

The Jew That Shakespeare Drew?

HERBERT W. KLINE

With the exception of Hamlet, none of Shakespeare's creations have been given a wider range of interpretation by professional actors than Shylock, the Jewish protagonist of *The Merchant of Venice*. Stage history records three distinct conceptions of the character: as a clown, as a malicious villain, and as a near-tragic man of dignity.¹ Though there is little information about the original performance of Shylock (the play was first published in 1600), it is known that for more than a hundred years after his creation the character was presented wearing the red fright wig of a low comic. For most of these years, Shylock cavorted on English stages in productions like George Granville's *The Jew of Venice* (1701), a travesty of Shakespeare's play. Then, in 1741, Charles Macklin rescued Shylock from the comedians. His was a deadly serious, malicious portrayal, and it prompted the famous couplet, usually attributed to Alexander Pope, "*Here is the Jew/That Shakespeare drew.*" For a century after his performance, all the great Shylocks, in varying degrees of severity, were related to the tradition which Macklin initiated.

The American theatre, which always drew heavily upon England for theatrical inspiration and approval, had its share of venomous Shylocks. George Frederick Cooke, the first prestigious British actor to visit America, portrayed the character as a depraved usurer for early nineteenth-century audiences. In the trial scene he deviously

Dr. Kline is Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts at Sacramento State College in Sacramento, California. This essay represents a portion of his doctoral dissertation, *Henry Irving and the Lyceum Theatre in America*, which he is presently expanding into a full biography.

¹ An excellent stage history of the Shylock character has been written by Toby Lelyveld: *Shylock on the Stage* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1960).

whetted his knife on the floor in anticipation of collecting the pound of flesh. The great British actors Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready and America's first native-born star Edwin Forrest played similar Shylocks for American audiences as the century moved on. Even the gentle Edwin Booth, America's finest actor, continued the tradition of Macklin. *The New York Times* described his 1867 characterization of the Jew as "a fierce malignity," and noted that Booth could not resist "all the miserable old business of sharpening the knife."²

GALL AND WORMWOOD TO HIS NATURE

It is not surprising that the portrayals of Shylock in this country during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century emphasized the venomousness of the character. Tradition is a strong force in the theatre. In addition, a creeping anti-Semitism in America was characteristic of the years before and after the Civil War. In 1862, General U. S. Grant issued his notorious Order Number 11, which accused "Jews as a class" of wartime trading violations and expelled them from the territory subject to his control, but this was only the most odious of a series of restrictive acts by the Union Army aimed at Jewish merchants.³ In 1877, Joseph Seligman, whose banking firm had helped Lincoln finance the war, was as a Jew refused admission to the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs.⁴ These are two instances of the Jew-baiting which made news during the period. Little wonder that at this time a number of Judeophobic farces, similar to George Granville's early eighteenth-century travesty, caught the fancy of American theatregoers.⁵ The malicious Shylocks and their grotesque farcical counterparts offered only a distasteful picture of the Jew to American audiences. It was not

² *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1867.

³ Joakim Isaacs, "Candidate Grant and the Jews," *American Jewish Archives*, XVII (1965), 3-16.

⁴ Carey McWilliams, *A Mask for Privilege* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), pp. 3-8.

⁵ Lelyveld, pp. 115-32.



*Courtesy, The Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum,
Columbia University, New York*

Henry Irving
A Shylock he could encompass

until 1883 that theatregoers in this country were able to see a markedly different interpretation. In that year the London Lyceum Theatre, headed by the great actor-manager Henry Irving, toured America.

Irving was a strange figure in the theatrical world. His thin, ungainly body and heron's stride delighted the caricaturists. His voice was weak, his pronunciations were strange, and he was never able to master the music of Shakespeare's verse. Unfit to be a traditional actor, he gained acclaim as an innovative one. He foreswore the oratorical and frequently ranting style of the older tragedians and adopted the techniques of the "new school" of acting. This acting was dependent on the ability to produce on stage the actually observable details of human behavior—including the natural by-play which has become commonplace in contemporary realistic acting—in order to develop more natural, individualized characters. Such acting had been seen only in lightweight domestic comedies when Irving took it up. He was the first to use it in plays from the traditional repertory.

According to Bram Stoker, Irving's business manager, the role of Shylock had not appealed to Irving until he made a summer yachting trip to Morocco and the Levant in 1879. "When I saw the Jew in what seemed his own land and in his own dress," he said, "Shylock became a different creature. I began to understand him; and now I want to play the part. . . ."⁶ Irving's production of *The Merchant of Venice* opened in November, 1879, and was a tremendous Lyceum success. It played two hundred and fifty consecutive nights, the play's longest run till that time.

The Theatre for December, 1879, gives a vivid analysis of Irving's innovative performance:

Irving evidently believes that Shakespeare intended to enlist our sympathies on the side of the Jew. . . . the bearing of this Shylock is distinguished by a comparatively quiet and tranquil dignity. . . . In point of dignity and culture he is far above the Christians with whom he comes in

⁶ Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1907), pp. 53-54.

contact, and the fact that as a Jew he is deemed far below them in the social scale is gall and wormwood to his proud and sensitive nature.⁷

According to Toby Lelyveld, Irving transformed Shylock "from antagonist to protagonist, shifted sympathy to him," and, for the first time, "Shylock took his place among the great figures of tragedy"—despite the fact that he was appearing in a comedy.⁸

APART FROM WESTERN CUSTOM

It would be a mistake to infer that Irving's tragedy-oriented, sympathetic portrayal was an altruistic attempt to alter the picture of the stage Jew which decades of malignant and farcical Shylocks had fostered. There is evidence which suggests that Irving's characterization was prompted by the actor's recognition that he lacked the power required in a traditional interpretation. J. H. (Jack) Barnes, who played Bassanio in the production, almost apologetically declared:

. . . at the early rehearsals I saw him "make shots" at the big scheme, and, with his great mentality, recognize that it was out of his reach, and so, by degrees, he came to develop, with consummate art, a Shylock he could encompass.⁹

Irving's Shylock appears to have been a compromise with his limitations.

Whatever the motives for Irving's conception, he treated American audiences to a production of *The Merchant of Venice* unlike any ever seen before in this country. For once Irving had decided to embody a dignified Jew, he used all the theatrical elements at his command. He began by making Shylock clearly distinct from the Venetian society which surrounded him. Shylock's garb was that of a Levantine Jew, an alien in Venice, and therefore more saturated with Judaism than those of his religion who had rubbed shoulders

⁷ *The Theatre*, II (July 1, 1879), 397.

⁸ Lelyveld, p. 84.

⁹ J. H. Barnes, *Forty Years on the Stage* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1914), p. 103.

with Europeans. The costume "suggested that Shylock kept his household and himself apart from Western custom."¹⁰ On his head was a tightly fitting black cap with a yellow bar on the front, suggesting a discriminatory racial badge.

Irving used his imaginative skills in stage management to further the sympathetic atmosphere. A memorable moment occurred at the end of the scene in which Shylock's daughter had run away with her gentile lover. The stage, depicting the street before Shylock's house, was momentarily filled with a group of gaily dressed masqueraders. The whirl of the crowd passing through provided a moment of striking contrast with the silence which followed, in the midst of which Shylock appeared over a Venetian bridge. When he knocked on his door for admission and no one answered, his realization of the deception became apparent. The curtain lowered on the picture of the still, lonely figure. Later, in the trial scene, Irving added a sympathetic touch. To the crowd of spectators at the trial, he added "a knot of eager and interested Jews, among whom the sentence condemning Shylock to deny his religion falls like a thunderbolt." The use of this group and the "explosion of popular wrath against this body, which the result of the trial produces,"¹¹ were examples of Irving's intelligent use of action as commentary.

But the prime generator of sympathetic audience response was, of course, Irving's dignified portrayal of Shylock. The following description of his acting of the last moments of the trial scene is sufficient illustration of his innovative performance.

The whole history of the Jewish race was illustrated in his expression at the bare mention of his turning Christian. At the loathed word (and Antonio purposely gave a long pause) Shylock, who could no longer speak, lifted his head slowly and inclined it backwards over his left shoulder. His eyelids, which hung heavily over his dimmed eyes, were open to their full and his long pleading gaze at Antonio showed how bitterly he felt the indignity. Then, as he slowly turned his head, he raised his eyes fervently; his lips murmured incoherent words as his whole body resumed a dreamy, motionless attitude.

¹⁰ Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving—The Actor and his World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 340.

¹¹ *The Athenaeum*, Nov. 8, 1879.

When Shylock grasped the severity of his sentence, his eyelids became heavy as though he was hardly able to lift them and his eyes became lustreless and vacant. The words "I am not well . . ." were the plea of a doomed man to be allowed to leave the court and to die in utter loneliness. But Gratiano's ill-timed jibe governed Shylock's exit. He turned. Slowly and steadily the Jew scanned his tormentor from head to foot, his eyes resting on the Italian's face with concentrated scorn. The proud rejection of insult and injustice lit up his face for a moment, enough for the audience to feel a strange relief in knowing that, in that glance, Shylock had triumphed. He inclined his head slightly three times and took three steps toward the door of the court. (Irving had a mystical belief in three-fold action.) As he reached the door and put out his hand toward it, he was seized with a crumpling convulsion. It was but a momentary weakness indicated with great subtlety. Then, drawing himself up to his full height once more, Shylock bent his gaze defiantly upon the court and stalked out.¹²

The passage indicates that Irving's characterization was thoroughly modern, both in technique and intention. As an acted performance, Irving aimed at revealing the inner feelings of Shylock by the use of carefully selected external signs. In addition, the staging of the scene makes it clear that Irving was attempting to prevent the audience from feeling any sense of elation at the victory of the Christians; the presentation of Shylock as a dignified, deep-feeling human being is quite clear.

THE PLAY ALWAYS MADE MONEY

Theatre critics in America agreed with the reviewer who wrote that Irving's rendering of the role of Shylock was "a more subdued one than any to which American play-goers have been accustomed and it is in many respects a bold departure from the established traditions of the stage."¹³ Some condemned Irving's untraditional performance. "An idealized Shylock," wrote one of them, ". . . is as incongruous as a glorified Richard III or a saintly Iago. . . ."¹⁴ How-

¹² Irving, p. 343.

¹³ *Brooklyn Union*, quoted in *Mr. Henry Irving and Miss Ellen Terry in America: Opinions of the Press* (Chicago: John Morris, 1884), section 2, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Globe* (Boston), Dec. 13, 1883.

ever, the major portion of critical opinion agreed with the New York writer who claimed that Irving's playing enabled Shylock to become "a natural and probable character, instead of a raving scene-chewer and impossible monstrosity."¹⁵

In city after city, the humanizing of Shylock was recognized and applauded for its enlightening effect on audiences' perception of the famous stage Jew. In Philadelphia, it was noted that Irving's portrayal "shows the Jew as something more than the mere incarnation of avarice," and the reviewer found it possible to sympathize with Shylock "in the midst of persecution."¹⁶ A Brooklyn writer declared that the presentation "carried the sympathies of the auditors with the Jew, and revealed his judges fairly in the light of persecutors."¹⁷ And a Chicago reviewer stated that "the actor interprets the intrinsic dignity which Shakespeare, with the justice and unconsciousness of genius, gave to Shylock."¹⁸ Irving's playing of the trial scene impressed a Boston critic, because it was played "without artifice or bombast, but with a dignified and quiet intensity which was very touching."¹⁹ These are, indeed, enlightened statements from the critics who for decades had endorsed, and even demanded, a venomous Shylock.

A late nineteenth-century Chicago journalist, in an exaggerated estimate of the period's liberal attitude toward Jews, wrote the best paean to Irving's performance:

It is a nineteenth century Shylock. It is a creation only possible to our age, which has pronounced its verdict against medieval cruelty and medieval blindness. Two hundred years ago the world would have rejected the impersonation which Irving gave last night. Today the world accepts it. The future will vindicate it.²⁰

¹⁵ *The Spirit of the Stage*, Nov. 10, 1883.

¹⁶ *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), Dec. 24, 1895.

¹⁷ *Eagle* (Brooklyn), quoted in *Mr. Henry Irving and Miss Ellen Terry*, section 2, p. 23.

¹⁸ *Tribune* (Chicago), Jan. 10, 1884.

¹⁹ *Sunday Globe* (Boston), Jan. 14, 1894.

²⁰ *Tribune* (Chicago), Jan. 10, 1884.

The future did vindicate Irving's performance, if vindication was ever necessary, for his characterization of the role was the progenitor of the best Shylocks seen on our contemporary stages.

The Merchant of Venice was the most popular play in the Lyceum's American repertory, for it was the only production which Irving included on each of the eight tours of this country which his company made from 1883 to 1904. Frequently used as a replacement for productions which failed to attract audiences, the play always made money. Irving's Shylock, then, was a milestone for Americans, for not only was it performed in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, but also in Scranton, Toledo, Memphis, Omaha, and a host of other cities and towns. It was the role with which most Americans identified Irving, and people would frequently travel for miles to see the production for a second or third time. Though it would be a mistake to argue that Irving was responsible for any major sociological change in attitude toward Jews, it seems defensible that his widespread playing of his unique characterization helped to engender an attitude of sympathy and understanding for the stage Jew, where before there had been only scorn. Perhaps most importantly, Irving showed American actors that a Shylock based on higher motives than simple maliciousness could be a viable stage creation.

A Modern Jewish Gladiator, California Style

Jerusalem on Top!—A great, two fisted Irishman, intending to buy a pair of kid gloves of our Hebraic friend, Mr. Fridenberg, insisted on first trying them on! The merchant objected to the magnitude of the glove-stretchers, whereat the fellow called him a Jewish son of a bitch. He was ordered out, and when outside, he dared the merchant to come out and get licked. Mr. Fridenberg, who is some on the shoulder, went out, and then the Irishman shot at him. It was then that Israel went up against the Ammonite, prevailed mightily, threw him down, took the pistol away from him, and was about to take the top of his head off, when others interfered and let the fellow off.

That is the third pistol which that unoffending and worthy citizen has forcibly taken from ruffians who had shot at him.

—*The American Flag* (Sonora, Calif.), Oct. 8, 1863