his, is poisoned with the rest of the nuns.

Barrabas adds treason to murder. He betrays Christian to Turk, Turk to Christian. He delivers the Christian island to the Turkish fleet besieging the port. The Turks reward him by making him governor. Then he traitorously tries to betray and annihilate the Turks. He conspires with the governor he
replaced to "blow up" the Turks. He plans to throw Selim and his attendants into a boiling pit filled with liquid fire. The ex-governor exposes him, and finally he is thrown into the cauldron he has artfully contrived for his principal benefactor and is boiled alive.

In merely recounting the story one almost surfeits on the excesses of its melodramatic plot. Marlowe has carried the tradition of the villainous Jew to its ultimate. The play and the character would seem only ludicrous were they not saved by a number of redeeming features, which, however, do not fall within the scope of this paper. That Shakespeare had Marlowe's Jew on his mind when developing Shylock is discernible. However, the differences are more apparent than the similarities.

Robert Greene's Selimus, Emperor of the Turks is a lengthy, intricate, and melodramatic play that employs a Jew as an important secondary character. For the most part Greene's Abraham falls within the tradition of the villainous stage Jew. The characteristics of greed, cunning, and cruelty are emphasized. Stretching our credulity, Abraham, considerably out of character, in the end chooses to poison himself along with his victims.

Baiazet, Emperor of the Turks, after a reign of thirty years is old and plagued with gout. He is weary of the burdens of the throne and grieved by the loss of his oldest and dearest son Alemshae in a war with the Tartars, who with the Christians and the Persians, are his standing enemies.
There is a struggle for the throne among the three surviving sons. Corcut, the oldest, a philosopher and scholar, is considered unfit to rule in an age of warfare. Acomat, the second, though lascivious, is Baiazet's favorite son and also his choice for a successor. Selimus, the youngest, a warrior, who has just taken a Tartar wife, is favored by the imperial army and also by Mustaffa and some other high officials.

Each son petitions Baiazet for the crown. Corcut alone loves his father and unselfishly wishes him to complete his reign. Selimus tries unsuccessfully to seize the throne by force and, defeated in battle, flees to the Tartars. Acomat tries to clear his path to the throne by destroying the heirs. He besieges the town Natolia, where the nearest heirs, Alem-shae's son Mahomet and daughter Zanara, live. After murdering them, he massacres 6,000 townspeople. When Baiazet sends Aga to ask Acomat to relent, Acomat pulls out Aga's eyes, cuts off his hands, and sends the old man back to Baiazet.

After this atrocity, Baiazet summons Selimus as the lesser villain to lead the army against Acomat. When Selimus returns, Baiazet disinherits Acomat and appoints Selimus chief general of the army. The captains of the army almost immediately elect Selimus Emperor and demand that Baiazet surrender the crown on pain of death. Baiazet complies, saying that he is weary of the cares of a king and so resigns the crown willingly. Placing the crown on Selimus' head, he wishes him a long and
victorious reign and triumph over his enemies. Then he announces his immediate retirement with Aga to Dimeticum where he expects to live in peace the rest of their days.

Selimus soliloquizes about his many labors to attain the crown. He thinks that although Baiazet proposes to live in ease, as long as Baiazet lives, Selimus will not "sleep in rest" without some broil, for Baiazet is as inconstant as the wind. Therefore Selimus lays "a platform." He recalls a cunning Jew whom Baiazet has with him "professing physic," skilled as though he has power over life and death. This Jew is so "stout and resolute" that he will venture anything for gold. Selimus plans that with some intoxicated drink this Jew shall poison Baiazet and the blind Lord Aga, thereby cutting off one of the Hydra's heads threatening his throne.

He sends a messenger to summon Abraham the Jew. While awaiting Abraham's arrival, Selimus resolves to destroy his two brothers Corcut and Acomat, as well as Acomat's sons, Amurath and Aladin.

It is, of course, with the Jew of this play that this study is most concerned. In the first scene of Abraham's appearance he reveals a great deal about himself. Selimus, after welcoming him, announces that he has a piece of service for him and, cautioning him to extreme secrecy, tells him to get a strong poison whose envenomed taste will take away Baiazet's life before he leaves Byzantium.
Abraham's prompt acceptance of this nefarious task brands him as a willing, hired assassin. Suavely addressing Selimus as his "gracious sovereign," he guarantees that Balaazet will be quickly sent to his grave, for he has poisons so potent that merely touching them will cause death. Then he reveals his duplicity when in an aside he expresses an equal willingness to serve the potions to Selimus as well as to his aged father if Selimus will only taste them. To Selimus he says, "My Lord, I am resolved to do the deed." This speech concludes the first Jew scene, which, brief as it is, is the one that really characterizes the Jew as a villain.

In the second scene involving the Jew, the three old men are alone, Balaazet and Aga in mourning clothes and Abraham carrying a cup. Balaazet bemoans his tragic life. He has been "drowned in woe" from youth and has been expelled by his sons. He wishes for death. Aga then tells his tragedy. Born of a poor family, he had been exalted by Balaazet. It would have been better to die among his enemies than lose his eyes and hands because of tyranny at home. Balaazet calls time on their weeping to utter curses on "all things under the wide sky" and an everlasting curse on Acomat for his crime against Aga. Abraham interrupts this doleful colloquy by offering the noble Lords a drink which will soon calm their stormy passions and gladden their hearts. He identifies himself as Balaazet's humble servant and is invited to sit and drink with him. Abraham decides that since he himself is old and has only a
few years to live, he does not care much if he ends his life with Baiazet. He drinks to the "Lordlings" with full "carouse." Baiazet drinks to Aga and tells Abraham to hold the cup to Aga while he drinks. After all three have sipped the poison, Abraham informs the others that they have been poisoned on Selimus' orders. He dies saying he is glad that such companions will go with him to Proserpina's kingdom.

The play then ends very quickly. With pretended grief Selimus buries his father; he then returns to his victims. He captures and strangles his brother Corcut, then goes to Amafla, where he also strangles Acomat's Queen. Her sons, Amurath and Aladin, forewarned by Mustaffa, escape from the country. Finally, the armies of Selimus and Acomat meet in battle. Acomat is captured and, when he refuses to kneel to Selimus, is strangled by Selimus' agent, Sinam. At last Selimus is king.

It is from the final scene with Abraham that Greene's Jew earned the title "Abraham the poisoner." In creating this character, Greene might have recalled the false charges that in the Middle Ages the Jews brought on the Black Death by poisoning the wells. In any case, Greene's Jew is in the historical and literary tradition of the Jew-villain.

The three extant plays cited in this chapter and all involving prominent Jewish characters are the most important manifestations of the Jew in English literature prior to Shakespeare's Shylock. It is clear that Marlowe's Barrabas and Greene's Abraham, each with certain distinctions, fall
within the ancient tradition of the Judas-figure. Neither in plot nor in characterization do Marlowe's and Greene's plays come very close to *The Merchant of Venice*. Wilson's *Gerontus*, on the other hand, foreshadows some aspects of Shakespeare's Shylock. Also the plot elements of Wilson's play are much closer to the plot elements of *The Merchant of Venice* than any other play of the period, possibly excepting *The Jew*, no longer extant. No reputable critic would try to specify direct influence from any of these plays to Shakespeare's. Nonetheless, the stimulus of these plays on Shakespeare must have been great, especially that of Marlowe's play.
CHAPTER IV

SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK

Heritage and Antecedents

In the interpretation of a dramatic character several things should be considered. In the first place, the author's model is some indication of the kind of character he intended to create. Another consideration is the different portrayals by famous actors who are quasi-critics. The opinions of the critics, who are Shakespearean scholars, are an invaluable aid in reaching a conclusion. And finally an analysis of the play itself (and this is most important) is indispensable.

The question of the source of Shakespeare's play and the prototype of his Jew has long been debated by critics and scholars. It is one of the theater's leading riddles. In the search for Shylock's prototype the simplest answer to arrive at is the origin of his name. There are four Jewish characters in the play, one of whom, Chus, is only mentioned. All of these names are Biblical. The names of Jessica, Tubal, and Chus with current spellings are found in the tenth and eleventh chapters of Genesis. And in the genealogy of Noah, which is given in these chapters, appears the name Shelach, or Shalach, as the son of Noah's third son, Japheth. Shylock is said to be the Anglicized form.¹

¹Sinsheimer, p. 87.
As to the model for Shylock one thing is manifest. Shylock is based either on a living model or on a prototype from literature. This brings up another puzzling question: the possible presence of Jews in England in Shakespeare's day.

The dates of the expulsion (1290-1656) have already been reviewed. During this span of almost four centuries it was illegal for unconverted Jews to remain in England, although converts of the Hebrew race were welcomed. Jews practicing Judaism were promptly expelled. Since converts were not the type of fanatic Christian-hating usurers represented by Shylock, an unconverted Jew could not have been used as a model. It is doubtful that such a figure as Shylock existed, if we can believe Jacob Cardozo and others.

Cardozo made an exhaustive study of this question when he examined the theories of two Shakespearean scholars, Lucien Wolf and Sir Sidney Lee, each of whom believed that there was a fair sprinkling of overt Jews in England continuously during the exile. Cardozo presents convincing historical evidence that the only Jews remaining in England were converts who were themselves few in number. He states in summation that historical evidence does not indicate that there were any undisguised and unmolested Jews in England before the Commonwealth. He further intimates that a

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2} Jacob L. Cardozo, The Contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan Drama (Paris, 1925), pp. 1-140.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 48.}\]
prototype resembling the grotesque, lurid stage Jews like Shylock would have been hanged, drawn, and quartered. ⁴

George Sampson, referring to the later Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, says that there were few Jews in England and that these were practically unknown to the average citizen. He concludes that Shylock is not a portrait from life. ⁵ John Palmer agrees with Sampson that there were officially no Jews in England in Shakespeare's time and suggests that his literary source could be the ballad, "Gernutus the Jew of Venice."⁶ Marchete Chute says there was no living model for Shylock since the law regarding expulsion was enforced, and she cites an example of the typical treatment of unconverted Jews found in England. In short, they were arrested and deported. In the 1580's a Jew from Prague, Joachim Gaunz, found working in Bristol, was arrested and deported. He was unacceptable on religious, not racial, grounds since Jewish converts went unnoticed and unmolested. ⁷ It is the consensus of historians and critics that there were no overt unconverted Jews in England, and, as a consequence, Shakespeare must have found a prototype in myth or in literature.

⁴Cardozo, p. 48.


The remote and the more immediate possible literary sources of Shakespeare's concept of the Jew have been reviewed in previous chapters. The question of Shakespeare's specific model for Shylock, though much debated, remains unsolved. In speculation critics have pointed toward the ballad "Gernutus," *The Jew of Malta*, *The Jew*, and even the vague figure of the mythological Jew.

Three eminent Shakespearean scholars consider the more likely source to be the lost play referred to by Gosson. H. R. Walley thinks that the Lopez trial of 1594 was the immediate inspiration for Shakespeare's play and that he probably rewrote the old play mentioned by Gosson. Sidney Lee says it is almost a certainty that there was a pre-Shakespearean play, no longer extant, which combined the stories of the caskets and the pound of flesh. F. E. Halliday speculates that Shakespeare may have worked from an earlier play, *The Jew*, now lost, which apparently combined the two themes of the bond and the caskets. He believes also that Marlowe was influential and cites the noteworthy similarities between Shylock and Barrabas; Jessica and Abigail. He also connects Shakespeare's play with the execution in 1594 of the Jew, Roderigo Lopez, for attempting to poison Queen Elizabeth and

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Don Antonio of Portugal. The logic in these claims is found in Gosson’s brief description of the lost play, which shows "the greediness of worldly chusers and the bloody minds of usurers," indicating a double plot similar to Shakespeare's.

The more traditional critics such as those just cited have come to feel that the most reasonable hypothesis in the absence of an obvious direct source is to pose the prospect of a missing play as source and prototype. Gosson's citation of such a play gives support to this view.

Taking a very different tack, some critics, most notably Walter Kerr, have made a convincing case on the basis of circumstantial evidence for Shylock as a comic character stereotype. Walter Kerr, finding only a superficial resemblance between Shylock and Marlowe's Barrabas, finds Shylock's image in the Pantalone of the Italian commedia dell'arte. He notes that troupes came to London following the year 1574. In the repertory the pantalone was prominent. He is a merchant of Venice, an old and wealthy miser, whose fortune is tied up in shipping. He starves his servants, and the valet threatens to leave. The old father comes to intercede for his son. The valet mimics his master's speech behind his back. His daughter elopes. The Pantalone is the butt of jokes, is robbed of his


11 Walter Kerr, "In Search of Shylock," Horizon, II, No. 3 (January, 1960), 89-96.
ducats, and is deceived by his daughter. The character is strikingly similar to Shylock, even down to the hooked nose. There are, in addition, parallels to Launcelot, Old Gobbo, and Tubal. Kerr's theory is valuable mainly in reminding us that Shakespeare's play is, after all, a comedy. He rightly emphasizes that the modern tendency to sentimentalize Shylock warps the concept of the character, and that many of the lines and scenes which do not seem especially comic to an audience today would have seemed so to the Elizabethan playgoer.

In the last analysis one can be no more conclusive about the sources of The Merchant of Venice than he can be about Hamlet. Until further evidence is discovered, the source of Shakespeare's Jew remains an unsolved problem. From the evidence at hand it seems most logical to assume that Shakespeare combined some suggestions from the old lost play with the concept of the mythic Jew to produce the complex character of Shylock.

Analysis and Interpretation

There has been more variance in the interpretation of the Merchant of Venice than any other play except Hamlet, and these differences result from the uncertainties about Shylock. The actors and the critics of successive generations have differed widely on the interpretation of the character of Shakespeare's Jew, and in spite of extensive scholarship the views have not been reconciled.12

12Walley, p. 213.
What Shylock meant to an Elizabethan audience is only supposition.\textsuperscript{13} As Walter Kerr has indicated, the role was probably comic. It is certain that Richard Burbage was the first actor of a long list of famous Shylocks,\textsuperscript{14} and he played the part comically with the traditional attributes of red hair and a large nose.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the seventeenth century three distinct and divergent conceptions of the role have evolved from efforts to fathom Shakespeare's intention:\textsuperscript{16} comic, malevolent, and sympathetic.

Beginning with George Granville's \textit{Jew of Venice} in 1701, Shylock became a grotesque comic figure and remained so throughout the first half of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{17} In Granville's version, Thomas Doggett, an actor of low comedy parts, portrayed Shylock. He did not burlesque the part but played it comically without buffoonery.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, Granville's version, which held the stage forty years, was a travesty on Shakespeare's play and Shylock primarily because all Shakespearean motivation was removed.

\textsuperscript{13} Walley, p. 213.

\textsuperscript{14} Hardin Craig, editor, \textit{The Complete Works of Shakespeare} (Dallas, 1951), p. 56.


\textsuperscript{16} Walley, p. 213. \textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Appleton, pp. 43, 45.
Granville's interpretation was supplanted by another in 1741 when, in a revival of *The Merchant of Venice*, Charles Macklin portrayed Shylock as a malignant and vengeful Jew. Macklin's followers retained this unsympathetic concept of the character and Shylock became the incarnation of cruel, venomous malice. The first performance by Macklin was at the Drury Lane theater on February 14, 1741. He wore a red hat in the Venetian style, a short red wispy beard, and a loose black gown. In this costume he bore a striking resemblance to the pantalone of sixteenth-century Italian commedia dell'arte. Shattering the earlier tradition of Doggett and refusing to play the part sympathetically, he rescued Shylock from farce but kept him in the comic tradition. His Shylock was so evil that George II, after seeing the performance, lost a night's sleep. Macklin won a lasting reputation as Shylock. One ecstatic critic exclaimed, "This is the Jew that Shakespeare drew."20

In the Macklin tradition Edmund Kean first played Shylock at Drury Lane on January 26, 1814. Scornful of stage conventions, he wore a black wig. His was not a dirty, repulsive, stage Jew, but a Jew with tidy costume and a clean face. He wore a loose, dark robe, a knife, and a white scarf.21 Kean's Shylock was a bitter, unsentimentalized Jew, fighting to the end.

\[19\] Walley, p. 213.  
\[20\] Appleton, pp. 43, 55.  
The most recent and most persistent interpretation, espoused by Sir Henry Irving and his followers, gives sympathetic treatment to Shylock and pictures him as an avenger of his oppressed race. His Shylock has the dignity of tragic pathos and is "more sinned against than sinning." The most successful English actor of his time, Irving first played Shylock on November 1, 1879. He won the sympathies of all, and his performance ran 250 consecutive nights, an unequalled record for a Shakespearean play. He restored the fifth act, long omitted.

Irving portrayed the Jew not as the conventional, dirty, hook-nosed usurer, but as a refined, Italianized Jew, genteelly dressed in black cap, brown gaberdine, and a short robe underneath. This sympathetic and sentimental interpretation lasted through the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth and persists to the present day.

On the whole, it would seem from the evidence that actors and directors have not been particularly successful in coming to grips with the complexities of Shylock. Even when it is granted that an actor views the role from a somewhat different perspective than the critic and historian, it still remains true that in the hands of even the best actors the role is likely to be conceived as one-dimensional.

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22 Walley, p. 213.

In all fairness, it must be noted that Shylock is no less an enigma to Shakespearean scholars and critics than he is to actors. Admittedly, his character is one of the knottiest problems in critical analysis. It can be noted, too, that some critics have been heavily influenced by their counterparts in the theater.

The chief spokesman for a comic interpretation of Shylock is E. E. Stoll, who in a long, subtle argument arrives at his conclusion. Stoll says that Shakespeare is "not with" Shylock as proven by unfavorable comments of good characters and by the declarations in his soliloquies. Nobody commiserates with Shylock, and only Tubal has a good word for him. According to Stoll, Shylock cannot be at one and the same time villainous, comic, and pathetic. He maintains that Shylock is a comic villain and in reality is not pathetic. Although on the popular stage he may be played as Irving's Jew, that is not Shakespeare's Jew. The manifest intention of Shakespeare, according to Stoll, was to make Shylock a villain and a butt, not a monster nor a caricature. He supports his contention by noting that pathos is an emotion that had very little place in the sixteenth century. Stoll's great error, Bernard Grebanier thinks, is in not realizing that Shakespeare had more wisdom and foresight than

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his contemporaries. He says that other scholars have followed Stoll’s lead and even twist comic values out of passages not comic at all.  

H. C. Goddard draws a sentimental picture of Shylock, whom he describes as humane and kindly and whom he considers "insulted and injured if a man ever was." He also thinks that Shylock had "no idea of literal bloodshed" until he was goaded into such action by Antonio’s storming at him. Shylock’s original intention, he says, is merely to have Antonio exiled from the city. Goddard belongs to the school of thought which maintains that Shylock plans Antonio’s death after the bond is signed. The significance of this point is that it makes Shylock a lesser villain if his murderous attempt was unpremeditated.

A view which dissents from Goddard’s is taken by Mark Van Doren, who calls Shylock an alien and hostile spirit who "threatens to rend the web of happiness" but is cast out. In Van Doren’s view he may excite pity when he remembers Leah, but his pain is "animal pain self-inflicted, self-licked." He is a music-hater and therefore, according to Lorenzo, "fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils." Van Doren summarized

Shylock by saying that though Shakespeare has not made "the least inch of him lovely," yet he is not a monster. 30

The views of E. K. Chambers somewhat resemble those of Van Doren. He thinks that in the play Shylock represents Hate, the roots of which are found in his sufferings. In spite of the famous lines vindicating the Jew, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (III, i, 57-76), Shylock alone is the villain of the play, as Chambers sees it, and it is heresy to convert him into the hero. 31 Chambers criticized Kean's sympathetic treatment of Shylock and says that historic imagination must be used in judging the play. The evolution of moral ideals makes characters reprehensible to us that were not so to sixteenth century audiences. In the twentieth-century, Antonio's spitting on Shylock's gaberdine is offensive, and the enforced conversion of Shylock is intolerable. Less objectionable but not exemplary is the conduct of Jessica, who robbed her father, and of Bassanio, who is a fortune hunter. 32

The critics reviewed here represent in the main the chief divergent views on the nature of Shylock. In light of these opinions, and in spite of certain redundancy, a close analysis of the play itself, with chief emphasis on the scenes in which Shylock appears, is finally the most logical and most rewarding way to come to grips with the character.

30Van Doren, pp. 86-87.


32Ibid., pp. 113-115.
The Merchant of Venice has twenty scenes. Shylock appears in five of these (I, iii; II, v; III, i; III, iii; and IV, i). In another (II, vii) there is an account of his conduct. Still another scene (II, iii) gives some insight into his character. \( ^{33} \)

In the first half of the play (including the first three of these scenes) Shylock is a character of great complexity. He is a human being rent by varying emotions which differentiate him from the other characters. In the last half of the play encompassing the last two of these scenes Shylock is a simple character with one driving purpose. He is a revengeful, malicious villain, and the inhuman incarnation of malevolence. He is a fiend exulting in revenge, not a human being. His unmitigated villainy precludes the possibility of viewing him either sympathetically or sentimentally, or of seeing him as comic unless from satisfaction at his defeat.

Act III, Scene iii foreshadows his action at the trial scene. He refuses to listen to Antonio's pleas and anticipates with seeming relish and glee his expected triumph over his enemy. The scene emphasizes his malice and petulance. He is no longer a complex character but a conventional villain.

In the trial scene (IV, i) Shylock's action is consistent with that in the foregoing scene. He is deaf to every appeal for mercy and arrogantly refuses to explain the motive for

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\( ^{33} \) William Shakespeare, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, edited by Hardin Craig (Dallas, 1951), pp. 506-530. All reference to the play will be from this edition and in this form.
his conduct, which is based on hatred and revenge. This is proven when he refuses more than the amount of his loan.

He wants only revenge and insists upon the letter of his bond, which gives him the opportunity to commit legal murder. He exults over his anticipated triumph, and when the tables are turned on him, Gratiano retaliates in kind. Defeated in his purpose, Shylock tries to salvage what he can. Foiled in this he says, "Nay take my life and all" (11. 374-377). In his final moments on the stage he says, "I am not well: send the deed after me." In view of his conduct throughout the scene there is little pathos in any of this.

The final portrayal in the trial scene is unmistakable. Shylock is a conventional villain deserving neither tolerance nor sympathy. Yet the picture is blurred by the earlier scenes in which appear most of the passages used by critics as the basis for the plea of extenuation.

It is a fact of supreme importance that there is no indication in the street scene (I, iii) that the signing of the bond implies more than Shylock stated. In other words, there is no suggestion of his contriving a murder. The signing of the bond is apparently innocent but potentially dangerous. Both his final remarks and those of Bassanio point out the ambiguity of the scene.

Shylock is not a motiveless villain. Shylock's motives, justifiable to himself, are indicated in the play. They are comprehensible, however inadequate to account for his
villainy, and an understanding of motives, as one critic suggests, leads to sympathy if the tragic villain is the protagonist but not if he remains a villain as Shylock does.\textsuperscript{34}

Shylock hates Antonio on the basis of religion and business practice. His long speech (II, 107-130), often used to defend Shylock, outlines the deep-seated reasons for his resentment against Antonio. Antonio has spat upon him and called him dog. Antonio threatens to repeat these wrongs. Shylock's intention in inducing him to sign the bond is uncertain. Up to this point Shylock is certainly not a monster. He is at worst an avaricious Jew with a grievance and a devious mind.

Certain minor scenes in the play throw further light on Shylock in relation to some other characters. In Act II, scene iii, Launcelot and Jessica contribute to the unfavorable impression of Shylock. Jessica finds life intolerable with him and is ashamed to be his daughter. She regrets Launcelot's leaving Shylock's employ for Bassanio's because he was a merry devil in their house of "hell." Launcelot does not flatter Shylock when he questions the paternity of this "most beautiful and sweet Jewess."

In Act II, Scene v, Shylock is shown to be a petty, grudging miser. He begrudges Launcelot food and releases him to Bassanio to help impoverish the latter. He berates Launcelot

\textsuperscript{34}Walley, p. 236.
for oversleeping, overeating, and wearing out clothes. He
goes to feed upon the "prodigal Christian." He dreams money-
bags, thinks merriment is folly, and keeps his daughter a
virtual prisoner. Scenes like these seem to brand Shylock
as a disagreeable miser. Still, there is the strong prospect
that much in these scenes was intended to be genuinely humorous
to the Elizabethan audience.

Act II, Scene viii, is a colloquy between Salerio and
Salanio. It is a preliminary scene reporting Shylock's ridi-
culous conduct in the streets when he learns of his daughter's
actions. It foreshadows his own action in the next two scenes.
To Salanio, who is unsympathetic, Shylock's actions are a warn-
ing to Antonio, who though innocent of the elopement, "shall
pay for this." This is the clue to Act III, Scene i, which
is the climax of Shakespeare's portrayal.

It is a dangerous scene because it is so subject to mis-
interpretation. The sub-plot supplies the indirect motive for
Shylock's revenge. He diverts his resentment for his daugh-
ter's actions against Antonio. He divides his grief between
his ducats and his daughter. There is a question as to whether
he is more a duped miser than a grieving father.

Salerio mentions Antonio's losses, and for the first
time since Act I, Scene iii, Shylock considers the bond. He
decides to demand the pound of flesh. He enumerates his
grievances against Antonio in the famous passage so much
quoted by those who consider Shylock a sympathetic character,
saying, "What's his reason? I am a Jew." However the lines are interpreted, a new element is introduced here. Shylock is shown to be human. It is human to resent injuries and to retaliate. He will retaliate as the Christians have taught him and will "better the instruction."

Tubal enters, the others leave, and the famous Tubal duo begins. Their dialogue is a constant interplay between the misfortunes of Antonio and those of Shylock. The idea of retaliation gains strength and reaches a peak at the news of the turquoise ring. Walley says that there is anguish in the scene about the "famous bartering of the turquoise" so dear to Shylock because he "had it of Leah when I was a bachelor," but that the pathos is nullified by Shylock's computing its sentimental value in material terms. Shylock then makes the final desperate decision to "have the heart of him, if he forfeit." His vindictiveness is comprehensible because he has been sorely goaded. But his final thoughts are of money as he says "were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will." He is a miser to the end.

Following this scene (III, i) the complex Shylock becomes the villain already described in the last half of the play. Close analysis of the play bears out the view that there is a duality in the character of Shylock. In addition, analysis is

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35 Walley, p. 240.
further complicated by the limitations of isolating a line of the play and analyzing it independently of the whole play.

All the evidence that has been presented adds up to a few unmistakable conclusions. To begin with, the play must be seen in its historical context and in the cultural milieu that produced it. In this context, particularly in view of the position of the Jew in European society up to the time of Shakespeare, Shylock could hardly have been intended as a "sympathetic" character, and certainly not a sentimentalized one. It must be noted also, in conclusion, that in some ways Shylock is the culmination of a long literary tradition of the Jew. In this tradition the Jew is almost invariably portrayed as villainous, although, somewhat paradoxically, the stage Jew takes on certain serio-comic overtones. Finally in conclusion, Shakespeare's literary genius and his uncanny sureness of touch on the stage cannot be discounted. It is probably this intangible but important creative ability that accounts for the fact that Shylock is a complex and effective dramatic characterization and not the one-dimensional stage-Jew so common in Shakespeare's time. What helps distinguish Shylock from other stage-Jews is that he is human. He is a believable human being first, and a stage-Jew only second.

In the last analysis, the result of this study must remain inconclusive in the sense that Shylock cannot be definitely categorized. At the period of Shakespeare's writing he was able to draw a character not merely with a few salient characteristics but with many facets. Shylock, a character of great
complexity, is the product of this skill. Indubitably he is a villain but one who is softened at times by comic elements or by sympathetic humanizing touches. The study is rewarding in that Shakespeare combined imagination and fact to create an immortal character and to give the myth of the Jew "a local habitation and a name."
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