

SHYLOCK: A PERFORMANCE HISTORY
with particular reference to
LONDON and STRATFORD-UPON-AVON
1879-1998

by

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Abstract

This thesis charts the performance history of Shakespeare's Shylock from the earliest recorded interpretations to those of the present day. After a survey of the most significant early productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, starting with Granville's adaptation in 1701, I refer to every major professional production of the play in London and Stratford-upon-Avon from 1879, the year which saw the first performance of Henry Irving's landmark interpretation of Shylock at the Lyceum and the opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford.

While many of Shakespeare's characters hold special challenges for the modern actor, Shylock is unique in the extent to which he is influenced by the weight of history, and by twentieth century European history in particular. There is a focus in this study, therefore, on the changing sensibilities which have influenced theatrical interpretation of the character through the ages, and especially on the differing extents to which actors have attempted to present Shylock as a sympathetic character. It has not been possible - and neither would it have been proper, in my opinion - to exclude from my study references to the ever-changing manifestations of anti-Semitism in the world outside the theatre, nor to the enduring discomfort which many people still experience at seeing stage representations of Shakespeare's Jew. Accordingly I have included a brief account of the theatre's response at the time of the Nazi persecutions, as well as more recent examples of the controversies that this play has the power to engender.

Reflecting upon the ways in which productions have in their different ways met the challenge of presenting Shakespeare's Jew to post-Holocaust audiences, I conclude the study by proposing the notion of 'honest' and 'dishonest' interpretations.

The thesis is approximately 81,600 words.

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CHAPTER 1

SHYLOCK & PERFORMANCE

Such are the controversies which potentially arise from any new production of *The Merchant of Venice*, that no director or actor can prepare for a fresh interpretation of the character of Shylock without an overshadowing awareness of the implications of getting it wrong. This study is an attempt to describe some of the many and various ways in which productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have either confronted or side-stepped the daunting theatrical challenge of presenting the most famous Jew in world literature in a play which, most especially in recent times, inescapably lives in the shadow of history.

I intend in this performance history to allude to as wide a variety of Shylocks as seems relevant and this will mean paying attention to every production of the play in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, as well as every major production in London since the time of Irving. For reasons of practicality, I have confined my study to the United Kingdom¹ and make few allusions to productions which did not originate in either Stratford or London.

Three works dealing substantially with the stage history of Shylock already exist. Toby Lelyveld's *Shylock on the Stage*² traces the stage history as far as the late 1950s only and is selective in its approach; John Gross's *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*³ is a popular and journalistic book, which understandably does not set out to analyse performance in the way intended by the present work; James C Bulman's volume in the *Shakespeare in Performance* series⁴ is not exclusively about Shylock and

¹ I have included one production which originated outside the United Kingdom: that of the Goodman Theater, Chicago, which performed in London in 1994 (see below, footnote 13, and pp 223-235).

² Toby Lelyveld, *Shylock on the Stage* (Cleveland, 1960; Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1961).

³ John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (Chatto & Windus, 1992).

⁴ James C Bulman, *Shakespeare in Performance: The Merchant of Venice* (Manchester University Press, 1991).

looks in detail at only five productions. Nonetheless, Bulman's observations are remarkable for their detail and perception; and, to avoid merely replicating his work, it has been my aim to explore features of the productions concerned which he does not treat in depth.

My opening chapters are an attempt to provide an overview of some of the early interpretations of Shylock and to begin to categorise the various theatrical means by which actors and directors have sought to present the character as a human being, worthy - to a greater or lesser degree - of audience sympathy (with an awareness that it is difficult in many productions to assume consensuality). I then move on to the twentieth century and examine key productions in detail.

There are clearly limitations to the adoption of a chronological method: for example, there will almost certainly not be a clean linear progression in approaches to the rôle or in audience responses. To answer this, it has been my aim to establish in the early sections a number of strands which will be followed throughout - the growing awareness of and response to anti-Semitism being one of the more obvious examples - and to employ these as a means of ensuring coherence, in addition to such techniques as frequent cross-reference to earlier (and, in a few cases, later) productions.

Before beginning to examine some of the Shylocks of the past, however, it is important to draw attention to four factors which have been influential in encouraging a history of increasingly sympathetic portrayal. The first is that, from Kean's coruscating performance onwards, Shylock has almost consistently been a 'star' rôle, since it pre-eminently offers the actor the opportunity to display his full emotional range, from humour to bitterness, tyranny to pathos:

The star actors who, from the eighteenth century onwards have chosen to play the role, have not done so out of a sense of moral duty in order to combat anti-Semitism, but because their theatrical instinct told them that the part, played seriously, not comically, offered them great possibilities.⁵

The resulting villain, moreover, seen in a complex and ambiguous social context, is always likely to elicit more audience sympathy than an unalloyedly wicked one. Secondly, the rôle has frequently tended to attract actors more usually associated with tragedy, who have, albeit sometimes involuntarily, brought to the rôle the sympathy normally attached to tragic figures. Related to that, and thirdly, is the fact that, uniquely among Shakespeare's villains, Shylock's argument is one that speaks with conviction and eloquence to the audience's sense of injustice. While condemning the extremity of his planned revenge, we are tempted to endorse the reaction of the woman who, having watched Kean's dignified and intelligent Jew collapse under the force of Christian justice, remarked in Heine's hearing: 'the poor man is wronged.'⁶

Fourthly, and quite simply, Shylock is a Jew. As will be shown, audiences at least as early as the 1770s were beginning to see Shylock's treatment as part of a wider picture of anti-Semitic⁷ prejudice, and by the 1830s were linking his defeat with the whole history of Jewish maltreatment and suffering. If the context of growing nineteenth century liberalism was enough to encourage Irving's sympathetic portrayal, how much greater are the influences upon actors and directors of the post-war generation who live and work in the shadow of the Nazi holocaust.

⁵ WH Auden, 'Brothers and Others', *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p. 223.

⁶ Cited in the introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* ed. M. M. Mahood (New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1987), p. 44.

⁷ Strictly speaking, the term 'anti-Semitic' is an anachronism if applied to Dogget's Shylock, say, or Macklin's, since the phenomenon of despising Jews *as a race* (as distinct from despising them for their religion) did not appear until the nineteenth century. Hostility to Jews up to that time should, therefore, more correctly be termed 'anti-Judaism'. The more familiar term will be retained throughout this study, however, since the greater part of it is concerned with interpretations from Sir Henry Irving's onwards. Irving's first performance as Shylock was in 1879, the year in which the German Wilhelm Marr first coined the term 'anti-Semitism'.

CHAPTER 2

EARLY SHYLOCKS

From prompt-books and contemporary audience reports, it is possible to see what actors such as Kean, Booth and Irving made of Shakespeare's Jew; but of the earliest interpretations we know nothing at all, not even the name of the actor who first played the character. There are three reasonably plausible candidates for the creator of the rôle of Shylock, the most widely supported of whom was for a long time Richard Burbage. As the most celebrated of the Chamberlain's Men, Burbage seems a likely choice, and for a while it looked as though the tradition that he had indeed played the part - and in a red wig - had been borne out by the discovery by the Victorian scholar, J Payne Collier, of a funeral elegy to the great actor in which his rôles, Shylock among them, were lovingly lauded in convincing doggerel.⁸ The fact that the manuscript in which the elegy appeared turned out to be a forgery does not, of course, invalidate the Burbage claim, but the volume in which Collier published his 'find' contains an interesting piece of surrounding text which goes some way to suggesting why the Victorians in particular might have seen Burbage as the obvious first Shylock, and why they might have been led astray by their preconceptions of the rôle. Collier writes:

To the list of characters in plays by Shakespeare sustained by Burbadge [*sic*] we still have to add Lear and Shylock, so that we may safely decide that he was the chosen representative of all, or nearly all, the *serious parts* in the productions of our great dramatist [*my italics*].⁹

⁸ Heart-broken Philaster, and Amintas too,
Are lost for ever; with the red-haired Jew,
Which sought the bankrupt merchant's flesh,
By woman-lawyer caught in his own mesh...

'A Funeral Elegy on the Death of the Famous Actor, R Burbadge, who died on Saturday in Lent, the 13th of March, 1618'; quoted in J. Payne Collier, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London; printed for the Shakspeare Society 1846), p. 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

The significance lies in the categorising of Shylock as a ‘serious’ part. Collier is writing at a time when the two great interpreters of Shylock to date had been Macklin and Kean, both of whom had played the part with utmost seriousness, as will be seen below, while the Shylock of William Charles Macready, revived at Drury Lane only five years before the publication of Collier’s book, had been ‘abject, sordid, irritable, argumentative’,¹⁰. Collier took it for granted that Shylock would always have been played by a ‘serious’ actor; had he lived in the time of the comic Shylock Thomas Dogget, he would presumably not have assigned the rôle to the Chamberlain’s Men’s leading *tragic* actor, but to one of their clowns.

The two outstanding comic actors in Shakespeare’s company at the time when *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed¹¹ were Will Kempe and Thomas Pope. Kempe is known to have played, among other rôles, Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and might also have played Pistol¹². Pope, like Kempe, was a senior member of the company - a ‘payee’ with Heminges in 1595, one of the seven sharers in the Globe building costs four years later and also a sharer in the Curtain. It has been speculated that he played Sir Toby Belch¹³. That either of these actors might have played the original Shylock, the other taking the rôle of Lancelot Gobbo (perhaps with Burbage as Bassanio) is, I would suggest, plausible speculation. It is certainly unwise to associate Burbage with Shylock on the post-Macklin presumption that the rôle demands tragic weight.

¹⁰ See William Archer & RW Lowe (eds.), *GH Lewes: Dramatic Essays Reprinted from the Examiner* (London: 1894), p. 115.

¹¹ I am following most current thinking, including that of Jay L Halio (*The Merchant of Venice* [Oxford University Press, 1994]) in assuming a date of composition between summer 1596 and summer 1598.

¹² Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 291.

¹³ See TW Baldwin *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1927), pp. 228-229.

George Granville's 1701 version of Shakespeare's play, retitled *The Jew of Venice*¹⁴, is at best a mutilation of the original. It is, however, useful for this present study in that it offers interesting evidence about three of the principal ways in which production decisions can fundamentally influence the manner in which the character of Shylock is interpreted, and the effects that he can have upon the audience: through the choice of actor; through cuts to the text; and through interpolated scenes.

In considering the first of these, choice of actor, it is significant that the performer chosen to play Shylock was Thomas Dogget, a leading *comic* actor of his day, rather than a Kean, Booth or Irving, all essentially tragedians who, in their different ways, were to invest the part with some dignity. Assigning the rôle to a comedian might seem to indicate an attitude towards it, imply a certain kind of interpretation and suggest a concomitant style of acting. In describing that style, Furness quotes Downes, the Lincoln's Inn Fields prompter for over forty years:

Mr Dogget, On the Stage, he's very Aspect-abund, wearing a Farce in his Face; his Thoughts deliberately framing his Utterance Congruous to his Looks: He is the only Comick Original now Extant: Witness *Ben, Solon, Nikin, The Jew of Venice, &c.*¹⁵.

If we are to trust Downes, it seems abundantly clear what kind of Shylock this was. 'Action and appearance' used in Dogget's case to comic effect, are also, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, key tools for those who wish to play Shylock sympathetically.

The second interesting feature of Granville's version is that, according to Odell, 'Shylock has fewer lines by the adapter than has almost any other leading character...'¹⁶.

¹⁴ George Granville (later Lord Lansdowne), *The Jew of Venice* (London, 1701; facsimile published by Cornmarket Press from the copy in the Birmingham Shakespeare Library; London, 1969).

¹⁵ H. H. Furness (ed.) *The Merchant of Venice* (New Variorum Edition, 1888) Vol vii, p. 371.

¹⁶ G. C. D. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving* Vol 1 (Scribner, 1920; reprinted 1963, Benjamin Blom, Inc., New York), p. 79.

An examination of the text reveals that the cuts include several small touches which have done much to humanise Shylock when exploited by actors working to a different agenda, and with the presumed effect (whether consciously intended or not) of exposing the Jew as an out-and-out comic villain. Later productions, as will be shown, have trimmed or excised speeches to quite different ends.

If *The Jew of Venice* is interesting for what it has removed, it is perhaps even more noteworthy for the third of these production features: its additions. The most notorious of these is the interpolated scene in which we observe Shylock dining with the ‘prodigal Christians’ (Granville’s Act II). Shylock has only one speech in this brief scene, but it is enough to reinforce the conviction that the character must have been presented as, first and last, an avaricious monster. In response to Gratiano’s toast to ‘the sex in general’, Shylock is made to declare:

I have a mistress that outshines ’em all -
Commanding yours - and yours tho’ the whole Sex:
O may her Charms increase and multiply;
My Money is my Mistress! Here’s to
Interest upon Interest. *[Drinks.]*

Moreover there are also, as Odell points out¹⁷, many interpolated lines for Gratiano in the trial scene, the effect of which is to increase the intended comedy and thereby diminish the figure of the Jew.

Despite its distortions, however, Granville’s Shylock is undoubtedly an adaptation of Shakespeare’s, rather than an independent creation; and can therefore lay fair claim to being an appropriate starting point for any study of the character and his stage

¹⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 79.

interpreters. Notwithstanding, the first real Shylock of the post-Restoration period was Charles Macklin.

When Charles Macklin prepared for his performance of Shylock at Drury Lane in 1741, it was in an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. There were serious doubts about reviving a play that had not been performed in its original form in living memory¹⁸ and this animosity was no doubt fuelled by the fact that:

...at every rehearsal, whilst he enjoined the rest of the performers to do their best, he himself played both under his voice and general powers, carefully reserving his fire till the night of representation.¹⁹

As Appleton suggests, Macklin did not wish to alarm his fellow actors by ‘the novelty of his interpretation’.²⁰ Macklin’s Shylock was an outrageous success, however, and he went on to play the part for the next 48 years.

In most respects the contrast with Dogget’s farcical interpretation could not be more striking. Here was a serious attempt to play with utmost vividness all the Jew’s ferocity, malice and vengefulness; and a contemporary account describes the acting abilities that made possible such an interpretation:

...his voice is most happily suited to that sententious gloominess of expression the author intended; which, with a sullen solemnity of deportment, marks the character strongly; in his malevolence there is a forcible and terrifying ferocity...²¹

¹⁸ William W. Appleton *Charles Macklin An Actor's Life* (Harvard University Press; and London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 44.

¹⁹ William Cooke *Memoirs of Charles Macklin Comedian* (London, 1804; reissued by Benjamin Blom Inc. New York, 1972) p. 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²¹ Francis Gentleman *Dramatic Censor* (1770, i, 291), quoted in Furness, p. 373.

It was, as Lelyveld remarks, the first time (so far as we know) that audiences had been startled into taking Shylock seriously.²²

For further details of Macklin's Shylock we are indebted to a contemporary visitor from abroad, Georg Lichtenberg, who writes in 1775:

He is heavy and silent in his unfathomable cunning, and when the law is on his side, just to the point of malice.²³

This portrayal seems to have been rooted in Macklin's innovative acting style, which eschewed the then customary forced gesture and sing-song delivery in favour of something which was at least a step towards more naturalistic speech and movement.²⁴

Furthermore, despite the power and tempestuousness of Macklin's own personality (he was known for his violent outbursts, and had killed a fellow actor in an argument over a wig), he advocated - and demonstrated himself - what must be termed a respect for the rôles that he undertook, advising young actors

to know the passion and humour of each character so correctly, so intimately, and (if you will allow me the expression) to feel it so enthusiastically as to be able to describe it as a philosopher.²⁵

²² *Op cit.*, p. 22.

²³ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg *Vermischte Schriften*, iii, 226 (Göttingen, 1867), in the translation by Margaret L Mare & WH Quarrell: *Lichtenberg's Visits to England* (New York: Benjamin Blom Inc, 1938; revised 1969), p 40.

²⁴ Macklin's biographer James Kirkman quotes from John Hill's *The Actor, A Treatise on the Art of Playing...* (1750): [Macklin] would bid his pupil first to speak the passage as he would in common life, if he had the occasion to speak the same words, and then give them more force, but preserving the same accent, to deliver them on stage.' Quoted in George Winchester Stone, Jr & George M. Kahrl *David Garrick A Critical Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1979), p. 36.

²⁵ James T. Kirkman *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Macklin, Esq.* Vol. I, pp. 363-364; quoted in Stone & Kahrl, p. 698, n. 30.

‘Philosopher’, of course, has the sense of ‘scientist’, and in the case of Shylock this desire to get inside the character led Macklin to undertake the kind of research and preparation more recently associated with actors such as Antony Sher and Dustin Hoffman.

Two further features of Macklin’s interpretation deserve consideration. Both are of particular interest to this present study in that they are the twin focal points around which most discussions about the interpretation of Shylock, and performances of the play as a whole, were subsequently to revolve. The first is to do with the presentation of Shylock as a figure who evokes sympathy and pity rather than hatred and ridicule; the second - intimately bound up with the first - concerns the accusation that the play is anti-Semitic.

Most observers agree that Macklin’s portrayal of the Jew was not one to evoke audience sympathy. Garrick at the time referred to ‘the extreme spite and bitterness’ with which Macklin played his opening scene;²⁶ Thomas Davies, though, saw something else, and remarks that the interpretation ‘made some tender impressions upon the spectators.’²⁷ What Davies seems to have witnessed, whether consciously designed by Macklin or not, were the beginnings of audience sympathy for Shylock.

In the Foreword I identified several reasons why an actor might wish to endow Shylock with some sympathetic qualities, not the least important of which was the awareness that Shylock’s story is indissolubly linked with that of the suffering and persecution of the Jewish people as a whole. This consciousness, and the accompanying fear that the play can be seen as anti-Semitic, can be traced back at least as far as Macklin; and there are

²⁶ Appleton, p. 50.

²⁷ Quoted in Lelyveld, p. 27.

two elements of his performance which point to an embryonic sensitivity concerning the ways in which Jews should be played upon the stage.

The first lies in the care with which Macklin researched the rôle, visiting the Exchange and

...adjacent coffee-houses; that by a frequent intercourse and conversation with ‘the unforeskinned race’ he might habituate himself to their air and deportment.²⁸

This does not, of course, imply a favourable stage portrayal: most of the contemporary evidence shows that it was not; but it does at least indicate an unwillingness merely to replicate a stale comic stereotype or deny the character individuality.

The second piece of evidence which might be said to demonstrate some unease over the ramifications of portraying an evil Jew, is found in the Lichtenberg letter. He writes:

It cannot be denied that the sight of this Jew is more than sufficient to arouse once again in the mature man all the prejudices of his childhood against this race.²⁹

What I find interesting in Lichtenberg’s comment is his reference to the susceptibility of ‘the mature man’ to prejudice and hostility if Shylock is played in certain ways; and the fact that such feelings are inculcated in childhood. This brief statement demonstrates not only the deep-seated hatred which permitted generations of parents to use the figure of the Jew as bogey-man; but also, conversely, the awakening sensibility in thinking men and women that this was fundamentally wrong. Moreover there is something in Lichtenberg’s careful phrasing (‘It cannot be denied that...’) which hints that this is not

²⁸ George Colman and Bonnell Thornton *The Connoisseur* no 1 (January 31, 1754), quoted in Appleton, p. 46.

²⁹ Lichtenberg, in Mare & Quarrell, p. 40.

merely a personal confession, but the beginnings of a serious debate upon the implications of restating and reinforcing this racial and cultural stereotype on the popular stage.

In studying the Shylocks of Dogget and Macklin, I have highlighted five features of performance which are known to have made an impression upon contemporary audiences, and which have continued to the present day to be key factors in influencing audience response. These are: the choice of actor to play the rôle; the cuts made to the text; the scenes or moments of stage business added for particular effect; the attention paid to ‘outward shows’ such as dress, facial characteristics and speech mannerisms; and the increasing interest in Shylock as an individual and as a product of a particular society, rather than as merely a comic villain.

Edmund Kean’s interpretation is notable for two further landmarks in the performance history of Shakespeare’s Jew: the endowment of the figure with a degree of tragic grandeur; and the apparent response in the actor’s portrayal to the changing moral sensibilities of the age.

Kean’s biographer, F. W. Hawkins, recalling the ground-breaking performance of 1814, reports the comments of an anonymous member of the first night audience, who observed:

[Shylock’s] voice swells and deepens at the mention of his sacred tribe and ancient law, and he dwells with joy on any digression to distant times and places, as a relief to his rooted and vindictive purposes.³⁰

³⁰ F. W. Hawkins *The Life of Edmund Kean* (2 vols, London, 1869; reissued by Benjamin Blom, Inc., New York, 1969), p. 129.

But, for the particular language he employs, I find Hawkins's own response more illuminating:

...and as, with knitted figure, he gave with tremendous energy that unanswerable question, "Has [*sic*] not a Jew eyes?" &c., he towered above himself and reached the noblest heights of grandeur.³¹

To audiences raised on the Shylocks of Olivier and Sher, Hawkins's comment may not seem particularly noteworthy: we have come to expect, if not 'grandeur', then certainly stature; and even a degree of nobility in defeat. But, in evaluating Kean's contribution, it is important to remind ourselves constantly of two things. The first is that this was 1814, not long after a half century dominated by Macklin's sullen, vengeful Jew. The second is that, if we try for a moment to free ourselves of all twentieth century preconceptions, it should actually strike us as extremely odd

that a villain - the one who threatens the happiness of the others - should so run away with a play that is a comedy by other signs, and that makes only a passing, unconcerned allusion to him at its conclusion.³²

Kean's Shylock, in other words, was not only a bold and original conception; it was one which endowed the rôle with a star-vehicle status that it was never to lose.

Lelyveld asserts that 'it was not until 1879 when Henry Irving successfully demonstrated that Shylock could be played, not as a sinner, but as a man sinned against, that the stage-Jew finally attained dignity.'³³ Contemporary responses to Kean's Shylock suggest that

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³² John Russell Brown, 'The Realization of Shylock' in *Early Shakespeare* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 3, London: Arnold, 1961), p. 189.

³³ *Op cit.*, p. 36.

this statement might warrant qualification. Certainly there is a difference between dignity and 'grandeur'. But it is hard to believe that the former quality was lacking in a Shylock who, in Douglas Jerrold's famous words, 'impressed the audience like a chapter of Genesis'³⁴; or who, in Procter's account, becomes a man who 'does not merely resent his own wrongs, but the insults offered to his race...', a man whom the same biographer thinks fit to describe as 'the high-priest of his tribe'.³⁵ It seems reasonable, therefore, to view Kean as the first actor to endow Shakespeare's Jew with dignity.

The second feature of Kean's Shylock on which I would like to focus is difficult both to define and to identify in performance. It is the way in which an interpretation seems to be responding to the changing sensibilities of the society from which it derives; to reflect, in some manifestations, 'the spirit of the age'. I referred above³⁶ to Georg Lichtenberg's misgivings concerning the stage portrayal of a villainous Jew. If, as Mahood observes, 'The apologetic tone of this comment made in 1775 shows that eighteenth-century reasonableness and sentiment were beginning to replace fanaticism and prejudice in an audience's response to Shylock',³⁷ then it seems equally significant four decades later that 'The mellowing of attitudes towards Shylock was inseparable from the growth of nineteenth century liberalism.'³⁸ Kean's relationship to this growing liberalism is hard to determine. But I would argue that it is significant that his biographer Procter concludes his account of the actor's Drury Lane success with an impassioned plea for an acknowledgement of Jewish suffering through the ages. Was Kean's interpretation motivated, if only in part, by compassion for Jewish suffering? Gross is sceptical: 'He was an actor, on the look-out for dramatic opportunities: religious and social questions were of little if any account to him.'³⁹ Gross may be right. But, whatever motivated the

³⁴ Quoted in G. H. Lewes *Of Actors and the Art of Acting* (London, 1875 ed.) p. 11.

³⁵ B. W. Procter (Barry Cornwall) *The Life of Edmund Kean* (2 vols, London, 1835; reissued by Benjamin Blom, Inc., New York and London, 1969), vol 2, p. 47.

³⁶ See above, page 11.

³⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 43.

³⁸ Gross, p. 114.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

actor, the fact remains that Procter, writing in 1835, certainly made a connection himself between Kean's Shylock and the persecution of the Jews. In a section following on without pause from the account of Kean's performance, he writes:

We confess that we sympathise somewhat with the revenge that rankled in the heart of Shylock. He was an ill-used and oppressed man. He suffered, individually, and as one of a people, on whom the world had been spitting its scorn for nearly two thousand years....⁴⁰

Whether Kean himself entertained these wider social and religious considerations seems less important than the fact that his was a performance which - if Procter is in any way typical - served to raise the audience's consciousness about Jews and Jewish persecution.

Kean's was therefore a Shylock for its time. For, as Lelyveld points out, Jews were to be admitted to the Bar for the first time in 1820, to the Shrievalty in 1835 and to other municipal offices in 1843; the Religious Opinions Bill was passed in 1846, and in the following year, Baron Lionel de Rothschild was elected to Parliament.⁴¹

While interesting in their own particular ways, the Shylocks which succeeded Kean's - for example, those of his son Charles, Junius Brutus Booth and, notably, William Charles Macready - do not make a sufficiently distinctive mark to be relevant to this present chapter. In that respect, the one important Shylock before Henry Irving's was that of Edwin Booth.

Booth's Shylock is of particular interest for one major reason: it did not conform to the 'revisionist' interpretation of a semi-tragic and sympathetic Shylock, prevalent from Kean onwards. In a letter to William Winter in 1884, Booth writes:

⁴⁰ Procter, Vol 2, page 47. The digression on the recognition of Jewish suffering continues for a further two pages and concludes the chapter.

⁴¹ Lelyveld, pp. 57-58.

I sent you a paper from Baltimore - not for what is said of my performance of Shylock but for what I regard as the true Shakespearian portrait of the Jew. I believe you hold a different estimate of the character, as many do, but I have searched in vain for the slightest hint of anything resembling dignity or worthiness in the part.⁴²

And his performances, clearly documented in prompt books, the material provided to Furness and his own letters, all reflect this same attitude, and show that Booth played Shylock as a 'malignant, vindictive avenger.'⁴³ Booth's Shylock, in Winter's opinion,

...was not made the representative of the Mosaic deity, neither was he specially urged as the champion of the Hebrew faith. He was a Jew, but more particularly he was a man; and while he hated his enemy for being a Christian, he hated him more for being just and benevolent in his dealings - the foe of usury...⁴⁴

This, therefore, was a Shylock motivated more by commercial interests than by racial pride; and such a figure, 'chiefly impelled by personal hatred and greed'⁴⁵, is not one most likely to awaken an audience's sympathy. Indeed, on this central issue of sympathy, Booth himself wrote:

If we side with him in his self defence, 'tis because we have charity, which he had not; if we pity him under the burthen of his merited punishment 'tis because we are human, which he is not...⁴⁶

⁴² Daniel D. Watermeier *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter* (Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 256.

⁴³ William Winter *Life and Art of Edwin Booth* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), p. 198.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁶ Furness, p. 384.

In Booth's eyes, if there is any sympathy felt for Shylock, then it derives from the audience's innate decency; and not from any worthy quality in the Jew himself or pity for the treatment he receives.⁴⁷

Booth is an unusual Shylock because, although he showed vividly in his famous portrayals of Hamlet, Iago and Brutus that he found ambiguity interesting, he seems largely to have eschewed it in the case of the Jew. In adopting this stance, Booth denied himself an opportunity which most leading actors since Kean have enthusiastically embraced: to present audiences with an absorbing and many-faceted villain who makes so many demands upon our sympathy that he departs the stage with the stature of a tragic hero.

⁴⁷ Winter did see some traces of pathos in Booth's interpretation, notably in Shylock's loss of Jessica and in his final defeat. 'But the pathos was not allied with either beauty of nature or fineness of conduct: it sprang out of the involuntary sensibility of the actor and out of the musical cadences of his voice. The observer received no suggestion of latent sensibility in Shylock.' (p. 198)

CHAPTER 3

HENRY IRVING

It has been my aim, in studying the Shylocks from Dogget to Booth, to focus largely on those elements of their performances which contributed to what might be termed a sympathetic portrayal or which are believed to have elicited a sympathetic audience response. In the case of Henry Irving, so much of his performance seems to have been dedicated to the one overriding aim of elevating Shakespeare's Jew to the status of dignified and heroic victim, that it is hard to know what could be excluded on the grounds that it is not strictly relevant to the present study. There are, however, two features of Irving's Shylock which are of special interest here, in that both are manifest in at least one of the recent twentieth century interpretations which will be the central focus of later chapters. These features are: the way in which Irving's interpretation was pre-eminently 'a nineteenth century Shylock ... a creation only possible to our age...'⁴⁸; and the attention he paid to set and costume. To these there can be added a third overriding feature, to which the first two are subservient: Irving's clear intention to present audiences with a sympathetic portrayal of the Jew⁴⁹.

Before examining these features, however, it would be well to follow the lead of many stage historians⁵⁰ who have considered it important to introduce their comments on Irving's interpretation of Shylock with a prefatory account of the actor's encounter with a Levantine Jew on a brief visit to Tunis in the summer of 1879, a meeting which seems to have influenced his later interpretation in a number of important ways. Irving's own

⁴⁸ Chicago Tribune 1884, cited in Henry Irving, *Mr Henry Irving and Miss Ellen Terry in America: Opinions of the Press* (Chicago, 1884) and quoted in Bulman, p. 33.

⁴⁹ Irving's Shylock also raises important questions about the whole business of studying Shakespeare in performance; for his was in reality several distinct and developing interpretations, spanning a performance life of 26 years. Frank Benson (see pages 36-41 below) is a further example of an actor who played the part over a long period and whose interpretation changed.

⁵⁰ Notably Lelyveld, Bulman and Gross.

account of the incident and its repercussions is recounted by Bram Stoker, who reports the actor as declaring:

When I saw the Jew in what seemed his own land and in his own dress, Shylock became a different creature. I began to understand him.⁵¹

Bulman suggests that Stoker's narrative revealed two things:

...first the Victorians' fascination with historical accuracy in their stage productions, and second, their attempt to bring a realistic awareness of cultural difference to their portrayal of 'the other'.⁵²

It seems to me, however, that an account of a dressing-room conversation with Irving written by Joseph Hatton, 22 years before Stoker's description, reveals even more.

According to Hatton, Irving described the encounter thus:

'I saw a Jew once, in Tunis, tear his hair and raiment, fling himself in the sand, and writhe in a rage, about a question of money, - beside himself with passion. I saw him again, self-possessed and fawning; and again, expressing real gratitude for a trifling money courtesy. He was never undignified until he tore at his hair and flung himself down, and then he was picturesque; he was old, but erect, even stately, and full of resource. As he walked behind his team of mules he carried himself with the lofty air of a king. He was a Spanish Jew, - Shylock probably was of Frankfort; but Shakespeare's Jew was a type, not a mere individual: he was a type of the great, grand race, - not a mere Houndsditch usurer. He was a man famous on the Rialto; probably a foremost man in

⁵¹ Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* Volume 1, p. 84 1906. The nature of the 'difference' is partly explained in a commentary by Laurence Irving, the actor's son, who writes that his father '...was haunted by a picturesque figure who had attracted his attention and sympathy in almost every port at which the party had landed in the course of their cruise round the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The figure was that of the Levantine Jew, whose romantic appearance and patriarchal dignity against the background of his native landscape was so much at variance with the popular conception of his race which was held by Western Europeans.' (L. Irving *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* [London, 1951], p. 333.)

⁵² Bulman, p. 30.

his synagogue - proud of his descent - conscious of his moral superiority to many of the Christians who scoffed at him, and fanatic enough, as a religionist, to believe that his vengeance had in it the element of a godlike justice...⁵³

This account seems to me to be more interesting than Stoker's version for two reasons. For one thing it is possible to see in this the seeds of the shifting moods of Irving's subsequent creation, a man who can veer from being 'beside himself with passion' to 'self-possessed', from 'fawning' to 'stately'.⁵⁴ Equally it reveals not merely an awareness of 'the other', but, more than this, a specific range of attitudes towards the Jew's exoticism, at once both admiring ('He was never undignified...') and patronising ('... and then he was picturesque.'). This complex set of sometimes contradictory attitudes towards Jews is not unlike that held by the producers of the earliest television documentaries about the Zulu or the Australian aborigine.

A particularly interesting detail of Irving's conversation with Hatton is his description of Shakespeare's Jew as 'a type of the great, grand race...'. It is easy to see how this romanticised perception could become the bedrock of a stage interpretation which would move A B Walkley to write in 1892:

To say that his was "the Jew that Shakespeare drew" would be to quote Pope's doggerel inopportunately. It was the Jew idealised in the light of the modern Occidental reaction against the *Judenhetze*, a Jew already conscious of the Spinozas, the Sidonias, the Disraelis, who were to issue from his loins.⁵⁵

⁵³ Joseph Hatton *Henry Irving's Impressions of America*, Volume 1 (London, 1884), p. 269.

⁵⁴ Saintsbury to some extent echoes this chameleon portrayal when he recalls that Irving's Shylock reminded him of some Moroccan Jews he had once seen: 'impudent and cringing, insolent, cunning, and prone to self-pity...' (H. A. Saintsbury and Cecil Palmer eds. *We Saw Him Act: A Symposium on the Art of Sir Henry Irving* [London, 1939], p. 166.)

⁵⁵ A. B. Walkley *Playhouse Impressions* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1892), pp. 159-160.

There was, of course, a quite different dimension to Irving's Jew. However much it reminded the audience of a Rothschild or a Disraeli, it also aimed to evoke sympathy and understanding for an underdog, downtrodden and despised. If the portrayal fleetingly reflected prosperous and successful Jews, assimilated into the cultural and economic life of Victorian England, it also had to be reminding us throughout of the abused and maltreated peoples from whom Shylock had sprung. This was undoubtedly a dimension which Irving held in the forefront of his mind. He calls Shylock 'the type of a persecuted race',⁵⁶ a view consistent with opinions expressed in *The Drama*⁵⁷ and with a performance, which, in Bulman's words, 'focused attention on questions of social morality... - the rights accorded to aliens, the prejudices of those in power...'⁵⁸. Irving wrote:

If you uphold the theatre honestly, liberally, frankly, and with discrimination, the stage will uphold in the future, as it has in the past, the literature, the manners, the morals, the fame, and the genius of our country.

This is a salutary observation for anyone writing a theatre history of *The Merchant of Venice*. It confirms what Lichtenberg told us in the late 1700s⁵⁹: namely that consciences about performing or watching Shakespeare's Jew were awoken long before the latter half of the twentieth century.

It was, of course, not pre-eminently as a celebration of the 'manners' and 'morals' of his century that Irving's *Merchant of Venice* so appealed to Victorian audiences. The Lyceum production of November, 1879 was also famous for its design: scenery and costumes which, according to numerous contemporary observers, were both original and

⁵⁶ Hatton, p. 265.

⁵⁷ Henry Irving *The Drama: Addresses by Henry Irving* (London, 1881), p. 31.

⁵⁸ Bulman, p. 31.

⁵⁹ See above, p. 11.

sumptuous.⁶⁰ This scenography, ‘as gorgeous and dazzling as the mélange of dappled colour in the great Louvre picture...’⁶¹, was, of course, ideally suited to an interpretation of Shylock which would emphasise the Jew’s dignity and semi-tragic stature. Equally, their supposed historical verisimilitude complemented perfectly Irving’s ‘naturalistic’ style of acting. Recent twentieth century productions have exploited the power of scenery and costume in comparable ways, as will be seen below.⁶²

The two features of Irving’s Shylock considered so far - his portrayal of the Jew as a prosperous and civilised gentleman of his times, and his use of scenery and costume - were both powerfully instrumental in elevating Shylock to the status of near-tragic hero. This, according to Hatton’s recollections, is how Irving seems to have seen the character:

‘I look on Shylock as the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and most ill-used.’⁶³

Irving, moreover, saw in Shylock’s vengeance ‘the element of a god-like justice.’⁶⁴ For someone as immersed in the play as Irving surely was, a play in which the distinction between vengeance and justice can hardly be missed, this is an interesting comment.

Holding such views of Shylock, it is hardly surprising that Irving elevated him on stage in the ways that he did.⁶⁵ Foulkes shows, for example, how Irving staged the trial scene

⁶⁰ Among those who commented on scenery and costumes were: William Winter (*Henry Irving* [New York, 1885], pp. 33-34; and *Shakespeare on the Stage* [London, 1912] p. 176); Charles Hiatt (*Henry Irving: A Record and Review* [London, 1899], p.180); Percy Fitzgerald (*Sir Henry Irving: A Biography* [London, 1906], p. 103); and Austin Brereton (*The Life of Henry Irving* [London, 1908], p. 302).

⁶¹ Fitzgerald, p. 103. The reference is to a painting by Paolo Veronese.

⁶² See, for example, page 156 and note 4..

⁶³ Hatton, p. 265.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁶⁵ When Irving decided to cut the final Act in May 1880, in order to perform a play called *Iolanthe* as a benefit for Ellen Terry, it was seen by some as an outrage perpetrated by an actor who presumably felt that Shylock had become the only point of interest. F.J. Furnivall wrote to Irving about this ‘crime of lèse-majesté’ and there were attacks in the press. Undaunted, Irving played the four-Act version for the rest of the season. (Laurence Irving, p. 356-357.)

in order to centre the action on the Jew⁶⁶; and Beerbohm throws a further light on Irving's elevation of Shylock, seeing it in the context of 'the "star" system', observing of Irving that:

He did not, of course, invent the "star" system. But he carried it as far as it could be carried. And the further he carried it, the greater his success.⁶⁷

This elevation of the character was itself subservient to the overriding aim of making Shylock sympathetic; and there is ample contemporary and near-contemporary evidence to demonstrate how successful Irving was in accomplishing this design.⁶⁸ This evidence for the sympathetic nature of Irving's portrayal, however, is for the most part generalised; it says little about how the actor contrived to command the audience's sympathy quite so securely and all-embracingly. For a clearer impression of the means by which Irving secured audience sympathy, it is necessary to focus on particulars: firstly, on the two areas of Shylock's public and private life which Irving played on - his religion and his family; and then on five other features of performance, all of which contributed to the sympathetic portrayal. These are: the cuts he made to the text; the addition of stage business; the focus on key moments of performance for particular interpretation; the presentation of the Christians; and, finally, what might be construed as wilful misreading of the text.

Joseph Hatton records the actor as having said that he 'would like to play Shylock to a Jewish audience'.⁶⁹ Irving himself saw 'something divine in [Shylock's] act of vengeance'⁷⁰; an element picked up by many contemporary reviewers,⁷¹ and Dutton

⁶⁶ Richard Foulkes 'The Staging of the Trial Scene in Irving's *The Merchant of Venice*', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 1976, Vol 28, p. 317.

⁶⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 397.

⁶⁸ See, *inter alia*, Saintsbury, pp. 167 & 172; Henry James *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama, 1872-1901* (New Brunswick, 1948), p. 140; Hiatt, pp. 174 & 180; and Austin Brereton *The Life of Henry Irving* Vol I (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1908), p. 306.

⁶⁹ *Op cit.*, p. 264.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Cook, taking a further perspective on Shylock's religious motivation, was not alone in seeing the character's victimisation in the context of centuries of Jewish persecution:

..if he avenges private injuries, he also represents a nation seeking atonement for centuries of wrong⁷²

Dogget in Granville's version had used Shylock's Jewishness as a means of whipping up hatred against the character; for Irving it was one of the keys to unlocking audience sympathy.

Presenting Shylock as a representative of an abused and oppressed race, as Irving clearly set out to do, was one major route by which he could expect to get the audience on his side. Another was to portray him as a family man, a patriarch, but with all the vulnerabilities and anxieties that a widower with a single daughter might be expected to possess.

There are two notable features of Shylock's implied domestic life which can be exploited by an actor if it suits his designs. They derive, firstly, from his relationship with Jessica; and, secondly, from a single sentence spoken to Tubal. William Winter, writing in 1885 about Irving's performance, referred to both:

His denotement of *Shylock's* domestic affections, which are passionate and pathetic, was clear and thrilling - especially in the frantic lamentation over his fugitive daughter, and the heart-broken words about *Leah* and the turquoise ring.⁷³

⁷¹ These included Winter (*op cit.*, 1912); Hatton (pp. 264 & 273); and Hiatt (p. 178).

⁷² Dutton Cook *Nights at the Play* (London, 1883), Vol II, p. 225; quoted in Edward M Moore 'Henry Irving's Shakespearean Productions' *Theatre Survey* 17:2 (1976), p. 202.

⁷³ *Op cit.* p. 35.

The major source of sympathy from the domestic quarter was, for Irving - and, as will be seen, remains for many actors - the grieving for the loss of Leah's ring. Talking to Hatton, Irving referred to Shylock's 'tender recollection of Leah'⁷⁴; and, reviewing the moment in performance, the enthusiastic *Spectator* critic felt that:

...his one pathetic mention of his 'Leah' was as beautiful a touch as ever has been laid on the many-stringed lyre of human feeling...⁷⁵

This particular reviewer might seem excessive in his praise and enthusiasm; but, as Alun Hughes observes, 'a host of other critics agreed.'⁷⁶

The religious and domestic facets of Shylock's life were therefore central to Irving's aim of presenting a Shylock who could be seen as a pathetic and tragic victim rather than an embittered villain. In order to achieve this aim, however, Irving made widespread cuts.⁷⁷

Edward Moore writes:

The cutting of the play was typically Irvingesque. There was actually less of Shakespeare's text than in either of the two most scenically lavish and textually spare productions before him, Charles Kean's in 1858 and the Bancrofts' in 1875. Passages - indeed whole scenes - which tended to discredit Shylock were simply cut out, such as Jessica's conversation with Launcelot (II, iii) and the scene between Jessica, Lorenzo, and Launcelot after Portia leaves Belmont (III, v)...⁷⁸

⁷⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 272.

⁷⁵ Hiatt, p. 178.

⁷⁶ Alun Hughes 'Henry Irving's Tragedy of Shylock' *Educational Theatre Journal*, 1972, Vol 24, p. 258. In a footnote, Hughes cites the following newspapers as having carried equally enthusiastic reviews: *Glasgow North British Daily Mail*, 8/9/93; *Liverpool Daily Post* 3/10/83; *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, 13/12/83; *Edinburgh Scottish Leader*, 3/9/87; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 3/9/87; *New York Daily Tribune*, 7/11/83.

⁷⁷ According to Hughes, 'Irving's text was really little better than that used by Charles Macklin in 1741.'
(*Ibid.*, p. 250).

⁷⁸ Moore, p. 203.

Of particular importance, however, in enhancing the presentation of Shylock as an ‘affectionate, while austere’ family man, was the fact that ‘he also cut most of Shylock’s ravings about the loss of his ducats, though not, of course, of his daughter.’⁷⁹

The cuts made by Irving were obviously crucial in helping to create the kind of Shylock he wanted. Equally important, though, and having a much greater impact upon the audience, were his additions in the form of stage business and newly created scenes, the most famous of which came after the flight of Jessica. William Winter’s eye-witness account (though written seven years after Irving’s death) is worth quoting in full:

The elopement of *Jessica* and *Lorenzo* was then effected, in a gondola, which moved smoothly away in the canal, and the scene became tumultuous with a revel of riotous maskers, who sang, danced, frolicked, and tumbled in front of *Shylock’s* house, as though obtaining mischievous pleasure in disturbing the neighborhood of the *Jew’s* decorous dwelling. Soon that clamorous rabble streamed away; there was a lull in the music, and the grim figure of *Shylock*, his staff in one hand, his lantern in the other, appeared on the bridge, where for an instant he paused, his seamed, cruel face, visible in a gleam of ruddy light, contorted by a sneer, as he listened to the sound of revelry dying away in the distance. Then he descended the steps, crossed to his dwelling, raised his right hand, struck twice upon the door with the iron knocker, and stood like a statue, waiting - while a slow-descending curtain closed in one of the most expressive pictures that any stage has ever presented.⁸⁰

Many contemporary observers noted the pathos of the moment:⁸¹ as a piece of stage business designed to convey all Shylock’s loneliness, humanity and - looking forward - feelings of deep betrayal, it could hardly have been bettered. Recent productions, as will

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁸⁰ Winter (1912), pp. 186-187,

⁸¹ *Inter alia* Brereton (pp. 307-308) and Robert Hichens, writing in Saintsbury (p. 168).

be seen, have not been reluctant to attempt comparable *tours de force*, designed to exploit the sensibilities of their modern audiences.

There were many other key moments in Irving's performance which impressed contemporary audiences and subsequently remained in the collective theatre-going memory. A significant number of these were contrived to play down Shylock's villainy and accentuate his humanity. Winter, for example, recalls the Shylock of Act III as 'an authentic and terrific image of tragedy'⁸²; but it was the Jew's final exit in Act IV that excited more comment. Irving's son gives the most detailed and vivid account of the actor's meticulous stagecraft and calculated manipulation of his audience in those closing moments of his father's performance:

During the last minutes of this scene Irving demonstrated his absolute mastery of significant byplay. 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 opened 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. 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 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 towards the door of the

⁸² Winter (1912), p. 191.

court. (Irving had a mystical belief in threefold action.) As he reached the door and put out his hand towards 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.⁸³

Robert Hichens described this exit as:

A famous moment when he got my sympathy, and I think the sympathy of almost everyone in the audience.⁸⁴

No character exists in isolation, however, and Irving further enhanced the dignity of the Jew by presenting many of the Christians as mean-spirited and frivolous. Dutton Cook felt that -

...beside him, the Christians, for all their graces of aspect and gallantry of apparel, seem but poor creatures...⁸⁵

while, for the reviewer in *The Spectator*, they were ‘dullards’ and ‘mean, pitiful beings’, and Antonio ‘a sentimentalist, and a reckless speculator’, when set alongside the Jew, a ‘forlorn, resolute, undone, baited, betrayed, implacable old man...’⁸⁶ As far as individual Christians go, the ambiguous Antonio is among the characters most likely to receive an unsympathetic portrayal in a performance geared towards presenting Shylock as a victim. One detail from Irving’s production will serve to exemplify the kind of stage

⁸³ *Op cit.*, pp. 343-344.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Saintsbury, p. 167. Other witnesses to the power of this moment include the critic of *The Saturday Review* of 8th November, 1879, who wrote: ‘He leaves the court with a dignity that seems the true expression of his belief in his nation and himself. His mind is occupied with greater matters than the light jeers of Gratiano, and to those jeers he replies with three slow downward movements of the head, which are infinitely expressive of his acceptance of that which has befallen him and of his power to bear himself nobly under its weight.’ (quoted in Hiatt, p. 177.) William Winter, as noted above, called Shylock’s exit ‘an apex of perfect pathos’ (Winter [1885], p. 36).

⁸⁵ Quoted in Brereton, p. 306.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Hiatt, p. 179.

business which can influence an audience's feelings in this way. The critic in the *Saturday Review* noted the moment -

...when, in talk with Antonio, [Shylock] touches the Christian merchant, and, seeing the action resented, bows deprecatingly, with an affectation of deep humility.⁸⁷

In this small detail of business, Antonio's resentment and Shylock's correspondingly humble response could hardly have failed to alienate the audience's sympathies from the Christian, and Bob Peck is among recent Shylocks who have replicated this moment to good effect.⁸⁸

There are one or two concluding remarks to make about Irving's Shylock. The first relates to a comment made by Irving to William Winter, who recalls their conversation in this way:

"*Shylock*," he said, in my presence, "is a bloody-minded monster,- but you mustn't play him so, if you wish to succeed; you must get some sympathy with him."⁸⁹

This seems to me to be a candid - and certainly illuminating - admission of an actor's motives and methods. But it does raise the question - perhaps the most important question with which this present study ought to be concerned - of how far a performance can go in 'getting some sympathy for him' before it moves into the area of wilful misreading of the text. Hichens was of the opinion that Irving was '...far too much of an artist to play for illegitimate sympathy'⁹⁰; and most would probably agree that there is

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁸⁸ In the Channel 4 Television production, directed by Alan Horrox and broadcast initially for schools in 1996.

⁸⁹ Winter (1912), p. 175.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Saintsbury, p. 167. Hichens does not explain why he believes artistry to be an infallible guard against theatrical 'illegitimacy'.

nothing illegitimate in playing up the Jew's dignity; or emphasising the harsh treatment he has received in the past; or exacting every ounce of pathos from his court room exit. But other elements of interpretation can be open to harsher judgement. For example, assertions by Irving that Shylock is 'almost the only gentleman in the play', or - even more oddly - that Jessica 'is the friend of Portia'⁹¹ can cause us to call in question the care of his reading or even his understanding of the kind of world Jessica and Portia inhabit. Equally Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew...?' speech can indeed be in some senses a 'defence of his race'⁹²; but we might well consider it a distortion to play it as though it were *only* that. Moore believes that 'Irving's Shylock was hardly Shakespeare's' and observes that the actor's 'attitude led him to play... directly against the text...'⁹³ In this he echoes Shaw, who felt that Irving 'was simply not Shylock at all.'⁹⁴ Even more damningly, because it precisely identifies the motive that can lie behind wilful misreadings, as well as their potential consequences, was Shaw's comment that Irving's

...huge and enduring success as Shylock was due to his absolutely refusing to allow Shylock to be the discomfited villain of the piece. The Merchant of Venice became the Martyrdom of Irving, which was, it must be confessed, far finer than the Tricking of Shylock.⁹⁵

This 'refusal' has been, to one degree or another, a significant trend in many recent interpretations.

⁹¹ Quoted in Hatton, pp. 265-266.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁹³ *Op cit.*, p. 201. As evidence, Moore cites Irving's actions after he has said 'I would my daughter were dead at my foot...' *etc.*: 'Irving paused, hid his face in his hands and murmured an anguished "No, no, no, no, no!" and in the subsequent self-pitying lines on his losses, he opened his robe and smote himself continually, slowly, and heavily on his bare breast...' (pp. 201-202).

⁹⁴ From an obituary on Irving initially published by the Neue Freie Presse of Vienna, and later in *Pen Portraits and Reviews by Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable, 1931), p. 163.

⁹⁵ Edwin Wilson ed. *Shaw on Shakespeare* (London: Cassell, 1961), p. 252. Shaw's comments, however, always have to be read in the light of his lifelong championing of Barry Sullivan over Irving, for whom he rarely had a good word.

CHAPTER 4

FROM 1879 TO THE GREAT WAR

Irving's *Merchant* opened at the Lyceum, London, in November, 1879. The first performance of the play at the newly built Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon took place just five months later. Shylock was played by Barry Sullivan, an actor who dominated the provincial theatre scene as comprehensively as Irving did the metropolis.⁹⁶

The prompt copy for Sullivan's performance of Shylock in 1849 is frustratingly short of interesting annotations in that it reveals little about how Sullivan actually approached the part.⁹⁷ It relates, in any event, to a performance given thirty years before the Stratford appearance and may bear little relation to it. Of the later performance we have only the comments of the reviewer in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, who tells us that Act V was omitted, that the scenery included 'views of Venice by old masters' and that at one point a 'gondola draws across the stage'. Two moments are also highlighted:

A really effective piece of 'business' was the placing of the seal attached to his precious bond on the point of his knife while uttering the words -

"Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond
Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud."

This was a palpable hit and the audience applauded vigorously.

...Again, when narrating the supposed indignities to which he had been subjugated at the hands of his Christian neighbours, he utters in a cringing tone of mock humility the well known sentence commencing -

"Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,

⁹⁶ In April, 1870, when Sullivan appeared in Dublin for the first time, he was hailed as 'the leading legitimate actor of the British stage'. (*Annals of the Theatre Royal, Dublin*, p. 53.)

⁹⁷ Held in the library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness..."⁹⁸

Possibly the most interesting feature of these observations is not the description of the business itself, but the reviewer's reference to the '*supposed* indignities' to which Shylock had been subjected. Given that Sullivan had been playing the part for thirty years, it seems probable that his Shylock was, in fact, quite uninfluenced by Irving's sympathetic portrayal, which had been seen for the first time only a few months before (and which Sullivan may not even have seen). It is also a possibility that the Stratford audience, being far less cosmopolitan in outlook, would have been unprepared for an Irvingesque interpretation anyway. As the reviewer charmingly wrote in introducing his article, Shylock was '...a character somewhat new to residents in the Midlands.'

A little more is known about William Creswick, Stratford's second Shylock, thanks to a prompt book (though, as with Sullivan, from an earlier performance⁹⁹) and an interesting review, again in the *Herald*. It is difficult to draw safe conclusions about Creswick's interpretation from his prompt book, as it is only marginally more fully annotated than Sullivan's. But there are notes and comments in what seems to be the actor's own hand¹⁰⁰ which possibly call for a minor revision of theatre history, as they indicate that Creswick seems to have harboured some embryonic notions of a sympathetic portrayal some five years before Irving had been inspired by his sighting of the Levantine Jew in Tunis. The first hint of this is in a note written opposite the line spoken to Jessica in II v, 'Perhaps I will return immediately'; Creswick has written: she kneels he kisses & blesses her.¹⁰¹ This is a small detail and perhaps not indicative of any great show of paternal affection; on the other hand, it is not the action of a Macklin or Booth. The second

⁹⁸ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30th April, 1880.

⁹⁹ Held in the library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and thought to be from 1857. It does, however, bear an inscription on the first page of text which reads 'Melbourne Benefit Dec.r 10th 1877', which would date it at only six years prior to the Stratford performance.

¹⁰⁰ The copy is marked up only for Shylock and also has what appears to be a signature - 'Wm Creswick Oct 8th 1872' - after Shylock's final exit, which is in the same hand as the annotations.

¹⁰¹ Creswick prompt book, Act II, scene v. Most of the annotations are underlined in this way. This note makes one wonder exactly what Creswick did in terms of a Jewish 'blessing'.

indication that Creswick himself had some sympathy for Shylock is found in annotations to Act I, scene iii. In a note which might have been used in defence of Olivier's interpretation a century later, Creswick asks:

Was not this bond made on the belief that it would be duly met by Antonio? Shylock could not have supposed the possibility [*sic*] of Antonio's failing - & suggested the terms for a vengeful purpose - besides - had it not been so explained to the notary who drew the bond he would have come under the law "for it is enacted in the laws of Venice" - Act 4 Scene 1¹⁰²

Creswick believed, then, that Shylock did not intend the bond to be a serious means of entrapping Antonio; and that, moreover the notary would have pointed out the dangers to Shylock of entering into such an agreement. It would be interesting to know how far, if at all, that conviction came across on stage. There are certainly other indications that Creswick felt some sympathy for the Jew. On the same page, the actor 'Observes the indignity' when Antonio (delivering the speech beginning 'Mark you this Bassanio...') 'turns from him in disgust' and '...takes no notice but keeps his back to him which Shylock observes.'

How much sympathy Creswick's 1877 audience felt when watching his Shylock is impossible to tell. But the little evidence we have suggests that it was not, at least, an unsympathetic approach to the opening scene with Antonio. Creswick's interpretation of the trial scene, however, seems to have caused the 1883 audience to waver in their support for the Jew:

The spirit of revenge by which he was animated was so forcibly depicted that the sympathy he had in his earlier efforts awakened seemed to have been alienated, and there was a feeling of relief when an act of the highest injustice resulted in his absolute fall and ruin.¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Act I, scene iii. The note is written across the bottom of the page.

¹⁰³ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 20 April, 1883.

The same reviewer's comments that 'Mr Creswick realised fully the fierce and base passions engendered and nurtured in the breast of ...Shylock' are borne out by the notes in the prompt book throughout the earlier part of the trial scene, which include 'Smile of great satisfaction'; 'Shylock triumphantly accepts this - as a decision in his favour'; 'Growing joy'; and 'look of hate'.

It seems, however, that, although Creswick seems not to have gone out of his way to play the trial scene for sympathy, the audience were totally on his side by the time the tables had been turned on him. This reaction, however, appears to have resulted not as a response to a semi-tragic Irvingesque portrayal by the actor, but from the audience's natural sense of fair play (rather as Booth suggested would always be the case). In the sentence quoted above, for example, the reviewer refers to the 'despised and persecuted' Shylock, but most of his comments on the actor imply that the audience were impressed rather than sympathetic:

His frame withered beneath the mental agony which the Court's decree that he should become a Christian imposed upon him. His postures seemed chosen with admirable art for the purpose of blending the greatest possible amount of revenge with the utmost possible parade of rectitude. This is, of course, the true reading, the whole shame of Shylock being due to his unyielding passion.

The next performance of the *Merchant* in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was two years later, when Shylock was played by Jones Finch. It is interesting to compare the *Herald* reviewer's introductory comment on this 1885 performance with that of his counterpart only five years earlier. Shylock is no longer 'a character somewhat new to residents in the Midlands'. Now, in an interestingly partisan evaluation,

Shylock is a great study. A nation's wrongs are embodied in his person, and one's sympathies, in despite of one's self, go out to the unhappy, disappointed old man, who stands a picture of shame and despair, baffled and broken, and longing for the shelter of his own ruined home.¹⁰⁴

According to this reviewer, Charles Barnard's production contained moments which were, to say the least, reminiscent of Irving's:

...His silent return to his house, for example, was so effective, and his exit at the close of the trial scene aroused so much compassion for his many wrongs, that a striking contrast was afforded to the condemnation he had shortly before excited by his savage cruelty.

In three productions over the first six years of the Stratford theatre's history, therefore, there seems to have been a perceptible increase in the degree to which the influence of Irving's semi-tragic interpretation was being felt. At this point, however, an actor appeared on the scene who was to set his own stamp on the rôle of Shylock for many years to come.

From 1886 to the closure of the theatre during the Great War (1916), the annual repertoire of plays at the Memorial was performed by Frank Benson's Company. *The Merchant of Venice* appeared twenty-two times during this period, and in all but six of these Festival Memorial Performances, Shylock was played by Frank Benson himself.¹⁰⁵

Of the Benson Company's production the critics were in greatest accord over the decorative sets built into the cramped Memorial stage:

One was transported to a veritable Venice, with its moonlight serenaders, its masks, dominoes and lanterns...¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 1 May, 1885.

¹⁰⁵ Five other actors played Shylock during this period: E Lyall Swete in 1893; Hermann Vezin in 1900; Arthur Bouchier in 1907 and 1914; Henry Ainley in 1909; and Oscar Asche in 1915.

¹⁰⁶ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 5 May, 1899.

Moving figures, with bundles of merchandise, keep up the illusion of the street scenes. Masked revellers, merrily singing, flit about the stage, with dominoes and lanterns, and we see a carnival in miniature...¹⁰⁷

And, in case we should feel that too much effort had been lavished on superficialities -

The scenic effect was not to dazzle, but to show the thing itself idealised to the proper point for stage effect - to make the play look real through an atmosphere of poetry...¹⁰⁸

Over Benson's Shylock, however, there was less agreement. One reviewer described him as 'less an intense than a subtle Jew'.¹⁰⁹ Another was of the opinion that Benson could be seen -

Fascinating the audience by his wonderful facial expressions, his inimitable portrayal of passion, whether of hatred, avarice or of baffled rage, and, we must say too, of tenderness.¹¹⁰

A third commented:

Frank Benson's Shylock by no means comes under the head of character acting. The Jew as an individual is the last thing one thinks of when witnessing his performance. It is the race which suffers, not the particular money-lender.¹¹¹

Critics must be allowed to see different things in an actor, especially when witnessing between them a series of performances spread over a period of nearly three decades

¹⁰⁷ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 15 April, 1898.

¹⁰⁸ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 26 April, 1901.

¹⁰⁹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 21 April, 1911.

¹¹⁰ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 28 April, 1905.

¹¹¹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 7 August, 1914.

(1887 to 1916)¹¹², and which had a break of ten years between the first and second appearances.¹¹³ They were consistent, however, in responding to the ways in which Benson played upon Shylock's religion. As an interesting development of costume, Benson's Shylock wore a badge on his arm, which he pointed to in referring to 'sufferance' as 'the badge of all our tribe'¹¹⁴ and later, as a dramatic gesture of denial, covered over with his hand when Antonio declared that the Jew must become a Christian.¹¹⁵ The *Herald* observed of his first performance that 'He presents Shylock as a representative of a race which generation after generation has been cruelly used, insulted, execrated. It is an hereditary hate...'¹¹⁶ and seventeen years later the interpretation is still being described as 'implacable in its Judaism'.¹¹⁷ According to the prompt book, some of the Christians' reactions helped to capitalise on the natural sympathy felt by the audience for Shylock's oppressed race. When Shylock says 'I am a Jew', for example, 'Salanio [*sic*] crosses himself & catches hold of Salarios hand.' Then 'both Sal & S laugh'.¹¹⁸ When, at their first meeting, Shylock points out Antonio's policy of neither lending nor borrowing 'upon advantage', the Jew 'Places hand on Ant [*sic*] arms who shrinks from him' and the same action of rejection is used a few moments later when Shylock tries to placate the Christian with 'Why, look you, how you storm!'¹¹⁹ Something is also made of the 'Christian fools' and their masquing. They are heard to laugh and there is a drum-roll when Shylock warns Jessica to keep the casements shut, underlining that the threat is

¹¹² Benson also returned for a farewell performance in 1932.

¹¹³ During that period, Benson's Shylock, if we may believe one reviewer, 'seem[ed] to have gained in mellowness' by 1904. (*Birmingham Weekly Post*, 23 April, 1904). It might be appropriate here, however, to issue a caveat about the degree of trust which can be attached to these earlier reviews. A number seem to have taken the view that, since Benson was repeating his Shylock from a previous year (and had, in the interim, played the part in London [see page 43, note 40]), they were within their rights to recycle review comments. Hence the same sentences appear in several reviews over a number of years. This is all very well when the comments apply to the same actor; but, on one occasion, Benson's performance is described in exactly the same words as Hermann Vezin's from the year before (*Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 27 April, 1900; and *Birmingham Weekly Post*, 21 April, 1901).

¹¹⁴ Benson prompt book, April, 1887, held in the library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (Act I, scene iii). See illustration 1, following page 50.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, note to Act IV, scene i.

¹¹⁶ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 22 April, 1887.

¹¹⁷ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 22 April, 1904

¹¹⁸ Benson 1887 Prompt book, Act III, scene i.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Act I, scene iii. These two notes are among several written in ink and then crossed through in pencil. Possibly the actions were removed later in the run.

not an imagined one. Again, as Shylock returns to the empty house, much in the manner of Irving, there is a ‘Distant burst of laughter...’ which echoes heartlessly as we witness the lone figure who ‘knocks twice on the door’.¹²⁰ Finally, there is the contribution made by Gratiano. In this production - as in so many since - his tasteless gloating served effectively to reinforce the audience’s conviction that Shylock had been very badly treated:

[Shylock] staggered out of the courtroom, broken in spirit and crushed beneath the weight of his misfortunes. As he left, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and, turning he saw the jeering face of Gratiano. He drew himself up to his full height, and back in his eyes came the look of hate and defiance. Then he disappeared, followed by a feeling of deep compassion that wells up, although one tries to suppress it, and is of itself an eloquent tribute to the actor’s great powers.¹²¹

Benson’s scenes with Jessica presented him as much the same kind of loving father as Irving had been. The series of notes in the prompt book against Shylock’s final half dozen lines in Act II, scene v, give a clear picture of the scene: ‘gives flower - Jess starts in fear’; ‘kisses Jessica’; ‘Gives Jess a ring’ (as he says ‘Fast find...’; and then, after his concluding line:); ‘XSL stops. Jess goes to him & kisses his hand & exits...’ A different hand has written above Jessica’s couplet: ‘Shylock kisses her forehead’. One reviewer wrote of his ‘tenderness’ and alluded to:

his dealings with Jessica ...the plucking of the white rose for his truant daughter, whom he suspects so little, the placing in her hand of the turquoise ring, the tender embrace at parting...¹²²

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, note inserted between Acts II and III.

¹²¹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 15 April, 1898.

¹²² *Leamington Spa Courier*, 28 April, 1905.

The other aspect of Shylock's more sensitive side of which Irving made much was, of course, his reaction to the loss of Leah's ring. Benson's first reviewer in 1887 noticed 'the heart-broken words about Leah and the turquoise ring'¹²³, and a later critic stated that -

...when he heard of his daughter's extravagance ...that she had given away the turquoise ring that he had received from Leah, his acting was indescribably pathetic.¹²⁴

All this possibly betrays the influence of Irving. Benson's own contribution was to intensify the audience's identification of the ring by means of a clever piece of business in the first scene with Antonio:

He breathes upon it, holds it so as to catch a certain light, polishes it on the sleeve of his gabardine...¹²⁵

It seems, then, that Benson followed Irving's lead in a variety of ways, not least in portraying Shylock as a loving and concerned parent, deeply hurt by his daughter's betrayal, especially in the matter of the turquoise ring. As to the question of whether Benson was a sympathetic Shylock in an overall sense, we can only turn to the reviewers. The critic in the *Morning Post*, reviewing one of Benson's later performances, wrote:

Mr Benson's is not a specially subtle Shylock but he is eminently human: neither the unmitigated fiend of the older conception nor the ill-used half-hero some have tried in recent years to make him.

¹²³ *Op cit.*

¹²⁴ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 26 April, 1901.

¹²⁵ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 28 April, 1905. The reviewer goes on: 'All this reveals the student. The turquoise alone was supposed to possess virtue, that its colour faded or brightened as the health of the wearer increased or abated. It was a charm against evil, as Drayton quaintly puts it: "The turkesse, which who haps to wear, Is often kept from peril."'

If in the end our sympathies were slightly on the side of the unhappy, baffled usurer, it was perhaps due, as usual, to resentment of Gratiano's persistent hitting of an old man "when he was down", perhaps a little also to the partisan attitude of Portia...¹²⁶

This review is particularly interesting for its awareness of the ways in which post-Irving Shylocks had become semi-tragic (the 'ill-used half-hero' of 'recent years'), and the fact that our sympathies were only with the Jew on balance - and then largely because of his unjust treatment at the hands of the Christians. It could have been written of many interpretations from the past three decades.

Descriptions of Benson's Shylock, in fact, tend to use adjectives such as 'pitiful', 'broken', 'vanquished', to describe his final departure from the stage. But many also give the impression of an interpretation more fierce and aggressive than Irving's.¹²⁷ In all, Benson seems to have played the Jew for sympathy to some degree, counting upon the natural affinity with the oppressed underdog that most of his audience would share, but never losing the hard edge of hatred and vindictiveness which had characterised the Shylocks of a century before. This balancing act was perceived by the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* reviewer in 1906:

In the embodiment an actor adopts one of two courses. He represents Shylock as an ignoble and malignant Hebrew, typical of the passion of revenge. Or he endeavours to portray [*sic*] him as representative, religiously, of the vindictive rigour of Hebraic law. Mr Benson takes a middle course. He was intent not only on feeding his "ancient grudge", but on avenging the wrongs of his race. The malignity, the cherished, inveterate resentment, the "lodg'd hate" were expressed with

¹²⁶ *The Morning Post*, 11 August, 1913.

¹²⁷ *Pace* one reviewer's comment that perhaps Benson's Shylock had 'mellowed', the *Herald* critic of 1911 is very clear about the harshness of the interpretation: 'Mr Benson's Shylock ...is an intellectual being, who is master of the situation and he knows it. He is business-like and coldly cruel. He sits at a table, as it were, with his implements - his bond, his money-bags, his knife and scales, rising only to deliver with telling effect his famous forensic speeches' (*Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 21 April, 1911). The newspaper photograph of Benson, thought to be from 1904, gives some indication of the malice and venom which he brought to the part (see illustration 1, following page 50).

intense smouldering passion and with the potency of a keen intellect. But while witnessing his representation we are forced to remember Shylock's wrongs, and under the jibes of Antonio he has borne himself so meekly that we feel something of justice in the retribution.¹²⁸

Benson's Shylock was certainly not 'sympathetic' in the way that Irving's was. One reviewer wrote:

If he is passionate he has also something of a saving dignity, and it is dignity rather than pathos.¹²⁹

The same critic makes an extremely telling observation on the development of audience sensibilities, which needs to be borne in mind when assessing any post-Irving audience response to the interpretation of this challenging character:

From the original conception of him as a loathed and loathsome viper, there has been developed, if one may use the term without satire, a more Christian view of him. Thus it is that all modern Shylocks have extracted from us a certain measure of sympathy varying in amount from the representations which are placed before us.

Audiences, in other words, by the first decade of this century, were settling into their seats already on Shylock's side: it was merely a question of how much sympathy a new interpretation would attract and by which means.

Arthur Bouchier's seems to have invited - and accordingly received - very little; and the stark contrast between Bouchier's uncompromising Shylock and Benson's broadly

¹²⁸ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 11 May, 1906

¹²⁹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 21 April, 1911

sympathetic interpretation is clearly implied in the comments from this critic writing in the *Birmingham Post*:

Mr Bouchier's is in essence a quieter reading than that of Mr Benson. Not that it wants anything of passion where the development of the character calls for it. But the Shylock of yesterday was mainly incisive. He wore an air of contemptuous indifference to the indictments of his accusers. He was not concerned to rebut them with temper and gesture so much as with the self possession of a man who believes he has the whip-hand of his enemies. His ducats and his daughter naturally raise his ire when he reflects upon the loss of both.¹³⁰

The most significant part of this review, for me, comes towards the end. The way an actor chooses to play Shylock's attitude to the loss of his daughter is, as has been shown, a significant yardstick by which to measure the degree of sympathy that he is aiming for. Olivier and Irving, for example, both worked hard to stress how wounded the Jewish father is by his daughter's betrayal. The keynote of Bouchier's overriding passion here, on the other hand, is anger; and this was clearly the performance that Bouchier had first given at the Garrick Theatre two years earlier:

His behaviour is charged with an adequate amount of malignity, and no attempt is made to win for him the sympathy which Shakespeare purposely denies him.¹³¹

In a similar vein, the *Illustrated London News* observed that Bouchier's Shylock was not 'the martyr of his race' and went on:

¹³⁰ *Birmingham Post*, 30 April, 1907.

¹³¹ *The Globe*, 12 October, 1905. A photograph appeared in *The Sketch* on 25 October (see illustration 2, following page 50).

Mr Bouchier's reading is nor particularly romantic or even poetic. Its chief note is masterful energy and virility; this Shylock is something of a modern overman with a strong, passionate, overbearing temperament.¹³²

Another important touchstone for judging how much sympathy we might feel for Shylock is, of course, the way in which he proposes the bond: does he intend it as a Macchiavellian ploy; or, as he claims, a 'merry bond' to win Antonio's friendship? The reviewer in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* was in no doubt:

Mr Bouchier made it apparent that the proposal of the "merry bond" was not conceived in any fantastic spirit of merriment, but was a deliberate cast of the die, and that Antonio would have been well advised to follow Bassanio's warning to beware of "fair terms and a villain's mind".¹³³

A reviewer of Bouchier's later (1914) Stratford performance wrote:

This is no gentle Jew who appeals to our sympathy by reason of the losses and the spurnings. He is a venomous, revengeful usurer, who is probably nearer the Shakespearean intention than some of the milder Shylocks of more sentimental appeal.¹³⁴

It is difficult to know how disparaging this later reviewer intended his reference to 'sentimental' Shylocks to be, nor whether this was a veiled reference to the school of Irving. Certainly he regards Bouchier's interpretation as being probably closer to Shakespeare's 'intention' - and presumably a good deal nearer than Benson's, which, by

¹³² *The Illustrated London News*, 21 October, 1905.

¹³³ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 3 May, 1907.

¹³⁴ *Birmingham Post*, 21 April, 1914.

the time of this review, had played the Memorial stage in almost every spring festival for seventeen years.¹³⁵

The comment also raises an interesting speculation on the question of audience expectation in relation to critical opinion. The review quoted earlier on the subject of Frank Benson's audiences, which claimed that 'all modern Shylocks have extracted from us a certain measure of sympathy' (above, page 41), seems at odds with this critic's clearly stated preference for a Jew who is 'venomous' and 'revengeful', displaying, as the critic of the London *Times* described it, 'fierce passions' and 'savage malignity'.¹³⁶ The difference in expressed preferences might be purely idiosyncratic; equally (at the risk of seeming patronising) they might highlight the distinction between the essentially parochial predisposition of a Stratford critic and the more cosmopolitan perspectives of his Birmingham and London counterparts.¹³⁷ Pursuing this thesis a little further, might we actually be witnessing a difference between, on the one hand, *audience* expectations (of 'a more Christian view'), and, on the other, a growing sense among many critics that the post-Irving Shylock had strayed some way from Shakespeare's 'intention' - insofar

¹³⁵ The only breaks in this run were for performances by Hermann Veizin in 1900 and Henry Ainley in 1909, but Benson was also performing his Shylock in London: at the Camden Theatre in March and November 1904, Dalston in 1902 and the Coronet Theatre, Notting Hill Gate, in 1905, 1909, 1912 and February and September 1913. Veizin's Shylock seems to have been so similar to Benson's that the review of the latter's in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* in 1901 contains passages repeated almost verbatim from the one written on Veizin in 1900 (see page 37, note 18). Ainley's interpretation seems to have been undistinguished. The *Birmingham Mail* wrote: 'Shylock lost all his ferocity in Mr Ainley's reading and the racial antagonism, which is the keynote of the character, was deprived of all its significance in the later passages of the play. The tender, human side of the Jew in his love for his daughter was duly emphasised, but the venom in his speech with Antonio was entirely missing, and in the trial scene the significance of his insistence on the bond was entirely absent.' (*Birmingham Mail*, 27 April, 1909.)

¹³⁶ *The Times*, 21st April, 1914. This, incidentally, was the first time any Stratford Shylock had attracted the attention of the major London newspapers. It must have been galling for Benson, and was perhaps attributable to the reputation that Bouchier had built up from his performances as Shylock, first as a student at Oxford University, and then at the Garrick Theatre (1905 and 1906) and His Majesty's Theatre (1910). No doubt it was also not unconnected with the fact that he had played the part before the King at Windsor in 1905.

¹³⁷ In support of this position, it is interesting that, although the Stratford reviewer of 1907 can identify the wicked vengefulness of Bouchier's Shylock and exemplify it in some detail (see above), he nonetheless feels that 'The "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech was delivered in a tone of absolute sincerity and conviction, and produced a feeling of real sympathy *in spite of the closing words renewing his intention to wallow in revenge*' (my italics). It is tempting to suggest that he is blinded to the evidence of the performance by his own preconception that Shylock should be played for sympathy.

as that was, or could ever be, determinable -and that Bouchier's harsh interpretation was, in many ways, a welcome return?¹³⁸

Certainly Bouchier's was not the only Shylock at this time to have reinstated the harshness. A year after his final performance of the rôle at Stratford, *The Merchant of Venice* was again on the Festival repertoire and this time the Jew was played by Oscar Asche. Asche had taken the play on tour to Australia and South Africa only a few years earlier¹³⁹ and the annotations in the prompt books from those tours accord with the one review of his Stratford performance of 1915 in building a picture of a Shylock who made few bids for audience sympathy. Although the review in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* describes Asche's 'character study' somewhat oddly as 'full of pathos', all the quoted evidence is about its 'power' and 'dignity', and the critic observes interestingly that

Mr Asche's Shylock is by no means the Jew decadent strung to extremes of feeling. His is less an intense or subtle Jew than a vigorous one.¹⁴⁰

There are many ways in which an actor can gain sympathy for Shylock; and four of them were notable for having been conspicuously avoided by Oscar Asche. They were: giving the impression that the 'merry bond' is genuinely meant when offered; portraying the Jew as a tender and loving father; minimising the horrors of the planned revenge in the court room; and using stage business to elicit sympathy at particular key moments (such as returning home to find an empty house, or making a heart-rending final exit). Asche

¹³⁸ In other respects Bouchier's production was praised for its dynamics (the front scenes, according to the *Times* reviewer, being played before the curtains), and for its design concept: 'a pleasing compromise between realism and suggestion, something after the manner of Professor Reinhardt' (*op cit.*).

¹³⁹ Prompt Books (presented by Lily Brayton, who played Portia) are held in the Shakespeare Centre Library for both the 1909-10 Australia tour and the 1912-13 South Africa tour. They include drawings in an unknown hand which suggest that Asche played the part in a protruding beard, false nose and added locks of hair. (See illustration 3, following page 50.)

¹⁴⁰ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 April, 1915. The language ('intense... subtle Jew') can be interestingly compared with that used about Benson in 1911 (see page 36).

opted for none of these, but rather seems to have gone out of his way to deny his audience any feature they might sympathise with. His intentions concerning the bond, for example, were clear from the outset. In his first scene, as if to highlight his unpleasantness, Asche's Shylock made a re-entrance after Bassanio's 'fair terms and a villain's mind', dragging Launcelot Gobbo by the ear.¹⁴¹ There was also one other conspicuous piece of stage business which still has the power to shock:

...the venom oozes out of him at every point, and a realistic, if chilling, touch as the curtain falls is Shylock spitting apparently after Antonio. Thus we are in no doubt as to when his devilish scheme enters his cunning head. So much for villainy...¹⁴²

The business of spitting will be returned to below, when considering the performances of Herbert Beerbohm Tree and some more recent Shylocks.

With Jessica too Asche eschewed all tenderness and, on the contrary, made much of business in which he removed his daughter's ear-rings and deposited them in a box, as he told her 'Look to my house'; took hold of her ear on 'Hear you me, Jessica'; and even slapped her face on the reference to the Christians' 'varnish'd faces', as though punishing her in advance for a misdemeanour she might - and, in truth, does - commit, an action which had a similarly devastating effect when employed by Patrick Stewart's Shylock over sixty years later.¹⁴³ He then placed the jewels in a safe and,

...before taking his departure, he utters the words, "A proverb never stale in *thrifty* minds," and at once extinguishes the candles on the table.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ 'Shylock enters with Launcelot by the ear drops him L' (1912-13 Prompt book.)

¹⁴² *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 April, 1915.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* See below, page 145.

¹⁴⁴ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 April, 1915.

This was about as far from Irving's approach as an actor could go, and it has to be said that there is a kind of honest equalising of Shylock and Jessica in the Asche production which is rarely seen. He is nasty to her, and she is seen responding in kind immediately afterwards, for, unusually, the means by which she accomplishes her furtive theft is not simply alluded to, but shown:

Masque music in distance C

Jes gets to stall R, then X's to window L, throw open shutters, look out. Take keys goes to safe take jewels cte [*sic*]...¹⁴⁵

The uncompromising bitterness of Asche's Shylock was seen to full effect in the trial scene. Any interpretation anxious to mask the horror of Shylock's contemplated attack on Antonio can do so by deliberately ignoring certain textual cues (about the scales, for example, a grim prop which does not have to appear). Asche, however,

...business-like and coldly cruel ...places himself at a table with his implements - his bond, his money-bags, his knife and scales - rising only to deliver with telling effect his famous forensic speeches.¹⁴⁶

Nor does he call upon our compassion by leaving the court a bowed and broken man, but rather, after a laugh from Solanio and some typically jeering business from Gratiano,

...suddenly gathering his forces together and summoning all the pride of his race, he straightens himself and for the last few paces walks erect into the arms of a howling crowd.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Asche Prompt book.

¹⁴⁶ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 April, 1915.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

In concluding his comments on Irving's Shylock, James C Bulman observes that '...most productions of the play for the next fifty years paid homage to Irving, directly or indirectly' and that Irving's conception of Shylock as a Victorian gentleman 'was not effectively challenged until 1932 when, in Stratford-upon-Avon - that bastion of bardolatry - a Russian *émigré* named Komisarjevsky overturned Victorian stage traditions like a bear in an English china shop.'¹⁴⁸ That Irving's influence was a powerful and far-reaching one (even in what was at that time the relative theatrical backwater of 'the Memorial' at Stratford-upon-Avon) is evident. The local reviewer writing in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, for example, seems very confident about his audience's expectations of what the customary Shylock should do (my italics throughout):

Mr Asche departs from *the usual business* of other actors in this role in many respects...

In some Shylocks, but not in Mr Asche's, we see a most beautiful aspect of this performance..

When he returns, too, he does not follow *the usual tradition*...¹⁴⁹

These references to the 'usual' could imply almost a D'Oyly Carte slavishness to conventionally repeated business and lines of interpretation (and perhaps account for the facility with which Stratford and Birmingham reviewers during that period could apply repeated sentences or even paragraphs of comment to different actors' performances). The 'some Shylocks' referred to here are most likely to have been Frank Benson's, however, which was certainly Irvingesque in features such as the Jew's tenderness for his daughter, but which had many harder edges, as has been shown. Given that Asche's and Bouchier's were also harsher interpretations, it seems that Stratford audiences in the earliest phase of the Memorial Theatre's history were not receiving merely a fare of watered-down Irving.

¹⁴⁸ *Op cit.*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴⁹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 April, 1915.

It does seem to have been the case, however, that, whatever Asche and others did with the rôle, the local critics and audiences would always compare them - overtly or by implication - with what they considered to be a norm established by Irving, especially at key moments made famous by the great man:

His exit when the blow has fallen is fine, but it scarcely elicits the sympathy of the audience which the late Henry Irving was capable of evoking.¹⁵⁰

No actor of this period was immune from the Irving comparison, but Herbert Beerbohm Tree certainly impressed critics with the novelty of his interpretation when it first appeared on the stage of His Majesty's Theatre in April, 1908:

Mr Tree's Shylock is not Henry Irving's any more than Henry Irving's was Charles Kean's, or than Charles Kean's was James [*sic*] Macklin's.¹⁵¹

The great thing is that it is *his* Shylock and not a replica or a reminiscence of someone else's.¹⁵²

Tree's was, like Bouchier's and Asche's, a Shylock who displayed a 'malignant passion'¹⁵³, an emotional figure given to extravagant gesture:

In the paroxysms of his despair at Jessica's elopement he rends his garments and pours dust upon his head... He chokes and gurgles and writhes and gives out those hoarse screeches of his...¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 6 April, 1908.

¹⁵² *The Times* 26 April, 1910.

¹⁵³ *The Times*, 6 April, 1908. The review describes how Tree's Shylock in the Trial 'hammers out his words one by one with the hilt of his knife'.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

As the comment above reveals, Tree's was a studiedly Jewish Shylock who 'goes to synagogue to listen to Hebrew chants from "Mogan Dovid"'. He hates the Christians with a fierce passion, spitting at Antonio, a piece of business which was to be picked up by Oscar Asche.¹⁵⁵ Spitting has been the occasion of impressive theatrical moments in recent performances, not least those directed by Bill Alexander, and will be considered further when dealing with his productions and others.¹⁵⁶ Tree's Shylock played every year for six seasons on the stage of His Majesty's Theatre (1908-1913) and remained:

...still the same rather extravagantly picturesque haunter of the ghetto, [who] adulterates his cunning and cruelty with paternal emotion and outraged religious feeling in just about the same proportions...¹⁵⁷

Whether Bouchier, Asche and Tree (and Benson too, but to a lesser degree) were consciously rebelling from a line of interpretation which they found sterile - or perhaps even considered to run counter to the text - cannot be determined. But they merit at least a footnote to the stage history of Shylock, if for no other reason than this: that they cause us to be wary of any generalisation which might encourage us to believe that Irving's sympathetic line of interpretation continued unbroken until the arrival of Komisarjevsky in 1932.

¹⁵⁵ See above, pages 45-46.

¹⁵⁶ Bill Alexander directed the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1987-88 and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company in 1997. See below, pages 173 (and note 62) and 186.

¹⁵⁷ *The Times*, 10 June, 1913. One of the many photographs and illustrations of Tree's Shylock which appeared in contemporary newspapers and magazines is reproduced following page 50 (illustration 4).

CHAPTER 5

FROM THE GREAT WAR TO 1929

The Stratford Shylocks during the 1920s are interesting not for the quality of their performances - which seem to have been, to say the least, variable - but for two other reasons. The first is that the reviews they received help to clarify the picture of the audience's and critics' expectations of the rôle of Shylock at that time and their attitudes towards its embodiment on stage. The second is that, in their different ways, each one serves to illustrate one of the features of Shylock performance discussed in Chapter 3.

When we look at evidence of critical expectation during this period, three distinct standpoints seem to emerge. The first, represented, for example, by the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald's* review of Murray Carrington's Shylock in 1920, is a position characterised by its assertions about what the character is 'actually' like, and clear expectations concerning how he ought to behave:

Murray Carrington's Shylock was an excellent performance. The Jew appeared as Shakespeare undoubtedly intended him - essentially human... Modern audiences are liberal-minded and hold the balance fairly between Jew and Gentile...¹⁵⁸

The *Atheneum*, while taking a different view of the actor's performance, is equally terse and assertive about expectations and very confident about the author's 'intention':

But Shylock is not a subtle character. Shakespeare never meant him to be one; and he meant much less that he should be a tragic character... [Carrington] may not be aware that by making Shylock a realistic figure the key of the play is hopelessly put out. To play tragi-comedy as tragedy is almost as bad as setting a High Mass in rag-time... in England we really ought to have got beyond the

¹⁵⁸ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 23 April, 1920.

point where Shylock is taken seriously at all. He is just an Elizabethan bogey-man, vamped up to outdo Marlowe.¹⁵⁹

Reviews such as this are common throughout the early years of the Memorial Theatre's history and are identifiable by the fact that they seem more concerned with expressing an ideal than describing the details of a particular performance. A further typical example is from the *Sportsman*. Reviewing Arthur Phillips's 'romantic' interpretation and his Shylock's 'gusts of almost hysterical fury', the critic wrote:

That is a legitimate reading... but I think that restraint, the suppressed resentment of a despised and downtrodden race, is far more effective.¹⁶⁰

In its most extreme form, criticism of this kind (encountered equally in the London press) could be dogmatically prescriptive in its expectations and unfairly dismissive of performances which did not conform:

But one expects something more than that from Shylock. One expects him to be a terrible figure in his malignancy and a pathetic figure as the wronged father, and a majestic figure in face of his enemies, and a tragic figure in his condemnation; in short, one expects him to be altogether in the grand style, and Mr Forbes-Robertson's Shylock never quite reaches to that style.¹⁶¹

[Brember Wills's] was a niminy-piminy Shylock, a mincing conceited fellow who was rather more of a sentimental fool than *the real Antonio* whom *the real Shylock* despises for his sentimental meddlings with the natural course of trade. [*My italics*]¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ *Athenæum*, 7 May, 1920.

¹⁶⁰ *Sportsman*, 2 May, 1924.

¹⁶¹ *The Times*, 6 May, 1913, on Forbes-Robertson's performance at Drury Lane.

¹⁶² *The Times*, 8 October, 1929, on Brember Wills's performance at the Old Vic. The review went on: 'Mr Gielgud seemed also miscast as Antonio...'

A second approach common at this time is to make comparisons, either with Shylocks of the past (notably Irving's, of course), or with an alleged familiar norm. One reviewer began a comment with: '[George Hayes's] Shylock, unlike the majority...'¹⁶³ and others took a similarly comparative line:

Mr Ayrton's Shylock is remarkably solid and virile by comparison with the lean, fawning Jew normally presented...¹⁶⁴

The Shylock of the trial scene followed neither of the two interpretations that have become customary. He was neither a cringing moneylender, nor a pathetic patriarch...¹⁶⁵

This was not Shylock "played for sympathy", nor Shylock played as villain above all...¹⁶⁶

Mr George Hayes gave us a kind of Shylock which is apparently popular on the stage at present, a humble Jew, visibly of the lower order, a cringing creature, and in no way a figure out of the Old Testament, like some of the great Shylocks of the past...¹⁶⁷

The Old Testament reference in this last quotation recalls Edmund Kean, though Irving is more probably intended. Certainly, since Irving's death, he had frequently been evoked as some kind of yardstick:

Mr Tree's Shylock is not Henry Irving's... His exit from the Court is striking, even for those of us who cannot help remembering the tremendous thing Henry Irving made of it...¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ *Birmingham Mail*, 18 April, 1929.

¹⁶⁴ *Birmingham Mail*, 15 April, 1926.

¹⁶⁵ *The Times*, 2 January, 1922, writing about Henry Baynton's performance at the Savoy Theatre.

¹⁶⁶ *The Times*, 16 January, 1923, writing about Robert Atkins's performance at the Old Vic.

¹⁶⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 2 July, 1928.

¹⁶⁸ *The Times*, 6 April, 1908.

No doubt Sir Henry Irving overdid the “nobility” of the part. Perhaps Sir Herbert goes to the other extreme...¹⁶⁹

Irving... once told of a new and improved fifth act submitted to him, wherein Shylock turned up at Belmont selling lemons... One can imagine that Mr Carrington’s Shylock might in time turn fruiterer and possibly drop in at Belmont bringing Tubal along with him to push the barrow.¹⁷⁰

The shadow of Irving was for many reviewers a long one, and the great actor’s additional scenes became for some critics such an expected part of the play¹⁷¹, that their omission was noteworthy:

Minor points are that Shylock is not seen returning to his deserted home - an incident introduced by Irving which always created difficulties and has since been outrageously amplified by others...¹⁷²

While Irving remained fresh in the theatrical memory, this particular piece of business was almost obligatory, Bouchier being among many who made it a feature of their performance (see illustration 2, following page 50).¹⁷³

While many commentators were very ready to compare particular Shylocks with an assumed norm, however, there seems to have been some difference of opinion over what exactly the norm was. While the *Birmingham Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* see the

¹⁶⁹ *The Times*, 26 April, 1910.

¹⁷⁰ *Morning Post*, 21 April, 1920.

¹⁷¹ A critic reviewing George Hayes’s Shylock took him to task for missing ‘points which have become conventional “moments”’ (*Birmingham Mail*, 3 July, 1928).

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ A critic reviewing George Hayes’s Shylock took him to task for missing ‘points which have become conventional “moments”’ (*Birmingham Mail*, 3 July, 1928).

typical 1920s Shylock as ‘fawning’ and ‘cringing’, the critic of *The Times* regards him as distinctly elevated:

...the Shylock seen today was a thoroughly unpleasant person. Moreover, it was quite refreshing to have him so, for there has been a tendency for a long time to make Shylock a persecuted saint.¹⁷⁴

It is difficult to account for such a discrepancy in perception, unless to assume that the individual reviewers quoted had each seen only a limited range of the Shylocks on show at that time. Indeed, it should be said that, when surveying even the narrow selection of Stratford Shylocks from Irving’s death to Benson’s final performance on 1932, it is very hard to identify any one trend in interpretation which might reasonably justify the definition of an established norm.

These two comparative standpoints - viewing individual performances in the contexts of an ideal and of a norm - were matched in their assertiveness by a third, which was characterised by its dislike of ‘modern developments’. This, of course, is not a phenomenon exclusive to one character, a single play or even a particular era of theatre history. There will always be a sector of critical opinion unhappy with new directions and with what it considers to be unwarranted liberties taken with the text or the interpretation of character, and frequently the objections will be voiced with some venom, as they were by the critic quoted above, writing of Murray Carrington’s Shylock in the *Athenæum*:

He imported the stupid Ghetto realism that M. Moscovitch¹⁷⁵ has made fashionable. He said “Tank God” and “By buddies”, because it made what is to him a dull character more interesting.

¹⁷⁴ *The Times*, 4 August, 1921, writing about Bouwmeester.

¹⁷⁵ See below, pages 63-65.

Mr Carrington really has a mind well above this claptrap Yiddishness; and he knows, as well as we do, that Shakespeare would have written "Tank God" if he had wanted it that way.¹⁷⁶

Carrington's delivery, however, was a cause of minor controversy in comparison with that of Louis Bouwmeester, who, on August 23rd, 1921, played the complete part in his native Dutch¹⁷⁷. Bouwmeester's visit drew much attention from the national newspapers, not least because he was seventy-nine and had flown to England in order to play one matinée at the Stratford summer festival. More will be said about Bouwmeester's Shylock below; the point being made here is that the linguistic adventure was the occasion of some eyebrow-raising from a number of critics, however much the capacity Stratford audience loved it:

Not that they were anything but enthusiastic, for at the end of the trial scene, when I took a walk in the gardens, two hundred yards had been measured before the applause subsided... A memorable impersonation indeed; but the effort of the entire performance was a little freakish.¹⁷⁸

From the critic's standpoint the performance was all extremely interesting, though I cannot admit that public understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's art is in any way assisted by these freakish dodges.¹⁷⁹

That two critics as distant - geographically and culturally - should both opt for the adjective 'freakish' is telling, and betrays an attitude which will be explored further when considering, in particular, Peter Sellars's Goodman Theater production in 1994.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ *Op cit.*

¹⁷⁷ Bouwmeester had some years earlier given similar performances in London (see below, pages 60-63).

¹⁷⁸ *The Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 August, 1921.

¹⁷⁹ *The Stage*, 11 August, 1921.

¹⁸⁰ Performing on tour in the National Theatre (see below, pages 223-235). A later review of an all-female *Merchant of Venice* in 1929 managed to convey comparable sentiments: 'Shakespeare wrote Shylock as a low-comedy character but essentially as a man filled with a great paternal love. Why should this, of all

A *Times* reviewer from a few years earlier, however, while joining the ranks of those who disliked innovation, could at least see why it should happen in *The Merchant of Venice*. Applauding the behaviour of ‘a row or two of school girls’ who had cheered when Portia ‘turned the tables on the bloodthirsty Shylock’, he observed:

That is the way we should all try to enjoy our Shakespeare in, if we were wise, instead of making a fuss over new “readings” or minute details of *mis-en-scène*. The trouble is that at every successive Shakespearian performance a long vista of previous recollections gets in the way of our simple pleasure and spoils what should have been a wholehearted surrender to the romance or the fierce passion or the mere fun of the moment. The players too, are in much the same case, embarrassed by the past, racking their brains in the effort to depart from it, tempted even to purchase novelty at the price of extravagance or absurdity... In the main the company are content to present the familiar story - or brace of stories - in a plain, straightforward, unpretentious fashion; and that is the fashion wherein Shakespeare is always best served.¹⁸¹

Reviews from this period are therefore interesting in giving an impression of the kinds of critical opinion - and in some cases prejudice - being exercised in response to the variety of Shylocks seen in both Stratford and London.

The Memorial Theatre was at this time under the direction of William Bridges-Adams and his New Shakespeare Company. His period of management is of particular interest to the present study in that the Shylocks for whom he was responsible - as played by Murray Carrington, Louis Bouwmeester, Arthur Phillips, Randle Ayrton and George Hayes¹⁸² - each in his different way recalls one of the influential performance features

Shakespearean rôles, be played by a woman?’ (*Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 4 October, 1929, writing about a Shylock played by Lucille la Verne in an amateur production on the temporary stage.) Similar sentiments have been expressed about actresses essaying, *inter alia*, Hamlet and Richard II.

¹⁸¹ *The Times*, 12 December, 1915 (from a review of a production at the St James’s Theatre in which Shylock was played by Matheson Lang).

¹⁸² Bridges-Adams directed one other Shylock, Baliol Holloway, who played the part on all the other performances during the August 1921 season, made famous by Bouwmeester’s flying visit. Holloway returned to the rôle between 1940 and 1942, (see below, pages 71-72). Bridges-Adams also presided over

discussed in Chapter 1 - the means by which a sympathetic interpretation may be achieved; namely through: choice of sets, cuts to the text, additional business, the presentation of the Christians, and the representation of Shylock first as an alien, then contrastingly as an urbane man of his times. Carrington and Hayes, additionally, were notable for their witty and humorous Shylocks.

Murray Carrington played Shylock in the April and July festivals of 1920, and while critical opinion of his interpretation seems to have been divided¹⁸³, there was significant unanimity over one particular production feature: the sets - especially in terms of their relationship to cuts made to the text. The basic set for Bridges-Adams's *Merchant of Venice* in 1920 was described as:

...an architectural arrangement approaching in essence, though not superficially, to that of the Elizabethan stage...¹⁸⁴

From the outset the set seems to have caused difficulties and the first performance in the April season started late because of problems deriving from the stage's 'limited resources'¹⁸⁵. This would not in itself be noteworthy were it not for the fact that the complex scene changes could be accommodated only by cuts to the text, and that by making these cuts, Bridges-Adams (who had formerly earned the soubriquet of 'Mr Unabridges-Adams'¹⁸⁶) was required to abandon his long-maintained whole-text policy¹⁸⁷.

Frank Benson's final performance in 1932 and Komisarjevsky's production of 1932, revived in 1933 (see pages 77-81).

¹⁸³ 'Murray Carrington's Shylock was an excellent performance.' (*Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 23 April, 1920); 'As Richard II, he was all but perfect; as Benedick in "Much Ado" he was admirable; as Shylock he was almost detestable.' (*Athenæum*, 7 May, 1920).

¹⁸⁴ *Star*, 21 April, 1920.

¹⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 20 April, 1920.

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Robert Speaight *Shakespeare on the Stage* (Collins, 1973), p. 158.

¹⁸⁷ Sally Beauman (*The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* [Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 90) sees this change of policy as taking place from 1923. Newspaper reviews from 1920 indicate that it happened earlier.

Of other features of Carrington's interpretation, we do know that:

His Jew was from first to last the villain of the piece, making not the slightest appeal to one's sense of pity, either for him or for his race as it existed in his day, but sending delicious thrills down one's spine by the horrid intensity of his hate.¹⁸⁸

At the same time an element was apparent which had hardly been in evidence since the time of Dogget. After two centuries of profoundly serious Shylocks - even some notably tragic ones - Carrington's was remarkable for its humour:

Mr Carrington cannot disguise his personality, therefore there was always a piece of waggishness in his Shylock, and he will probably not be angry at one who found his rendering more genuinely entertaining than instructive.¹⁸⁹

There was no insistence on the gloomy side of the play, which was treated rather as a comedy.¹⁹⁰

In tune with this strain of comedy, there seems to have been a lightness in Carrington's performance which placed him at the opposite end of the scale from Henry Irving's tragedy or Edmund Kean's grandeur:

Mr Carrington did not attempt to make Shylock a repository for sympathy, but presented him as a low-type, broken English Jew...¹⁹¹

This underplayed approach was evidently not to everyone's liking:

¹⁸⁸ *Daily Mail*, 20 April, 1920. In appearance Carrington's Shylock resembled the sketches in the Asche promptbook (see illustration 3, following page 50).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Stage*, 29 April, 1920.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

This Shylock is as cunning, as sarcastic, as madly enraged, as utterly broken in defeat as he can be, but at every point one feels that the real Shylock could and would be more so - hence less a mistaken than a diluted and underproof Shylock, too measured in his malignity, too faint in his fury.¹⁹²

One final feature of interest in Carrington's portrayal was the way in which he used Shylock's religion. Many actors in the post-Irving tradition had played up Shylock's faith in order to enhance the Jew's moral standing and also draw sympathy for him by evoking associations with his persecuted people. Carrington, conversely -

...keeps all Shylock's appointments, but does so, as it were, in his best Sabbath-go-to-synagogue clothes. All he does is very intelligent and is probably quite satisfactory to those who take a charitable view of a man to whom his synagogue appeals only as a convenient place at which to meet and discuss the best way of committing murder.¹⁹³

In contrast to Carrington's Shylock, Louis Bouwmeester's was 'an avaricious and relentless Jew'¹⁹⁴, not underplayed as Carrington's was, but 'a very full blooded affair indeed'¹⁹⁵ and -

...always a magnetic Shylock, using an amount of gesture which, though foreign to English actors, is exactly in consonance with his varied and forceful impersonation.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² *Morning Post*, 21 April, 1920.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 5 August, 1921.

¹⁹⁵ *The Times*, 4 August, 1921.

¹⁹⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 August, 1921.

Demonstrating in the trial scene ‘a perfectly volcanic explosion of baffled rage and hate...’¹⁹⁷, the experience for audiences was ‘like watching a maniac shaken by some profane orgasm’¹⁹⁸. In two respects - the extremity of his emotions and the ways in which he presented the character as an alien - Bouwmeester foreshadowed Antony Sher’s exotic, flamboyant and passionate outsider some sixty years later. The following comment from the *Times* could almost have been written about Sher, even down to the detail about the knife brandishing:

At the trial he was the outcast, the alien, standing alone in defiance and scorn against all the Christians of Venice. When Antonio bared his breast, Shylock swept over to him and flourished his knife over it ghoulishly, and when the bond was discredited he tore it to pieces and spat upon it. His Jew was a primitive and barbaric man, whose humanity had been perverted by oppression, not only the oppression of his own life, but of his ancestors for generations. His voice was the voice of all medieval Jewry.¹⁹⁹

To Stratford audiences used to nothing stronger than Arthur Burchier, Bouwmeester’s emotionalism must have been something of a shock:

The other notable moment was in his return to his house to find Jessica fled. Here he departed from the text to call out “Yessie” (i.e. Jessie) in a voice of agony, and fall down in an epileptic fit.²⁰⁰

...after Antonio has agreed to the bond, Shylock returns and curses the Christians. In the court scene, his glee when he finds that he has his enemy in his power is almost fiendish as he rolls his eyes and his tongue and kisses the blade that is to cut the pound of flesh. Then when he finds himself thwarted he gives his passion full play. He hurls himself about the stage in his anger, spits

¹⁹⁷ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 5 August, 1921.

¹⁹⁸ Reginald Denham *Stars in My Hair* (1958), p. 93, quoted by Gross, p. 166.

¹⁹⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 August, 1921.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

out his rage at the whole Christian race, and lurches out of the court a wounded animal rather than a baffled litigant... There is a good deal to be said for the French critic who declared that even his stick talks.²⁰¹

In this connection, the review from *The Times* is particularly interesting in what it reveals about audience taste and sensibility at that time:

[Bouwmeester] does not act with the reticence that foreigners associate especially with the English. He gives all his emotions full scope. When he laughs he shakes as though the joke were exquisitely humorous. When angered he curses and stamps and foams. Expression of emotion, even from the stage, always makes a British audience rather self-conscious, and to-day there was almost a titter when Mr Bouwmeester rose to the height of acting, on the return of Shylock to his home after Jessica had fled.

Cursed and abused by the revellers, he knocks on his own door in a comfortable state of fiendish anger. There is no answer, and gradually he begins to realise the truth. He goes right through the gamut of emotion from rage to despair, and finally rolls on the ground in an ecstasy of misery. It was a most wonderful piece of acting, yet at one point it was interrupted by hysterical laughter from some members of the audience and loud attempts to obtain silence from the remainder. It was a poor compliment to pay to the supreme piece of acting of a supreme actor.²⁰²

In this extravagant and protracted reaction to the discovery of Jessica's flight, Bouwmeester out-Irvinged Irving.

A concluding point to be made about Bouwmeester's performance is that it was possibly the most obvious example, since the opening of the Memorial Theatre in 1879 of the rôle being exploited as a star vehicle. Sullivan was well known, Bouchier charismatic and

²⁰¹ *The Times*, 23 March, 1920.

²⁰² *The Times*, 4 August, 1921.

Benson highly respected. But Bouwmeester, flying over at the age of seventy-nine to give his one matinée performance²⁰³, was in the Edmund Kean and Henry Irving tradition (later taken up notably by Olivier) in terms of his domination of the play and the star quality he brought to it:

It was not really *The Merchant of Venice* that was played to-day. It was *The Rise and Fall of Shylock*. Mr Bouwmeester was not merely the leading character in the play. He was the play itself. His very stick seemed to act and his clothes took on a histrionic dignity of their own. His acting in the scene where Tubal comes to rub his raw wound, while administering consolation by describing the misfortunes of Antonio, should be seen and studied by every aspiring actor in the country.²⁰⁴

Many of these comments on Bouwmeester could have been made about another foreign actor, who had assayed the part to considerable acclaim in London the year before. Maurice Moscovitch²⁰⁵, ‘a Russian Jew who [had] played Shylock in America and in Yiddish in the East End’²⁰⁶ gave his Court Theatre audiences a Jew who was ‘rather greasy, snuffling, with a strong sense of humour and not a shred of dignity.’²⁰⁷ The adjective most commonly applied to Moscovitch’s Shylock is ‘exotic’ and much was made of the fact that he played the part in a strong accent:

He speaks as a foreigner and you have the odd effect of Shakespeare with an accent...You might call him an adenoidal Shylock...²⁰⁸

²⁰³ As ‘an air sailor’, according to an impressed journalist in *The Evening News* (6 August, 1921).

²⁰⁴ *The Times*, 4 August, 1921.

²⁰⁵ Moscovitch, in fact, began at the Court Theatre on 9th October, 1919, Bouwmeester replacing him during the last two weeks of the run.

²⁰⁶ *The Times*, 10 October, 1919.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Mr Moscovitch's English, though quite clear and vigorous, has a foreign accent. That, of course, emphasises the isolation of Shylock, makes him patently a stranger in a strange land. With that and the look he gives the man, Mr. Moscovitch makes the most Jewish Shylock that any of us have seen...²⁰⁹

The 'Jewishness' of Moscovitch's Shylock is an important and interesting feature, which will be returned to below (page 73), but the great link with Bouwmeester is the sheer energy which Moscovitch gave to his performance, the extravagance of gesture and display of violent emotions (as can be seen in illustration 5, following page 76):

...he is... a Shylock charged with vitality...there is no under-playing, no reserved force about him. Watch him in the "my ducats and my daughter" mood. He is no more afraid of being ridiculous than any man driven wild with passion, he rings the changes violently, he cares nothing about keeping your sympathies.²¹⁰

When he hears from Tubal about Antonio's misfortune he positively dances with joy, round and round... He seizes Antonio and forces him to his knees. When foiled and dismissed he makes faces at the court in the impotency of his rage, his whole body writhing... He is overwhelmingly alive and grotesquely deadly, an obsession, a nightmare...²¹¹

For deprecating movements of the hands, shrugs, dubious slantings of the head, agitated shakings of the wrists, for a certain pervasive subserviency of manner, for effusiveness in cajolery, for homely expansiveness in joy, for childish abandonment to weeping (poor miserable puckered face!), for gusto in *schadenfreude*, his Shylock is perfect.²¹²

²⁰⁹ *Morning Post*, 10 October, 1919.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *The Times*, 10 October, 1919.

²¹² Desmond MacCarthy *Drama* (London: Putnam, 1940) p. 15 (quoted in Gross, p. 167).

Critics were unanimous in praising Moscovitch's Shylock for its integrity as an independent creation which seemed to owe nothing to Irving or to any other fashionable interpretation:

It is easiest to begin a description of acting in a familiar part by saying what it is not. Well, this Shylock of Mr Maurice Moscovitch is not a martyr; he is not a monster either, he is not the spirit of a tortured race or the fire of its revenge. He is, in fact, not anything on the heroic scale, not anything in the grand style.²¹³

It is an entirely different Shylock from the heroic, villainous or purely comic...²¹⁴

The new Shylock of Mr Maurice Moscovitch is wonderfully good. Indeed we can remember none better. He is neither a Minor Prophet²¹⁵ nor a Public Monument, but the Jew that Shakespeare drew or a very good guess at it...²¹⁶

It is tempting to read a sigh of relief into these reviews, as of critics who have at last seen a powerfully performed Shylock - 'acting of striking originality and force'²¹⁷ - unpolluted by an English tradition that was labouring as much under deliberate deviations from the Irving tradition as from slavish adherence to it.

Returning to Stratford, Arthur Phillips's portrayal of Shylock, given in the spring and summer seasons of 1924, is noteworthy in raising the question of how the presentation of

²¹³ *Morning Post*, 10 October, 1919.

²¹⁴ *Era*, 10 October, 1919.

²¹⁵ This might be an allusion to Frank Benson, whose Shylock was described on one occasion as resembling a 'Major Prophet' (Gordon Crosse *Shakespearean Playgoing 1890-1952* [London: Mowbray, 1953], p. 31).

²¹⁶ *The Times* 10 October, 1919.

²¹⁷ *Morning Post*, 10 October, 1919.

the Christians can influence our attitude to the Jew. The *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* wrote:

He was a being with the same feelings as the Christians; for all that he had in great degree all the demerits of his race and time. Arthur Phillips made him a really pathetic figure as his hopes of revenge crumbled to dust before the dread edict of the law.²¹⁸

The *Star* took this point a stage further by demonstrating how unstable the balance of sympathy in the play can be:

The neat balance of “The Merchant of Venice” was made precarious last night ...by a Shylock whose voice and manner invoked sympathy. A good, innocently-spoken Portia saved things by presenting her ultimatum in a manner almost as sympathetic, but the business was nearly undone by that sympathy for the distraught Shylock.²¹⁹

This is one of the more interesting observations from the theatre critics of the twenties, raising as it does the major question of what can happen to the play as a whole when Shylock is allowed to elicit sympathy. In its extreme form the play ends up being ‘The Tragedy of Shylock’²²⁰ or ‘The Rise and Fall of Shylock’²²¹. In the case of Phillips’s interpretation, an ‘innocently spoken’ (and presumably appealing) Portia saves matters by contriving to be ‘almost as sympathetic’.

The final Stratford Shylock from the 1920s was performed by George Hayes in the 1928 and 1929 seasons played in temporary accommodation after the destruction by fire of the

²¹⁸ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 2 May, 1924.

²¹⁹ *Star*, 11 June, 1924 (reviewing a performance by Arthur Phillips at the King’s Theatre, Hammersmith, London).

²²⁰ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 11 May, 1928, reviewing a performance with George Hayes as Shylock (see below, pages 66-68). The reviewer also remarked: ‘Even to go to Belmont after the trial is not to go there in spirit. Shylock is still pictured in the mind and one wonders constantly what has happened to him.’

²²¹ *The Times*, 4 August, 1921 (writing about Bouwmeester; see above, pages 60-63).

Old Memorial Theatre²²². Like Randle Ayrton before him²²³, Hayes presented a Jew who, in certain respects, was clearly recognisable to his audience, not an exotic alien, but

-

...a youngish, active, alert man of affairs, wasting no time on the details of business, pleasure and sentiment, and taking things very much as they came.

Ayrton's portrayal two years earlier had suggested a less dynamic figure, but the field of reference had still been the commercial world of the 1920s:

He portrays a portly dignified tradesman, prosperous in garb and commanding of respect in manner...²²⁴

Both, in their different - and smaller scale - ways, recall Irving's interpretation, which had suggested Disraeli and Rothschild, and both look forward first to Olivier's Edwardian City gentleman, then to Calder's cultured financier from the age of technology²²⁵.

Hayes's interpretation also occasioned a number of observations on its humour:

Shylock is habitually the jester, as Mr Hayes reveals in his manner of reply to Salerio's question -

"...thou wilt not take his flesh:

What's that good for?"

²²² The 1928 production had also played in Birmingham between the May and July Stratford seasons, where it had 'attracted a good deal of critical attention' (*Birmingham Mail*, 3 July, 1928).

²²³ Ayrton played Shylock in the April and July seasons of 1926 under Bridges-Adams's direction. His more notable Shylock, however, was in Komisarjevsky's famous production of 1932 (see below, pages 77-81).

²²⁴ *Birmingham Mail*, 15 April, 1926.

²²⁵ In the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of 1993-94. See below, pages 199-217.

The words “to bait fish withal” come hardly past the Jew’s lips. Wracked with mental agony he jests in spite of himself, yet shows a touch of disinterested surprise at his own wit.²²⁶

This critic was not alone in regarding the humour as intrinsic to a psychologically realistic portrayal:

The delivery of this one speech is diabolically clever in its psychological insight into the manner of human suffering and is capable of standing the most critical analysis.²²⁷

...and he enlivened the character with a view of naturalistic humour which was much appreciated.²²⁸

In all, Hayes’s Shylock, played with a ‘matter-of-fact quietness’²²⁹ and ‘much subtlety’²³⁰ seems to have been one of the more interesting interpretations from the era preceding the opening of the new theatre.²³¹ To at least one critic, it was also one of the most moving:

The cloak of fanaticism, loosened by the words of the clever young lady from Belmont, falls slowly from Shylock’s shoulders as the realisation comes to him that his self-appointed task cannot be executed, until finally, he stands there, much aged, merely as a man who has lost a

²²⁶ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 11 May, 1928. *The Birmingham Mail* was less impressed: ‘Mr Hayes makes little of the famous outburst beginning “To bait fish withal!” and elsewhere he seems to miss points which have been conventional “moments”, but his Shylock remains an interesting and original performance.’ (3 July, 1928)

²²⁷ *Birmingham Mail*, 3 July, 1928.

²²⁸ *Financial News*, 4 July, 1928.

²²⁹ *Birmingham Mail*, 18 April, 1929.

²³⁰ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 11 May, 1928.

²³¹ *Birmingham Mail* wrote that: ‘Mr Hayes, as he does always, made Shylock interesting and challenging. He was never one to follow a rut.’ (18 April, 1929). Hayes was to return to the rôle in the next two decades.

daughter. The passion has gone, if only temporarily, but the grief remains. Personally I have rarely been so moved in a theatre.²³²

The same critic also provides an interesting example of the difficulty experienced in attempting to define the feelings that Shylock can awaken if interpreted in particular ways. Here the writer seems to be referring more to the actor's commitment to the rôle than to audience response; but in making his point the two become indissolubly linked:

Mr George Hayes's performance is masterly... He shows the Jew's faith and his sincerity as he shows his mental suffering, not so much by gesture or inflection, but by something almost indefinable which, for convenience only, and because words are so inadequate, one calls depth of feeling, or, better still, sympathy.²³³

The London theatre scene, meanwhile, was still very much in its post-Moscovitch and Bouwmeester period. Henry Baynton²³⁴ attempted to match them for emotion and power ('...he has the rare gift of allowing passion to take him by the throat...'²³⁵), but seems to have lacked moderation in gesture:

...the mind cried out for peace from gesture, from the unending palsy that became almost a hand-waving. Face and voice were so splendidly used that a curse seemed upon the hands. "Hath not a Jew eyes?..." - If in that speech there could have been one tremendous stillness, one poise of emotion, how beautiful would its influence have been.²³⁶

²³² *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 11 May, 1928. The corresponding lack of sympathy for Portia shows clearly in the reference to 'the clever young lady from Belmont'.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Baynton's Shylock was seen in the Savoy Theatre from January, 1922.

²³⁵ *The Times*, 2 January, 1922.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

If the performances of Bouwmeester, Moscovitch and Baynton might be said to have been characterised by emotionalism and a leaning towards the grotesque, then those of their contemporaries Matheson Lang, Ernest Milton, Robert Atkins, Hay Petrie and Lewis Casson arguably presented an alternative Shylock whose distinguishing contrary qualities were stillness, moderation and a resemblance to 'normality'.

The tenor of Matheson Lang's interpretation may be gauged from the fact that he selected *The Merchant of Venice* for performance because it was 'delightful entertainment' which offered 'relief from the strain and anxiety of the war',²³⁷ but the quietest Shylocks from this period seem to have come from Ernest Milton and Robert Atkins. Milton's Shylock was: 'a dreamer, so played that one almost awaits the mystic line...';²³⁸ and Atkins seems at the beginning of his performance almost to have taken over from where the dreaming Milton left off:

...his opening as Shylock was surprising enough. He leaned his head against the wall while Bassanio spoke with him, a quiet, shy old man, bored rather than angry or resentful, and awakening slowly to his opportunity. We do not remember an opening more quiet...²³⁹

Hay Petrie's too was understated:

What it lacks is splendour. What it possesses is naturalness... Shylock has never seemed more intimate, more human, less a figure of the stage; there is no striking of attitudes, no burst of rhetoric, no reaching out for spectacular effect. just an old man, you would say - the friend of Tubal, the father of Jessica, lonely, vindictive, a little bewildered...²⁴⁰

²³⁷ From Lang's programme note to the production at the St James's Theatre in December, 1915, held in the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden.

²³⁸ *The Times*, 10 January, 1922, on Milton's performance at the Old Vic.

²³⁹ *The Times*, 16 January, 1923, on Atkins's performance at the Old Vic.

²⁴⁰ *The Times*, 8 April, 1924, on Hay Petrie's performance at the Old Vic.

James Agate declared this to be ‘a Shylock *intime*’, which

...restores the play’s balance, and brings it back into the region of comedy. There is pathos in his final exit. But the sun has not gone out for ever...²⁴¹

What these comments show is that, by the mid 1920s, different views had crystallised on how Shylock should be played. At one extreme were those like the critic from *The Times* who looked to Shylock for grandeur and ‘greatness’; at the other, those like the reviewer writing in the *Athenæum* about Murray Carrington’s Shylock in 1920²⁴² who was convinced of the need to play the character as ‘just an Elizabethan bogey-man, vamped up to outdo Marlowe’ and held that:

Only if he is treated as such will the trial-scene and the closing act of the play be freed from the jeering callousness and the anti-climax which now, thanks to Mr. Tree and M. Moscovitch, have infected them. Here we are in imminent danger of a definitely false tradition. Shylock is a part which should be given to the most melodramatic actor in the company with the instruction that he should speak English and let himself go.

Occupying the middle ground, there were people like James Agate who felt that either of these interpretations over-balances a play which, for all its shadows, should remain a comedy. Writing of Hay Petrie’s interpretation, he said:

He has as much pathos as may become the central figure in a comedy, sufficient dignity, and a nicely controlled amount of power. This Shylock is not a Lear uprooting oaks and leaving them lying around; the storm passes, and we are ready to bask in the sun again... To my mind this was the

²⁴¹ James Agate, from *The Contemporary Theatre, 1924*, quoted in *Brief Chronicles* (London, 1943), p. 52.

²⁴² Writing in the *Athenæum*, 7 May, 1920. See above, pages 58-60.

Jew of Shakespeare's imagining - half-way between the pre-Macklin buffoon and the high priest of Irving.²⁴³

When studying productions of *The Merchant of Venice* from the first three decades of this century, two further features stand out. One concerns Shylock's domination of the play in performance; the other, the ways in which actors and critics were beginning to respond to the character's 'Jewishness'.

Baliol Holloway, whose Shylock was first performed at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in April, 1921, is noteworthy for one particularly important development in the performance history of *The Merchant of Venice*. His later Old Vic production in 1925 is the first for which the reviews focused largely upon Portia rather than Shylock. This was due in no little measure to the fact that, although Holloway was an experienced and popular actor, his Portia was played by the young Edith Evans. As numerous newspaper reviews testify²⁴⁴, Portia was the centre of the play, and Edith Evans had recreated it as 'the comedy of the lady of Belmont' - if only for a few weeks in 1925²⁴⁵.

When Irving's Shylock burst upon the West End in 1879, much was made of the character's devotion to his faith²⁴⁶. Yet, for all that Irving's Shylock was clearly 'A Jew, in intellectual faculties, in spiritual discipline'²⁴⁷ and in his 'Hebraic dignity'²⁴⁸, there was little about him that was *Jewish*.

²⁴³ *Op cit.*, pp. 52-53.

²⁴⁴ See, for example, the *Tatler*, 23 September, 1925; the *Times*, 14 September, 1925; the *Standard*, 14 September, 1925; the *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September, 1925; and the *Morning Post*, 14 September, 1925.

²⁴⁵ The photograph in the *Tatler* (see illustration 6, following page 76) parallels the *Daily Telegraph* article in graphic form: Portia is shown full-faced, disdainfully glancing at Shylock's submission of the bond.

²⁴⁶ See above, pages 23-24.

²⁴⁷ Hiatt, p. 180.

²⁴⁸ Winter (1885), p. 34.

Irving's Shylock had the brains but lacked the characteristic temperament. He was not noticeably Jewish; or perhaps I should say that he had the grandeur, the mysticism, the austerity and poetry of the race, but lacked the familiar touches which make for recognition.²⁴⁹

The first actor who can be said to have displayed the 'characteristic temperament' sought by Agate was Beerbohm Tree. Drawing a distinction with Irving's portrayal and at the same time recalling 'previous states of existence in which he was Svengali and Fagin', a reviewer of Tree's first performance in the rôle records that:

The new Shylock lives (throughout Act II) in the Ghetto among the children of the Ghetto and many details for which Mr Tree is indebted to the courteous assistance of high Jewish authorities....
250

This picture of a 'rather extravagantly picturesque haunter of the ghetto'²⁵¹ (see illustration 4, following page 50) played for six seasons between 1908 and 1913, and might well have been seen by Matheson Lang, whose serious attempts at Jewish authenticity are attested to in his programme note.²⁵²

Lang's Shylock wore a yellow turban and 'the yellow badge of his tribe over his heart'. He bowed and 'salaamed' before the Christians, putting his hand to his forehead in salute and bowing low as he touched his yellow head-dress. He made great play of studying the Talmud on display in his house, sitting cross-legged 'like a Turk'²⁵³, saluted the Mezuzzah as he left home and muttered a Jewish prayer as he received the sentence of

²⁴⁹ Agate, p. 52.

²⁵⁰ *The Times*, 6 April, 1908.

²⁵¹ *The Times*, 10 June, 1913.

²⁵² See Matheson Lang's production note in the programme to the 1915 season at the St James's Theatre (Theatre Museum, Covent Garden).

²⁵³ *The Times*, 7 December, 1915.

forcible conversion. It must be said that this attempt at authenticity was made in the spirit of understanding; Lang had discussed the rôle with the Jewish writer Israel Zangwill and his emphasis on Shylock's Jewishness was all part of an intention to offer what he considered to be a fair and balanced picture:

Thus I endeavour to show every side of him: his good points and his bad, his better qualities and his worse; the big, fine, passionate nature that he was born with, and the mean, grovelling, petty habits which the ignoble treatment of his race had developed in his relationship with the hated Christians.²⁵⁴

Moscovitch's Shylock, four years after Lang's, was declared by one critic to have been 'the most Jewish Shylock that any of us have seen'²⁵⁵, an impression created by his exotic accent and appearance. Moscovitch, of course, was himself a Jew, a fact to which the caption-writer of the *Sketch* drew attention below four action photographs of the actor in dramatic poses (see illustration 5, following page 76):

It will be a very difficult thing for a mere Gentile to play Shylock after Mr. Moscovitch. He, being to the manner born, has all the gestures which no one who has not Semitic blood in his veins could have. His Shylock is not the poetical, dignified creation of Irving; but "the Jew that Shakespeare drew" ...²⁵⁶

This is, of course, a highly contentious assertion and raises a number of questions beyond the obvious one of whether a non-Jew can play a 'Jewish' Shylock effectively. For example, the 'gestures' to which the writer refers, together with the actor's facial expressions, bear ample testimony to the 'exotic' performance described by the

²⁵⁴ Lang's programme note.

²⁵⁵ *Morning Post*, 1919.

²⁵⁶ *Sketch*, 29 October, 1919.

reviewers. Audiences with modern tastes and sensibilities, however, might well condemn such a portrayal as offensive stereotyping.

Even more disconcerting for this modern reader is *The Times* critic's conclusion to his favourable first-night review. Praising the power of Moscovitch's acting in having created 'an obsession, a nightmare', he rounds off his critique thus:

...this Shylock is a terror. We do not excuse, but begin to understand, pogroms.²⁵⁷

Our knowledge of the events of twenty years on raises a shudder at such a comment, as it does at the news that, in one of Tree's performances,

...1,600 county council school children should rise as one and yell derision at the baffled Shylock.

There was no sated indifference, no mild depreciating enjoyment among these guests... and they screamed (it is the only word) with laughter at Gratiano's Jew-baiting. Indeed they were a delightful audience....²⁵⁸

Similarly troubling is this observation by St John Ervine on Lewis Casson's Shylock in 1927. According to Hubert Griffith, Casson played the Jew in 'a nose that must have weighed nearly half a pound' and 'made him filthy and unkempt.'²⁵⁹ This description does scarce justice to the reality, as evidenced in the *Daily Sketch*'s photographs (see illustration 7, following page 76) which show a character who is little short of a monstrous grotesque. St John Ervine, describing Casson's Shylock as looking like 'an old clo'man from the Palestine Road in Manchester' goes on to say:

²⁵⁷ *The Times*, 10 October, 1919.

²⁵⁸ *The Times*, writing about Beerbohm Tree's production, 6 July, 1909.

²⁵⁹ Hubert Griffith, *Standard*, 18 October, 1927.

Mr Ewer wrote a verse which runs thus: "How odd of God to choose the Jews." *That may be*, but such a choice cannot be made without enriching the chosen in some measure, and it is a prime defect of Mr Casson's performance that he does not for a single moment let us see that this humiliated man, Shylock, whose most sacred feelings are violated by that contemptible baggage, his daughter, is a member of a race which was once divinely-selected, *even if the selection was subsequently repented.*²⁶⁰ (*My italics*)

Looked at from our contemporary perspective, these anti-Semitic comments raise unanswerable questions about audience attitudes and response in performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during the early decades of the century.

Making moral judgements about performances and reviews of eighty years ago is a precarious activity and not the business of this present study. What can be said, however, is that these critical responses remind us that no Shylocks have been created in a social and political vacuum. In Germany in 1922, for example (a year in which there were three productions of *The Merchant of Venice* in London²⁶¹), Hitler was writing that if he came to power 'the annihilation of Jews will be my first and foremost task'²⁶²; and that was three years after the critic of *The Times* had announced that watching Moscovitch's Shylock caused him to 'begin to understand', if not actually 'excuse', pogroms.

²⁶⁰ St John Ervine, *Observer*, 23 October, 1927.

²⁶¹ These featured Henry Baynton at the Savoy, Ernest Milton at the Old Vic and Augustus Milner at the Duke of York's.

²⁶² RS Wistrich *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* (London: Mandarin, 1991), p. 66, citing J Toland *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Ballantyne, 1977).
p. 157.

CHAPTER 6

THE YEARS SPANNING WORLD WAR TWO

Much has been written²⁶³ about Theodore Komisarjevsky's 1932 version of the play as a revolutionary interpretation which once and for all marked a break with the enduring legacy of Irving's noble Jew. As I have attempted to show, Irving's influence was certainly not universally felt either in London or the provinces during the three decades following his death. Nonetheless, many of the key Shylocks from that period were in the Irving tradition, and it had been most strikingly kept alive at Stratford by the remarkable endurance of Frank Benson. Benson had himself acted with Irving and, although his Shylock was fiercer and more aggressive than Irving's, his acknowledgement to the master was apparent in a number of performance features, not least the business of returning to the empty house, the tender relationship with Jessica, the reaction to the loss of Leah's ring and his final departure from the trial. It was fitting, then, that the production of the play which immediately preceded Komisarjevsky's arrival on the Stratford stage in July 1932 should be the farewell performance given by Sir Frank Benson and the 'Old Bensonians'.²⁶⁴ The passage from the old era to the new could not have been more symbolically marked.

Despite that fact, Richard E Mennen's assertion that Komisarjevsky's was 'the first new interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* in over fifty years'²⁶⁵ warrants qualification when we come to focus on the portrayal of Shylock. While it is certainly true that no one before Komisarjevsky had hitherto set out to reject pictorial realism quite so single-mindedly, and, through his technique of 'internal eclecticism',²⁶⁶ restore what Mennen terms 'some of the play's complex, interpretive potential',²⁶⁷ the director's demand for a malicious and comic

²⁶³ Notably by Richard E Mennen and James C Bulman (see below).

²⁶⁴ The farewell performance by the 'Old Bensonians' was on 16 May, 1932. Komisarjevsky's production opened two months later, on July 25.

²⁶⁵ Richard E Mennen 'Theodore Komisarjevsky's Production of *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Theatre Journal* 31 (1979, pp. 386-397).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

Shylock was not in itself new. Several notable Shylocks - *inter alia*, those of Bouchier, Asche, Bouwmeester and Moscovitch - had rejected Irving's semi-tragic approach for one which emphasised the Jew's malice and vengefulness, and at least one of them - Moscovitch's - was, in respect of its grotesque comedy, even closer to Komisarjevsky's ideal than his own Shylock, Randle Ayrton.

Komisarjevsky was recorded as having stated before the 1932 performance that:

The point about Shylock is revenge, and revenge can never be sympathetic. There is a hint of triumph about the Jew, even at the crucial point in the court when everything has been taken from him.²⁶⁸

Ayrton certainly complied with his director's wishes in playing Shylock unsympathetically:

Only once does this Shylock claim the tragic dignity which belongs to a more impersonal hatred, and that is when he pleads the cause of a common humanity to Salerio and Salarino, wasting upon those exquisites his superb burst of passionate logic. For the rest of the play he is moved by a hatred that is beyond our sympathy. We know that he has at least three good reasons for loathing Antonio, but Mr Ayrton persuades us that beneath these motives there is something vulpine and instinctive.²⁶⁹

The *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, moreover, considered Ayrton's Shylock to be:

venomous and burning with as deep a hatred as any Shylock that we have seen...²⁷⁰

while the *Daily Mail* described him as:

...a monster of cruelty, crying at one moment, bullying at the next, only fit to deride or insult.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Interview in the *Daily Mail*, 7 July 1932.

²⁶⁹ *The Times*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁷⁰ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 29 July, 1932.

Even at his exit, the moment which offers itself most readily for some final call upon the audience's sympathy, Ayrton's Shylock remained implacably unattractive:

Rightly, he lets himself be dismissed from the Court without the least straining after heroic gesture, making an exit that well befits the crushed and sordid usurer who, once persuaded that the law has played him false, would now be only too content to take his three thousand ducats and let the Christian go.²⁷²

The *Daily Mail* also observed that:

As Mr Komisarjevsky sees him, Shylock has no redeeming qualities, except perhaps his racial pride. He has no longer a shred of dignity or authority, and is indeed often perilously near a low-comedy character.²⁷³

'A low-comedy character' might well have been 'as Mr Komisarjevsky [saw] him', but there remains some doubt as to how far this was how his Shylock, Randle Ayrton, saw him. While Ayrton was by all accounts quite happy to desentimentalise the Jew, in accord with his director's overall interpretation, there is conflicting evidence concerning whether or not he agreed to play him comically. Mennen cites Bruno Barnabe, who played Lancelot Gobbo, as having recalled that Ayrton refused to play a comic Shylock²⁷⁴, but also acknowledges newspaper reports which allude to Ayrton's 'refreshing, cynical humour'²⁷⁵ and his ability to be 'facetious when the text permitted',²⁷⁶ also admitting that his costume might have added a

²⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Daily Mail*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁷⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 394, citing a recorded interview with Bruno Barnabe (London, January, 1970).

²⁷⁵ *Daily Express*, 26 July, 19432.

²⁷⁶ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 29 July, 1932.

comic overtone.²⁷⁷ There are other reviews, too, which stressed the character's 'crisp wittiness',²⁷⁸ a quality seemingly enhanced by a 'casually conversational' tone²⁷⁹.

What is not clear is whether these comments are simply indications of a witty Shylock whose humour we can admire, or a low comic character who is *the target* of a crueller kind of laughter. Perhaps Ayrton's Shylock had elements of both: certainly, the review in the *Birmingham Post* seems to indicate that this might have been the case:

Another great gain is Mr Randle Ayrton's impersonation of the Jew as a Jew, with an amusing accent and a sense of humour which is quite unexpected. During the first half the laugh seems to be entirely on his side, though in the end it is turned against him...²⁸⁰

Mennen's assertion that 'Randle Ayrton refused to play a comic Shylock'²⁸¹ might therefore be misleading, depending, as it does, upon the recollections of Bruno Barnabe. Barnabe was, after all, himself a comic actor who had studied mime under Komisarjevsky (and who might therefore be considered partisan), an actor whose Harlequin-like Lancelot Gobbo featured much horseplay and was considered the comic centre of the production.²⁸² Evaluations of the available reviews suggest more that Ayrton's Shylock *was* played for comedy, but that it was not as low a comedy as Komisarjevsky might have wanted; that it was, in fact, exactly as the *Daily Mail* had described it: no more than '*perilously near* a low-comedy character' (my italics). The more detailed reviews, in fact, such as those in *The Times* and the *Birmingham Post*, suggest that the conflict - if such it was - between Ayrton's interpretation of Shylock, and Komisarjevsky's vision of the play as a whole, gave rise to a creative tension which,

²⁷⁷ *Daily Mail*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁷⁸ *Birmingham Mail*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁷⁹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 26 July, 1932.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ *Op cit.*, p. 395.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 395. A recent Lancelot Gobbo who recalled Barnabe in his physicality was Marcello Magni in the 1998 production at the Globe. (See below, page 257, note 5.)

fortuitously, served to create one of the most subtle and complex interpretations of Shakespeare's Jew to date.

Shortly before the first night of Komisarjevsky's *Merchant of Venice*, he is reported to have remarked that:

Bassanio, Lorenzo, Gratiano, Salarino, and the rest - will be put in their place. They will be shown as the dissipated, fast, bright young people like the crowd we have in London today.²⁸³

As Bulman observes:

Komisarjevsky alludes to the spoiled darlings of England's moneyed classes who seemed oblivious to the fact that the economic system which had kept them rich had also led to a terrible depression. In his production, then, comic romance gave way to topical satire, and moral sententiousness to a light-hearted indictment of contemporary social values.²⁸⁴

In ways that bring to mind David Thacker's 'yuppie' production of 1993 (see below, pages 199-217), Komisarjevsky judged that his interpretation might be enhanced by a dimension of topicality. And this is important inasmuch as it demonstrates that productions of the play from the mid-thirties to the late-forties had the option of topical reference if they chose to take it. That no major production during that period did choose to take it - by presenting unambiguous parallels between the treatment of Shylock and the persecution of the Jews under Hitler - is one of the more perplexing features of this challenging play's stage history. In fact, many of the major productions of *The Merchant of Venice* during the thirties and forties could hardly have been less topical in their presentation of the conflict between the Jews and the Christians had they tried. Gielgud, for example, directing the play at the Old Vic

²⁸³ *Birmingham Mail*, 7 July, 1932.

²⁸⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 65.

in the same year as Komisarjevsky's Stratford production, deliberately shifted the emphasis of the plot away from Shylock (played by Malcolm Keen), making Portia the centre of a play which was studiedly unrealistic in design.²⁸⁵ Many later productions sound merely bland, such as that at the New Theatre in 1943:

Here ...is a treatment which in style gives the public what it has never ceased to want - a chance to enjoy the story as a story, with its fairy-tale romance...²⁸⁶

Others, such as Wolfit's in 1938, seem in retrospect quite remarkable for the savagery of their interpretation at a time when they might have been expected to be wary of charges of - at the least - insensitivity, and possibly anti-Semitism:

...[Wolfit's] Shylock is then the kind of Jew whose humiliation an Elizabethan audience would probably have revelled in, the very Jew the bare plot seems to require, one who, as he leaves the court, spits in the face of Antonio...²⁸⁷

In many ways even more extraordinary, when we consider the political context from which they arose, are portrayals which emphasised Shylock's physical repulsiveness (a theme which will also be pursued in the following chapter). Most striking in this respect are Mark Dignam's Shylock, in a 1935 production 'purged of its Irvingesque sentiment and Shakespearean humanity',²⁸⁸ and Gielgud's, performed in the year preceding the outbreak of war. Both of these recall vividly those German propaganda posters which sought to represent Jews as skulking rats:

²⁸⁵ *Spectator*, 16 December, 1932.

²⁸⁶ *The Times*, 17 February, 1943, reviewing a production at the New Theatre, in which Shylock was played by Frederick Valk.

²⁸⁷ *The Times*, 4 October, 1938, reviewing Wolfit at the People's Palace.

²⁸⁸ *The Times*, 3 December, 1935.

[Dignam's] Shylock, a dirty, down-at-heel moneylender in a bowler hat several sizes too big for him, has no shred of dignity left, and whether bewailing the loss of his ducats and his daughter or pleading the cause of a common humanity he is never more than a grotesque little man in a temper.²⁸⁹

[Gielgud's] ...Shylock: puling, remorseless, toothless - utterly revolting in the remnants of a ginger wig...²⁹⁰

[Gielgud's] appearance throughout was extraordinary - gummy, blinking eyes, that suggested some nasty creature of the dark...²⁹¹

John Gross's observation upon the theatre's bewildering silence seems, therefore, to me to be over generous:

In retrospect, responses to Hitler during the 1930s are bound to seem slow and inadequate (as indeed most of them were), and it would be absurd to single out the theatre in this regard, let alone the Shakespearean theatre. Ideally, it is true, one might have hoped for a shift in emphasis in productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, an oblique recognition that contemporary events had given the play frightening new overtones. But while such a thing was always possible, it was never very likely; and in the event, it was not to be.²⁹²

As Gross himself acknowledges,²⁹³ it was not unknown for newspaper critics to allude to Jewish persecution when reviewing the play. In fact, the allusions are less rare than he implies. For example, the phrases 'Jew-baiters' and 'Jew-baiting' appear frequently to describe the Christians when they are portrayed as tormentors of Shylock, as exemplified by these three examples from *The Times* in different years:

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Daily Express*, 22 April, 1938.

²⁹¹ *New Statesman*, 7 May, 1938.

²⁹² *Op cit.*, p. 178.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp 181-182.

If [an Elizabethan] retained his taste for a little Jew-baiting he might have laughed uproariously at the despairing rage of the crafty alien usurer... (26 July, 1932);

Jew-baiters these Christians might be... (15 April, 1936);

...and a Jew baited by the Venetian riff-raff... (17 February, 1944).

Moreover, the following review comments make it perfectly clear that theatre critics could see the topicality of Shylock's persecution, even if the productions themselves were determined to ignore it:

FEMINISM AND JEW-BAITING

MODERN MR. SHAKESPEARE

...Though set in medieval Venice it is full of modern interest. Feminism: the leading woman is a lawyer. Anti-Semitism: there are Jew-baiting street scenes...²⁹⁴

"The Merchant of Venice", which was produced by Mr Iden Payne, the Festival director, at Stratford-on-Avon Memorial Theatre, yesterday, is one of the most-played and most popular of the Shakespearean dramas.

That fact is somewhat remarkable in these days, when Jew-baiting has ceased to be the sport of gentlemen. ...One is forced to the conclusion that in the "Merchant of Venice", though Shakespeare started his play as an anti-Semite, before he had finished it he found himself with his tongue in both cheeks.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ *Daily Express*, 15 March, 1934, reviewing a production of the play at the Alhambra.

²⁹⁵ *Birmingham Gazette*, 16 April, 1936.

At a time when Jews are being driven to mass-suicide by unsurpassed brutalities, the spectacle of Shylock's baiting becomes almost unbearable.²⁹⁶

There can be few reviews from the period which so eloquently testify to the fact that critics were as alert to the play's topicality as producers and directors were blind to it. And this blindness seems to have been wilful rather than inadvertent. Discussing Bridges-Adams's production of *Coriolanus* in the 1933 season at Stratford, Dennis Kennedy writes:

Aware of the topicality of a play concerned with popular elections and military threats - Hitler had been appointed Chancellor just three months before the opening - Bridges-Adams nonetheless felt himself to be a "custodian of eternal values" and steadfastly avoided political overtones in the production. He thought it "shockingly improper" when a theatre artist "turns his stage into a platform and takes sides in the temporal issues that divide us."²⁹⁷

Kennedy effectively exposes the position of people like Bridges-Adams when he says:

Nothing shows the retreat of British Shakespeare from the external conditions of the world more clearly than the decision of a director of the official Shakespeare theatre to treat *Coriolanus*, in 1933, as "a very simple play, dependent mainly on sincerity and drive." Later that same year a production at the Comédie Française was read by audiences as an attack on the socialist government, and demonstrations from the left and right disrupted the performances night after night, causing their eventual cancellation. But British audiences, neither attuned to find messages in classic drama nor encouraged to see them by the SMT performance, remained aloof from the contemporary applications of Shakespeare's most insistently political play. The director ostensibly strove for a balanced view, but he had managed to make the play "very simple" by substantially cutting the political speeches and some of the minor political arguments.

²⁹⁶ *New Statesman*, 7 May, 1938.

²⁹⁷ Dennis Kennedy *Looking at Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) p 126. He quotes from Bridges-Adams's *Looking at a Play* (p. 32) and from an interview in the *Birmingham Mail*, 25 April 1933.

In fairness to Bridges-Adams, it has to be observed that he did take the bold step of inviting Komisarjevsky to Stratford, a director whose views were the antithesis of the Englishman's theatrical parochialism, and who wrote, for example, that:

...it is absurd to assert, as some do, that the art of the theatre is a purely aesthetic function and has nothing to do with "propaganda", either moral, religious or political.²⁹⁸

But perhaps the Russian, with his confused political ideals (he seems to have been a proponent of the socialist dictatorships, and regarded the herding of Jews into Nazi concentration camps as an understandable concomitant to 'any mass progressive movement',²⁹⁹) was never likely to inspire in the English theatre an enthusiasm for political commitment.

Returning to the contemporary press, I would furthermore like to suggest that scrutiny of the national newspapers during the thirties and forties brings to light an additional factor to which Gross does not refer, but which renders the theatrical silence concerning the Jews in Europe even harder to comprehend. This is the regular and prominent publication of articles throughout that period which drew the public's attention to the link between Shakespeare's play and the plight of the Jews in Germany. These articles were of three kinds. The first catalogued the Nazis' determination to establish and define their relationship to Britain's greatest dramatist; the second expressed the growing unease among the Jews in Britain concerning the study of *The Merchant of Venice* in schools; the third took the form of a series of forceful reminders in the newspapers, by journalists and correspondents alike, of the obvious link between Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew...?' and the persecution of his people by the Nazis.

²⁹⁸ Theodore Komisarjevsky *The Theatre and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane, 1935) p. 2.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; quoted by Bulman, p. 73.

Throughout the 1930s articles such as the following are commonly to be found in the British press:

Shakespeare “Especially Dear” to Nazis Berlin, Monday

“Nordic thought and Nordic character are stamped through and through the creations of Shakespeare, but, in addition, no one is more definitely Germanic.”

This is the conclusion of an article by Herr Thilo von Trothe, an official of the Foreign Dept of the Nazi Party, who refers to the poet’s “ancient, heroic, warlike view of life.”

Shakespeare, he says is “especially dear to us of the present day who are experiencing the Nordic rebirth.”³⁰⁰

Wilhelm Shakespeare

Not for the first time, Germany has acclaimed Shakespeare as “a true German”. He appears to be, if anything, rather truer than before.

Professor Hecht pointed out yesterday that “the more heroic ideals” of Nazi Germany make it possible to view the poet’s personality in quite a new light.

I would give a lot to see a production of “The Merchant of Venice” in Berlin today.³⁰¹

In many respects the last sentence is the most interesting, one of many comments which show that, even if the theatre itself were not acknowledging the obvious links between the behaviour of the Nazis and Shylock’s tormentors, journalists in the popular newspapers were. The German obsession with Shakespeare was, in fact, frequently reported upon. In February of 1936 the *Manchester Guardian* commented that Dr Goebbels was to make a decision concerning the ‘Proper Translation’ of Shakespeare, the choice to be made between

³⁰⁰ *Evening Standard*, 27 April, 1936.

³⁰¹ *Evening Standard*, 26 April, 1934. Similar articles appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* (26 April, 1934) and the *Morning Post* (27 April, 1934) which reported Professor Hecht as having claimed that Shakespeare - the ‘greatest poet of the Germanic race’ - was ‘In the realm of the theatre... as German as the German classic dramatists themselves.’

Schlegel's eighteenth century version and a modern one by Hans Rothe³⁰². The year before, the *Daily Express* had informed its readers that 21 theatres in Germany were currently staging Shakespeare's works and that no fewer than 46 productions of his plays were to be presented in the 1935-36 season³⁰³. Less neutral is the following report in the *Evening Standard*, an article which obliges the reader to consider the wider implications of the Nazi philosophy and its proponents' interest in Shakespeare:

Shakespeare As "Germanic Poet"

Weimar, Wednesday

"If Shakespeare's plays are performed with success in Moscow and Harlem, New York's negro quarter," declared Professor Werner Deetjen, president of the German Shakespeare Society, in his opening speech to this year's meeting of the society at Weimar, "it is because they misunderstand this great Germanic poet."

...Professor Guenther endeavoured to show how Shakespeare, in his attitude to the problem of choosing a companion in marriage, laid stress "not on numerical fertility, but on the qualitative breeding of a finer race," and compared him in this respect to Nietzsche, the German philosopher of the "Superman".³⁰⁴

Moreover, as Nazi oppression becomes more widely reported, so the perspective of *The Merchant of Venice* is more commonly invoked:

Shakespeare Verboten

The latest restriction is that Jewish booksellers must not sell Shakespeare...

³⁰² *Manchester Guardian*, 8 February, 1936.

³⁰³ *Daily Express*, 23 September, 1935.

³⁰⁴ *Evening Standard*, 28 April, 1937. In the following year, the same newspaper carried a similar report, under the headline 'Weimar and the Fuehrer': '...I do not think that the Fuehrer himself has as yet referred to Shakespeare in his speeches. But his lieutenant, Dr Goebbels, has given the Bard the Nazi OK. Shakespeare, he once said, had more in him of the Teuton than of the modern Englishman.' (*Evening Standard*, 7 November, 1938). Further articles in which the Nazis claimed Shakespeare as their own appeared in *The Times* and the *Evening Standard* (both 24 April, 1940) and the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* (both 25 April, 1940)

...If the Nazis want to be true to their quaint principles, they should compel Jews to sell copies of “The Merchant of Venice” as an additional humiliation.³⁰⁵

While the Nazis were busy accommodating Shakespeare to their philosophies and reshaping him for their own particular ends, British Jews were similarly, but more painfully, coming to the conclusion that *The Merchant of Venice* did not and could not exist in a political and social vacuum. The absence of debate on the stage seems even more remarkable when we read an article such as the following:

SHYLOCK AS HERO

JEWISH COMPLAINT OF MISINTERPRETATION

Was Shylock a hero or a villain? The question, which has been canvassed for some years among literary critics, has now been brought forward by the Board of Deputies of British Jews as a matter which affects them wherever “The Merchant of Venice” (or Mary Lamb’s story of the play) is taught in schools.

It is urged by the Board that the “unsympathetic” interpretation of the character creates a prejudice in the minds of schoolchildren against Jews.

No objection is taken to the play, the greatness of which is recognised, but it is felt that, either the play should not be taught in schools, or that the character of Shylock should be “interpreted” by the teacher in such a way that the dignity and nobility of the Jew should not be obscured by the less pleasant traits of his character.

It may be remembered that in the opinion of some critics, Shylock, by contrast with the other male characters, emerges as a heroic figure.

³⁰⁵*Evening Standard*, 19 August, 1937. On the same day, under a headline which read: ‘SHAKESPEARE NOT TO BE SOLD BY JEWS. NEW ‘ARYAN’ BOOKS RESTRICTION. NAZI CAMPAIGN TO FORCE EMIGRATION’, the *Daily Telegraph* reported: ‘...The latest restriction concerns Jewish booksellers. Under an order which came into force at the beginning of this month, they may only sell books by Jewish authors and serve only Jewish customers, who must present written evidence of their racial origin.’ This item was ominously linked to a report that Jews were now unable to leave the country unless they were emigrating. (*Daily Telegraph*, 19 August, 1937).

No action is at present contemplated by the Board but the position is being carefully watched. If necessary, they will protest to the Board of Education.³⁰⁶

When seen in the context of the reports which were at this time coming out of Germany, it is not difficult to appreciate the Board's anxiety. It is impossible to know how individual teachers were handling the play in schools; but what is certain is that the British newspaper-reading public was repeatedly made aware of the connection between Jewish persecution and Shylock's famous plea, especially in popular and patriotic publications such as the *Daily Express*:

THE JEWS

Hitler's treatment of the Jews calls to mind the following lines: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases... as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

These words of Shakespeare are the only comments necessary on the Nazi persecutions.

Edinburgh S. Marcus³⁰⁷

JEWS

This renewed attack on Jews in Germany, not because of any individual offence but in blind antagonism to a race, is merely bestial. "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes... [etc.] The Merchant of Venice."³⁰⁸

Heil Hitler!

Hitler, studying Shakespeare, must have picked on this bit:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases... as a Christian is? If you prick

³⁰⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 2 August, 1934.

³⁰⁷ *Daily Express*, 11 April, 1933.

³⁰⁸ *Daily Express*, 17 September, 1935.

us, do we not bleed? For Herr Loeffler, Nazi leader, announces that persons spreading the idea that Jewish blood is not permissible for transfusion are guilty of damaging the health of the people since it results in unnecessary restrictions when quick action is essential.

The blood, of course, becomes Aryan on transfusion.³⁰⁹

The story of *The Merchant of Venice* and Hitler's persecution of the Jews is like that of Conan Doyle's dog that did not bark in the night. And it has more than one ironic coda. The first is that, although, as we have seen, Shakespeare's plays were widely performed in the Third Reich, *The Merchant of Venice* was not:

During the Nazi period there was a sharp drop in the number of performances [of *The Merchant of Venice*]. Whereas previously it had averaged twenty to thirty productions every year with about two hundred performances, after 1933 the average dropped to less than a third, in 1939 to an all-time low of three productions totalling twenty-three performances. The most flattering explanation is that a sense of shame stopped most theatre managements from adding insult to injury, and it is worth noting that there does not seem to have been more than a single production of the play in Berlin during the whole period.³¹⁰

A related irony is that, while the Folk House in Stepney was celebrating the end of the war with a Yiddish production of the play³¹¹, it was being banned in Frankfurt -

...as a result of threats and protests from Jewish and Communist quarters, who claimed that 'Shylock cannot be portrayed on the stage without re-awakening anti-Semitism.'³¹²

³⁰⁹ *Daily Express*, 22 October, 1935. The writer's juxtaposition of '...do we not bleed?' with a report about transfusions is matched only by the journalist who chose to quote Portia's 'take thou thy pound of flesh' speech in an article on meat rationing. (*Daily Express*, 11 March, 1940).

³¹⁰ Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 134-135.

³¹¹ The performance was advertised in the *Daily Express* on 9 September, 1946. Myer Zelnicker played Shylock and his daughter, Anna, Portia.

³¹² *Sunday Express*, 29 December, 1946. Earlier that year a brief report had appeared in the same newspaper: 'TO BE The German Shakespeare Society will be reestablished next Sunday. - Reuter.' (*Sunday Express*, 17 February, 1946)

The Stepney production, by virtue of its Yiddishness, must have contained at least some implicit allusion to recent history. But, for the mainstream theatre, it was as though nothing had happened:

The Jew of Mr John Ruddock is like some blandly smiling archimandrite showing a party of foreign visitors over his monastery... and when he ventures to ask if a Jew has not passions like other men, we can only suppose that he has not...³¹³

And it was not as though there had been some tacit agreement to keep Shakespeare free from the taint of politicisation. In 1944 Olivier's film of *Henry V* had been prefaced by a dedication to 'the commandoes and airborne forces...' and was, two years later, being shown in Berlin to 1800 students and school children.³¹⁴ It seems strange that a version of *Henry V* could have been made as virtually an institutionalised part of the war effort, while productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, even after pictures of the concentration camps had appeared on cinema screens throughout the land, remained doggedly silent about the greatest atrocity in the history of the twentieth century. This bewildering dent in the reputation of actors as 'the abstract and brief chronicles of the time' will be considered further in the next chapter.

³¹³ *The Times* 14 July, 1947, reviewing *The Merchant of Venice* at Stratford.

³¹⁴ 'Before each performance a short address is being given by an officer of the education section of Military Government, which regards the film as useful material for German re-education' (*The Times*, 2 February, 1946).

CHAPTER 7

THE POST-WAR PERIOD

While memorable for some entertaining and well reviewed Shylocks, the three decades from the end of the war to the mid 1970s were not notable for innovative interpretations. (The one exception - the National Theatre production of 1970 - will be the subject of the following chapter.) Robert Helpmann's performance, for example, was typical in being described as a 'strong, old-fashioned Shylock'³¹⁵; while Michael Redgrave's was 'not afraid to be thought conventional'³¹⁶. Of the performances which received most critical attention during that period - those of Robert Helpmann, Paul Rogers, Donald Wolfit, Michael Redgrave, Emyln Williams, Peter O'Toole, Eric Porter, Laurence Olivier and Emrys James - only Olivier's and O'Toole's stand apart from the rest as being unconventional for their time. The majority flowed with the current in portraying malicious and vengeful Jews whose nastiness - and extravagant 'stage Jewishness' - were reflected in their appearance and mannerisms.

Of Robert Helpmann's Shylock, for example, the critics wrote:

The small, neat Helpmann features were completely submerged in a melancholy black-haired Hebraic make-up - tortured eyes, red, sensuous lips, and the noblest nose in all Jewry...³¹⁷

...this Helpmann Jew ...is like a sad, bedraggled vulture - crook-back, hook-nosed, grotesque. Malice peers from sunken eyes, defiance yowls from twisted lips...³¹⁸,

an interpretation from an actor who was himself a Jew - the first to play the rôle on the Stratford stage, in fact. Michael Redgrave's interpretation was of a 'slobbering, hideous old

³¹⁵ *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 20 April, 1948.

³¹⁶ *The Times*, 18 March, 1953.

³¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 20 April, 1948.

³¹⁸ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 April, 1948.

Jew'³¹⁹, 'greasy, hissing, hiccouging...'³²⁰, a preview of which the actor had given to a visiting journalist the day before the first performance:

The players were not in costume, but in his dressing room Mr Redgrave put on his wig and beard and a cleverly constructed nose and let me have a glimpse of the Jew my colleagues will see tomorrow night...³²¹

Emlyn Williams's 'repulsive, Fagin-like Shylock'³²² was 'a matted and slightly disgusting old figure'³²³, 'unwashed, leering, greasy'³²⁴, 'insect-like'³²⁵, 'a kind of revengeful, Hebraic gnome'³²⁶, a portrayal summarised by one headline as 'Squalid - But the Real Shylock'³²⁷.

A photograph in the *Observer* shows that Eric Porter's Shylock was given bags under the eyes and a long hooked nose³²⁸, and confirms the accuracy of JC Trewin's description of him as:

...not a major prophet but an old pinched figure with hooded eyes, looking drably like that most meagre of the Jews before Pilate in an early Rembrandt picture.³²⁹

It is easy to see from the photograph what Robert Speaight meant about Porter when he observed that:

There was indeed something vulture-like in his whole treatment of the part...³³⁰

³¹⁹ *Daily Express*, 18 March, 1953.

³²⁰ *Daily Herald*, 18 March, 1953.

³²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 16 March, 1953.

³²² *Gloucester Echo*, 18 April, 1956.

³²³ *Financial Times*, 18 April, 1956.

³²⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 20 April, 1956.

³²⁵ Samuel L Leiter (ed.), *Shakespeare Around the Globe* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), p. 431.

³²⁶ *Birmingham Post*, 20 April, 1956.

³²⁷ *Birmingham Sunday Mercury*, 22 April, 1956.

³²⁸ *Observer*, 4 April, 1965.

³²⁹ JC Trewin writing in the *Birmingham Post*, 17 April, 1965.

³³⁰ Quoted in Leiter, p. 424.

Emrys James depended for his repulsiveness less upon make-up than saliva. Described by one critic as

Barefoot, robed in old curtains, with a mouthful of spittle...³³¹,

James was

a medieval Jewish stereotype in a large, baggy kaftan, with grey ringlets spilling from beneath his skull cap.³³²

The same reviewer went on:

This is a Jew straight out of the Penny Dreadful magazines, literally salivating at the thought of his pound of Christian flesh.

In accord with their attempt at physical repulsiveness, most of these actors elected to convey what they saw as the racial origins of the character by adopting an appropriately grotesque manner of speech and gesture. In this, they seem to have drawn upon the still familiar tradition of comic stage Jews. Of Helpmann's Shylock, the reviewers observed:

Certain stock stagey tricks of Jewish speech and gesture crept in - the ponderous lisp, the extravagant shrug...³³³

³³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 31 March, 1971.

³³² *Daily Express*, 31 March, 1971.

³³³ *Daily Mail*, 20 April, 1948.

...as played by Robert Helpmann, this was an unimpressive figure, with a rolling eye, a prodigal indulgence in formalised gesture, an extravagant make-up and a delivery which suggested the raconteur rather than the actor.³³⁴

Where [Helpmann's] tirades fail in force, gesticulation lends its point...³³⁵

Writing of Redgrave's delivery, the critic of the *Evesham Journal* offers the following attempt at a phonetic transcription:

'Ugh! what zees Christians are... I will buy wiz you...' etc.³³⁶

and somewhat surprisingly refers to this as the actor's 'skilfully accented voice'. Emlyn Williams and Emrys James are described respectively as 'talking something between a Welsh lilt and a Hebraic lisp'³³⁷ and perpetrating 'strange oscillations between stage Jew and Welsh preacher.'³³⁸ James is also guilty of

plenty of 'Oi - yoi - yoi' noises and low, throaty giggles³³⁹,

which mannerism, interestingly, is apparently enough to establish him in the eyes of the reviewer as 'a stage villain, in fact.'

The repulsive appearance, the lipping, the extravagant gestures all seem to have contributed to the reviewers' perception of 'Jewishness', a quality undefined but much alluded to in the decade following the end of the war:

³³⁴ *Birmingham Mail*, 20 April, 1948. This portrayal also gave rise to the headline HELPMANN'S SHYLOCK IS NOT A MAN, with the explanatory comment: 'it is a "character"...' (*Daily Worker*, 20 April, 1948).

³³⁵ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 April, 1948.

³³⁶ *Evesham Journal*, 21 March, 1953.

³³⁷ *Financial Times*, 18 April, 1956.

³³⁸ *Guardian*, 1 April, 1971.

³³⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 31 March, 1971.

Mr Helpmann's Shylock is abundantly Jewish, even to spoken "v's" for "w's" ...³⁴⁰

[Paul Rogers makes] one remember how Maurice Moscovitch brought out the Jewishness in the part...³⁴¹

[Wolfit's Shylock] is a beautifully observed study of what, for want of a better word, we may call Jewishness.³⁴²

Almost all the portrayals from Helpmann to James were founded upon a system of well established signs which audiences could be relied upon to read without difficulty, and were predicated upon a logic which - however much the directors might have denied it - appeared to go like this: villains are repulsive in appearance; Jews lisp and shrug and have matted hair, hooded eyes, hooked noses and full lips; Jews are therefore villains. That this was a common train of thought is testified to by the critic who wrote about Emyln Williams's interpretation:

As portrayed by Mr Williams, Shylock was villainous and even repulsive in appearance... A cringing Jew... A whining cur...³⁴³

Here he inadvertently speaks for many of his colleagues when he damningly links his idea of 'a cringing Jew' with villainy and physical repulsiveness. This craven surrender to sloppy thinking and the distressing dependence upon stereotyping are - to say the least - surprising, given the time in which they prevailed.

Even more extraordinary was the critic who could write:

³⁴⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 21 April, 1948.

³⁴¹ *The Times*, 7 January, 1953.

³⁴² *The Times*, 10 March, 1953.

³⁴³ *South Wales Argus*, 18 April, 1956.

Mr Campbell's make-up is convincing, his accent is Hebraic to the very limit of authenticity and he blusters like a Nazi.³⁴⁴

Contemporary reviews do not record whether this actor (who took over from Paul Rogers at the Old Vic in February, 1953) had actually drawn the audience's attention to the link between Shylock's treatment and the Nazi persecutions. It seems just as likely that the critic had no conscious point in mind when using this particular simile.

One reviewer pertinently asked of Emlyn Williams's portrayal ('repulsive' ... 'disgusting-looking' ... 'squalid'): 'Why must Shylock so often look dirty and bedraggled?'³⁴⁵ Not one critic noted that the same actor wore a prominent Star of David on his chest³⁴⁶, which suggests that, even though the connections with recent history had been made by the designer, the performer's portrayal failed to convey them. In the case of Redgrave, the actor had even visited Holland prior to his performance, a country whose Jewish population had experienced terrible suffering only a few years before, and he was said to be 'basing his portrayal on some of the Jews he met in Amsterdam.'³⁴⁷ How this personal contact encouraged him to portray a 'slobbering, hideous old Jew' is hard to imagine. So unpleasant was the portrayal, argued the critic of the *Daily Herald*, that

he could never put the performance on the screen, for America would ban it.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ *Sunday Express*, 1 February, 1953, writing about Douglas Campbell's Shylock.

³⁴⁵ The reviewer in the *Gloucester Echo* (18 April, 1956), writing about Emlyn Williams's Shylock.

³⁴⁶ This can be seen in the photograph in the *Leamington Courier*, 20 April, 1956.

³⁴⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 16 March, 1953.

³⁴⁸ *Daily Herald*, 18 March, 1953. Five years before this, the American Legion of Decency had demanded that 40 minutes should be cut from Olivier's film of *Hamlet* (reported in the *Daily Express*, 30 June, 1948) and in 1949 the New York Board of Education was threatened with legal action if it refused to ban *Oliver Twist* and *The Merchant of Venice* from its schools. Both were alleged by Joseph Goldstein, a former New York magistrate, to be anti-Semitic, inculcating 'bitter hatred and malice against American citizens of the Jewish faith' and instilling in children 'an unwholesome prejudice and hatred against the Jews' (*Daily Telegraph*, 26 March, 1949 and *Daily Express*, 28 March, 1949).

Yet this ability of British actors to dissociate the portrayal of Shylock from its wider contemporary context seems not only to have been accepted by critics, but even applauded. One reviewer, commenting on Helpmann's 'thoroughly satisfying villain' of a Shylock in 1948, congratulated the actor on succeeding in:

...convincing a modern audience that this is what Shakespeare meant. No mean feat, for recent events in Europe and the many excellences of more sympathetic Shylocks have obscured the fact that Shakespeare's Jew is very far indeed from the dignified martyr that some actors would have him.³⁴⁹

It seems to me extraordinary that, at a time when the topicality of other plays was being recognised and translated into theatrical reality,³⁵⁰ not one critic thought it relevant to point out that Helpmann was himself a Jew; and that he should be praised for allowing his interpretation of Shakespeare's Jew to remain uninfluenced by contemporary history and by the enormity of 'recent events in Europe'.

One actor did not remain so uninfluenced, and did not play Shylock either. On 16 January, 1960, an article by Orson Welles appeared in the *Morning Post*, carrying the headline: 'Why I won't play Shylock ... at any rate not just now.' Welles's testament has a tendency to self-dramatisation and he admits his occasional pomposity; many would say that its major conclusions are also flawed. But it is worth quoting from as it provides the contemporary perspective that actors from John Gielgud in 1938 through to Emrys James in 1971 - all with their villainous and physically repulsive Shylocks - appear not to have taken.

³⁴⁹ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 23 April, 1948.

³⁵⁰ Examples include the 1948 *Coriolanus* at the Old Vic ('Topical Shakespeare' - *Sunday Express*, 4 April, 1948) and the 1949 modern dress *Julius Caesar* at the same theatre, of which the *Times* reviewer wrote: 'Recent hard experience disposes us to regard all things political with eager and anxious interest.' (20 September, 1949). Much later (writing about the 1965 RSC production) a reviewer does refer to 'Shakespeare's Venetian *Herrenvolk*' (the reviewer's italics), but the use of this term does not seem to have been inspired by an interpretation which asked the audience to recall Nazi persecutions.

Welles introduces his article with the fact that he had expected to be playing his 'dream part' at that moment in London, but that the current 'global fever of anti-Semitism' had caused him to abandon the project. He goes on:

Certainly our own particular plans for the theatre have no importance whatsoever. But perhaps the reasons forcing me to change them do involve some issues worth talking about....

Suggesting that the box-office is not the only criterion by which we should judge the appropriateness of a particular play, Welles acknowledges that, in cancelling his production, he is hardly making a 'brave blow for freedom'; but he does believe that the media attention on his performance, successful or otherwise, would be damaging:

In this case there would be pictures of me made up as Shylock - a picture of a ghetto Jew... The picture of a Jew to be published just now is not Shylock. The Jewish story to be told just now is not the one about the pound of flesh. Not so long ago, 6,000,000 Jews were murdered. I think I know what Shakespeare would have felt about that story. I only wish he were alive to write it.

Welles's conclusions might be questioned: he could, for example, have elected to proceed with the production and play the part for sympathy, as Olivier was to do ten years later. A cynical view might also be that he is putting a moral gloss on an economic decision. Of central importance, however, is his reasoning for not coming before the public as 'a ghetto Jew', and the concomitant puzzle of why so many of his fellow actors did.³⁵¹

Peter O'Toole - despite playing the part with 'a foolish, inaccurate, unnecessary, obtrusive, vulgar, distasteful, mock-Yiddish accent'³⁵² - was an exception; and the unusual quality of

³⁵¹ The contrast with Germany is again instructive: 'In the fifties and sixties there was a predominance of noble Shylocks..., more sinned against than sinning... These 'expiation Shylocks', as they came to be called, satisfied a deep need for making moral amends...' (Hortmann, *op cit.*, pages 254-255).

³⁵² *Daily Express*, 13 April, 1960.

his interpretation is reflected in a notable feature of the reviews. After a quarter of a century in which the Holocaust was barely alluded to - presumably because performances of grotesque Shylocks seemed to make it an irrelevance - the critics writing about Michael Langham's production were hard put to keep off the subject. The *Guardian* set the tone by asking:

Why does "The Merchant of Venice" remain one of the best-known and most popular of Shakespeare's plays? It can hardly be the theme - Jew baiting Christian, Christian baiting Jew - for so many of us are still too conscious of the horrors of Auschwitz and Belsen to be amused by that sort of thing...³⁵³

The *Evening Standard* and *Evening News* both took a similar line, pointing to the play's topicality:

...more seriously, the brazen anti-Semitism of the Venetians disturbs today where once, no doubt, it drew a cheer from the mob.

RELEVANCE

Today we look uneasily for the relevance to us of this ugly clash between Jew and Christian...³⁵⁴

Shylock is often played for bravura. He can never comfortably be laughed at. Shakespeare has made him too human, too sympathetic, too pitiful. And today we are very conscious of the implications of the Jew and his relations with the Venetians...³⁵⁵

This change of perspective was occasioned largely by O'Toole's refreshing approach to the part. The *Daily Telegraph* headline - O'TOOLE'S JEW IN IRVING STYLE³⁵⁶ - was not wholly warranted by the interpretation. But the actor's portrayal was certainly in stark

³⁵³ *Guardian*, 16 April, 1960.

³⁵⁴ *Evening Standard*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁵⁵ *Evening News*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁵⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 April, 1960.

contrast to those that audiences had become accustomed to. If not actually a sympathetic portrayal in the Irving mould -

His was not a pathetic Jew: 'no tears but of my shedding' was said not for sympathy, but with the ritualistic beating on his breast.³⁵⁷

- it was undoubtedly one which won audiences over by the character's almost Byronic *attractiveness*:

...Mr O'Toole, tall, handsomer than the usual Shylock, immensely dignified...³⁵⁸

[O'Toole] looked superb, a dignified figure from the New rather than the Old Testament - a Christ in torment...³⁵⁹

His costume was more dignified than usual, so that when he returned after his daughter's flight with his gown torn and muddied the audience was at once aware of a great reversal. Neither director nor actor stressed the 'inhumanity' of Shylock: his rapaciousness was not evident, for he was dressed too well for a miser; he walked too upright to suggest cunning or unbridled hatred; in the savagery of the court scene he was controlled.³⁶⁰

If the performance recalls anyone, in fact, it is Edmund Kean, playing the Jew 'by flashes of lightning',³⁶¹:

...a tremendous performance of hate, suffering, humour and fire...³⁶²

³⁵⁷ John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 135.

³⁵⁸ *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁵⁹ *Evening News*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁶⁰ John Russell Brown, *op cit.*, p 135.

³⁶¹ See above, pages 12-15.

³⁶² *Yorkshire Post*, 13 April, 1960.

This impression was created not least by the 29-year-old actor's own good looks, but also by his attention to detail, in which:

Every anguished twist of the fingers, every jerk of tension when anyone touched him were illuminating.³⁶³

and individual points were hammered home by unusual and selective emphasis upon key words:

This was less through the longer speeches than in short phrases, snatches or bites at single words: 'I *hate* him... If I can *catch* him... Even on *me*... I have an oath in *heaven*... Is *that* the law?' Sometimes this effect was delayed or reversed, as when he waited for the third 'let him *look* to his *bond*' before fully realizing and uttering his hatred, slowly and quietly.³⁶⁴

O'Toole himself was later to recall his Shylock as

a man of learning, of courage, a tough bloke with a high humour, his manner and diction quirky, foreign, but completely in control... A Jewish usurer, tweaking Christians who need his money... a loner ...he always goes and comes or arrives alone.³⁶⁵

and wrote memorably about the moment at which he purposed to pursue the bond:

'Out upon her!' I howled; 'Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.' I rent my garment, ...wept, reflected,

³⁶³ *Evening News*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁶⁴ John Russell Brown, *op cit.*, p. 135.

³⁶⁵ Eluned Brown & Terence Hawkes (eds.), *A Gathering of Friends for Moelwyn* (Llandysul Gomer, 1992), pp. 23-24.

hauled my spirit up into a hard resolve and Shylock walked out to his synagogue and there to God he swore that with Christian justice he would seek merciless revenge.³⁶⁶

In the same way that O'Toole's attractive Shylock attempted to draw upon the audience's understanding of his suffering, rather than engage their sympathy, so the play as a whole served to *remind* the audience of contemporary anti-Semitism, only, like York in *Richard II*, to 'remain as neuter':

...Peter O'Toole's admirable Shylock ...incarnates the legendary Jew with a flesh-and-blood reality of coldly smiling menace, savage inner amusement and proud-felt dignity, and he makes irrelevant a heap of problems about such aspects of Shylock as the contemporary context of anti-Semitism...³⁶⁷

...The play remains, of course, a furiously anti-Semitic blast. However, Peter O'Toole's Shylock, disgraced but not disgusting ...[turns] it into weak propaganda, more worthy theatre, and lighter comedy.³⁶⁸

This neutrality was made possible because Shylock was played

not as the representative of a race but as an individual Jew whose actions make him detestable.³⁶⁹

In this respect, just as O'Toole's interpretation looks back to Edmund Kean rather than Henry Irving, so it looks forward - as will be seen in subsequent chapters - to Patrick Stewart rather than to Laurence Olivier.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁶⁷ *Financial Times*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁶⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 13 April, 1960.

³⁶⁹ *The Times*, 13 April, 1960.

CHAPTER 8

LAURENCE OLIVIER

Jonathan Miller's National Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1970 has been much discussed and continues to excite a diversity of critical opinion. Of the more recent retrospectives, Bulman's is - with reservations - admiring:

By calling into question what the play traditionally was thought to be about, Miller discovered a new way of looking at *The Merchant* that made Shakespeare - at least for the moment - our contemporary.³⁷⁰

Marion Perret is less happy about the production's balance:

...The emphasis ... on commerce and anti-Semitism leads to a slightly cynical de-emphasizing of romance: except for the last, the scenes at Belmont are played for laughs.³⁷¹

Gross takes an even more critical view, complaining that the Christians were 'travestied' and that the theme of assimilation and rejection

...was something which the production tried to graft on to the play from the outside, and the result was a high degree of incoherence.³⁷²

Tot homines, tot sententiae - a wide variation in responses was indeed apparent from the first performances. Foulkes effusively compared Olivier's Shylock with Irving's, alluding to 'the realism which both actors gave to Shylock' and concluding that:

³⁷⁰ *Op cit.*, p. 100.

³⁷¹ Marion D Perret 'Shakespeare and Anti-Semitism: Two Versions of *The Merchant of Venice*' in JC Bulman & HR Coursen (eds.), *Shakespeare on Television* (University Press of New England, 1988), pp. 156-168.

³⁷² *Op cit.*, pp. 302-303.

They saw him as a human being, worthy of their sympathy and understanding, and with the sensibility and artistry found only in the higher reaches of their calling, they presented that man on the stage.³⁷³

Patrick J Sullivan, while showing more restraint, nonetheless called it a ‘highly original interpretation’ which

...takes the Shakespearian back to the play and the audience back to themselves and their deepest intuitions about life... I am also certain that students of Shakespeare and the theatre must take it seriously as an effort at discovering and dramatizing the essential moral energy of *The Merchant of Venice*.³⁷⁴

For Peter Anson, writing in *Plays and Players*, however, this was

a production which in theory [Miller] has conceived compellingly but, at best, put very uncertainly into practice.³⁷⁵

And Anson concluded that

...the rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice* may well have been more engaging to watch than the actual performance which, to my mind, reveals just a few pale flickers of meaning borrowed from an original luminous conception.³⁷⁶

In a climate of such extreme views, it is hardly surprising that the body of commentary on the performance has been unparalleled in its multiplicity of approaches. While Foulkes drew similarities with Irving’s Shylock (see above and footnote 4), Billington used Olivier’s performance to exemplify ‘great’ acting, observing in this interpretation ‘sheer interpretative

³⁷³ Richard Foulkes ‘Henry Irving and Laurence Olivier as Shylock’, *Theatre Notes*, 1972, vol 27, p. 35.

³⁷⁴ Patrick J Sullivan ‘Strumpet Wind - The National Theatre’s *Merchant of Venice*’, *Educational Theatre Journal*, 1974, vol 26, p. 44.

³⁷⁵ Peter Anson, writing in *Plays and Players*, June 1970, p. 39.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

originality' and Matthew Arnold's quality of 'high intellectual power'³⁷⁷. Sullivan, on the other hand, was more interested in the ways in which Miller's direction was that of a 'moral visionary' and believed that, in productions of this kind,

...performance becomes itself a critical act, one capable of regenerating a vision which avoids 'benign' anti-Semitism on the one hand and stodgy moralism (or amorality) on the other.³⁷⁸

Of all these approaches, the most interesting to a student of the play's stage history - and especially of the performance history of Shylock - are those of Foulkes and Billington; Foulkes's because his particular interest (a comparison with Irving) obliges him to be selective in his commentary; Billington's for the quantity of finely observed detail.

In perceiving similarities between Olivier's Shylock and Irving's, Richard Foulkes points to a wide variety of performance and design features. He notes that both actors set their Shylock in a historical context (the names of Disraeli and Rothschild had frequently been invoked by reviewers of each interpretation); both actors played Shylock as a man of between fifty or sixty who wore sober garments (both entering dishevelled in III. i); both made strategic cuts to the text, added extended stage business and played their opening scene with an 'affected bonhomie'³⁷⁹. The relationship with Jessica was given a similar slant and there were many moments of stage business at which Olivier's performance recalled Irving's in matters of detail. Both actors, for example, 'played the trial scene quietly without the large scale histrionics often associated with it'³⁸⁰; while Shylock's exit, according to Foulkes, was 'the culmination and crowning achievement of both Irving's and Olivier's performances.'³⁸¹ Both treated Shylock as a star rôle, dominating the productions in which they appeared, playing the Jew essentially for sympathy.

³⁷⁷ Michael Billington *The Modern Actor* (Hamish Hamilton, 1973), p. 82.

³⁷⁸ *Op cit.*, p. 44.

³⁷⁹ Fitzgerald, *op cit.*, p. 131.

³⁸⁰ Foulkes, p. 33.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

A close examination of records of the two performances - Irving's and Olivier's - will certainly bear out most of Foulkes's observations. He does, however, omit an important point of comparison, possibly because he is so dazzled by the brilliance of the two performances as to miss a key feature of the motivation behind them.

William Winter's report of one of Irving's observations is worth recalling here. The actor said:

Shylock ...is a bloody-minded monster, - but you mustn't play him so, if you wish to succeed; you must get some sympathy with him.³⁸²

The success to which the actor alludes here is surely measurable in theatrical terms only and judged by the criteria of the professional career actor. And surely the one major link between Irving's and Olivier's Shylocks which Foulkes failed to mention is that a major motive underlying both actors' decision to give a 'sympathetic' interpretation (and each, for its time, a revolutionary one) was the sure knowledge that it would be extremely impressive and would display the full range of their craftsmanship most brilliantly.³⁸³

Billington's account is helpful in that it highlights three features of the interpretation and the actor's stage performance which other reviewers on the whole missed. The first was the fact that Olivier's Shylock

³⁸² See above, page 29.

³⁸³ John Cottrell relates how Tynan persuaded Olivier that a performance as Shylock was exactly what the National Theatre needed from him at that time (*Laurence Olivier*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975, pp. 360-361).

knows his revenge upon Antonio is inextricably tied up with Venice's credibility as an international trading area (a point high-lighted by Julia Trevelyan Oman's realistic nineteenth-century setting with its hint of St Mark's Square).³⁸⁴

The second was

Olivier's familiar ability to seize on a line or a moment and impale it forever on our memories. Thus Shylock's last words to the court - 'I am content' - are delivered with rigid, poker-stiff back, eyeballs bulging and hands clapped firmly to the sides like a carefully-welded toy soldier...³⁸⁵

The third was that the performance

offers us the terrifying and exhilarating spectacle of a full-scale piece of heroic acting being given in an orderly, mercantile late-nineteenth-century setting.³⁸⁶

Following this last comment, Billington observes:

It is like seeing a tiger unleashed in a drawing-room.

an image which is recalled at other points in the account, when, for example, in III. i,

He prowls restlessly around the stage like a caged wolf...³⁸⁷

or gives a cry on exit from the court which

³⁸⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 82.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

reminds one of a wolf impaled on a spike and dying a slow death, or of some savage mastiff gradually having the life squeezed out of it as it is forcibly put down.³⁸⁸

Billington is unmatched for the precision of his account. Of particular interest, for example, is his description of a detail of performance in III. iii, a moment of artistry which the television version could not accommodate³⁸⁹ and which was therefore lost to a wider audience:

He exits with sublime confidence using one of his favourite tricks: that of leaving part of himself trailing behind as he departs. In *Rebecca* there is an extraordinary shot of him going out of a door momentarily leaving his hand caressing a support; in *Coriolanus* he let a hand linger on a pillar after his body had gone past; and here he places his stick on his shoulder as if it were a rifle and exits slowly upstage so that for a second or two all we can see is the tip of the stick after he has gone out.³⁹⁰

One of the commonest features of Olivier's performance to excite comments in contemporary newspaper reviews was his manner of speech and particularly his accent. It was a feature, however, which proved difficult to describe. Irving Wardle heard in the accent

a ghastly compound of speech tricks picked up from the Christian rich: posh vowels and the slipshod terminations of the hunting counties...³⁹¹

This impression was supported both by the critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, for whom the voice was

a contemptuously drawled imitation of upper-class speech³⁹²

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁸⁹ See below, pages 114-130.

³⁹⁰ *Op cit.*, p. 87.

³⁹¹ *The Times*, 29 April, 1970.

³⁹² *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 April, 1970.

and by JC Trewin, who felt that Shylock was

probably aware that his carefully nurtured accent [could] slip into plebeian vowel sounds.³⁹³

All reviewers were disappointingly imprecise, however, when it came to describing the constituent sounds that made up the accent. Trewin described one feature of Olivier's speech as a tendency

to clip words like "meanin' " and "speakin' ";

and Wardle attempted a similar transcription with:

'I am debatin' of my present state.' [sic].

These transcriptions of verb endings were accurate enough, but critics got into all sorts of trouble when they attempted to replicate the vowel sounds, the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer's 'Ai am a Joo!' being typically crude. The performance was preserved on screen, however, and this permits us to analyse the accent a little more scientifically.

An examination of Shylock's first scene establishes all the key features of the voice adopted by Olivier for the rôle. In addition to the 'clipped' verb endings alluded to in a number of reviews - ['mI:nin], [di'bFitin], ['I:nlinz], etc. (*meanin*, *debatin*, *eanlins*)³⁹⁴ - there were, in my opinion, six features of the accent which made it so distinctive. In no particular order of significance, the first of these was the occasional occurrence of [t] for [T] and [d] for [D]. This happened in phrases such as 'Ay, for three months...', and 'he was the third...' - [de

³⁹³ The *Illustrated London News*, 9 May, 1970.

³⁹⁴ I am giving both broad transcriptions based upon the International Phonetic Alphabet and phonemic transcriptions.

tC:d] (*de tird*), moments when the character might be considered to be interpolating a thought and perhaps be off guard. A more consistently heard feature was the rolled *r*, [R] especially noticeable in exotic names such as ‘Rialto’ and ‘Tripolis’, or in words which were delivered with some emphasis, such as ‘Hebrew’ and ‘tribe’. But it was the vowel sounds which established the accent with the greatest subtlety and which are correspondingly the hardest to describe. Three played a major part: those heard in the pronouns ‘me’ and ‘you’ and in the possessive ‘our’.

Consistently, words such as ‘memory’ - Received Pronunciation [‘mEmrI:] or [‘mEmri:] (*memri* or *memry*) - would be pronounced [‘mEmrE] (*memreh*) a mannerism most noticeable in terminal positions of the sound (for example, in ‘...you’ll not hear me.’). ‘You’ (RP [jU:]) was always [jo] (*yoh*), so that ‘What should I say to you?’ became [hwot Sud AI sFI to jo] (*what should ai seh toh yoh*: wh- sounds being fairly consistently aspirated [hw]). Finally, the sound in ‘our’ - RP [Aue] became beautifully mutilated to something more closely approaching [B:e]³⁹⁵. This, for me, was the key sound. It is a vowel frequently heard in speakers of London or Home Counties English when they are striving - without total success - to conform to RP. As such it was the perfect phonetic indicator of a man desperately anxious to be accepted by the merchant class, but always likely to betray his alien origins. Its visual equivalent was the moment when Shylock, confidently waving his silver-tipped cane and holding the financial newspaper under his arm, lifted his glossy top-hat in salute, only to reveal the yarmulke beneath.

In addition to using these constituent sounds, Olivier also engaged in the hyper-corrected pronunciation of unusual or impressive vocabulary. Thus we hear [‘mEhikqu] (*mehico*) for ‘Mexico’ and [‘ENglend] (*eng-gland*) for the more usual [‘iNglend] - pronunciations that Antonio and his friends would die rather than perpetrate - and the over-precise [sVpqu‘ziSon] (*sup-po-sition*) for [sVpe‘ziSen], [kVn‘dZU:ed] (*cun-joored*) for [‘kVndZed], and [‘fo:fitSU:e]

³⁹⁵ The first sound of the diphthong is something like the vowel in *cat*.

(*forfit-yoor*) for [ˈfo:fitSe]). Finally, this studied display of quasi-RP is thrown into relief when, in a glorious moment of defensive self-parody, Olivier descends into the stage-Jewish that the anti-Semites no doubt expect from him, imitating the ‘bondman’s key, With bated breath and whisp’ring humbleness’:

Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last...³⁹⁶

- [fFe TC: jU: TpEt]... (*fair thir, you thpet...*) etc..

Given that the best that other Shylocks from this period could manage were accents lazily - and sometimes offensively - borrowed from the music-hall (even the dignified and tortured O’Toole Jew had ‘a foolish, inaccurate, unnecessary, obtrusive, vulgar, distasteful, mock-Yiddish accent’³⁹⁷), Olivier’s was a masterly creation. Even more than his clothing (Shylock had clearly bought the best that money could buy), or his mannerisms (such as the studiedly casual, one-handed flicking open of the Rialto newspaper), his accent marked him out as a man on the periphery of Venetian society who, however hard he tried (and, with the accent, he tried *too* hard) would always remain an alien.

³⁹⁶ I. iii. 120-122.

³⁹⁷ *Daily Express*, 13 April, 1960.

CHAPTER 9 SHYLOCK ON TELEVISION

There can be no doubt that the 1970 National Theatre *Merchant of Venice* was an originally conceived and boldly executed interpretation. Many would say that - *pace* Komisarjevsky - this was the most controversial production of the play since Irving's. Bulman pinpoints one major reason for the production's historical importance when he says that:

For a century, certainly since Irving, [*The Merchant of Venice*] had been widely recognised as a play whose comic form did not comfortably resolve the issues of racism and social class it broached, and the horrors of the Holocaust only served to sharpen our focus on them. By updating the play to the nineteenth century, Miller forced audiences to confront those issues without the reassurance provided by the historical 'difference' of an Elizabethan staging. The society he created more closely resembled their own, the codes of conduct were familiar, the subtleties of prejudice readily recognisable.³⁹⁸

Concluding his chapter on the National Theatre *Merchant of Venice*, he writes:

...like Irving's, Miller's production, especially after it was televised worldwide in 1973/4, in effect *became* the play for a generation of audiences.³⁹⁹

It is to the televised version of this production that I now wish to turn.

It is impossible to identify all of the many subtle ways in which the 1973 televised performance, directed by John Sichel, differed from its stage original. Certainly, there were some changes in the cast⁴⁰⁰ and the comic scenes with Launcelot Gobbo were removed, as was the scene of Jessica's elopement. The more interesting differences in my opinion, however, were those that occurred inevitably in transferring from one medium to another.

³⁹⁸ *Op cit.*, p. 83.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 100. The version was broadcast by Associated Television in the United Kingdom in 1973, and by ABC in the United States a year later.

⁴⁰⁰ Michael Jayston replaced Derek Jacobi as Gratiano; Louise Purnell, Jane Lapotaire as Jessica; and Denis Lawson, Jim Dale as Launcelot Gobbo.

In order to bring out some of the important features of the performance shown in Britain in 1973, I should like to compare it with the version made a few years later by the BBC, directed by Jack Gold. Studies have already been written of both the ATV and the BBC versions. Marion Perret, in her article ‘Shakespeare and Anti-Semitism: Two Television Versions of *The Merchant of Venice*’,⁴⁰¹ makes some illuminating comparative observations; while JC Bulman gives a detailed account of both versions in *Shakespeare in Performance: The Merchant of Venice*⁴⁰². It might be appropriate, therefore, to give a brief outline of these two studies, before proceeding to make any observations of my own.

Perret’s comments on the two earlier versions for television are largely confined to III. i and IV. i, the scenes which, in her opinion,

...focus for us how each production as a whole deals with the problem of anti-Semitism...⁴⁰³

(her major area of interest). Establishing the broad distinction that

...the National Theatre’s emphasis [is] on money, the BBC’s on love.⁴⁰⁴,

Perret shows how cuts are made in the former in order to

...[eliminate] as much as possible motives of revenge unflattering to Shylock...⁴⁰⁵,

adding that

[what] makes it possible to cut these explanations of Shylock’s behavior is that this whole production emphasizes the transcendent importance of money.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰¹ *Op cit.*

⁴⁰² *Op cit.*, pp. 75-116.

⁴⁰³ Perret, p. 156.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

In the BBC version, by contrast,

...warmth of feeling is characteristic of both Venice and Belmont, and people everywhere are valued not for financial soundness but for fullness of humanity.⁴⁰⁷

Drawing a distinction with the earlier version, the BBC's is

characterised by constant undercutting of approval based on religious identity⁴⁰⁸

and

...forces us to recognize how Shakespeare leads us to question sympathy that is based on theology rather than humanity.⁴⁰⁹

Perret concludes:

To emphasize that both Jews and Christians are a mixture of good and bad is true to Shakespeare's text. Where the National Theatre production compels us to listen to "Hath not a Jew eyes?" the BBC production invites us to consider a larger question, "Have not human beings hearts?" This unspoken question resonates throughout the play, giving it unity and making possible a production that is indeed not anti-Semitic.⁴¹⁰

Bulman's chapter on the BBC version ('The BBC *Merchant*: diminishing returns'⁴¹¹) is particularly interesting for its observations on Jonathan Miller's developing attitudes towards both the play itself and the medium of television, as he transferred from being director of the original National Theatre stage version, to producer (albeit one with a very 'hands-on' style) of the BBC production. Bulman remarks that,

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

⁴¹¹ Bulman, pp. 101-116.

In the interim, he had radically altered his view of the play, which he now saw as ‘totally symmetrical in its prejudices’, with Shylock as culpable as the Christians (PBS Interview, 23 February 1981)...⁴¹²

One consequence of this *volte-face* was that, in contrast to Olivier’s Shylock - a Jew desperately imitating the Christians’ manners in a bid for acceptance - Warren Mitchell’s was

an ethnic Jew... resolutely unassimilated, antagonistic to the proprieties of bourgeois Venetian behaviour...⁴¹³

Secure in the fact that actor, director and producer were all Jews (or, in Miller’s case, a former Jew), the intention was to portray Shylock as authentically Jewish. The result, however, was a performance which, for many, bordered on caricature:

...[a] squat, domestic, garrulous little man, [a] comic figure with a plaintiff face⁴¹⁴

This portrayal, as will be seen below (pages 135-136), became the cause of some controversy. According to Bulman,

...Mitchell harked back not to the Elizabethan stage Jew ...but to the more recent stage ‘Yid’ of music-hall reviews and vaudeville skits. This heritage made it hard to take Shylock’s villainy seriously ...and indeed, Mitchell shamelessly exploited the traditions of music-hall performance. Appropriating the comedian’s direct address to his audience, he spoke his asides straight to the camera, breaking the illusion of naturalism with a theatrical device to ingratiate himself with the viewer.⁴¹⁵

Consistent with the traditions on which he was drawing, Mitchell’s comic Shylock uses laughter in his relationship with the Christians, but:

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

...more than a mark of his garrulous disposition, it works in subtle ways to weave a complex web of deception and intimidation. At the outset, it seems primarily to be the means by which Shylock disguises his malicious intent with false *bonhomie*,... Yet later on it serves to disguise his pain, and the suggestion of its darker purpose complicates our response to Shylock.⁴¹⁶

Perret and Bulman, themselves drawing on other commentators⁴¹⁷, testify to the importance of these two television versions in forming images of Shylock which were both memorable and influential. There are, however, interesting features of these two productions which remain to be explored. The first concerns the respective presentations of Shylock at his first appearance (Bulman's account is of the stage version only; Perret does not write about I. iii); the second concerns the choice of the moment when Shylock appears to decide that the bond can actually be enforced.

When the television audience first sees Olivier's Shylock, he is standing thoughtfully gazing through a generously proportioned window, a pen held in one hand, lightly touching his chin. He utters his first words - 'Three thousand ducats,' - and turns to camera on the 'well.' When Bassanio speaks, the camera stays on Shylock, as he seats himself comfortably at an expensive looking desk, removes the top from his pen and starts to sign some papers, making a great play of only half attending to the Christian. It is the beginning of a sequence of shots, all of which establish his complete control over the situation. Mitchell's first appearance in the BBC version could hardly be more different. He and Bassanio are first seen in dramatic silhouette, back-lit and framed under a dark archway. The shadow-puppet effect emphasises a feature of Warren Mitchell's playing which is to dominate his interpretation: his use of exaggerated gesture and brisk, scurrying movements. As the two figures emerge into the light, we see that the transaction is taking place in the street. This fits well with Shylock's fidgety behaviour and could not be more different from Olivier's calmness and the cool serenity of his office. There is a further contrast in the use of props and scenery. Where Mitchell relies solely upon expression and gesture, Olivier's Jew exploits his fountain-pen (which he lifts from document-signing to point at Bassanio on 'Three thousand ducats for three

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

⁴¹⁷ *Inter alia*: Michael Manheim ('The Shakespeare Plays on TV: *The Merchant of Venice*', *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter*, 5 [1981]); Henry Fenwick ('The Production' in *The Merchant of Venice*, BBC edition, London [1980]); and Michael Shapiro ('Shylock the Jew onstage: past and present', *Shofar* [Winter 1986]).

months, and Antonio bound.’ [ll. 9-10]), a financial newspaper (which he is able later to flick open deftly with one hand, demonstrating his familiar use), his spectacles (removed to scrutinise the shipping reports) and, of course, his cane (a key visual aid in the telling of the Laban story). The architecture of the building in which he lives is also put to good use when he strides from the room, Bassanio significantly in his wake, and descends a beautiful staircase, which the camera lingers on, as Shylock himself pauses on the landing to point the ‘pi-rats’ joke (l. 23). Every visual cue suggests opulence and - superficially at least - confidence.

Both productions exploit framing to aid interpretation: the arrival of Antonio (l. 36) is a good example of this. As Sichel directs the moment, Olivier’s Shylock is left alone in the frame, asking ‘Who is he comes here?’, with Bassanio scurrying out of shot to greet an off-camera Antonio. The camera pans to reveal the Christians in the middle distance, but retains Shylock in frame, pensively stroking his chin with the tip of his cane, a visual echo of the first shot we had of him. The sequence hints at Shylock’s sudden uncertainty at the entrance of his enemy, but the cutting of the aside (‘How like a fawning publican...’ [ll. 38-49]) reduces the impact of Antonio’s arrival and Shylock’s expression gives no indication that he harbours any emotion beyond a certain wariness. Jack Gold directs the scene quite differently. On ‘Who is he comes here?’ (l. 36), Shylock and Bassanio look out in the direction of the television viewer. Gold cuts to show us their view: a distant shot of Antonio silently instructing a servant, into which Shylock and Bassanio enter from behind camera, one on each side, framing the still distant Antonio.⁴¹⁸

Shylock’s aside is delivered straight to camera. Bulman saw this as ‘appropriating the comedian’s direct address to his audience’ and felt that Mitchell had ‘[broken] the illusion of naturalism with a theatrical device to ingratiate himself with the viewer.’⁴¹⁹, However, this is exactly what Ian McKellen does as Iago in the film of the RSC

⁴¹⁸ One of the most dramatic and visually impressive examples of framing occurs in the Channel 4 production at the very end of I. iii: as Antonio and Bassanio leave Shylock’s counting-house, the Jew is seen in the distance between them, still watching from behind his desk with an attitude of sinister intent. This cuts to a scene in which, after showing the bond being signed and sealed, the camera moves up to rest on Shylock’s expression of malevolent satisfaction (Channel 4 Television, 1996).

⁴¹⁹ *Op cit.*, p. 103.

*Othello*⁴²⁰; and the effect is hardly ingratiating. In fact, the close-up and the speaking to camera serve, if anything, to emphasise the harsher aspects of Shylock's character. Freed from the necessity to butter up the Christians, Mitchell's Shylock for the first time drops the mask of good-natured banter; his assumed smile disappears and his malice towards Antonio is vividly conveyed. We still have the shrugs, the eloquently raised eyebrows and the exaggerated gestures, but their effect is no longer comic; and the accents of the stage Jew here add an ironically pointed accompaniment to the already bitter speech: [mai: vEl vVn Trift vitS]... (*my vel vun thrift vitch...*) etc. Even more pointedly, Mitchell blatantly (to the viewer) resumes the *bonhomie* the second he turns away from the camera to apologise to the Christians for his apparent distractedness ('I was debating of my present store...' [l. 50]).

Both Shylocks play the game of affecting not to have noticed Antonio's arrival ('Rest you fair, good signor, Your worship was the last man in our mouths' [ll. 56-57]), though interestingly Olivier saw fit to dispense with the 'rolling masticatory jaw movement' which accompanied the line in the stage version⁴²¹, perhaps feeling that it was too grotesque a gesture for the more intimate medium. (Speculating further, it might be that he had learned to tone things down from the not altogether happy experience of filming his National Theatre *Othello* only a few years earlier.⁴²²) Both Shylocks derive great enjoyment in relating the Laban story, Olivier using the cane to show how the 'skilful shepherd peeled me certain wands' (l. 81), Mitchell relying on his expressive face and gesture, seen in a head-shot over Antonio's shoulder, a framing which enables the audience to get the full force of Shylock's obvious love of 'Jewish' story-telling. Both also attempt a show of being unmoved by Antonio's aggressive '...The devil can cite scripture...' (l. 95), but their methods in accomplishing this differ. Olivier is seen stalking across upstage behind a two-shot of the Christians, and the director then cuts to him burying his head behind the financial newspaper. His face is hidden even from the viewer, as he responds, as though absorbed in the share index and half talking to himself:

⁴²⁰ Directed by Trevor Nunn (1990). The effect of such direct address, of course, *can* be ingratiating, as McKellen himself demonstrates in the 1996 film of *Richard III* (Bayly/Paré, directed by Richard Loncraine).

⁴²¹ Billington, p. 84.

⁴²² Performed at the Old Vic in 1964 and released on film in 1965 (National Theatre/ABHE), directed by Stuart Burge.

‘Three thousand ducats... then let me see, the rate-’ (ll. 100-101). By interposing the paper between Shylock’s face and the camera, Sichel underlines that this is a stage trick on Shylock’s part, firstly to feign nonchalance in the face of Antonio’s insults, and secondly to remind the Christians graphically that they are here to borrow money. Gold engages in similar framing, but Shylock’s interruption about the rate is blocked differently. Whereas Sichel’s Christians are obliged to overhear Shylock, as it were privately mulling over the requested loan and the rate, Gold’s are physically interrupted, as Shylock forcibly interposes himself between them. The contrast epitomises an essential difference between the two performances.

One of the most important speeches in guiding audience response to Shylock, and to his adversary Antonio, is that beginning ‘Signior Antonio, many a time and oft...’ (ll. 103-125). It is instructive to compare the two television treatments of this speech. Olivier impressively begins his delivery still hidden behind the newspaper. The effect is to link what can otherwise sound like a set piece to what has gone before, and to suggest that the resentment expressed has been bubbling beneath the surface since Antonio’s first brusque response. Only on ‘rated’ does he let the newspaper drop - he cannot resist marking the pun - and then to show that, despite his feelings, he can still react with urbane good humour. Up to ‘Well then, it now appears you need my help’ (l. 111), Sichel maintains a two-shot of Shylock and Antonio, but on ‘Go to then...’ (l. 112), Shylock moves away, his back to the camera, as his anger perceptibly builds. When he turns at the end of the line on ‘you say so’, we view him across Antonio’s shoulder and see him as the Christian does, pointing at us accusingly with his cane. The camera closes on him to give a mid-shot on ‘Fair sir...’ (l. 122) and cuts to Antonio only when Shylock’s speech is ended. In this way the viewer receives the full force of Shylock’s indignation and we tend ourselves to feel the impact of what he says, in addition to considering its effect upon the Christian.

In the BBC version, Mitchell begins the speech with his back to camera and his face is first in frame on ‘You call me misbeliever...’ (l. 108). Like Sichel, Gold gives us a shot over Antonio’s shoulder but the effect is quite different. Instead of brandishing a cane accusingly, Mitchell wags an admonishing finger, as though good-humouredly rebuking a child for calling him a cut-throat dog and spitting upon his gabardine. Furthermore,

unlike the Sichel version, Gold frequently cuts to the Christians in order to show how impassively they are receiving Shylock's words. The speech ends with a shot of Shylock and Antonio face-to-face, and it is in this confrontational position that the Christian begins his response 'I am as like to call thee so again...' (l. 126).

When Mitchell's Shylock proposes the bond, he does so in a traditional three-shot and we register Bassanio's alarm throughout. Gold maintains this framing and, when the Jew makes his take-it-or-leave-it offer ('If he will take it, so...' [l. 166]), his threatened departure is merely a token half-turn, before he is called back.

Sichel also brings all the characters into the shot, when Shylock proposes the bond, to let us see how much all three are enjoying the joke. This framing permits us to register, firstly, the change of expression which creeps over Jeremy Brett's face as Bassanio shows his unease, and then the removal of Shylock's glove for the offer of the outstretched hand. Shylock is then deliberately excluded from the shot in which Bassanio expresses his anxiety and Antonio attempts to allay his friend's fears. The ensuing cut then offers an entertaining moment: from Bassanio's *sotto voce* panicking, we cut to Shylock at his most relaxed, his left hand resting confidently on the wrought-iron banister, his cane held jauntily over the right shoulder. Behind him, kept carefully in frame, is a classical bust: the refined and cultured business-man is in control again. Unlike Mitchell, Olivier's feigned departure is full-bloodied and theatrical. He sweeps away from the Christians on 'adieu' and the camera moves after him to underline his control of the situation. He has almost reached the door before Antonio responds, but he has been so confident that he will be called back, that he turns in one graceful and rehearsed movement and speaks his lines ('Then meet me forthwith...' [ll. 169-174]) with a rapidity which betokens an efficient man of affairs who wishes to put this small deal in place without delay or fuss. He exits, top-hatted, holding his silk gloves and silver-tipped cane. (Mitchell, by contrast, scurries off under the archway through which he entered, and the final shot shows him silhouetted as before, but this time framed between the Christians in the foreground.)

Discussing the BBC Shakespeare series, Michèle Willems writes:

Superficially, the cinema, the television and the theatre all rely on the layering of signs to communicate with their publics... But there the similarity ends, because the respective importance and status of these signs vary enormously from one medium to the next. On the stage all other signs are subordinated to speech (in monologue, dialogue or aside), while on the screen words are secondary, as dialogue follows the image...⁴²³

No feature of interpretation better illustrates this truth than the choice of the moment when Shylock decides that the bond is in earnest and that he will exact the forfeit.

For both productions, this moment came in III. i, but at different points and in different ways. Mitchell's Shylock, intent upon offering his jocular friendship to the Christians until it is absolutely certain that they will reject it, even joins in with Salerio's and Solanio's laughter at his misfortunes. Bill Overton comments on the key decisions in this scene and describes what happens:

The scene in which [Salerio and Solanio] mock Shylock's grief contrasts what they see as his inhumanity with Antonio's friendship. Solanio scotches their laughter abruptly with the words: 'Let good Antonio look he keep his day, / Or he shall pay for this' [II viii 25-6]. If Shylock clearly decides to exact payment only later, this emphasises his accusers' prejudice. What tells even more, in the BBC production, is the disturbing mockery with which the two repay Shylock's bid for a friendship taken for granted among the Christians. Trading on that bid, they jostle him with unpleasant, intimidating familiarity. At his obscene pun, 'Rebels it at these years?' [III i 32-3], Solanio goes so far as to grasp Shylock by the crotch and heave him up. On his words, 'I am a Jew' [53], they sardonically fake getting an obvious point and they supply crude horseplay gestures for most of the following speech, pointing to eyes, presenting hands, offering fingers, prodding and tickling him. The scene edges on hysteria and Shylock is trembling, but with a massive effort he changes the mood to an appalled silence by shouting the word 'revenge?' [61]...⁴²⁴

For Perret, 'the scene becomes almost unbearable.'⁴²⁵ For me, it is somewhat contrived: the Christians' laughter goes on too long, their mocking actions lack conviction; it is one of the few sequences in this production which betray the heavy hand of the director, whose touch is in most respects a light one.

⁴²³ Michèle Willems 'Verbal-visual, Verbal-pictorial or Textual-televisual? Reflections on the BBC Shakespeare Series' in Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: the Plays on Film and Television* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 70.

⁴²⁴ *Op cit.*, pp. 51-52.

⁴²⁵ *Op cit.*, p. 164.

It is Overton's opinion that the moment of decision comes when Shylock says, 'Go, Tubal, fee me an officer.' (ll. 118-119). I can see no evidence for that. No perceptible change comes over Shylock at that point, neither does Tubal react in any significant way. Surely, unless the actor playing Shylock himself signals the moment when the 'merry bond' evolves into a serious threat to Antonio's life, then we the audience have to be guided by the reactions of the characters around him and the visual cues provided by the camera. And in the BBC version that moment is cued very deliberately when Salerio and Solanio freeze in the middle of their mocking laughter on the question 'And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' (ll. 62-63). At this point the camera, which has held the same three-shot throughout the speech, narrows its focus slightly, and maintains that closer attention to Shylock until the end of his speech. Panning left when Antonio's man enters, the camera then frames the servant and Salerio. The servant is clearly anxious when he delivers what is usually a fairly uninteresting line ('Gentlemen, my master Antonio is at his house and desires to speak with you both.' [ll. 70-71]) and Salerio's response shows us that he is palpably shaken: having played the character up to this point as a Welsh prop-forward, the actor John Rhys-Davies, even prefaces his reply to the servant with a hesitant 'Er...': a stark contrast to his massive confidence hitherto. The Christians are no longer laughing; and we, the audience, should take our cue from them.

Olivier's moment of decision is both more obviously signalled than Mitchell's, and more theatrical in its execution. The scene takes place outside Shylock's house and the Jew emerges, as though having overheard Salerio and Solanio talking. Upstage are the steps to a bridge and Olivier's Shylock ascends these, turning his back at Salerio's slur upon his and his daughter's 'bloods' (l. 38), the camera following him. He reaches the top as Salerio asks him about Antonio's losses and prefaces his reply with a shouted (and interpolated) 'Yes!', turning on '...a beggar...' (l. 43) to make a mocking gesture in parody of Antonio's erstwhile smugness on 'the mart'. Then he leans on the rail of the bridge overlooking the canal and two things happen. One is that the camera angle changes so that we have a rear view which accentuates his stooped, defeated posture and the depressed costume now revealing bank-clerk sleeve-protectors; the other is that we become aware of a bell tolling ominously in the silence. Its slowness suggests that it might be a funeral knell, and after three chimes, we sense Shylock's body stiffening, as

though with shock, and, as he slowly turns to camera, his face expresses the appalled realisation that he has it in his power to make the Christian suffer. He slowly turns his head to the left and the camera angle changes to capture one of the most evocative shots in screen Shakespeare.

Shylock stares at the camera, the fingers of his left hand touching the lower lip of his slightly open mouth, the whole of the left-hand half of the frame empty. His hand clenches slightly and then slowly drops as he voices the awful thought that has dawned upon him: 'Let him look to his bond.' (l. 44). He descends the steps, accelerating the remainder of the speech as his excitement mounts, and the camera retreats before him until Salerio comes into frame. The moment when the Christians take in the full import of Shylock's statement is clearly signalled. Salerio laughs through his question 'Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh.' (ll 48-49), seemingly assured of the preposterous nature of the proposition. But all self-assurance ebbs away as he looks into Shylock's eyes and the conclusion of his speech, 'What's that good for?' is deeply troubled and hesitant. This is the point at which the Christians are convinced that Shylock means business; for the television audience, that moment came a few seconds earlier with the change of camera angle as Olivier stood with his back towards us on the bridge, silent except for the tolling of the bell.

The scene with Tubal takes place in Shylock's house, perhaps to underscore the personal nature of the loss which he has suffered. As Tubal enters, Shylock is gazing at Jessica's photograph (it had been her dress in the stage production) and continues to caress it until, in a fit of confused emotion, he hurtles it to the floor on '...dead at my foot...' (l. 84). After the confirmation has been given of Antonio's losses, Tubal embraces his friend comfortingly and the camera closes in to frame Tubal's dignified features and his hand on Shylock's shoulder. This framing is held until Tubal breaks the hardest of the items of news picked up from the sailors in Genoa:

One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey. (ll. 111-112),

raising the intonation questioningly on the last three words, as though even he can not quite accept it. As Shylock recalls Leah, he goes to her photograph, and the camera

closes in as he kisses and fondles the picture, weeping. It will stay on him in a continuous shot for the rest of the scene.

Judiciously cutting the phrase ‘for were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will.’ (ll. 120-121) - thereby denying the possibility that his motives for pursuing the Christian’s life are in any way mercenary - Olivier’s Shylock utters the first ‘Go Tubal...’ (l. 121), while reaching down to retrieve something from the desk drawer. It is a tallith, which he kisses and wraps around his head and shoulders, wiping his eyes with it before he completes his instruction: ‘Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue.’ (ll. 121-122). As he walks away from Tubal, the camera follows, then withdraws to show Shylock in full length, standing in the centre of the oppressively furnished room. The framing of the beshawled figure, alone in the centre of his possessions, emphasises both the man’s religious convictions and his isolation.

Finally, as if we needed any further spur to our sympathy, the scene cuts to an exterior shot, in which we see a smug Portia and Bassanio, clad in fashionable Victorian riding gear (the epitome of the leisured classes from which Shylock is excluded), leading their horses up the gravel drive before the heiress’s mansion, handing the reins, wordlessly, to a waiting lackey.

Writing of Miller’s televised version, Bulman said:

His interpretation often challenged what generations of playgoers had taken the play to mean, but in doing so *it seldom worked against the text.*⁴²⁶

Even allowing for the qualifier ‘seldom’, this is an opinion that many people would be inclined to dispute. To be fair to Bulman, however, it has to be said that he does tackle, in the concluding paragraph of his chapter on this production, the central question of how far an interpretation can go before it ceases to be an interpretation and actually becomes a different play. Quoting Benedict Nightingale’s comment that Miller’s

⁴²⁶ *Op cit.*, p. 83; my italics.

Merchant of Venice looked like ‘the play Shakespeare *ought* to have written’⁴²⁷, Bulman asks whether

...by accommodating the play to a social and political context in many ways different from Shakespeare’s, Miller essentially fashioned a play of his own.⁴²⁸

Bulman goes on:

He appropriated Shakespeare’s text, and with it his cultural authority, to advance an ideological agenda peculiar to his own time. Was Miller’s *Merchant* Shakespeare’s?

This question, of course, can only be answered with another: whose Shakespeare? Miller did what any director of Shakespeare does: he tailored the play to suit his cast, his venue and his audience. Invariably, in the process of staging a Shakespeare play, a director will adapt and revise the text in light of current cultural assumptions and values: such revision is sometimes conscious, sometimes not.⁴²⁹

Perhaps the most obvious textual feature of the ‘conscious’ revisions made by Miller in shaping the text to suit his particular lines of interpretation were the cuts. I alluded above to the removal of ‘for were he out of Venice...’⁴³⁰, but the most significant cut was of the aside which accompanies the arrival of Antonio in I. iii:

How like a fawning publican he looks.
I hate him for he is a Christian,
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance with us here in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursèd be my tribe

⁴²⁷ *New Statesman*, 8 May, 1970; cited in Bulman, p. 99.

⁴²⁸ *Op cit.*, p. 99.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴³⁰ III. i. 120-121; see above, page 127.

If I forgive him.⁴³¹

As other interpreters of the play have found, cutting these lines permits the actor playing Shylock to hide several things: that he has a long-standing hatred of Antonio; that this antagonism is not nobly motivated but is partly fuelled by the Christian's sabotage of the Jew's usury; and - perhaps most importantly for a production that wants to present a sympathetic Shylock - that he is looking out for the moment when he has the Christian at his mercy and can exact his revenge ('feed fat' is the expression he uses) to the full. Cutting the speech also, of course, allows the actor to offer the bond genuinely 'in a merry sport', the sole motive of which is to gain the Christians' friendship, and concomitantly to defer the moment at which he decides to exact the forfeit, playing it as a sudden realisation rather than a pre-conceived plan. This crucial cut thereby helps to create a character whose desire for revenge is activated some time into the play, and then only by the loss of his daughter and his realisation of the Christians' complicity in her flight. Our sympathy for such a Shylock is engaged from the outset when we hear of his ill-treatment at the hands of Antonio and, if reinforced by other measures such as those which Miller and Olivier took - the business with Jessica's and Leah's photographs, for example, or the portrayal of a set of distinctly unappealing Christians - that sympathy is never completely lost.

⁴³¹ I. iii. 38-49.

CHAPTER 10

TWO PRODUCTIONS DIRECTED BY JOHN BARTON

Between 1978 and 1981, two actors were to play Shylock with the Royal Shakespeare Company, both under the direction of John Barton - Patrick Stewart and David Suchet⁴³². Discussing the rôle with Barton some years later, Suchet, himself a Jew, said:

It's a terrifying thing studying such a famous part because of the history of how it's been played. Mostly black, as you say, or white. I was desperate to try to look at that play without preconceptions and to look into each scene for exactly what it was, for what it said to me, and to play that. Also to play the inconsistencies throughout the role, and to see what happened if I just went with each scene without overlaying them with something that I had worked out before.⁴³³

Stewart shared this determination to 'play the inconsistencies'; in fact, it might be said to have become the keynote of their two interpretations:

...With the belief that, if you played all the inconsistencies, when the final inconsistency slotted into place like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, then you would no longer have an inconsistency but a complete and wonderfully colourful and complex whole... Instead of getting all the inconsistencies, putting them in a pot, stirring them up, making a blend of them and playing the blend, from the beginning to the end...⁴³⁴

⁴³² The first production opened with Patrick Stewart as Shylock in *The Other Place* on 11 May, 1978, and subsequently transferred to the Theatre Royal, Newcastle (from February, 1979) and the Donmar Warehouse, London (from May, 1979). The production featuring David Suchet opened in the main house at Stratford on 21 April, 1981, and transferred to the Aldwych Theatre in July of that year.

⁴³³ Quoted in John Barton *Playing Shakespeare* (Methuen, 1984), p. 174, the published texts of a series made by the Royal Shakespeare Company for London Weekend Television in 1982 and shown on Channel 4 in 1984.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

This was certainly recognised in performance by the critic of the *Morning Star* who admired the production's re-examination of 'a play built on unresolved contradictions.'⁴³⁵

For Stewart, moreover, such an interpretation was underpinned by a powerful conviction that Shylock should not be seen narrowly as a racial symbol, but rather a figure who represented 'all victims who turn on their persecutors.'⁴³⁶ In rehearsals, this concept of Shylock as a representative of all oppressed people led the actor to hold the view that 'the Jewishness which is so often emphasised in *The Merchant* is ...a distraction' and that '...to concentrate on Jewishness can lead to missing the great potential in the character which is its universality.' He went on:

I think that whenever I've seen a very ethnic, a very Jewish Shylock, I've felt that something's been missing. Shylock is essentially an alien, an outsider. I think if you see him as a Jew, first and foremost, then he's in danger of becoming only a symbol. Shylock is an outsider who happens to be a Jew.⁴³⁷

There are two interesting perspectives on Stewart's interpretation of the rôle which follow from this premise. The first looks inward and concerns features of performance; the second turns its view outward to the recurrent allegations that the play is anti-Semitic.

⁴³⁵ *Morning Star*, 16 May, 1978.

⁴³⁶ Patrick Stewart in Philip Brockbank (ed.), *Players of Shakespeare I* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 19.

⁴³⁷ Barton, p. 171. Stewart later wrote: 'Jewishness could become a smoke screen which might conceal both the particular and the universal in the role.' (Brockbank (ed.), p. 18.)

The decision that the part should be freed from its traditional ‘Jewishness’ had clear implications for performance, most obviously in terms of physical appearance and the rejection of what, for Stewart, had become a stereotyped image:

- swarthy, foreign features (invariably incorporating a prominent hooked nose), ringlets, eastern robes (rich or shabby to taste) and clutching either the famous scales or the murderous knife.⁴³⁸

More interesting, however, was what Stewart decided to do with Shylock’s accent. In the actor’s words:

As for the voice, one thing influenced me. Shylock is living in an alien culture. I think that for an outsider to survive there it’s necessary for him to assimilate himself into that culture. I therefore gave him an accent which was more cultured, more refined and more native than the natives. And much more so than the aristocrats in the play. You see, I think that what is truly strange and exotic in Shylock is his foreignness. And this lies in his language, not in how he appears. No one in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks like Shylock, not even his fellow Jew, Tubal.⁴³⁹

Three actors in the post-war period have notably addressed the question of assimilation and all have done so to a significant extent through their choice of accent. Olivier’s Shylock was desperate to be considered a prosperous Rialto businessman along with the likes of Antonio, but was always betraying his essential other-ness through deviations from Received Pronunciation.⁴⁴⁰ David Calder’s Jew was the most urbane and cultured individual in the City money-markets and adopted an accent indistinguishable from the Christians with whom he rubbed shoulders.⁴⁴¹ Stewart, in opting for an accent even more

⁴³⁸ *Op cit.*, p. 16.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, p 172. Nicholas de Jongh described Stewart’s Shylock as: ‘speaking in the emphatic tones of an upper-class gentleman.’ (*The Guardian*, 13 May, 1978).

⁴⁴⁰ See above, pages 110-113.

⁴⁴¹ See below, Chapter 12.

cultured than that of his Christian adversaries⁴⁴², positioned himself more closely to Olivier, in that both portrayed an alien whose failed attempt at assimilation was cruelly and unremittingly betrayed by speech: in one case because it did not approach quite closely enough to RP; in the other because it went too far.

Removing much of the Jewishness from the performance, moreover, offered the audience the chance to believe that Shylock was not bad because he was a Jew, but was a Jew who happened to be bad. For much of the time they were able to forget that he was a Jew; and, when reminded, could take the view that, even among Jews, this Shylock was regarded as beyond the pale. From the first performance, a number of reviewers were quick to seize upon this feature of presentation as central to Stewart's interpretation of the rôle, but were divided in terms of the degree to which they felt that such an approach mitigated the play's traditionally alleged anti-Semitism:

...The late nineteenth century setting provides initially another production attempting to find a social context through which to "interpret" the play's undeniable anti-Semitism, so painful to twentieth century consciousness. But no, Barton simply accepts it.

Patrick Stewart's frock-coated Shylock, always ready to feign laughter with the young bucks, is not a detestable Jew, but a detestable human being.⁴⁴³

At the heart of the production is Shylock, powerfully played by Patrick Stewart as a Jew clearly regarded as eccentric and extreme by his own fellow-Jews. The contrast with the calm fellow-Jew Tubal (Raymond Westwell) is cleverly presented.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² The accent comes across clearly in the television programme *Playing Shakespeare* (see footnote 2, above). The vowel sound that Stewart's Shylock utters in 'me' is from an even more extreme version of Received Pronunciation than the one that Olivier's Shylock was imitating (see page 112).

⁴⁴³ *Morning Star*, 16 May, 1978.

⁴⁴⁴ *Birmingham Post*, 12 May, 1978.

Does the Race Relations Board yet know? Time and again we admire the way in which Mr Barton and his players skate round the uninhibited expression of prejudice which pushes most of the plot along...⁴⁴⁵

More than any other of Shakespeare's plays, 'The Merchant of Venice' requires redemption as much as production. The easy bigotry of its plot is somewhat out of fashion with most theatre audiences and the destruction of Shylock hardly makes for a pleasant comic resolution except perhaps in the eyes of the Neo-Nazis.

In the close space of the Royal Shakespeare Company's small theatre in Stratford, one might expect the anti-Semitism to be particularly sour... It is quite an achievement, then, that the play becomes lyrical and comic in John Barton's production.

Mr Barton has not done this by distancing the play and its more offensive sentiments, but by bringing it closer to us. The costuming places the action within the past 100 years, putting it uncomfortably close to Fascist Italy. But he also softens its implications by showing Shylock as uncommonly vicious among men.⁴⁴⁶

Despite this fairly general absolution, Barton nonetheless found himself involved in one of the periodic debates that have attended performances since Lichtenberg was a member of the audience in 1775 - namely concerning the charge that the play is anti-Semitic and should not be performed. Writing about the BBC Television version (which was transmitted between Patrick Stewart's performance run and David Suchet's), James Murray used his column in the *Daily Express* to question -

...why Shakespeare so savagely created such a horrific scenario to promote anti-Semitism in 'The Merchant of Venice'. It is difficult to imagine any TV authority permitting such a vicious play to be screened had it been written by a modern playwright...⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Eric Shorter, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 May, 1978.

⁴⁴⁶ Ned Chaillet, *The Times*, 13 May, 1978.

⁴⁴⁷ James Murray, *Daily Express*, 31 December, 1980.

The attack prompted Marcus Shloimovitz to write to Barton, known to be between productions of the play, quoting Murray's article. After a further exchange of letters⁴⁴⁸, Barton's reply encapsulated the core of the argument that he was to reiterate later:

...You think 'The Merchant of Venice' is anti-Semitic. I and others in the theatre are sure it is not. Neither do the Israelis, otherwise they would not be playing it in Israel now.... I repeat, the play is about true and false value and not about race, and that is how I am rehearsing it.

Leaving aside the question of whether Barton, or any director, has the right to tell us what the play is 'about', his argument that a performance of the play should not become a political tract has singularly failed to convince directors such as Timothy Luscombe, with his 1990 production for the English Shakespeare Company⁴⁴⁹, or Peter Sellars, working with the Chicago Theatre Company in 1994⁴⁵⁰. It has, however, been endorsed most recently in Gregory Doran's direction of the play⁴⁵¹ and certainly rang true at the time with Michael Billington, who, hailing Barton as 'the nonpareil of Shakespearean directors' for his 1979 revival of the production at The Warehouse, wrote:

The most original feature of John Barton's Edwardian production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which has now arrived at The Warehouse, is that it treats the play as a comedy: not as an Ibsenite problem play, not as a failed tragedy, not as a documentary about a mercantile society, but as a spirit-healing comedy that manages to absorb the play's darker elements.⁴⁵²

Despite Barton's success in re-focusing the play and allowing it to stand free for a while of its post-holocaust burden - or perhaps because of it - he decided to introduce the

⁴⁴⁸ In January, 1981.

⁴⁴⁹ See below, pages 192-198.

⁴⁵⁰ See below, pages 223-225.

⁴⁵¹ See below, Chapter 14.

⁴⁵² Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 4 May, 1979.

relevant episode of his Channel 4 television series filmed in 1982 with comments which addressed the very problem that he appeared to have solved:

The Merchant of Venice is perhaps the play that today is most argued about. Many people feel it's deeply anti-Semitic and ought not to be performed. [Patrick Stewart, David Suchet and I] believe that [Shakespeare] shows Shylock as a bad Jew and a bad human being, but that this in itself does not make the play anti-Semitic. If we thought it was so, we would not have done it. Anti-Semitism is certainly expressed in the play by some of the characters, but of course that doesn't mean that Shakespeare himself approves of what they're saying...⁴⁵³

Paradoxically the production which set out quite deliberately to remove the anti-Semitism debate from the agenda was the one which brought it once more into the public arena.

The other major feature of Stewart's interpretation to excite interest was his 'picture ...of a man in whose life there is an imbalance, an obsession with the retention and acquisition of wealth...'⁴⁵⁴ This obsession would cause Shylock always to prioritise material possessions whenever he was faced with a choice, whether between his ducats and his daughter or - most noticeably - his fortune and his religion:

...I found one dominant motivation, one dominant objective for the whole play: money, finance and possessions. Whenever Shylock is given the choice between race and religion on the one hand, and financial security, commerce and business on the other, he always makes the commercial choice..⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ Barton, p. 169.

⁴⁵⁴ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 16.

⁴⁵⁵ Barton, p. 173.

Images of money, commerce and possessions abound, and even people seem to have a price. The value of assets and possessions always seems to dominate and colour relationships. This theme, where it touches Shylock, appears as a series of alternatives for comparison. People, feeling, religion and race versus commerce and material security.⁴⁵⁶

This dominant objective was apparent to reviewers:

...he is ready to ingratiate himself after the verdict, clearly believing that there are worse fates than Christianity and already planning new business enterprises (his “I am not well” is pure malingering).⁴⁵⁷

Patrick Stewart’s intelligent and often explosive performance makes Shylock an opportunistic and avaricious maverick, content to give up his religion if it means saving his money and his life.⁴⁵⁸

...and in a real stroke of originality he sighs with relief when stripped of half of his wealth and forced to become a Christian.⁴⁵⁹

Integral to this all-embracing obsession was a small-scale meanness, cleverly signalled on stage through habits and dress:

Shylock was shabby, almost miserly, carefully preserving the stubs of the home-rolled cigarettes which constantly drooped from the side of his mouth.⁴⁶⁰

Accentuating Shylock’s distance from his fellow-Jews -

⁴⁵⁶ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 15.

⁴⁵⁷ Bernard Levin, *Sunday Times*, 21 May, 1978.

⁴⁵⁸ Chaillet, *op cit.*

⁴⁵⁹ Billington, *op cit.*

⁴⁶⁰ Roger Warren, ‘A Year of Comedies: Stratford 1978’, *Shakespeare Survey* 32, p. 204.

He contrasted sharply with Tubal, who dressed impeccably and smoked cigars, like the smart Venetians-about-town.⁴⁶¹

(Of particular interest to semioticians, ‘Antonio smoked sheroots, Tubal a havana, and Shylock his mean little hand-rolled cigarettes...’⁴⁶²) The meanness was carried over into Shylock’s personal hygiene - he had ‘a very large bushy beard and a lot of long, dirty, tangly hair’⁴⁶³; while his dress - ‘which showed an almost studied contempt for neatness or even cleanliness’ - consisted of:

A shabby black frock coat, torn at the hem and stained, a waistcoat dusted with cigarette ash, baggy black trousers, short in the leg, exposing down-at-heel old boots, and a collarless shirt yellowing with age.⁴⁶⁴

Looking like ‘a shabby back-street usurer’⁴⁶⁵, the actor’s rationale was that ‘if [Shylock] was obsessed with money, he would not waste it on how he appeared.’

Despite his unappealing materialism and a distinctly unprepossessing appearance, audiences and critics alike found something strangely attractive in the character. For one thing, Stewart emphasised Shylock’s wit (having accommodated Barton’s requirement that the character should be a monster by playing him as ‘a witty monster’⁴⁶⁶) and played down the urge for revenge in order to display cooler, more restrained characteristics:

Control and irony are his weapons and defence.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 18. Ian McKellen was to gain a similar effect with hand-rolled cigarettes when playing Iago with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1990.

⁴⁶³ Barton, p. 172.

⁴⁶⁴ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 18.

⁴⁶⁵ Billington, *op cit.*

⁴⁶⁶ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 14.

⁴⁶⁷ de Jongh, *op cit.*

The concept of Shylock is both original and consistent; cool, rational, unportentious and human...⁴⁶⁸

In I iii, for example, Shylock's offer of the bond was made, not in Machiavellian deviousness, nor in friendship, but in mockery:

Shylock, knowing the extent of Antonio's wealth, could not dream that he would fail so dramatically. He will help his enemy but his hatred will publicly show itself in the humiliating clause of the pound of flesh. Shylock teases them about their suspicions and daringly inserts a final mock about the flesh of muttons, beefs and goats being more estimable than Antonio's. For most of the scene the audience should have enjoyed watching him enjoying himself.⁴⁶⁹

In several post-war productions, directors have sought to excuse Shylock's behaviour - at least, in part - by displaying most, if not all, of the Christian males in a thoroughly unpleasant light.⁴⁷⁰ Critical responses to these characters in this production were divided. While Bernard Levin felt able to say

[Shylock's] tormentors, on the other hand, are a nasty crew, Venetian jeunesse dorée who enjoy their Jew-baiting⁴⁷¹,

Shorter wondered whether the Christians were not 'too prodigal and smug',⁴⁷² de Jongh admired 'John Bowe's splendid sillybilly Gratiano',⁴⁷³ and Chaillet was interestingly of the opinion that

⁴⁶⁸ Levin, *op cit.*

⁴⁶⁹ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 21.

⁴⁷⁰ The most striking example of this was Timothy Luscombe's production for the English Shakespeare Company in 1990 (see below, pages 192-198).

⁴⁷¹ Levin, *op cit.*

⁴⁷² Shorter, *op cit.*

⁴⁷³ de Jongh, *op cit.*

Some sensitive performances and judicious readings of the text make the Christians' bigotry bearable.⁴⁷⁴

Benedict Nightingale echoed Levin's harsher view:

...the shock provoked by their deep instinctive prejudice is the shock of recognition, because they wear the suits some of our generation's grandfathers wore at public school or Oxbridge.⁴⁷⁵

Billington, most interestingly, felt that Shylock's sigh of relief at being permitted to retain half his wealth while being forced to become a Christian

mitigat[ed] the barbarousness of the Gentile gang⁴⁷⁶;

and this perspective is consistent with, if not actually shared by, Warren's:

But the Jew-baiting was not over-emphasised; neither the production nor the adequate but undistinguished supporting playing distorted (or clarified) the studied ambiguity of Shakespeare's presentation of the Christians.⁴⁷⁷

This variety of responses is difficult to interpret, but perhaps has something to do with the production's refusal either to see itself as part of the debate on anti-Semitism, or to play Shylock as a wronged hero. A performance which rejects those standpoints has no strategic reason for highlighting the Christians' unpleasantness; indeed, as Billington's observation implies, such bigotry as usually exists can actually seem less dramatically

⁴⁷⁴ Chaillet, *op cit.*

⁴⁷⁵ Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 4 April, 1979.

⁴⁷⁶ Billington, *op cit.*

⁴⁷⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 204.

impressive - if not less culpable - when set against a Shylock whose own moral currency is seriously debased.

Stewart's Shylock, then, was attractive for its wit, its control and its irony; there might even be a sneaking admiration for a man who was determined to survive as an alien in a hostile world. But could audiences actually sympathise with such a character, in the way that they did to a large extent with O'Toole's Shylock or Olivier's? In some respects they could. It was easy to feel pity, at least, for

a man in whose life there is an imbalance, an obsession with the retention and acquisition of wealth which is so fixated that it displaces the love and paternal feelings of father for daughter. It transcends race and religion and is felt to be as important as life itself. It inhibits warm, affectionate responses and isolates him from his fellow man.⁴⁷⁸

The actor saw 'a bleak and terrible loneliness' in Shylock, the cause of much of his anger and bitterness, and this sense of isolation - and the ways in which Shylock attempts to cope with it - were made evident to the audience in complementary features of behaviour:

Of course, it is not loneliness that the actor *shows*, but its compensating aspects: false gregariousness, ingratiating humour, violence and arrogance.⁴⁷⁹

Shylock's isolation seems therefore to have engendered sympathy of a certain kind during the first two acts. But something more tangible is required if that sympathy is to endure when he turns the full force of his hatred upon Antonio.

⁴⁷⁸ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 16.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

As has been established in earlier chapters, notably in the context of Irving's and Olivier's portrayals, a key factor influencing audience sympathy is the choice of the moment at which Shylock decides that the flesh bond can, and will be enforced. Since Olivier, most Shylocks have tended to push that moment late into III i, at a point where we, the audience, have been allowed to witness Shylock's devastation at the news of Jessica's flight. If the director is so minded, the audience can in this way be made to understand that Shylock pursues the bond *purely in revenge for* the loss of his daughter (and indeed might only be attacking Antonio because the real villain, Lorenzo, is out of his reach⁴⁸⁰). There is, of course, a particular moment in III i when the audience's sympathy for Shylock can be at its greatest; and that is when, in response to Tubal's information about Jessica's exchange of a ring for a monkey, Shylock replies 'I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor.'⁴⁸¹ Stewart decided that this should be the moment at which Shylock purposes to take Antonio's life:

At this deepest moment of sorrow Tubal confirms that Antonio is utterly vulnerable, and *now* Shylock decides to kill him. No single incident or word is entirely responsible, but it is certainly Leah's ring and Shylock's confusion of love and grief that is the trigger.⁴⁸²

Stewart's re-enactment of this moment on John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* demonstrates clearly the manner in which his Shylock receives Tubal's news and the moment at which he makes his choice. In complete contrast to performances such as Olivier's, Stewart's acting displayed emotions which were utterly consistent with his decision that Shylock is always motivated by money and possessions, and therefore more moved by the loss of material things, than by either his religion or the love of his daughter. He takes time out from his lamentations over the loss of Jessica, for example, to deal with Tubal's expenses -

⁴⁸⁰ The view taken by Philip Voss in his 1997 interpretation (see below, page 242).

⁴⁸¹ III. i. 114.

⁴⁸² Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), pp. 23-24.

...which he scrupulously paid out there and then with soiled notes from a pocket book in which he had calculated 'the rate' of Bassanio's loan.⁴⁸³

He then explains the value of the turquoise as though imparting a piece of matter-of-fact information, the only indication of his personal hurt being a half-sob on 'monkeys', and instantly resumes emotional control when reminded that Antonio is 'certainly undone.' As Stewart himself implied, that is the key moment for his Shylock; not the Leah line. His head has been hanging, chin on chest, up to that point, and, without moving it, he lifts his eyes to Tubal. Clearly the recognition is dawning on him that he has the Christian on the hip, and he prefaces his reply 'That's true...' with a hint of a nod and a thoughtful 'Hmm.' No words are spoken as he pensively takes a rolled-up cigarette from the tin, permits Tubal to light it, and sits back puffing and exhaling for some seconds. His next speech is spoken with calm deliberation, as though from a man who knows exactly what has to be done; and who, while understanding the deed's implications, considers it to be no more than a purely practical matter:

After a pause to light the inevitable drooping cigarette, he was struck with the idea of paying Tubal (more notes) to 'fee me an officer', answering Tubal's surprise that he should actually pursue the bond with a sharp, quiet, edged 'were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will', a commercial motive duly appreciated by Tubal.⁴⁸⁴

When revisiting the scene on television for John Barton, Stewart's actions were less restrained: as Tubal, realising the full and awful meaning behind '...the heart of him', silently remonstrates, Shylock whips out a knife, unsheathes it and slams the hilt down on to the table, the blade inches from Tubal's face; and he smiles as he explains that

⁴⁸³ Warren, p. 205.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Antonio's removal from Venice is a major - if not the real - motive behind his bloody intentions. His remaining lines are delivered as matter-of-fact practicalities, as he resheathes his knife, stands up and leaves.

Thus the audience watching Stewart's Shylock might well have been doubly predisposed to sympathise with him at the point where he decides to enforce the bond: firstly the actor has left it as late as he can to make the decision, and we might therefore be able to feel that he has understandably been pushed over the edge by the loss of his daughter; secondly the point at which he chooses to act - after letting us know that the stolen ring was a gift from Leah - is the one moment exploited by actors since Irving for milking the maximum of audience sympathy. What was striking about Stewart's performance of this key moment, however, was that any sympathy engendered was almost instantaneously lost as we witnessed his exultant recognition, not only that he could avenge himself upon Antonio, but that a major factor in desiring his rival's death was the financial advantage which would accrue. This alienation from the character was consistent with what had come before and what was to follow. In II v (Stewart's favourite scene⁴⁸⁵) he had forfeited all claim to sympathy by striking his daughter⁴⁸⁶; in the middle of III i he had the audience potentially on his side; but within seconds his bloody and avaricious intentions had again turned them away.

This is perhaps a good example of what the actor meant by 'playing the inconsistencies'; and there seems to be little doubt that these inconsistencies of behaviour engendered corresponding variations in audience response:

⁴⁸⁵ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), p. 22. Stewart wrote: 'This was consistently the most satisfying scene to play.'

⁴⁸⁶ Eric Shorter wrote: 'Patrick Stewart ...won my heart to start with and never lost it, until he slapped his daughter's face.' (*op cit.*)

Patrick Stewart's Shylock, a rather merry fellow, ...has right on his side more often than we may have realised. But this Shylock never asks us for too much sympathy, never becomes a caricature, and laughs even when his punishment is meted out. His last laugh is the laugh of a man too used to such treatment from life.⁴⁸⁷

Other critics were equally certain that, while we are made to grasp intellectually the reasons underlying Shylock's villainy, this was not a sympathetic interpretation. Nicholas de Jongh described Stewart's Shylock as 'more repellent than sympathetic',⁴⁸⁸ and the *Morning Star* was especially perceptive in defining what Barton and Stewart were attempting to do:

Although he reflects all the socio-psychological reasons Shakespeare provides for an alien's possible malevolence toward such a narcissistically exclusive society, he resolutely forgoes the dignity of the role for the sake of the play's alignment. ...Shylock's non-comprehending rejection of Portia's plea finally excludes him from our sympathies.⁴⁸⁹

Picking up this notion of forgoing dignity 'for the sake of the play's alignment', Billington wrote:

Neither an Elizabethan grotesque, nor the tragic hero of so many guilt-stricken productions, he seems to me to fit precisely the requirements of the text. ...And there is one small touch I shall long remember: the shrug of dismay that Antonio gives Shylock in the courtroom when Bassanio persistently intervenes on his behalf. In that one gesture, two natural aliens (one sexual, the other racial) are for a second drawn together in the true spirit of comedy.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 17 May, 1978. Of 'his last laugh', Roger Warren writes: 'And his response to Gratiano's ferocious gibe about the gallows not the font was to break into the laughter with which he had shared jokes with the Christians earlier' (*op cit.*, p. 205.).

⁴⁸⁸ De Jongh, *op cit.*

⁴⁸⁹ *Op cit.*

⁴⁹⁰ Billington, *op cit.*

Finally, in connection with audience response, it is worth saying something about Stewart's exit in Act IV, since this was as remarkable for its impact as for its originality. Concerning the moments leading up to his exit, Stewart wrote:

In the past I had been puzzled by the speed at which Shylock slams into reverse from 'A sentence, come, prepare' to 'I take this offer then.' If the interpretation is heroic or sentimental I don't know how the actor does it. If it's pragmatic, then it's easy. Shylock is told he will lose his lands and his goods. Portia plays the blood card. Shylock immediately sees the (expected) trap he has walked into, considers for a moment that he will lose, checks the law, and knows at once that he must back off... and when the word 'alien' hits his ears he knows he is to be finished off. Once again he is an outsider, without rights and utterly vulnerable. This is no place for pride or heroics. Shylock knows if he wants to survive he must get down in the dirt and grovel...⁴⁹¹

The grovelling was of a memorable kind. While remaining impassioned on 'Nay, take my life...', it was consistent with a Shylock who placed possessions above all else, that he should undergo a transformation when Antonio offers a better deal than he could have expected. He listens intently to Antonio's demands concerning his money and the requirement that he must become a Christian; and, when Portia asks 'Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?' he rises from a kneeling position and looks at her. Amazingly - and for many in the audience, quite shockingly - he deftly flicks the yarmulke from his head, smiles broadly and says 'I am content', holding his arms out in submission. This smile flickers a little only when Portia tells Nerissa to draw up the deed of gift; it is back in full force as he summons all his self-possession and requests leave to go:

⁴⁹¹ Stewart in Brockbank (ed.), pp. 26-27.

They want him to become a Christian and bequeath his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica and he is content because he has saved something when moments before he had nothing. Now he must get away before they change their minds or think up further punishment. Illness is a good excuse and he leaves them with the assurance that the deed *will* be signed.⁴⁹²

He pats his stomach, explaining confidentially that he is not well, as a man might do who has some embarrassing tummy disorder that can be laughed at but is awkward to discuss in public. Politely and very earnestly requesting that the deed be sent after him, he places the heaviest of stresses on 'I *will* sign it'. Then, during the Duke's 'Get thee gone, but do it', he bows three or four times to the court, still smiling, and makes to leave.

Gratiano's bitter jeers have often been used as the final indignity which sends Shylock from the court a broken man. Stewart used them very differently:

Every actor playing Shylock looks for an effective way to 'get off'.. Here Gratiano provided the clue. He makes a cruel joke out of Shylock's christening, and the person who must laugh most is, of course, Shylock. And so he leaves.⁴⁹³

Stewart's Jew pays polite attention to Gratiano, pauses briefly when he has finished, thinks about the jibe, and then, as though beginning to see the joke, he chuckles appreciatively. This grows to laughter, which is wholehearted as he exits.⁴⁹⁴ Stewart wrote:

It saddened me that people were upset by the squalor of Shylock's ending.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁹⁴ David Suchet had not seen Stewart's Shylock when it was first performed. As the audience applaud the performance of this scene on *Playing Shakespeare*, Suchet is heard to remark 'That was amazing!'

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The grovelling self-abasement undoubtedly is squalid. The impression we are left with, however, is that Shylock considers himself to have been let off lightly, and is quite willing to play the Christians' games if it will get him off the hook. He will undoubtedly be back.

Developing his theme that John Barton's 1978 *Merchant of Venice* succeeded in evoking 'the true spirit of comedy'⁴⁹⁶, Michael Billington said of Barton's 1981 production⁴⁹⁷:

Instead of seeming, as so often, a failed tragedy, the play becomes a genuine comedy in which the characters progress to some kind of spiritual understanding... Suchet's Shylock is humiliated but not destroyed. And the last act, instead of being a piece of sour whimsy, becomes genuinely festal, with Belmont symbolically moving from autumn to spring and with morning bird-song creeping up on the characters unnoticed. Without diminishing the play's darker aspects, Barton has made it into a Mozartian celebration of life.⁴⁹⁸

Writing about his performance some years later, Suchet observed:

It is important for us to remember that *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy not just in the scenes involving the Gobbos or the tricks played on their husbands by Portia and Nerissa. Even the Trial Scene - that classic cliffhanger of a courtroom drama - has a good deal of witty, almost slapstick exchange.⁴⁹⁹

Suchet's Shylock was much remarked upon for its wit, considered by Roger Warren to be 'somewhat in the old tradition of humorous Shylocks'⁵⁰⁰. Desmond Pratt called him a

⁴⁹⁶ Billington, *op cit.*

⁴⁹⁷ See above, page 131, footnote 1, for the relationship between these two productions.

⁴⁹⁸ Billington, *Guardian*, 23 April, 1981.

⁴⁹⁹ David Suchet, 'Talking about Shylock - a personal essay', in G & F Salgado, (eds.), *The Merchant of Venice* (Longman, 1986), p. vi.

⁵⁰⁰ Roger Warren, 'Interpretations of Shakespearian Comedy' in Stanley Wells (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey* 35 (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 141.

‘voluble, jocular Jew’,⁵⁰¹ Jack Tinker ‘witty’ and ‘ironic’,⁵⁰² Michael Coveney ‘edgy but good humoured’,⁵⁰³ For Irving Wardle and Francis King respectively,

The clue to David Suchet’s Shylock is that he goes through this first meeting [with Antonio] in giggles. He is the genial Jew: a mask he has long since perfected...⁵⁰⁴

The novelty of David Suchet’s intelligent and beautifully spoken Shylock is a rasping sense of humour. When Antonio, who has so often humiliated him in the Rialto, turns up to ask him for a loan, he at once sees the bitter joke of it...⁵⁰⁵

Robert Cushman, however, was the only reviewer to explore the nature of the humour or to examine its purpose in the context of the play’s difficulties:

I have never seen a funnier Shylock than the one offered by David Suchet...; or one more moving.

Obviously the two things go together, but getting the balance right is the problem that bedevils every production of this play...

Mr Suchet... laughs from the start. Laughter - mocking himself and everybody else - is Shylock’s line of defence. The amount that Mr Suchet conveys through the one word “Well” - repeated at the end of each of his first three lines - is extraordinary. “You,” he says to Antonio and Bassanio, “are coming to *me*”; the ludicrousness of the situation gets to them as well. It embarrasses Bassanio as it is meant to, but Tom Wilkinson’s Antonio (who seems the most manic of depressives) can see the joke, especially the really hilarious bit about the pound of flesh.

There is, of course, another level of fun - revenge-comedy - that Shylock shares only with the audience. Mr Suchet’s skill in drawing out and differentiating these strands is dazzling...⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰¹ Desmond Pratt, *Yorkshire Post*, 22 April, 1981.

⁵⁰² Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 22 April, 1981.

⁵⁰³ Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 22 April, 1981.

⁵⁰⁴ Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 22 April, 1981.

⁵⁰⁵ Francis King, *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 April, 1981.

⁵⁰⁶ Robert Cushman, *Observer*, 26 April, 1981. The article was headed ‘The laughing Shylock’.

Cushman particularly observed how in III i Suchet's Shylock could move from humour, through violence, to sudden self-pity:

On "To bait fish withal", though it is still a savage joke, he strikes a table with his stick, and with a force that nearly jerked me out of my seat. The ensuing scene with Raymond Westwell's Tubal... is a masterpiece of cat-and-mouse, with Shylock sometimes playing both roles himself... "The curse never fell upon our nation" is undercut by a self-pitying "*I never felt it till now*", whose absurdity the speaker half-recognises as he speaks it.⁵⁰⁷

Suchet's re-enactments of selected scenes for Barton's 1982 television series show clearly the effect that the humour had upon the invited audience. In III i, for example, there is laughter at Shylock's ecstatic reaction to the news of Antonio's losses - 'I thank God!' - and further audible amusement as he kisses Tubal, and puffs hard on the fat cigar that his friend is attempting to light for him: 'I'm glad of it... [*puff, puff*] I'm very glad of it.'⁵⁰⁸

Both Stewart's and Suchet's Shylocks hoped that a studied jocularly with the Christians, and a ready appreciation of their insults as amusing banter would be their passport to acceptance, in much the same way as Warren Mitchell's Shylock had done a few years earlier⁵⁰⁹. Inasmuch as the alien Shylock never is accepted, this strategy ultimately fails. But performing Shylock in this way allows the play to retain what Billington called the 'true spirit of comedy'. A genial Shylock - even one adopting what we know to be a forced jocularly - is never likely to face anything worse than abject humiliation. Though defeated, he will not be destroyed. Suchet wrote:

⁵⁰⁷ Olivier's Shylock had performed this line and the reaction to it in much the same way,

⁵⁰⁸ III. i. 109-110.

⁵⁰⁹ See above, Chapter 9.

My view is that Shylock is a survivor⁵¹⁰

and he builds the foundations for this survival in III i, where his decision to take the Christian's flesh is made in such a low-key fashion that we never feel that it will be a disaster to him if he should fail. It comes at the same point as the one chosen by Stewart: after Tubal has reminded him that '...Antonio is certainly undone.'⁵¹¹ He looks up and, from a slight shifting movement of his eyes, it is clear that the idea is forming. Unlike Stewart's Shylock, the full implications of the plan are plainly still developing as he thoughtfully says, half to himself, 'I will have the heart of him if he forfeit...' and he makes little of the mercenary motive in 'for were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will.' A fiercer intent takes over as he insistently instructs the somewhat reluctant Tubal to do his bidding, but the scene ends pensively rather than passionately, as he is left alone at the table to finish his cigar.

This lightness of touch was applied by Suchet throughout the performance and was central in preventing the trial scene from ever attaining the status of tragic dénouement that it can so easily acquire if the Jew is played as a wronged hero. This is not to say that Suchet's was an unsympathetic interpretation. It is simply that, by refusing to be 'either a heroic victim or saturnine villain'⁵¹², this Shylock was able to make his final exit 'humiliated but not destroyed'⁵¹³. To understand how he accomplished this, and to consider further the overall effect of Suchet's performance, it is necessary to examine the trial scene in greater detail.

The design concept, described by Roger Warren as 'Chekovian/Edwardian'⁵¹⁴ permitted IV i to open with a scene which resembled a gentlemen's club, a club of which Antonio

⁵¹⁰ *Op cit.*, p. xv.

⁵¹¹ III. i. 117.

⁵¹² Billington, 1981, *op cit.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ Warren, *op cit.*, p. 141.

was clearly a valued member - the Duke shook his hand as he entered⁵¹⁵ - and Shylock, of course, was not. The Jew, when he arrives, is in sad dissonance with what Cushman described as a 'mercantile tone... set by constant recourse to brandy and cigars'⁵¹⁶ He takes a seat down-stage left, opposite Antonio. The other Christians are all stage right, while the Duke sits informally in front of the grand oak table that dominates centre-stage. From time to time the Christians rise, walk to the table, refill their glasses and return to their seats; though tense about the outcome, they are plainly at ease in these surroundings. At one point, Solanio whispers something in the Duke's ear⁵¹⁷, and, when Portia reminds Shylock that

...that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy...

the Christians applaud⁵¹⁸, as though admiring a clever debating point.

The urbanity of the proceedings was supported by the manner in which Sinead Cusack's Portia handled the trial and dealt with her adversary:

I decided that when I entered the courtroom I knew exactly how to save Antonio; my cousin had shown me that loophole in the law which would save him from his bond. A lot of people ask why then does Portia put everyone through all that misery and why does she play cat-and-mouse with Shylock. The reason is that she doesn't go into the courtroom to save Antonio (that's easy) but to save Shylock, to redeem him - she is passionate to do that. She gives him opportunity after opportunity to relent and to exercise his humanity. She proposes mercy and charity but he still craves the law. She offers him thrice his money but he sticks to his oath. It is only when he shows

⁵¹⁵ Prompt book, held by The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

⁵¹⁶ Cushman, *op cit*. In fact, according to the prompt book, the drink was sherry.

⁵¹⁷ On line 100: 'If you deny me...' (prompt book).

⁵¹⁸ Lines 198-199 (*ibid.*).

himself totally ruthless and intractable (refusing even to allow a surgeon to stand by) that she offers him more justice than he desires.⁵¹⁹

Billington described what followed thus:

In one quite stunning moment... Portia bids him have a surgeon standing by “for charity”. The word “charity” is like a dagger-thrust to his own heart. Suchet pauses, stumbles and, visibly shaken, goes about his bloody business. Thereafter he accepts the punishment meted out to him with wry, rueful resignation.⁵²⁰

A diagram in the prompt book shows Shylock isolated down-stage centre, with the Christians ranged in an up-stage semi-circle, as Portia approaches him from behind to ask ‘Art thou contented, Jew?’. She kneels by his side, and on ‘I am content’ he removes his yarmulke⁵²¹:

“I am content”, he says quietly, still smiling. He has learnt the old lesson once again.⁵²²

In keeping with his interpretation of Shylock as a survivor, Suchet’s exit from the court was simple and undramatic, the character more relieved than destroyed:

In spite of the fact that he has failed in his objective, under Venetian law he might well have still been executed. Instead, however, his sentence is lightened and he is given - through conversion to

⁵¹⁹ Sinead Cusack, writing in Philip Brockbank (ed.), *Players of Shakespeare 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 39). Irving Wardle observed: ‘Sinead Cusack’s Portia is clearly working as much to save [Shylock] as to save Antonio.’ (*op cit.*).

⁵²⁰ Billington, 1981, *op cit.*

⁵²¹ Prompt book, line 391. The *Birmingham Evening News* considered the removal of his yarmulke, ‘...symbolising the order to renounce his Jewish faith’ to be ‘the one point on which he wins our sympathy.’ (22 April, 1981).

⁵²² Wardle, *op cit.* Picking up the smiling idea, Francis King observed: ‘...and again, it is a bitter joke to him, as well as a tragedy, when Portia, using his own mechanical standards, worsts him at the trial.’ (*op cit.*).

Christianity - the chance, as Shakespeare's contemporaries would have seen it, of salvation. What is more, being a Christian gives him... social acceptability and the opportunity to enter into other businesses or professions than that of money-lending. So I don't personally go in for the tense, anguished, howling kind of exit...⁵²³

The televised re-enactment shows that he takes the forced conversion to Christianity with characteristic calmness. In a sequence which asks for comparison with Stewart, he remains kneeling and slowly removes - rather than flicks off - his yarmulke and has just the faintest trace of an ironic smile playing upon his lips as he replies 'I am content.' Interrupting Portia's instruction to Nerissa with 'I pray you, give me leave to go from hence...', he delivers 'I am not well' with pauses between each word, almost as though he is himself beginning to realise the fact. Then, collecting himself, he stands and, like a lawyer reluctantly agreeing to an unpalatable contract, asks that the deed should be sent after him. The exit is quiet and controlled, perhaps because

My Shylock recognizes that he has had a lucky escape and that the accommodation is a fair one.

When he leaves the stage, he knows full well that he still has a life ahead of him.⁵²⁴

Despite the consistent jocularly and absence of tragic heroism in both Stewart's and Suchet's Shylocks, both made a powerful impact upon audiences. Of Suchet's Shylock at the end of the trial, James Fenton wrote:

It was for me an apt climax to an affecting, and consequently deeply disgusting exposition of Christian society at work. Now Shylock was cornered and his final humiliation could be achieved...

If there was one reaction which impressed me in the Stratford audience, it was the horrified sucking

⁵²³ Suchet, p. xvii.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

of teeth which greeted Antonio's insistence that Shylock become a Christian. That really told you something about the Venetian state religion. For the merchant of Venice such vindictiveness was utterly in character.⁵²⁵

Among their many achievements, therefore these two interpretations directed by John Barton demonstrated for the first time that it was perfectly possible to engender a healthy disgust at anti-Semitism without having to play Shylock as a tragic hero and martyr.

⁵²⁵ James Fenton, *Sunday Times*, 26 April, 1981. This reaction to the Christians was echoed in a number of reviews. Jack Tinker (in an article headlined 'O spare me this unlovable bunch of Rialto rascals') described them as a 'ghastly collection of bigots, braggarts, bullies and bores... (*op cit.*); Billington denied that they were 'the usual brutal hearties', but were nonetheless 'a gang of Edwardian dandies in plum-coloured capes and white trousers... incapable of understanding creeds and classes other than their own' (*op cit.*).

CHAPTER 11

1984 TO 1990: THE ISSUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

The four major productions of *The Merchant of Venice* to be staged between 1984 and 1990⁵²⁶ are connected by the fact that all raised the issue of anti-Semitism, though each one in a different way. This chapter will consider them in turn.

Ian McDiarmid, who played Shylock in the John Caird RSC production of 1984, said:

That the 1984 Stratford production of *The Merchant of Venice* was unsatisfactory is a fact with which few will quarrel.⁵²⁷

In fact, the newspaper reviews were, at worst, mixed. While Irving Wardle felt sufficiently moved to write that:

...the comedy simply unrolls on a level of dullness and mediocrity such as I have seldom witnessed at this address.⁵²⁸

and there was much criticism of the sets, in which

Gilded period organs on either side of the stage glide, swivel and meet, at least twice threatening to crush Jessica...⁵²⁹

⁵²⁶ John Caird's production for the RSC, with Ian McDiarmid as Shylock, opened in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre on 10 April, 1984; Bill Alexander's with Antony Sher opened in the same theatre on 23 April, 1987; Peter Hall's production with Dustin Hoffman opened on 1 June, 1989 in the Phoenix Theatre, London; and Timothy Luscombe's English Shakespeare Company's production opened with John Woodvine as Shylock on 17 November, 1990 in the University of Warwick Arts Centre.

⁵²⁷ Ian McDiarmid, writing in Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (eds.) *Players of Shakespeare 2* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 53-54.

⁵²⁸ Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 11 April, 1984.

⁵²⁹ Martin Hoyle, *Financial Times*, 11 April, 1984. Michael Billington developed this theme: 'As one enters the theatre one is greeted by two towering baroque organs suggestive less of the Adriatic than of 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea. The stage, meanwhile, is surrounded by sumptuous plum red patterned curtains and the floor festooned with cushions indicating the bedding department of an Istanbul

there was nonetheless considerable praise for McDiarmid's own performance, expressed most strikingly in headlines such as 'A spectacular Shylock'⁵³⁰, 'Hail to a sparkling Shylock'⁵³¹ and 'Ian, the greatest Shylock'⁵³². Jack Tinker thought McDiarmid 'a dazzling Shylock'⁵³³, Nick Baker judged his performance 'magnificent'⁵³⁴, Michael Billington 'mesmerising'⁵³⁵ and John Barber admired his 'intensity and passion'⁵³⁶. But this was only one set of views, and a less favourable body of opinion might best be represented by Martin Hoyle's eloquent reference to 'a Shylock of virtuoso grotesquerie'⁵³⁷, as a brief account of the features of his interpretation will show.⁵³⁸

Entering in I iii to heavy organ music reminiscent of *The Phantom of the Opera*, McDiarmid's Shylock removes his yellow hat with a flourish - its colour and conical dunce's cap shape have some historical justification - and utters his opening lines in the stage Jew accent which he has adopted as part of his stated aim of playing the character 'as Jewish as I can make him'.⁵³⁹ Writing about the chosen accent and his preparatory visit to Israel, McDiarmid said:

The question of whether or not to use an accent had vexed me. It was clear that Shylock's language was unlike that of anyone else in the play. 'And *spet*' upon my Jewish gabardine.' Was this an indication of some accent or a felicitous misprint? If an accent were to be employed, German

emporium.' He went on to criticise the over-elaborate caskets. (*Guardian*, 11 April, 1984.) Norah Lewis wittily observed a reference to the 'waltzing Wurlitzers' in Shylock's question '...hath not a Jew... organs...?' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 11 April, 1984).

⁵³⁰ John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 April, 1984.

⁵³¹ Peter McGarry, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 11 April, 1984.

⁵³² Ray Seaton, *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 11 April, 1984.

⁵³³ Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 11 April, 1984.

⁵³⁴ Nick Baker, *Times Educational Supplement*, 20 April, 1984.

⁵³⁵ Billington, *op cit.*

⁵³⁶ Barber, *op cit.*

⁵³⁷ Hoyle, *op cit.*

⁵³⁸ The following description is based upon the video-recording of the performance made by the Royal Shakespeare Company and held in the Library of the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon (recorded 18 January, 1985).

⁵³⁹ Interview in *The Times*, 9 April, 1984.

seemed quite appropriate, but a bastardised German. All around me there was the evocative sing-song sound of Yiddish, the language frowned upon by some but spoken by many who regard Hebrew as a holy language to be used only in prayer. Yiddish: the language of the ghetto, but, no doubt because of its origin, a language of great energy. It has the potency and self-deprecating humour, born of years of oppression. This, I was now convinced, should be the accent of Shakespeare's bastard Venetian.⁵⁴⁰

These comments seem to me to typify the dangerous areas into which an actor can stray in preparation for this most controversial of Shakespearean rôles. McDiarmid's deliberations involved forays into close analysis of the play's language ('It was clear that Shylock's language was unlike that of anyone else in the play...'), text history ('Was this an indication of some accent or felicitous misprint?'), socio-linguistics ('...a holy language to be used only in prayer') and Renaissance social history ('Yiddish: the language of the ghetto...'). Whatever the actor's sources for these investigations, they failed to protect him from a number of pitfalls, including linguistic imprecision - what *is* 'bastardised German'? - dubious historical deduction ('Yiddish ...no doubt because of its origin...') and subjective, essentially non-scientific assertion ('...a language of great potency.'). And it was on these shaky foundations that the actor formed his conception of the part and made the fundamental decision that 'If an accent were to be employed, German seemed quite appropriate...' (He neglects to say *why* it 'seemed quite appropriate', unless because of the supposed similarity to the sounds of Yiddish.)

The idea of preparing for the part by paying visits to a Jewish quarter in the City or touring distant lands is certainly not new to this century. Macklin frequented the Exchange, Irving was inspired by his visit to Tunisia⁵⁴¹ and, as will be seen below⁵⁴², Philip Voss took great pains in consulting academics and authorities on Judaism. But an

⁵⁴⁰ Jackson and Smallwood, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁴¹ See pages 11 and 18-20.

⁵⁴² Pages 243-246.

examination of the performance history of this rôle would seem to show little correlation between the amount or quality of this kind of research undertaken, and either (i) the critical success of the resulting performance; or (ii) its acceptance to most sectors of the audience as an interpretation which avoids negative stereotyping. Irving's portrayal did succeed in both of these respects, but not primarily, I would suggest because of the 'authentic' touches brought to the performance by the actor's encounter with the Levantine Jew.⁵⁴³ In McDiarmid's case, his little learning proved to be an extremely dangerous thing indeed, as he loped on to the stage in conical hat and ringlets, intoning his lines in a voice and accent which elicited giggles from the audience throughout the performance. Laughter was particularly forthcoming on lines such as 'Oh, no, no, no, no.' (I iii 15), comically intoned; the extravagantly plosive finish to the word 'sufficient' (I iii 17) delivered with his face almost touching Bassanio's; and the repeated 'I'll have my bond.' (III iii 4, 5 12, 13 and 17), uttered with a mechanical insistence which was presumably intended to indicate implacability, but bathetically recalled the monotonous tones of a dalek. Intonation, in fact, was a greater barrier to taking McDiarmid's Shylock seriously than was his accent. Overton wrote that

Vocally, McDiarmid could swoop within a sentence from high-pitched, even falsetto wheedling to sonorous bass, and from whisper to bellow.⁵⁴⁴

This is true, but his modulation at times bordered upon the arbitrary, and was especially damaging to understanding in the longer speeches, such as his opening address to the court (IV i 34-61). Here, there were over-heavy stresses on words such as 'baned' (45) and 'mood' (50) which gave no clear indication of the intended meaning; a curious sing-song intonation of 'harmless' (54) and 'inevitable' (56); and inexplicable pauses between

⁵⁴³ The reasons for Irving's success are not strictly relevant to this study, but may be inferred from the account of his portrayal given in Chapter 3 and in both Bulman (*op cit.*) and Hughes (*op cit.*)

⁵⁴⁴ Bill Overton *Text and Performance: The Merchant of Venice* (Macmillan, 1987), p. 55.

each word in ‘more than a lodged hate and a certain loathing’ (59). As Michael Ratcliffe put it - linking voice with gesture:

He speaks in a range of actorish voices, none of which sounds like his own and his body suggests semaphore in a state of moral indignation.⁵⁴⁵

Gareth Lloyd Evans voiced a similar complaint:

...one minute he’s kicking up a leg like a music-hall comic, the next he’s half-cackling, half-moaning, but he never finds a line of development...⁵⁴⁶

The range of immoderate gestures and unrestrained emotional behaviour to which Ratcliffe and Lloyd Evans allude was an apt accompaniment to the symphony of strange vocal mannerisms described above. The scene with Tubal is a good example of the ways in which McDiarmid contrived to run the complete gamut of emotional reactions within a few moments on stage. He beats his breast on each of the possessives in ‘...no ill luck stirring but what lights o’ *my* shoulders, no sighs but o’ *my* breathing, no tears but o’ *my* shedding’ (89-91); rushes upstage to shout through the curtains ‘Ha, ha! Heard in Genoa?’ (100); and crumples dramatically on to a chair to rue the loss of the ‘Fourscore ducats at a sitting!’ (104). The ‘wilderness of monkeys’ line (115-116) is delivered mockingly and he completes the scene by switching from a triumphant exclamation of ‘...I can make what merchandise I will’ (121), to silently kissing Tubal on both cheeks after arranging to meet at the synagogue. Then, somewhat bizarrely, he plants the cap back on his head and, as the lights dim, stands stiffly to attention, facing the audience.

⁵⁴⁵ Michael Ratcliffe *Sunday Times*, 15 April, 1984.

⁵⁴⁶ Gareth Lloyd Evans *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 13 April, 1984.

Describing McDiarmid's Shylock, Overton explains very clearly what the actor was attempting to do and what he in fact ended up doing:

The case for so histrionic a performance is that Shylock puts up an act to ingratiate himself with the Christians and to conceal deep cunning and a rage which breaks out when unguarded. But too often the impression was of a virtuoso stage Jew.⁵⁴⁷

In an essentially complimentary review JC Trewin called McDiarmid's Shylock

a closely considered, very Hebraic Jew⁵⁴⁸

and John Barber wrote that

Mr McDiarmid gives us the bearded, lisping, guttural Jew of tradition...⁵⁴⁹

But in what ways 'Hebraic' and whose tradition? John Taylor gives the game away by observing that

In lighter moments there were shades of Ron Moody's Fagin as [McDiarmid] wrung out the part's limited humour.⁵⁵⁰

However noble the intentions, a Shylock that recalls one of the most outrageously anti-Semitic creations in popular consciousness risks giving offence. But the reviews were in the main kind to John Caird's production in this respect, feeling that the presentation of the Christians as

⁵⁴⁷ *Op cit.*

⁵⁴⁸ JC Trewin *Birmingham Post*, 11tApril, 1984.

⁵⁴⁹ Barber, *op cit.*

⁵⁵⁰ John Taylor, *Guardian*, 12 April, 1984.

a more than usually repulsive set of opportunists⁵⁵¹

was enough to clear the play of any charge of anti-Semitism. Only William Frankel, recalling having studied the play in a class at school where he was the only Jew, asked whether Jews should have to go on suffering 'this old infamy'.⁵⁵² As Frankel saw the performance, McDiarmid played the part

...as it might have been in Shakespeare's time - comic, villainous and avaricious, cruel and insolent in success, servile in defeat - everything, in fact, apart from the hooked nose and devil's costume.

In so doing, argued Frankel, McDiarmid had - however unwittingly - based his interpretation upon modern Jewish stereotypes. Picking up McDiarmid's statement in a pre-production interview that he wanted his Shylock to be as Jewish as he could make him⁵⁵³, Frankel wrote:

This comment is revealing. Mr McDiarmid is not saying that he meant to reconstruct Shakespeare's imaginary portrait of a medieval Jew; he is presenting Shylock as a real Jew as he sees Jews, replete with anachronistic side-curls and guttural accent. As further evidence of his search for contemporary authenticity, he told the interviewer that he had prepared for the part by visiting Jerusalem, where he "felt very much an alien in a Jewish world." It is hardly surprising that a Shylock thus envisaged, researched and presented should give offence - an effect which the actor disarmingly anticipated.

Frankel felt strongly that McDiarmid's 'Jewish' portrayal challenged the reticence that Jews normally displayed when it came to arguing that Shakespeare's play was anti-

⁵⁵¹ Billington, *op cit.*

⁵⁵² William Frankel, *The Times*, 17 April, 1984.

⁵⁵³ See above, pages 157-158.

Semitic. As his argument is one that is sometimes levelled against the play, and which is compelling when attached to careless interpretations such as McDiarmid's, it is worth quoting at length:

Actors and directors operate in a world which is not entirely populated by the educated and sophisticated. Prejudice, bigotry, discrimination and even persecution have not disappeared. The reproduction, in this real world, of ancient stereotypes should take into account their potential for inciting or reinforcing racial or religious prejudice.

I believe that Mr McDiarmid's Shylock can have that effect, a view which was fortified at Stratford by the approving reception some members of the audience gave to the most virulent passages in the play.

...Even actors and directors most dedicated to their art might possibly agree that other factors exist of no less consequence than artistic freedom of expression. I wonder whether Mr McDiarmid did think about them. If he did, his Shylock suggests that the post-Holocaust inhibitions on public anti-Jewish presentations are fading.⁵⁵⁴

There is an unusual footnote to the subject of Caird's production and the charge of anti-Semitism. Frankel ended his article with a reference to the anthology of quotations printed in the theatre programme, most of which were anti-Jewish writings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He wondered if they were included in an attempt to add authenticity to the production, and whether

the search for authenticity justif[ied] the perpetuation of the malevolent stereotypes still capable of influencing impressionable minds.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵⁴ In fact, McDiarmid's performance recalled several Shylocks at Stratford in the immediate post-Holocaust years, such as those by Robert Helpmann and Michael Redgrave (see above, pages 93-99).

⁵⁵⁵ Frankel, *op cit*.

He had presumably been alerted to the controversy which had arisen after the first preview performance of the Caird production and which had persuaded the RSC to insert an explanatory note into the programme defending its choice of extracts. Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* under the headline ‘RSC defends its Shylock in anti-Semitism row’, Peter Harlock, Publicity Controller for the RSC, explained that

...the idea [of the extracts] was to show Shakespeare as a humanist who wrote the play at a time when virulently anti-Semitic attitudes were prevalent throughout Elizabethan society. The aim of the explanatory note will be to put the issues in context and suggest that perhaps modern atrocities against Jewish society had made people forget that anti-Semitic attitudes were prevalent in earlier times.⁵⁵⁶

There can be no doubt that neither John Caird nor Ian McDiarmid - nor the compiler and editor of the programme, Ellen Goodman - intended an anti-Semitic interpretation. It might nonetheless have been expected that McDiarmid’s performance, combined with the controversy over the programme (further headlines included ‘Theatre to revise “Jews” comments’⁵⁵⁷ and ‘Adding a footnote to “Racist” Bard’⁵⁵⁸) would act as powerful arguments in persuading the RSC that, when it next came to present this dangerously sensitive play, it ought to proceed with special caution. In the event, Bill Alexander’s 1987 production was to be even more controversial than Caird’s.

Writing about David Suchet’s ‘laughing Shylock’⁵⁵⁹ in 1981, Robert Cushman said:

Probably only a Jewish actor would take such risks in this role; Mr Suchet has no need to stand on his dignity, knowing that the play will take care of that for him, and it may be that only a Jewish

⁵⁵⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April, 1984.

⁵⁵⁷ *Birmingham Post*, 5 April, 1984.

⁵⁵⁸ *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 4 April, 1984.

⁵⁵⁹ Headline to Robert Cushman’s article in the *Observer*, 26 April, 1981.

actor ...can make sense of the play now. As written “The Merchant” is thoughtlessly anti-Semitic; what redeems it, even makes it useful, is its insights into the effects of persecution.

The risks to which Cushman alludes here are those which, if things go wrong, can lead a production into charges of anti-Semitism. The reality, of course, is that several non-Jewish actors have in recent decades taken greater risks than Suchet did, Patrick Stewart and Ian McDiarmid notable among them, and that with every new production there will be a renewal of the allegation that the play is anti-Semitic. Cushman’s leading statement does draw some support, however, from the fact that two of the most controversial interpretations from the 1980s in this respect both involved Jewish actors as Shylock. The first was the BBC television version with Warren Mitchell⁵⁶⁰; the second Bill Alexander’s production for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1987, with Antony Sher⁵⁶¹.

According to Bulman, Alexander’s production

...grappled with the play’s offensive subject-matter more daringly than any production in recent memory. Refusing either to rehabilitate Shylock as the play’s moral standard-bearer (as Miller had done in 1970) or to treat him from a safe historical distance as a comic ‘Elizabethan’ Jew (as Miller had done in 1980), Alexander courted controversy, seeming almost to invite accusations of racism. The controversy sprang in part from his refusal to honour the distinctions between romance and realism, comedy and tragedy, sympathy for and aversion to Shylock, from which stage interpreters have traditionally felt they had to choose. By intensifying the problematic nature of the text, Alexander modulated the dynamics of audience response: he goaded audiences with stereotypes only to probe the nature of their own prejudices; he confronted them with alienation in different guises in order to reveal the motives for scapegoatism. His Shylock was grotesque - at once comic,

⁵⁶⁰ See above, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶¹ First performance, 23 April, 1987, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

repulsive and vengeful. Yet he was made so in part by those Venetians who needed someone on whom to project their own alienation; Venetians who, in their anxiety over sexual, religious, and mercantile values, were crucial to the transaction Alexander worked out between Shakespeare's text and contemporary racial tensions.⁵⁶²

This commentary is particularly useful, not simply because it very clearly sets out what, in Bulman's view, Alexander was intending to do and the manner in which he hoped to accomplish it; but, more interestingly, because it exemplifies the precariousness both of the director's attempts to predict audience response and the performance critic's subsequent efforts to describe it. That Alexander intended to do what Bulman describes is not in dispute; but there are questions to be asked about how far these directorial intentions were fulfilled on stage, and to what extent they were clear to the audience. In other words, did Alexander in fact succeed in 'modulat[ing] the dynamics of audience response', as Bulman suggests? Were witnesses of the performance aware of being 'goaded ...with stereotypes'; and did they, if subject to this goading, 'probe the nature of their own prejudices'?

Fundamental to these assertions is the definition of the term 'stereotype', as it applied to the theatrical presentation of Jews (and, as will be seen, other minorities) in the late 1980s. There is clearly a context in which the term 'stereotype Jew' will be understood to mean a figure characterised by certain kinds of identifiable behaviour patterns, embracing features such as accent, gesture, appearance and general demeanour. Ron Moody's Fagin from Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* comes to mind as a typical representation of this kind in the comic mode, and recent history shows that such an image is never far from the popular consciousness. In another sense, however, the stereotypical *Shylock* in 1987 was, for a significant proportion of the audience, a different figure altogether, and not only for the professional sector responsible for the published reviews. For such

⁵⁶² *Op cit.*, p. 117.

people, unable to dismiss the Holocaust from their minds, and perceiving painful reflections in the play of Britain's own race problems, a stereotypical stage Jew was just as likely to be conceived of as a victimised alien deserving of our support and understanding. Indeed there is a strong argument for suggesting that the *theatrical* stereotype at the time of Alexander's production was not the East-end or music-hall Jew at all, but something closer to the image initiated by Irving and followed by numerous twentieth century actors, here described by Michael Coveney in the context of Antony Sher's interpretation as:

...the haughty dignified tradition most recently embodied by Alec Guinness at Chichester.⁵⁶³

As Coveney's statement rightly implies, there now exists a *tradition* of dignified theatrical Shylocks co-existent with the stereotype Jew of the popular imagination.

Alexander's interpretation was predicated upon a similar duality, but not precisely the one that I have just described. As Bulman suggests, it made the assumption that, for all our liberal attitudes and best of intentions, we remain conditioned by our responses to deeply ingrained racial and sexual stereotypes. In such a context, the play's aim was to challenge the audience to confront their buried prejudices; and to do this it must first awaken them. From the perspective of Deborah Findlay, playing Portia,

[Alexander] talked of wanting to create a situation where the audience's sympathies would be always shifting, where they would constantly have to assess and judge the characters on their actions and beliefs and presumably in so doing reassess themselves.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶³ Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁶⁴ Deborah Findlay in Russell Jackson & Robert Smallwood (eds.) *Players of Shakespeare 3* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 53.

For such a dramatic conception, it was decided that Shylock should in many respects be a stereotype Jew in the more traditional sense alluded to above; and it is revealing to consider which choices were made in realising an interpretation of that kind.

Physically, Sher's Shylock was as unattractive as he could make him -

a lip-smacking, liquid-eyed Levantine bargain hunter,

as the *Jewish Chronicle* described him,⁵⁶⁵

A Shylock we can loathe ...wearing the beard and nose of anti-Semitic Nazi cartoons...⁵⁶⁶

Playing the character as a Levantine Jew, Sher assumed a Turkish accent and adopted

...headslaps, swinging arms, pounding fists, and a barrage of rude Turkish gestures supplied by Jondon Gourkan, one of the RSC stage managers...⁵⁶⁷

In telling the Laban story, Sher's Shylock 'punches his hand, then punctuates the speech with bonking thumps'⁵⁶⁸; while his much commented upon deep-striding movements -

[an] ambling gait, a sort of seafaring waddle interrupted with sudden ferocious descents to a crouching position and a glassy-eyed grandeur...⁵⁶⁹

were faintly simian and suggestive of

⁵⁶⁵ David Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 8 May, 1987.

⁵⁶⁶ Milton Shulman, *London Evening Standard*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁶⁷ Gregory Doran in Russell Jackson & Robert Smallwood (eds.), *op cit.*, p. 73. Of Sher's accent, Doran remarks: 'ducats' became 'dockets'; 'Christian' became 'Chreestian'; and 'Justice' 'Jostice'.' (p 73).

⁵⁶⁸ Prompt book (held in the Shakespeare Centre).

⁵⁶⁹ Coveney, *op cit.*

...truculent isolation. His very walk [had] the thrusting quality of someone used to pushing his way
...through stone-throwing, cat-calling mobs.⁵⁷⁰

All this was present from the outset. In his first scene Sher's Shylock remains seated, 'a gypsy Jew in a canopied lair'⁵⁷¹, as if asserting his power over Bassanio, until leaping up on 'Rest you fair...' (56)⁵⁷². And when he makes the offer of the bond, he chillingly imitates with flailing arms the action of cutting off the flesh, accompanying the clause 'In what part of your body pleaseth me' (148) with a flourish down the length of Antonio's torso, culminating ominously around his genitals. This telling gesture is one that Bulman does not mention, but, of all Shylock's details of behaviour, it is this which might be said to have been designed to play most powerfully upon the audience's collective subconscious fears about Jews and, at an early stage, draw upon the stereotype which Alexander wishes to conjure up. As James Shapiro points out,

Those watching or reading *The Merchant of Venice* are often curious about what part of Antonio's body Shylock has in mind when they learn of Shylock's desire to exact "an equal pound" of Antonio's "fair flesh, to be cut off and taken" in that "part" of his body that "pleaseth" the Jew. Those all too familiar with the plot may forget that it is not until the trial scene in act 4 that this riddle is solved and we learn that Shylock intends to cut from Antonio's "breast" near his heart. Or partially solved. ...Why don't we learn of this crucial detail until Shylock's final appearance in the play?⁵⁷³

⁵⁷⁰ Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 1 May, 1987.

⁵⁷¹ Coveney, *op cit.*

⁵⁷² Description based upon the video-recording of the performance made by the Royal Shakespeare Company and held in the library of the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon (recorded 6 August, 1987).

⁵⁷³ James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, New York (Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 121.

Sher's gesture was, to me, clearly understood by the 'tainted wether', Antonio; and went some way to explain the knowing laughter with which the Christian readily accepted the terms of the bond. In a footnote to his account of Christian fears of circumcision, Shapiro quotes Freud's observation that

...here we may also trace one of the roots of the anti-semitism which appears with such elemental force and finds such irrational explanation among the nations of the west.⁵⁷⁴

and points out that, for Freud,

circumcision is unconsciously equated with castration...

Audience aversion to Sher's Shylock might then be said to have operated on a number of levels, many of them unconscious, but all bound up with the cultural stereotyping that Alexander sought to confront.

From my own recollection of the performance, however, refreshed by a study of the video-recording, it seems rather more probable that these Freudian implications passed the audience by without even rippling the surface of their subconscious. It seems highly likely too that a significant proportion of the audience at each performance remained completely unperturbed by Sher's grotesque and unappetising portrayal, responding instead to his Shylock as an amusing and ultimately sympathetic figure in the post-Holocaust⁵⁷⁵ theatrical tradition, and nothing more. For example, while John Peter seemed to be in tune with what Alexander was attempting to do, referring in his review to

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, footnote 2, p. 259. Shapiro quotes Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, trans. James Strachey et al., (London, the Hogarth Press, 1953-1974).

⁵⁷⁵ I am using the term 'post-Holocaust' as a short-cut to label particular kinds of sensitivity, rather than a historical period beginning in 1945; as I demonstrated above, 'post-Holocaust' awareness did not seriously impinge upon theatrical representation of Shylock in this country until 1960.

that special sense of discomfort and uneasy excitement which you experience when an apparently remote argument unexpectedly cuts close to the bone...⁵⁷⁶

most other critics were silent on the supposedly disturbing and challenging effect for which Alexander worked. Many, like Michael Coveney, might have been writing about Olivier (whose performance Sher assiduously strove to avoid imitating) in their conceptualisation of Sher's Shylock as a sympathetic figure 'fuelled with all the suffering of the Jewish nation'⁵⁷⁷:

But the blazingly important achievement here is the reappropriation of Shylock as a sympathetic stranger...⁵⁷⁸

Sher's interpretation and power of performance turns this tale on its head and by the end we feel great sympathy for the man.⁵⁷⁹

It is the first Merchant I have seen in which we *regret* he doesn't get his pound of flesh.⁵⁸⁰

His initial reaction [in III i] was intensely sympathetic as he rushed in, deeply distressed, pursued by urchins, poked at with sticks, mocked by Salerio and Solanio, and with blood on his injured brow... From being a representative of a wronged race he had become a vindictive individual; but even in court he still made a plea for sympathy...⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁶ John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 3 May, 1987.

⁵⁷⁷ Doran, *op cit.*, p 75.

⁵⁷⁸ Coveney, *op cit.*

⁵⁷⁹ Peter Rhodes, *Birmingham and Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁸⁰ David Shannon, *Sunday Today*, 3 May, 1987.

⁵⁸¹ Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare Performances in London and Stratford-upon-Avon, 1986-87', *Shakespeare Survey* 41, 1989, pp. 162-163.

The review from which this last comment is taken was like many which viewed Shylock in the context of a collection of Christians who were more than usually unattractive. It was with this group that Alexander made his other challenge to our liberal attitudes:

...there was no suggestion that Christianity implied moral superiority. The spitting that Shylock complains of in his opening scene became a symbol of anti-Semitic behaviour. Three Venetian urchins elaborated the action, baiting Shylock, crying ‘Jew, Jew, Jew’ after him and Tubal, mimicking and mocking their victims; and this kind of behaviour extended upwards to Salerio and Solanio, to Graziano, even to Bassanio and Antonio; among the male characters, only the Duke was free of it in the courtroom scene.⁵⁸²

John Peter observed the central point that Alexander was anxious to convey through his presentation of the male Christians:

It is not that Antonio and his friends are nasty in themselves. No, Alexander drives home the most appalling thing about racism: namely, that agreeable people, bluff companions, loyal friends, ordinary decent, likeable men, can be transformed into baying, spitting, racist hounds. No other production has brought out for me this fatal schizophrenia of Western civilisation.⁵⁸³

Much of the Christians’ nastiness was manifest in the physical violence they inflicted upon Shylock, nasty, small-minded attacks played out in front of a yellow star of David daubed on the back wall. The key tormentors in this respect were the often blandly portrayed Salerio and Solanio. Gregory Doran, who played Solanio, recalled their behaviour in this way:

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p 162. In fact, even the Duke was unusually oppositional in this scene.

⁵⁸³ Peter, *op cit.*

The Salads acted as a funnel for the bile of anti-Semitism flooding throughout that society... Generally the play is viewed from the Christian perspective. If we forced the audience to witness the violent and unholy racism of the Christian Venetians with their apartheid regime we might adjust that perspective. [In III i] ...the boys of Venice chased the Jew on stage, mocking him and pelting him with stones. It was a brilliant device which propelled Shylock straight into enemy territory... Shylock arrived on stage like a whirlwind, bruised and bloodied from the streetboys' catapults, dazed with grief. The Salads, bored with each other, and tetchy, fell upon this new distraction like vultures on a rattlesnake. We taunted and sneered at the Jew, shoving him between us, and knocked him to the ground... We prodded him with a stick, as if he were a poisonous scorpion, until he scuttled out of reach...⁵⁸⁴

But this kind of physical torment is somehow less disturbing to a modern audience than the constant spitting to which Shylock is subjected by the Venetians throughout the play. Hardly a single reviewer failed to mention this feature of the performance, seeing it typically as 'shocking and primitive'⁵⁸⁵ and 'quite brutal'⁵⁸⁶; and, while this production was neither the first nor the last to feature spitting⁵⁸⁷, it became in its casual violence a metaphor for the Christians' bigoted ill-treatment of the Jews. With its historic pedigree it acted as a disturbing reminder that Shylock and Tubal are only two among many to suffer this degradation, a point graphically represented when Shylock silently and tenderly wiped the spit off Tubal's beard after the departure of Salerio and Solanio in Act III.

⁵⁸⁴ Doran in Jackson & Smallwood, *op cit.*, pp. 72-74. The prompt book records that, as he runs in, Shylock '...crashes into Sol, then rebounds off Salerio then back to Sol who pushes him to the ground... Sol x D/S to pick up his stick then x U/SL of Sh, the point of stick under his chin... Sol boots Sh to Sal who boots him away D/S... Sh crawls away D/SL.'

⁵⁸⁵ Jeremy Brien, *Bristol Evening Post*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁸⁶ 'WW', *Shropshire Star*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁸⁷ Spitting has been a feature of several productions, *inter alia*, those featuring Henry Beerbohm Tree in 1908 (see page 49), Oscar Asche in 1915 (see pages 45-46), and Donald Wolfitt in 1953. Peter Hall used it in his 1989 production with Dustin Hoffman (see below, pages 00-00) and Alexander himself returned to it when he directed the play for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company in 1997 with David Schofield as Shylock.

There was one feature of the Christians' behaviour, however, which was designed to elicit a more ambivalent audience response, and this was the clear strand of homo-eroticism running through the production:

[Alexander] opened the play with what was virtually a tableau: John Carlisle as Antonio, not caught in mid-conversation as the text suggests, but standing centre-stage, staring glumly into the middle distance, only later to be approached by Solanio and Salerio. Here was the merchant of Venice, and it was soon to be made clear that his melancholy stemmed from frustrated desire for Nicholas Farrell's Bassanio. Antonio reeled as Bassanio spoke praise of Portia, and kissed him with despairing passion but little response as they parted. Antonio was obviously to be understood as a depressive homosexual, and Bassanio's reciprocation of his affection did not preclude the thought that their relationship might have been physical as well as emotional...⁵⁸⁸

Among the many reviewers who commented upon Antonio's homosexuality⁵⁸⁹

Billington saw Carlisle's merchant as 'a tormented closet-gay', who

in such a rabidly conformist world would actually prefer death to restricted life; and [who] greets his salvation with sullen, angry resentment.⁵⁹⁰

Most interestingly, David Nathan, writing in the *Jewish Chronicle*, made a connection between homosexuality and racism, in that the 'self-hatred' Antonio experiences because of his homosexual longing for Bassanio 'adds to the depth of his anti-Semitism.'⁵⁹¹

Other characters were clearly shown to share Antonio's homosexuality:

⁵⁸⁸ Wells, pp. 164-165.

⁵⁸⁹ Bulman counts fifteen (*op cit.*, p. 126).

⁵⁹⁰ Billington, *op cit.*

⁵⁹¹ Nathan, *op cit.*

By making [Salerio and the (younger) Solanio] lovers we paralleled the central relationship and pointed up the way the two follow its vagaries, hang upon its changes of mood, and thereby fuel the cold embers of their own affair. At one point we had the sentimental Salerio attempt to kiss his young toy-boy. It seemed a valuable moment, neither gratuitous nor provocative - but it was hell on schools' matinées.⁵⁹²

Doran's amusing punch-line contains a serious point. It is often the case that children respond unaffectedly to things that adults will force themselves to accept lest they should be considered unsophisticated. The Stratford adult audience might be expected to be as determinedly liberal in its attitudes to homosexuals as it was to Jews; but the reviewer who remarked that Carlisle's Antonio was 'distinctly creepy',⁵⁹³ no doubt unwittingly gave voice to feelings of unease that many of the audience experienced but were unwilling to admit to.

Comments such as this, and Doran's concerning the matinée, taken with the many objections voiced by members of the Stratford audience⁵⁹⁴, suggest that the portrayal of Christian homosexuality had awoken prejudices in ways that Shylock's presentation as an unsavoury alien had not. If that were indeed the case, then Alexander might be said to have achieved only the lesser half of his aims. While audiences had indeed been 'goaded ...with stereotypes' so that they might 'probe the nature of their own prejudices', these stereotypes had, in my opinion, only been effective in the realm of sexuality. If I am right, the difference in response can perhaps be attributed to the fact that, since the Holocaust, a Stratford audience is likely to know where it stands with regard to anti-Semitism. This is not to say that the audience will be free of racists; rather that the presentation of a normally 'civilised' Shylock engaging in barbaric vengefulness, these days has fewer dark areas of the bourgeois audience's subconscious to tap into, than the

⁵⁹² Doran, *op cit.*, pp 72-74.

⁵⁹³ Terry Grimley, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 30 April, 1987.

⁵⁹⁴ See Bulman, p 126.

vision of an otherwise 'masculine' Antonio kissing a young Bassanio passionately on the lips. If Shylock's meaningful gesture towards 'what part of your body pleaseth me' conjures up any image at all, therefore, it is more likely to be one of the tainted wether's emasculation than of the Jew as legendary castrator. Contemporary anti-Semitism tends to be religious, economic and social ('...they keep to themselves, look after their own, get to the top...'); homophobia is an altogether murkier prejudice, difficult for its proponents to articulate because it lacks even the vestiges of (albeit perverted) rationalism attached to racism. This is why Alexander's 'goading' of the audience failed with Shylock but worked spectacularly well with Antonio.⁵⁹⁵

Perhaps, in fact, Sher's portrayal was finally - despite its alien exoticism and crude, unappealing physicality - too conventional to stir up the kinds of visceral reaction that Alexander wanted, and such as he did achieve in arousing with his gay Christians. For all his toad-like squatting, wailing voice and a general demeanour which 'offend[ed] all patrician sense of propriety and decorum'⁵⁹⁶, Sher's Jew remained an amusing⁵⁹⁷ and essentially sympathetic figure. In keeping with so many other post-1950s Shylocks, he offered the bond playfully, in genuine 'merry sport', became crazed with revenge-lust only after the loss of Jessica (whom he had formerly treated with affection), and realised that the bond could be for real only during his maltreatment at the hands of Salerio and Solanio in III i.⁵⁹⁸ Add the fact that he was being played by one of the most attractive and exciting actors of his decade, and a Jew into the bargain, and it is easy to see why Alexander's aim that our liberal notions should be challenged by gut aversion to a grotesque stereotype had the odds stacked heavily against it.

⁵⁹⁵ A similar experiment along these lines had been conducted by Peter Zadek in Germany in 1972; he provoked 'embarrassment to the point of physical revulsion as the result of "revealing what in our society is not allowed to be revealed"' (Hortmann, *op cit.*, p.257).

⁵⁹⁶ Peter, *op cit.*

⁵⁹⁷ On the video-recording in the Shakespeare Centre library, the audience are heard to laugh throughout I iii, not only on Shylock's jokes about pirates, or making gold and silver 'breed as fast', but on unusual lines such as his comment that Antonio 'brings down the rate of usance.'

⁵⁹⁸ In a moment highly reminiscent of Olivier's performance, Sher's Shylock suddenly falls silent as he hears the distant tolling of a bell. In Olivier's case, it was a funeral knell; in Sher's, a ship's bell (see Doran, *op cit.*, p. 74, and the Sher prompt book).

While it is true that all four productions in this chapter did, in one way or another, raise the issue of anti-Semitism, the third from the period 1984 to 1990 did so by its apparent absence of a distinctive ideological agenda, rather than by bringing the issue forcibly to the audience's attention.

One of the most interesting things historically about Sir Peter Hall's production in 1989⁵⁹⁹ is that it brought out into the open two distinct camps: those who liked to see the darker and grittier aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* given expression in performances which clearly displayed a particular ideological stance; and those who preferred issues such as anti-Semitism to be explored less overtly, if at all. In this debate about the degrees to which such issues should be made explicit on stage, it was interesting to see how often Alexander's 1987 RSC production was raised as the standard around which the 'more explicit' camp rallied. Its supporters clearly found Hall's directorial approach to this production somewhat anodyne:

Peter Hall's finely crafted production of *The Merchant of Venice* never really allows us to take the play seriously. Although it works very well as a comedy, the deeper significance is never satisfyingly brought out... If you like your Shakespeare straight, no cuts, no ruffles, and little depth then this will surely please. If, however, you are after something more stimulating, prepare for disappointment.⁶⁰⁰

This represents a shift in method from Peter Hall's work at the RSC during the 1960s, which was often politically committed. ...here there seemed to be a lower level of engagement, resulting in a

⁵⁹⁹ First performance, 1 June, 1989, the Phoenix Theatre, London.

⁶⁰⁰ Lydia Conway, *What's On*, 14 June, 1989. Carl Miller called the production '...as sturdy, starry and full of life as Madame Tussaud's...' (*City Limits*, 8 June, 1989).

thoroughly conscientious and scrupulous but ultimately rather uninspired journey through the text rather than a sustained illumination of it.⁶⁰¹

Those in the opposing camp took the line that Alexander's version had lacked subtlety and had overstated the play's themes, while Hall's was creditable for its restraint and apparent willingness to 'let the text speak for itself'.

These different positions, together with a variety of reactions to Hoffman's portrayal of Shylock⁶⁰², were clearly documented in the press reviews. Given that this was also a production which, because of Hoffman's star status, excited a great deal of media interest, it is worth examining these reviews in some detail as indicators, not only of critical response to Hoffman's portrayal, but also of prevailing attitudes to the interpretation of the rôle more generally.

Among those who felt that Hall's production lacked bite was Michael Billington who regretted the 'loss of the tragic dimension' and 'any strong sense of the character's inveterate malignity', declaring:

This is clearly, however, part of Peter Hall's overall intention to redress the current balance which tends to treat the play as a study in racial persecution. Where Bill Alexander's recent RSC production brought to mind images of South Africa in its stress on the way racial oppression breeds violent revenge, Hall's production locates the play firmly in a Renaissance world... In the end, I don't find it as challenging a production as the Alexander one which pinned down the timeless ugliness of racial hatred.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰¹ Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare Production in England in 1989', *Shakespeare Survey* 43, 1991, p. 188.

⁶⁰²This too gave further occasion for comparison with Bill Alexander's production. Michael Coveney wrote: 'Small and dapper, scything the air with elaborately eloquent gestures, this Shylock is as full-bloodedly semitic and "apart" as was Antony Sher's for the Royal Shakespeare Company... Unlike Sher, though, he is less exotically Mediterranean than grimly Hassidic, with neat and bandy legs protruding beneath an ever-present black gabardine.' (Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 3 June, 1989.)

⁶⁰³ Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 2 June, 1989.

Sheridan Morley endorsed this view, seeing ‘the ugly racism of Venice’ in Hall’s version as

almost a subplot ...faintly at a tangent to the rest of the action.⁶⁰⁴

Milton Shulman similarly felt that

By balancing the play towards its sweeter side, Hall [had] taken the sting out of its anti-Semitism and turned it into a gentle, unruffled, conventional comedy in which Shylock happens to be merely an unpleasant racial distraction...⁶⁰⁵

while Michael Ratcliffe voiced the more extreme opinion that it was:

...a *Merchant* without context, in no way to be compared with the fierce and uncompromising version directed ...by Bill Alexander at the RSC.⁶⁰⁶

Focusing initially on the financial themes of the play, Lydia Conway argued that

By making [Portia] the central figure, Hall obscures the economic basis of the plot...⁶⁰⁷

Jim Hiley, writing in *The Listener*, voiced a similar complaint:

⁶⁰⁴ Sheridan Morley, *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 June, 1989.

⁶⁰⁵ Milton Shulman, *London Evening Standard*, 2 June, 1989.

⁶⁰⁶ Michael Ratcliffe, *Observer*, 4 June, 1989.

⁶⁰⁷ Conway, *op cit.*

Hall takes no perceptible line on the reiterated theme of money. This is a colossal omission, given the prominence of commerce in Antonio's conflict with Shylock, and the emphasis on value ('All that glisters is not gold') in Belmont.⁶⁰⁸

In an oblique reference to the alleged superficiality of Hall's approach, Hiley went on:

Portia's suitors bear fancy gifts and costumes to match. But the characters' gaudy, pageant-like appearances only obscure Shakespeare's critique of their confusion of love with riches.

He, too, moves on to the issue of anti-Semitism:

Hall also seems content to let the dramatist's anti-Semitism speak for itself, and even compounds the racist flavour of the play by having Morocco's attendants wear hideous 'black-face'.

Leaving aside the interpretation of his phrase 'the dramatist's anti-Semitism' (is he implying that Shakespeare is anti-Semitic?), there is a clear implication in Hiley's comment that letting something 'speak for itself' can be misleading and dangerous. Rhoda Koenig supported this view, expressing the concern that, if a production fails to condemn explicitly a social ill at the heart of the play, there is a strong possibility that the interpretation will be seen as endorsing it. Moving on from racism exclusively, she takes the argument outside this particular production in order to see Hall's *Merchant* as a product of the late eighties and its debased sensibilities:

Hall's treatment of some ...characters is questionable at best. The Prince of Morocco is accompanied by some hokey pageantry... The ancient, blind Gobbo rushes head-long into walls, repeatedly knocking himself out for the count. This may be historical comedy, but Shakespeare's treatment of the old and helpless is usually more humane. In any event, it got shrieks of laughter -

⁶⁰⁸ Jim Hiley, *Listener*, 15 June, 1989.

as did, I was appalled to hear, the pathetic capering of a deaf and backward girl in *The Debutante Ball* the week before. In the face of behaviour that is so - as the short-sighted cliché has it - un-Christian, perhaps Hall's reading is the right one after all for our interesting times.⁶⁰⁹

This was only one perspective, however. Among those endorsing Hall's approach was Tony Dunn, who praised the director (with some incidental irony aimed at interpreters of the Alexander school) for

...never [being] so clumsy as to ideologise his Shakespeare. Indeed, all his recent productions have been very firmly in period costume with maximum attention, as here, to intelligent verse-speaking and stage-movement. So the parallels with contemporary Muslim separatism, Salman Rushdie as the late Ayatollah Khomeini's pound of flesh, mullahs ranting against make-up, are probably my own reading.⁶¹⁰

Irene G Dash also indulges in a side-swipe at Alexander when she writes:

This production, stressing individual characterization and avoiding short-cuts - the heavy beard, the strong accent, the hooked nose, the blood and tallis on the ground - revitalizes the text...⁶¹¹

Alluding to the presentation of characters who, in some productions, are played as out-and-out violent racists, John Gross wrote:

Sir Peter has also resisted the temptation (except at one or two moments) to underline the aggressiveness and the double standards of the Christian characters, in order to make the play seem

⁶⁰⁹ Rhoda Koenig, *Punch*, 16 June, 1989.

⁶¹⁰ Tony Dunn, *Tribune*, 16 June, 1989.

⁶¹¹ Irene G Dash *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Spring 1990, p. 11.

more even-handed than it is. Where their faults are on the surface, he lets them show; where they are implicit, as they mostly are, he lets us work them out for ourselves.⁶¹²

Hall's interpretation was also welcomed by critics who, like Charles Osborne in the *Daily Telegraph*, presumably saw *The Merchant of Venice* as

...one of the least problematical of Shakespeare's plays⁶¹³

and it was later much praised for its restrained approach by HR Coursen:

How one responds to *The Merchant of Venice* indicates how one might respond to anti-Semitism. This theme may be a more powerful force in the script if, instead of being tossed at the audience like a grenade, as in the Alexander-Sher version, it is under-played, as in the Hall production.⁶¹⁴

The one reviewer at the time to focus on the exact ways in which Hall's restraint worked was the *Jewish Chronicle*'s David Nathan. His explanation is worth quoting in full, not only because commentaries from that publication are able to adopt a unique perspective where the issue of anti-Semitism is concerned, but also for his analysis of what actually happened in the play:

Peter Hall's view that the play is not antisemitic but, if anything, the reverse, does not lead him into any gross distortion of the Christians. The first night audience at the Phoenix Theatre - and it is doubtful if subsequent audiences will be any different - gave him extraordinary corroboration of an aspect of middle-class social antisemitism that he explored in one of the minor scenes.

Solario and Solanio ...are describing how Shylock took the news of his daughter's flight with Lorenzo and all Shylock's jewels and money. They talk of his crying, "My daughter, my ducats"

⁶¹² John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 June, 1989.

⁶¹³ Charles Osborne, *Daily Telegraph*, 3 June, 1989.

⁶¹⁴ HR Coursen, *Reading Shakespeare on Stage* (Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 99.

and mock, not so much Hoffman's accent, as a generalised "Jewish" speech such as when lousy comedians tell Cohen jokes.

A section of the audience, good, decent people all, I expect, found this very amusing. Moments later they gasped when two men, on leaving the stage, passed Tubal and casually spat at him. Hall makes the point that the mimicry itself is a spit in the face, though he had to transpose a scene in order to do it. He is the most rigorous director when it comes to the text, the most subtle in revealing and providing the sub-text.⁶¹⁵

Nathan's observation suggests that, at least in one quarter, Hall was exonerated of the charge of failing to condemn anti-Semitism with sufficient vigour, not least because the director appeared to have engineered a particularly telling juxtaposition in order to make a powerful anti-racist point. Michael Coveney drew similar conclusions from his reaction to Act V:

The nastiest taste of all is left by the news that Antonio's fortune is safe. The Jew's Jewness can be safely consigned to a category of bogey-man aberration. It is the strength of both play and production that we know to what extent Shakespeare, and his characters, are kidding themselves.⁶¹⁶

Given the many positive and negative comments that might be made of an actor's interpretation of the rôle of Shylock, one curious phenomenon in the reviews of this production was the frequency of allusion to Hoffman's stature⁶¹⁷. Almost without exception, the references were disparaging, the following being typical of the tone and content:

⁶¹⁵ David Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 June, 1989.

⁶¹⁶ Coveney, *op cit.*

⁶¹⁷ Twelve of the reviews published in the *London Theatre Record* (21 May - 3 June 1989) made some allusion to the actor's size, Martin Dodsworth notably describing him as 'notoriously not tall' (*Times Literary Supplement*, June 1989, p. 666). Maureen Paton and Paul Taylor alone alluded to Hoffman's size favourably: 'He is the smallest person on the stage and yet he seems the biggest. That is real presence for you.' (Maureen Paton, *Daily Express*, 2 June, 1989.); 'Hoffman's physical slightness and large head add ludicrous pathos to his character's bid for self-sufficiency.' (Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 3 June, 1989.).

One sign of dissatisfaction is that I became uncomfortably aware throughout of Mr Hoffman's diminutive stature: the other characters tower over him...⁶¹⁸

This lack of emotional weight is reinforced by the actor's reedy voice and - dare I say? - girlish figure.⁶¹⁹

Dustin Hoffman is at a considerable disadvantage in undertaking Shylock in London because he is American and short.⁶²⁰

Even those who made neutral references to the actor's stature linked it with observation that the performance was low-key, small-scale or light-weight, qualities which in turn were said to befit the interpretation's key-note mode: irony. Stanley Wells wrote:

...Hoffman, a ferrety little figure, bearded and with long hair curling in ringlets over his ears, gave a light-weight performance, stronger on irony than on passion.⁶²¹

Billington and Taylor made similar points:

Mr Hoffman's Shylock is not in the heroic tradition of Redgrave or O'Toole. In his simple gabardine and black yarmulka, he cuts a humble figure and his forte is quiet irony.⁶²²

Small-scale and low-key, Hoffman's Shylock, dressed in a drab, belted gabardine, with two corkscrew curls framing his scrubbily-bearded face, is no exotic alien or flamboyant wheedler, but a

⁶¹⁸ Gross, *op cit.*

⁶¹⁹ Hiley, *op cit.*

⁶²⁰ Shulman, *op cit.*

⁶²¹ Wells, p 187.

⁶²² Billington, *op cit.*

cagey, poker-faced, ironic little guy, given to tiny distrustful swivels of the eyes and slightly paranoid shifts of the head.⁶²³

Several critics made a connection between the character's 'sardonic humour and ...ironic detachment'⁶²⁴ and his wary dislike of the Christians, but not all made the same connection. It was seen variously as deriving from contempt:

With a half-smile playing around his lips as he cringes before the insults of his tormentors, this Shylock's yearning for revenge is a product of his contempt for them.⁶²⁵;

as a form of defensive self-parody:

Hoffman's Shylock is more full of quick sardonic wit than any burning desire for revenge on the 'Christian' Antonio. It is almost as if he were responding to the bullying Venetians' expectations of how a villainous Jew ought to behave.⁶²⁶;

as insecurity:

...there is little dignity in Hoffman's smothered Brooklynese. His outrage is undercut by a querulous self-mockery. This is a man who knows how to position himself only in the company of his compatriot Tubal.⁶²⁷;

as an assertion of superiority:

⁶²³ Taylor, *op cit.*

⁶²⁴ Paton, *op cit.*

⁶²⁵ Shulman, *op cit.*

⁶²⁶ Christopher Edwards, *Spectator*, 10 June, 1989.

⁶²⁷ Dunn, *op cit.*

Dustin Hoffman plays Shylock for his comic potential, displaying an impish grin which raises him above even the basest of insults and the perpetual stream of spit hurled venomously in his direction. Antonio's hatred, even when asking Shylock for money, is so overpowering, one almost believes spit could kill. Yet Shylock wipes it off his face as if it were pigeon droppings, unpleasant but of no real consequence.⁶²⁸

or as an aspect of his determination to survive:

...Hoffman and Hall stress not so much Shylock's villainy or his tragedy as his resilience. Hoffman characterizes him with wit, daring, sly irony...⁶²⁹

Michael Coveney and Jane Edwardes went further, observing the uneasy complementarity between the character's ostensibly good-natured acceptance of his persecution ('concealingly humorous...'⁶³⁰; 'everywhere more jocular than villainous...'⁶³¹) and the contemptible behaviour of his tormentors:

He is a man accustomed to masking his real feelings behind a benign smile, who wipes the vicious Christian spit off his face as though no more than a baby's dribble...⁶³²

Hoffman finds much comedy in Shylock's relishing adoption of low status. Rattling the bars of his ghetto cage, he stores up resentment like a squirrel stores nuts. One day, one day... Meanwhile he is showered in Christian spittle ...and pushed from pillar to post.

⁶²⁸ Conway, *op cit.* Almost all reviewers referred to the incessant spitting, Rhoda Koenig memorably describing Hoffman's Shylock as 'a perambulating spittoon for any velvet-robed Christians who want to relieve themselves of phlegm and contempt.' (*op cit.*) The fullest account of the spitting is given by Irene G Dash (*op cit.*, p. 10), who describes the patient deliberation with which Hoffman's Shylock wiped the spit from his face with a handkerchief 'specifically designed for the purpose'.

⁶²⁹ Bernice W Kliman, 'The Hall/Hoffman Merchant: Which is the Anti-Semite Here?', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Spring 1990, p. 12.

⁶³⁰ Ratcliffe, *op cit.* Many reviewers employed the adjectives 'benign' and 'jocular'.

⁶³¹ Kenneth Hurren *Mail on Sunday*, 4 June, 1989.

⁶³² Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 7 June, 1989.

The first full gob is aimed by Leigh Lawson's civilized, melancholy Antonio, and it caused a minor earthquake in the stalls on Thursday. Hoffman greets it with wryly smiling benignity, as he will greet the foul sentence of the Duke in the courtroom...⁶³³

It is worth recalling that the Thursday stalls which gave vent to the 'minor earthquake' included a clutch of first night celebrities⁶³⁴ who were possibly less prepared than their more regularly-Shakespeare-going companions in the cheaper seats for the savagery with which Shylock's treatment can sometimes be portrayed. It is undoubtedly the case that 'the most heavily-booked Shakespearean revival in the history of the West End'⁶³⁵ owed much of its box-office success to the celebrity of Dustin Hoffman, but equally clear that the execution of the part in no way traded on the actor's star status. Many reviewers concurred with Charles Osborne's conclusion that it was:

...something of a relief to find that, in Peter Hall's production at the Phoenix Theatre, Shylock is not played as a star role, but is properly integrated into the plot ...to the distinct advantage of the play as a whole.⁶³⁶

This phenomenon of mass astonishment is perhaps best epitomised in Lester Middlehurst's double paradox: the diminutive star; the celebrity company man:

Dustin Hoffman as Shylock is obviously the main attraction of Sir Peter Hall's production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

⁶³³ Coveney, *op cit*.

⁶³⁴ Michael Coveney and Kenneth Hurren both opened their respective reviews by naming the celebrities in the audience.

⁶³⁵ Morley, *op cit*.

⁶³⁶ Osborne, *op cit*. A similarly relieved tone was to be heard in Gross's comment that there was 'nothing objectionably starry' in Hoffman's performance; and Jane Edwards's that 'Dustin Hoffman deserves praise for making himself so much part of the company and resisting the desperate desire of the audience to see a star performance.'. Sheridan Morley considered Hoffman's Shylock to be '...one of the most self-effacing of recent times, a shy and halting, hesitant figure who seems almost embarrassed by his first-act demand for a pound of the merchant's flesh'. Ratcliffe called the performance 'unselfish' and Billington 'anything but a star-vehicle', while Dunn observed: 'We came to see the star and stayed to watch the ensemble' (all *op cit*).

But any fears that the play has been turned into a vehicle for a big Hollywood star are unfounded. Hoffman's ego is as small as his stature, and he has quickly mastered the art of ensemble playing. He is a gracious, generous performer, only dominating the stage when the script demands it.⁶³⁷

Comments such as these are made in the awareness that an actor with celebrity status can easily over-balance the play, especially if he adopts a powerful and impressive style which displays his virtuosity, as Olivier and Sher both did. Hoffman seems to have deliberately eschewed such possibilities⁶³⁸, thereby shifting the balance of the interpretation's interest directly on to Portia and Belmont.⁶³⁹ In Hoffman's case, this led to a somewhat muted IV i (though it must be said that the trial scene in the Miller/Olivier production was low-key too, despite featuring one of the most theatrical Shylocks of recent times). Christopher Edwards was among several to perceive the effect of Hoffman's non-starry, ironic and jocular interpretation on the trial scene and its closure:

Shylock certainly carries a sense of ironic vindictiveness with him into the trial scene. Hoffman flashes smiles at the Venetian judges as he insists on the letter of his bond - see, I'm acting the heartless Jew, he seems to be saying. The moment when he is about to slice into Antonio's flesh is a piece of black humour taken to extremes. And when Portia trips him up on a technicality, he accepts it all with matter-of-fact resignation.⁶⁴⁰

Here, the low-key closure is offered as a natural outcome of Hoffman's sardonic interpretation and one to be valued alongside more dramatic performances. Most, however, were less happy with the result:

⁶³⁷ Lester Middlehurst, *Today*, 2 June, 1989.

⁶³⁸ Christopher Edwards notes that Hoffman had 'resisted the usual temptation to take the role by the throat and make Shylock the centre of the work.' adding 'This may be tact, integrity, the wise restraining hand of Hall pursuing an ensemble production etc. Or it may just be the case of an actor intelligently playing to his strengths.' (*op cit.*)

⁶³⁹ William A Henry was among many to make the point that Hall's reading of the play was 'more comedy than tragedy and focuses more on Portia ...than on Shylock.' (*Time*, 3 July, 1989.)

⁶⁴⁰ Christopher Edwards, *op cit.*

Curiously, there is not even a spasmodic blaze of anger at his forced conversion, and he goes to his fate unprotestingly, hustled out of the court by the gentry and clearly destined for a beating; an ordinary little man who thought that he could take on the Venetian establishment and found he had overreached himself. It is consistent but it is theatrically unsatisfying.⁶⁴¹

...he passively accepts his fate and the smile lingers once more. All very creditable, but it doesn't make for a very dramatic climax to the trial scene...⁶⁴²

If the performance lacks anything, it is a tragic dimension. The climax of the great court-scene, for example, finds him humbly, almost inevitably, accepting his defeat.⁶⁴³

But this is what you get with a polite Shylock. His final departure from the courtroom, manhandled by a bunch of local thugs, and not for the first time, goes almost unnoticed as the Belmont mafia get back to their country pursuits.⁶⁴⁴

Mr Hoffman receives the news of his enforced conversion stoically, but when he says "I am content" you almost feel he means it.⁶⁴⁵

The trial concludes with too many laughs and little lingering sense of horror.⁶⁴⁶

Rhoda Koenig interestingly felt a coldness in Hoffman's interpretation, and it was this, rather than exclusively its irony and sardonic detachment, which most strongly influenced her response:

⁶⁴¹ Nathan, *op cit.* Shulman also noticed that there was 'surprisingly ...little resentment to the demand that he become a Christian.' and Billington adds that Hoffman's Shylock shows 'strangely little sense of horror at the injunction that he turn Christian' (both *op cit.*).

⁶⁴² Jane Edwardes, *op cit.*

⁶⁴³ Clive Hirschhorn, *Sunday Express*, 4 June, 1989.

⁶⁴⁴ Morley, *op cit.*

⁶⁴⁵ Billington, *op cit.*

⁶⁴⁶ Hiley, *op cit.*

Coldness - along with constriction - figures... in Hoffman's Shylock... When the trial goes against him, he does not disintegrate in anguish, but quietly submits, using his last reserves of strength to stop himself bawling before a hostile crowd that, as he leaves, surrounds him in a sickening little rush. Hoffman's performance is admirable in its refusal to beg for our sympathy... but his stoniness cuts off our empathy as well. He does not seem so much tormented as crabby and grey, and we don't feel outraged, merely sad at his downfall, which is too low-key to impinge on the following scenes of moonlit Christian bliss.⁶⁴⁷

While the Act IV closure was regarded by most as having been a disappointment, there were compensations elsewhere in the shape of a scene which frequently causes difficulties: Shylock's leave-taking of Jessica in Act II. For this scene, Hoffman seemed to have found quite a different mode of delivery, throwing off the otherwise pervasive irony to produce what more than one reviewer considered 'one of the most moving scenes in the play'.⁶⁴⁸ It was also notable for its originality in more than one respect. To begin with, the exchange between Shylock and Lancelot Gobbo was unusual for its good-natured banter:

Shylock's orthodox piety may be offended by the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife, but he lets Lancelot Gobbo go with an indulgent grin. The boy ate too much: perfectly understandable, but let someone else pay for the food.⁶⁴⁹

Hall had made this interpretation possible by creating a strictly comic Lancelot Gobbo, kitting out the clown with a pot-belly, a 'drolly telling detail'⁶⁵⁰ which rather belied his claims that his master had starved him. The non-antagonistic exchange between master

⁶⁴⁷ Koenig, *op cit.*

⁶⁴⁸ Conway, *op cit.* Taylor felt that: 'Without in any way sentimentalising Shylock, Hall ...included touches evoking the human side to him which years of being treated as inhuman by the Christians [had] warped.' (Taylor, *op cit.*)

⁶⁴⁹ Ratcliffe, *op cit.*

⁶⁵⁰ Taylor, *op cit.* Lancelot Gobbo was played by Peter-Hugo Daly. His comic performance was in stark contrast to Phil Daniels's dark and cynical interpretation in the Alexander/Sher production.

and servant made it easier for Hoffman to display the tenderer side of Shylock's character in the dialogue with Jessica which followed, imparting to the leave-taking what Paul Taylor described as 'an upsetting, thwarted warmth'. Taylor went on:

It is a crucial moment of the play because it is the only time we see the Jew in private, free from the need to put on an act for the Christians. If you want to stress Shylock as a constitutionally heartless villain, the text allows you to demonstrate the bitter lovelessness of his relationship with his daughter. But Hoffman and Francesca Buller's brilliantly torn Jessica give the scene superb emotional variation.

A genuine intimacy is shown by Shylock's tenderly paternal, back-rubbing embrace as he issues his directions. But this love is clearly something which his hatred of Christians can unbalance and get the better of, since it only takes news of the forthcoming masque for him to start shaking her in rough, paranoid agitation, and Buller's stricken face lets you see the way her emotions shift between guilt at her imminent defection, love of her father and rebellious dread of him.⁶⁵¹

Kliman responded similarly to Hoffman's behaviour in this scene:

Only with his daughter can he allow himself to feel. He loves her dearly, kissing her repeatedly, holding her to him as if with a premonition that he'll not see her again. While some, these days, may see his behaviour as excessive, almost hinting at incest, he seems no more to me than warmly responsive.⁶⁵²

Some of the actors who have been attracted to the rôle of Shylock because it offers the opportunity to play villainy tinged with victimisation (a mixture most evident in IV i - a scene which most critics felt Hoffman failed to carry off), have nonetheless expressed dissatisfaction with their performance of II v. David Suchet, for example, felt that this

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵² *Op cit.*, p. 12.

was a scene which he never got right; and Philip Voss expressed concern that the scene was too short for him to demonstrate to the audience how much Shylock loved his daughter. Hoffman, however, succeeded with it, possibly because his style of acting was best suited to the intimate and domestic, rather than the expansive and semi-tragic. Significantly, he was also much praised for the scene with Tubal, which Wells rated as his best, in that

his quick alternations of mood created a complex comedy⁶⁵³

and which Irving Wardle called ‘his most expressive scene’ -

...where he lets the verse relax into down-to-earth conversational exchanges, very low key, and then performs the huge emotional reversals between despair and exultation with the deliberation and force of a giant pendulum.⁶⁵⁴

It is indicative of the essentially small-scale, low-key nature of Hoffman’s Shylock (adjectives which need not be pejorative) that he succeeded in these scenes while falling short of a truly memorable performance elsewhere.

The English Shakespeare Company’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1990⁶⁵⁵ was the most extreme example of an interpretation which puts anti-Semitism at the centre of the play, in this case to the exclusion of almost everything else. Like Jonathan Miller twenty years before, Timothy Luscombe opted for an analogue, defined in respect of the production in question by Peter Holland as:

⁶⁵³ Wells, p. 188.

⁶⁵⁴ Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 2 June, 1989.

⁶⁵⁵ First performance 13 November, 1990, in the Arts Centre, University of Warwick.

...[a] precise historical analogy that would serve to illuminate the whole, relying on our knowledge of more recent history to explicate the Shakespearian text as if the play had no function in relation to its own time and, more significantly, could only be made popular by the recreation of the play as modern parable.⁶⁵⁶

Unlike Miller, however, Luscombe chose a period and political context to which the audience would have very specific and extreme responses - pre-war Fascist Italy - an almost inevitable result of which was to narrow the play's focus and simplify its complexities:

This is Italy 1938. Mussolini's officer corps spends its days at cafe tables, doing extravagantly nasal Shylock imitations, and its nights rampaging in devil-masks through the streets carrying Stars of David smeared with graffiti. In one spurious encounter, poor Tubal is beaten half-senseless... Even the set's fretwork towers seem designed to evoke death camps.⁶⁵⁷

...there are chants of "Duce, Duce"; the courtroom bristles with Fascist uniforms and Fascist salutes.⁶⁵⁸

During the night of the masque, a lone Jew is set upon by Gratiano *et al* and beaten up. A procession of jeering Venetians walks across the stage with banners depicting the Star of David

⁶⁵⁶ Peter Holland, 'Shakespeare Performances in England, 1990-91', *Shakespeare Survey* 45, p. 130.

⁶⁵⁷ Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 8 February, 1991.

⁶⁵⁸ John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 February, 1991.

crossed through or holding aloft Jewish effigies...⁶⁵⁹

Critical response to this presentation was almost uniformly hostile. Many reviewers attacked the inconsistencies which inevitably attended such a staging, and the fact that ‘...by choosing this context and treating the play as a text on anti-Semitism, Luscombe [raised] all sorts of issues that he [could not] resolve.’⁶⁶⁰ In terms of the plot,

...the historical context ...makes nonsense of the climactic trial scene. Can we really credit that a Fascist court, overlooked by Black-shirted, militarised toughs, would pussyfoot around over whether a Jew would lop a pound of flesh off a fellow Aryan? Or, worse, that two of them would obligingly pin the victim’s arms back while Shylock whetted his knife?⁶⁶¹

Can one imagine any Jew, even in a far-fetched fable, behaving in the way Shylock does in front of a Fascist tribunal?⁶⁶²

Shylock, one feels, must be mad to take Antonio to court, since the presiding Doge is dressed like the Duce and ends the session by swapping Fascist salutes with Portia.⁶⁶³

Why does this slow-moving, rather stuffy business-man sit down at a table to reason with the bully-boys about the existence of Jews’ eyes, hands, and involuntary reactions?⁶⁶⁴

...and would Lorenzo’s chums have been quite so keen about his absconding with a Jewish girl?⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁵⁹ Peter Smith, *Cahiers Elizabéthains*, April, 1991, p 78.

⁶⁶⁰ Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 13 February, 1991.

⁶⁶¹ Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 9 February, 1991. A similar point was made by other reviewers, including Peter Holland (*op cit.*, p. 131).

⁶⁶² Gross (10 February, 1991), *op cit.*

⁶⁶³ Nightingale, *op cit.*

⁶⁶⁴ Rhoda Koenig, *Punch*, 20 February, 1991.

⁶⁶⁵ Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 9 February, 1991.

More puzzling still is the portrayal of Portia as a champagne-sipping Aryan starlet, all platinum waves and bee-stung lips, like a cross between Eva Braun and Betty Boop. Her transition to eloquent courtroom advocate is preposterous. What would this giggling, malevolent flapper know, or care, about the quality of mercy?⁶⁶⁶

Such inconsistencies were more than an irritant: magnified in the context of the play's dynamic, they worked to confuse audience response in a production where 'Text and playing [were] in head-on collision'⁶⁶⁷:

This does not merely create difficulties: it turns Shakespeare on his head. What chance of sympathy for heroes and heroines who would happily set up Auschwitz on the Adriatic?⁶⁶⁸

In this respect, there were particular difficulties in terms of closure:

...the production could not defeat the inevitable rhythm of the [trial] scene so that, in spite of the fascist banners, uniforms and salutes, the audience still could be felt wishing that an answer to Shylock could be found, that this act of butchery, intensified by the sheer size of Shylock's carving-knife, could be prevented. The audience found itself siding with the fascists...⁶⁶⁹

Here... the shadow of the death camps cannot help but loom proleptically over the proceedings. Yet we are still, when it suits us, supposed to laugh with, and be happy for, Portia and gang. Quite how all this should alter the quality of our laughter is one of the issues on which this production has not made up its muddled mind.⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁶ Annalena McAfee, *London Evening Standard*, 11 February, 1991.

⁶⁶⁷ Irving Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*, 10 February, 1991.

⁶⁶⁸ Nightingale, *op cit.*

⁶⁶⁹ Holland, p. 131.

⁶⁷⁰ Taylor, *op cit.*

...the love-games that fill the last act, and contain some of Shakespeare's sweetest verse, do not just seem empty. They are bizarre and offensive.⁶⁷¹

Beyond even its factual inconsistencies and interpretative incoherence, Luscombe's production was criticised for having 'taken over the play, pressing Shakespeare's text into the agency of something beyond it.'⁶⁷² Murray Biggs's suggestion was reminiscent of the comment made by Benedict Nightingale of the Miller/Olivier *Merchant* - that 'it looks like the play Shakespeare *ought* to have written'⁶⁷³:

At the risk of hammering the obvious: the director's over-simple "concept" of the play's message, and its twentieth century application, has forced him to bend his raw material into the shape that suits it. The honest thing to do in such a case would have been for him to call this work an adaptation... It would then have been easier to consider his production in its own terms.⁶⁷⁴

Biggs goes on to comment upon the selective omissions from the production, focusing particularly on the cut in Jessica's lines in III v about Portia⁶⁷⁵, and argues that individual directors have a particular responsibility

...not to "adapt" the given script to a particular line without admitting to an audience waiting to be initiated what they are doing. Luscombe's silent omission of Jessica's tribute to Portia is crucially revealing. To have retained it would have seriously undermined his tendentious use of a many-sided

⁶⁷¹ Nightingale, *op cit.*

⁶⁷² Murray Biggs, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Fall 1991, p. 11.

⁶⁷³ Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 8 May, 1970. See above, pages 128-130.

⁶⁷⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 12.

⁶⁷⁵ In answer to Lorenzo's question 'How dost thou like the Lord Bassanio's wife?', Jessica's response was cut, leaving only the first three words and last eight, which the actress, Mary Roscoe, then delivered with heavy irony: 'Past all expressing... for the poor rude world Hath not her fellow.' (III. v. 68-78). Interestingly the 1997 RSC production (see below, Chapter 14) made the same cut, but there the lines were delivered without a trace of irony.

play. Ironically, therefore, it is in the end his own sharp practice, as much as that of the characters, which this production lays bare.⁶⁷⁶

The issue of strategic cuts will be returned to in subsequent chapters. Meanwhile it is interesting to reflect upon the critical resentment that Luscombe's methods engendered. Describing the play as 'the most crass, incoherent and distasteful account of Shakespeare's comedy that I've had the misfortune to witness', Charles Osborne wrote:

I can understand, though I do not share, the point of view that, in the light of 20th-century events, it is perhaps best not to stage *The Merchant of Venice*. But, if one does stage it, one must remember one's responsibility to the play, to its genre, and to the attitudes of the time when it was written. To attempt to press it into a service for which it is manifestly unsuitable is foolish, and to use the Holocaust to give the play a spurious relevance is unforgivable.⁶⁷⁷

It can be argued that the relevance is there, whether we like it or not: few members of a modern audience can fail to hear Shylock's complaints about his maltreatment at the hands of Antonio without recalling the persecution of the Jews more widely. Biggs's and Osborne's central point, however - about distortion, about forcing an interpretation which denies others, about making a complex play populist and simplistic - is one with which I for one would not argue.

In the midst of a production notorious for its extremity, John Woodvine's interpretation was of 'a calm, assured, sophisticated Shylock'⁶⁷⁸, 'moving without ever lapsing into the sentimental'⁶⁷⁹,

⁶⁷⁶ Biggs, *op cit.*, p. 13.

⁶⁷⁷ Charles Osborne, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February, 1991.

⁶⁷⁸ Clare Bayley, *What's On*, 13 February, 1991.

⁶⁷⁹ Sally Staples, *Sunday Express*, 10 February, 1991.

...a decent chap, a business man with barely a hint of a Jewish accent, seen at first working efficiently at his desk... In so far as the audience was anxious about Shylock's aims, they were excusable as the response of a desperate man to a vicious situation: his actions were nothing like as bad as those that the Venetian fascists had in store for his 'tribe', his 'sacred nation'...⁶⁸⁰

...a wholly credible, Homburg-hatted, sober-suited businessman quietly nursing a "lodg'd hate". He neither rails nor storms but he has a lean intensity that makes people back away nervously in cafés when he mercilessly exposes the fatal flaw of racial persecution: "The villainy you teach me I will execute."⁶⁸¹

Interestingly, however - and perhaps this is a measure of the actor's integrity - Woodvine did not mitigate the character's cruelty, playing him as 'a vindictive and calculating operator' who 'never wants sympathy - only justice.'⁶⁸², suggesting

...in equal measure both a man who is wounded and a man who is eager to wound.⁶⁸³

...impelled by an idea of professional etiquette, inflated under pressure to cause tragic conflict.⁶⁸⁴

He is the kind of wintry widower it is sadly plausible Jessica would wish to leave, and he does some splendidly grim things with his eyes, voice and knife in court. Before the Christians break his spirit, he allows himself just one moment of passion, sobbing and impotently beating his breast at the thought of losing Jessica; but it is enough, not just to humanise him, but to leave the impression of a morally rounded character, a victim turned vindictive.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁰ Holland, p. 131.

⁶⁸¹ Billington, *op cit.*

⁶⁸² Smith, pp. 77-78.

⁶⁸³ Gross, *op cit.*

⁶⁸⁴ Michael Coveney, *Observer*, 10 February, 1991.

⁶⁸⁵ Nightingale (8 February, 1991), *op cit.*

Woodvine's 'unfussed performance'⁶⁸⁶ was a Shylock that deserved a better stage.

These four productions all therefore raised the issue of anti-Semitism, though in different ways. John Caird's in 1984 featured a Shylock in the person of Ian McDiarmid who, despite assiduous preparation, slipped into offensive stereotyping, and was accompanied by an off-stage furore arising from entries in the theatre programme. The 1987 Shylock of Antony Sher, himself a Jew, made a bold attempt to confront the audience with their prejudices in the hope that they might thereby be helped to exorcise them. Dustin Hoffman - like Sher, one of the few Jewish actors to play the part on the mainstream British stage - offered a low-key interpretation in 1989 which raised the issue of how explicit the condemnation of anti-Semitism ought to be; and John Woodvine gave a controlled performance within a 1990 analogue which simply over-reached itself in an attempt to explore the prejudices of Shakespeare's Venetians in the light of pre-war Fascist Italy.

It was not to be until Gregory Doran's production at Stratford in 1997 that anti-Semitism as an issue was to take a lower place in the order of interpretative priorities; for the three major productions in the interim it was to remain a prime concern.

⁶⁸⁶ Coveney, *op cit.*

CHAPTER 12

SHYLOCK AND THE STOCK EXCHANGE: DAVID CALDER

Introducing an article on Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*,⁶⁸⁷ Iska Alter wrote:

*If The Merchant of Venice is not the most problematic of Shakespeare's plays, it certainly has become one of the most provocative, not to say provoking, for the contemporary sensibility, schooled by history to the horrific outcome of anti-Jewish prejudice in the twentieth century. A tentative hint suggesting the possibility of a production is often enough to generate a cause célèbre, prompting attacks on the playwright, cries of outrage against the theatre, and the inevitable demands for censorship among those who view the play as an antisemitic desecration. Once a production has been mounted, unless Shylock has been interpreted as an appropriately heroic if frequently sentimentalized figure, attacks often recur.*⁶⁸⁸

Such was the fate of David Thacker's RSC production of 1993⁶⁸⁹. The attack - not on this particular interpretation, but on the play itself - was spear-headed by the subject of Alter's article, Arnold Wesker, the playwright's thesis being that *The Merchant of Venice* is irredeemably anti-Semitic. An underlying irony of the debate which ensued (see below, pages 262-264) is that Thacker's interpretation went further than any previous production had done in attempting to present Shylock as a wronged victim whose recourse to villainy has nothing whatever to do with his being a Jew.

⁶⁸⁷ In Arnold Wesker, *Plays, Volume 4* (London: Penguin, 1980). The first performance was at the Royal Dramaten-theater, Stockholm, on 8 October, 1976; the British première was at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 12 October, 1978. A redrafted version, *Shylock*, was performed as a reading/workshop production at the Riverside Studios, London on 16 October, 1989.

⁶⁸⁸ Iska Alter, "Barbaric Laws, Barbaric Bonds": Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*, *Modern Drama*, vol 31, 1988, p. 536. Alter cites Joseph Papp's 1962 production of Shakespeare's play in Central Park (George C Scott as Shylock) and Paul Berry's in 1984 for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, as examples of productions in the United States which have given rise to attacks upon the play for its alleged anti-Semitism.

⁶⁸⁹ First performance 27 May, 1993 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

Thacker's plan for accomplishing these aims was three-fold. First, he directed the audience's attention in the opening acts not especially to religious or cultural differences, but to the unifying agency of money; second he worked with David Calder to produce a highly sympathetic Shylock; and third he encouraged the audience to draw the conclusion that, while we might condemn Shylock for the extremity of his response, his behaviour is in no way to be seen as representative of all Jews.

Of the focus on money, Thacker himself said:

It was just after Black Wednesday when the stock exchanges went haywire and it seemed to me an anarchic few days in which people's lives were effectively destroyed or ruined, the value of money dominated everything and it suddenly occurred to me that this is essentially what happens in "The Merchant of Venice".⁶⁹⁰

The commentary from which this quotation was taken went on:

'Today a value system which is based on generosity, compassion, love and kindness is entirely subordinate to the dominating ethic which is to make money fast and to make it at whatever cost to people's lives and fortunes...' By introducing the play to the harsh reality of a bang up to date society which is recognisable - 'a metaphorical world of high finance' - Venice can become the heart of capitalism...⁶⁹¹

One important result of these deliberations was a design in which -

When the play open[ed], Antonio, Salerio and Solanio [were] all in white and tan modern business suits, talking in a high-tech two-tiered office complex constructed of metallic tubes and

⁶⁹⁰ RSC Production Pack on *The Merchant of Venice* (RSC Education, 1993), p. 5.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.* (I have used quotation marks in place of the publication's use of bold type to denote the director's or actors' own words.)

thermoplastic panes, decorated with modern furniture and dominated by telephones and computers. When the actors [were] not speaking, the business environment [was] spotlighted in the hubbub of the world of commerce at the balcony level.⁶⁹²

There was, however, some dispute as to the decade in which the play was set. While the RSC Production Pack located it ‘most definitely in the 1990s’, other reviewers, basing their assumptions on what they had seen, considered the setting to be quite clearly the 1980s of rampant Thatcherism.⁶⁹³ Peter Smith’s review in *Cahiers Elisabethains* showed how important it was to get the decade right. Assuming it to be set in ‘the mid-eighties’, Smith felt that the director had made ‘a peculiar choice’:

The ‘get rich quick’ mythology of the deregulated city has waned ever since the beginning of this last recession and the presiding optimism in the rewards of shrewd marketing has collapsed along with the prime minister that promoted it... Thacker’s intention in revivifying such a recently exposed mythology is hard to fathom for the production seemed uninterested in offering a response to the eighties world in which it was set.⁶⁹⁴

If the RSC Production Pack’s authority is to be accepted, Smith’s critique had been based upon false premises: this *was* a ‘1990s concept’. But his observation raises two points. The first is that audiences were much more likely to share his response in interpreting what they saw in terms of the flashy false buoyancy of the yuppie eighties than with grey post-Thatcher cynicism: the mobile-phones, the presentation of a lurid-tied Gratiano as a brash, champagne-swilling young jobber, the heavy emphasis on Mammon - all indicated that highly materialistic period. In that sense, if Thacker wanted

⁶⁹² George L. Geckle, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Winter 1994, p. 11. Peter Smith described the set as ‘a multi-storey metallic climbing frame with walkways and ladder-staircases reminiscent of the Pompidou Centre’ (*Cahiers Elisabethains*, October 1993, p. 91.). Russell Jackson, like Geckle, was reminded of the Lloyds Building (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol 45, Fall 1994, p. 340), as was Neil Smith (*What’s On*, 9 June, 1993) who saw the set as ‘not a million miles from the Lloyds Building or Canary Wharf’.

⁶⁹³ Geckle wrote about ‘a 1980s London setting based on the Lloyds building’ (*op cit.*, p. 11). Peter Smith set the play in ‘the mid eighties’ (*op cit.*, p. 91).

⁶⁹⁴ Smith, *ibid.*

us to conceive of the story as happening in 1993, the setting was misleading rather than illuminating. The second point is that Smith's mistaken observation (accepting for the moment that an honest and informed audience response ever can be said to be 'mistaken') raises the question of exactly what the distinction is between a 'modern' and a 'period-analogue' setting, to employ Ralph Berry's categories⁶⁹⁵. If we take Thacker's *Merchant* to have been 'period-analogue', as some reviewers did, we attach to it all the relevant connotations of Thatcher's eighties and might conclude with Smith that the analogue was not successfully followed through. If, on the other hand, the setting was 'modern', we are able to see the actions in the context of a time, the character of which was not yet fully defined, not nailed down in the way in which the eighties, as a 'historical' period, had been; and this - which was presumably Thacker's intention - frees the interpretation to be no more than generally relevant to the audience's times. In my opinion, *pace* the Production Pack note, Thacker's *Merchant* evoked Thatcher's eighties, rather than the then indeterminate early nineties, and was therefore as much a period-analogue interpretation as Luscombe's had been, set in Fascist Italy.⁶⁹⁶ Peter Holland's account of the production both confirms these analogical dimensions and pinpoints the real success of Thacker's approach:

Played in modern dress in a context of the yuppie explosion of business-dealing in the modern City of London, *The Merchant's* attitude towards exploitative capitalism risked nonsense. ...Thacker refused to follow through the logic of the analogy, for Shylock's exorbitant interest charges and ability to make money would surely have been widely applauded in the social setting Thacker had chosen while Antonio's willingness to lend out money interest-free would surely have been regarded as the height of folly. Money as the sole principle of value assimilates Shylock into the centre of its moral system. Yet Thacker found, through the analogy of setting, a means to reveal much else about the social organisation of the play, its exploration of both belonging and being an

⁶⁹⁵ Ralph Berry, *On Directing Shakespeare: Interviews with Contemporary Directors* (Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp. 14-23.

⁶⁹⁶ See above, pages 192-198.

alien within a tightly controlled community. In this the analogy worked far more effectively than the ESC's *Merchant* of 1991.⁶⁹⁷

No analogue can work in all respects; Holland's commentary highlights clearly the ways in which Thacker's overreached itself, but also establishes the important dimension in which it succeeded: 'its exploration of both belonging and being an alien within a tightly controlled community.' David Calder's interpretation of Shylock was central to the success of this exploration.

Calder's Shylock was 'dignified, erect, urbane'⁶⁹⁸, 'humorous'⁶⁹⁹, 'Genial, shrewd and totally lacking in Hebraic trademarks'⁷⁰⁰,

...a substantial and credible human being, well set, at ease with himself when he [was] alone, watchful and sardonic in his dealings with the outside world.⁷⁰¹

In the early scenes he appeared

...a man desperate for assimilation (no skullcap for him), his voice cultured and anglicised...⁷⁰²

a picture established from the opening moments of I iii, as the lights went up on a preoccupied and successful businessman, sitting behind an expensive desk, his busy-ness signalled by the fact that he had removed his jacket to reveal his braces and was intently interrogating a computer terminal, while Bassanio sat, a little removed, uncomfortably

⁶⁹⁷ Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 163.

⁶⁹⁸ Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 5 June, 1993.

⁶⁹⁹ Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 8 June, 1993.

⁷⁰⁰ Irving Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*, 6 June, 1993.

⁷⁰¹ John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 June, 1993.

⁷⁰² Holland, p. 164.

sipping coffee in embarrassment and unease⁷⁰³. Shylock was clearly in charge and lightheartedly joked with his guest, expressing mild incomprehension that Antonio should have ‘a fourth for England’ ([20] some audience laughter there), and giving the lightest of touches to ‘Yes, to smell pork...’ (31-35), a response almost completely devoid of sarcasm, but interestingly wary.⁷⁰⁴ The subsequent reference to eating ‘of the habitation...’ (32-33) was delivered with little if any seriousness, the word ‘conjured’ accompanied by stage magician’s gestures, as if to imply that such superstitious nonsense was beneath intelligent and sophisticated business people like us.

Even when he delivered his aside, ‘How like a fawning publican...’ (38-49), it was low-key, importing little resentment and certainly no real conviction of hatred. Unusually ‘...for he is a Christian’ (39) raised a laugh from the audience, delivered as it was with a fussy gesture which suggested that Christians were rather some irritating little sect, than the persecutors of his ‘sacred nation’. All of this was to establish that Shylock’s attitude towards Antonio, far from being one of murderous intent, was only marginally on the negative side of neutral: Antonio might occasionally be troublesome, but there were no really hard feelings.

There are, of course, lines in this aside (as it appears in the text) which make such a genial interpretation hard to follow through: ‘Cursed be my tribe | If I forgive him’ (48-49) has to be delivered with quite extraordinary lightness if the audience are not to be left with the otherwise unavoidable impression that Shylock is harbouring a bitter grudge. Even more damning in this respect are the lines which many directors have taken to be an unambiguous expression of intent:

⁷⁰³ Description based on the video-recording of the production made by the Royal Shakespeare Company and held in the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon (recorded 13 January, 1994).

⁷⁰⁴ Jackson wrote: ‘When he remarked that he would refuse to eat pork, he was clearly disturbed not so much by the prospect of an affront to his religion’s dietary laws as by the threat to his self-respect in accepting an invitation to eat where he could not yet be sure he was respected.’ (*op cit.*, pp. 341-342).

If I can catch him once upon the hip

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. (43-44)

So difficult were these words to fit into Thacker's conception of Shylock as an essentially urbane and well-balanced businessman with no strong feelings of animosity towards his Christian rival, that they became one of many strategic cuts (or 'slight adjustments', as the Production Pack describes them) made by the director:

For his 1990s concept David Thacker needed an actor who would accommodate cuts or alterations, for the success of the production as the play that is on the page had to be looked at in great and sensitive detail. Both were concerned that it should not seem that in Act 1 Sc 3 Shylock was laying a trap for Antonio. They did not want the character to be handicapped from the start by the hidden agenda of a man who was vengeful and harbouring grudges. By cutting ... ['If I can catch him...'] there is an initial equality between the two men which as David Calder explains allows the bond to be an overt thing of nonsense, the extremity of which exposes its absurdity... David Calder ...explains: 'You can't do the play that is on the page. It has attitudes of its time which are not acceptable today.'⁷⁰⁵

The nonsense element referred to came across very clearly in Calder's manner of suggesting the bond, but it was the skilful way in which the actor led up to the moment which made it possible for audiences to accept it as a genuine offer of friendship. Retaining a light, good-humoured delivery whenever the lines permitted it (for example, eliciting much audience laughter on 'I make it breed as fast' [93]), Calder skipped quickly through 'Signor Antonio, many a time and oft...' (103-125), offering his observations as though the Christian's hypocrisy were more a subject for gentle ridicule than satirical condemnation and resentment. He interpolated a weary scoff of exasperation when enjoined by Antonio to lend the money as though 'to thine enemy'

⁷⁰⁵ Production Pack, pp. 11-12.

(131), as if to say ‘can’t we forget all that?’ and then moved into a cleverly choreographed approach to the moment of the offer.

For audiences watching the performance, the first sign that Shylock was mulling something over was the brief but thoughtful pause after ‘Why look you how you storm!’ (133). His delivery of ‘I would be friends with you and have your love’ (134) was carefully measured to place maximum weight and sincerity on each word of the declaration; while, in contrast, a throw-away intonation and accompanying gesture left no doubt that he was more than willing to ‘forget the shames’ (135) suffered at Antonio’s hands. He made the interest-free offer and laughed at the Christian’s drop-jawed amazement. All right, his actions then seemed to say, if you really need a contract, let’s have a nonsense one; and he doubly underlined the absurdity of the flesh clause by placing silent inverted commas around ‘forfeit’ ([145] as if to say: ‘- if we really have to deal in such absurdly legalistic terminology!’), and by delivering the key lines in a pantomime villain voice:

...an equal pound

Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me. (146-148).

It was a performance which convinced audiences unequivocally that Shylock’s offer was sincere and generous; and both men laughed openly at the silliness of it all. At Bassanio’s expression of concern, Calder’s Shylock stressed that he was making the offer to *buy* Antonio’s favour (165) - the motive was quite clear - and this spurred the more than satisfied Antonio to deliver his ‘Hie thee, gentle Jew’ (174) direct to Shylock as a rather heavy-footed but nonetheless good-humoured reciprocation of the proffered friendship. This moment typified Thacker’s directorial method; he rejected both the

traditional point of exit for Shylock⁷⁰⁶ and the usual mode of delivery for Antonio, leaving Shylock on stage to hear the joke, and having it delivered pleasantly rather than sarcastically. Calder's Shylock laughed in genuine appreciation of Antonio's gesture and they parted on good terms.

Important though cuts to the text were in helping to portray the kind of Shylock that Thacker and Calder wanted, they inevitably made less obvious an impact on the audience than did the added business. Typical of the additions was a memorable moment at the beginning of II v, when the lights went up on an expensively comfortable armchair, coffee table and hi-fi system. Shylock entered in a dark red velvet smoking jacket, inserted a CD in the player (something 'classical' but not too popular) and, as it began, picked up the photograph of his dead wife, which he stared at longingly until interrupted by Lancelot Gobbo. Peter Holland summed up the effect of this moment:

...seen at home in 2.5, listening to Schubert on his CD player and hugging a photograph of Leah, this cultured man did not deserve his treatment. It made Jessica's betrayal both something incomprehensible and something far more culpable, a commitment to the triviality of the yuppie culture, all champagne and mobile phones...⁷⁰⁷

It also established a feature of Shylock's make-up that we might recall later in the play when Lorenzo encourages us to suspect any man 'that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds' for being 'fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.' (V i 83-85). The cultured Shylock plainly did not fall into that category.

⁷⁰⁶ While Q and F indicate that Shylock exits after 'I'll be with you.', Capell placed his exit, as Thacker did, after 'Hie thee, gentle Jew.'

⁷⁰⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 165. Peter Smith felt that the scene made Shylock 'humane and empathic' and '...alluded to the civilised intelligence and loneliness of Inspector Morse.' (*op cit.*, p. 92). Nearly sixty years earlier, Arthur Phillips's Shylock had engaged in a similar piece of theatre: *The Times* of 1 October, 1935, referred to: '...a wordless scene showing Shylock at home with the daughter who is about to steal his ducats and jewels...'

Such a representation of Shylock's home life inevitably called into question the basis of Jessica's discontent. Russell Jackson felt that, in complaining 'Our house is hell...'

...she seemed to refer to her father's excessively sober taste, his dislike of modern music, and his irritating fondness for cracker-barrel philosophy... Little about the Shylock household could be called hellish...⁷⁰⁸

Even Shylock's farewell to Lancelot Gobbo was good-natured. To many of the audience,

Shylock did not seem miserly: he gave the departing Gobbo a large envelope (his wages, perhaps, or at least a reference), and his remarks about the servant's behaviour - "the patch is kind enough but a huge feeder..." - came across as a self-conscious joke to cover what may have been a real sense of loss.⁷⁰⁹

and he laughed at himself when admitting to having dreamed - ludicrously, he implied - of 'money-bags tonight' (18).

Far from being under the thumb of an oppressive parent, Kate Duchêne's Jessica stormed past her father when he warned her to avoid the masque and flopped into his armchair like a sullen adolescent, clearly signalling 'I am not listening', until startled by Shylock's assertion 'I have no mind of feasting forth tonight.' (37). Then she started up and, in a moment of duplicity painful to watch, took hold of his hand with affected warmth until certain that he would agree to be got out of the way. The knowledge that at least some of Jessica's show of love was false made the audience feel for Calder's Shylock, a tender father who affectionately stroked his daughter's hand as he prepared to leave while glancing yet again at the photograph of Leah, an action which clearly demonstrated the

⁷⁰⁸ *Op cit.*, p. 341.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 341. According to the prompt book (held in the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon), the envelope *was* a reference.

rôle that Jessica played of substitute for the lost wife. He was plainly hurt when she impatiently cut him off in the middle of his ‘cracker-barrel philosophy’, as Jackson terms it, shouting ‘fast find’ in unconcealed exasperation at having heard the proverb so many times before. Kissing her, he walked past, only to be pulled back by his partly remorseful daughter, who kissed him on the cheek, evidently to his great surprise, before being left alone to tell us of her planned desertion.

In company with some other recent productions⁷¹⁰, Thacker decided to stage moments from the Christian masque alluded to by Lancelot Gobbo. This is a useful device for an interpretation which wants to minimise the possibility that Shylock ill-treats his daughter, by showing that his directions (‘Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum...’ [II v 31-36]), far from being oppressive, are the well founded precautions of a concerned parent. When the masque is performed as a more than usually Bacchanalian office party, as it was here, it is very easy for the audience to see why any reasonable parent would wish to protect his teenage daughter from it. Accompanied by aggressive lighting and a thumping disco beat, the scene took place on the top storey of Sheelagh Keegan’s now nightmarish structure, while Shylock’s meeting with the Christians went on in subdued dumb-show below. Then, to draw the starkest of contrasts with Shylock’s quiet sobriety, the music stopped, except for the back-beat, and the lights dimmed, illuminating only the figure of the Jew on stage, hastening home from his dinner engagement. He entered his house and, following the Irving tradition, anxiously called ‘Jessica!’ three times. The conversation between Antonio and Gratiano (II vi, 60-68) followed on upper storeys over mobile phones and then, in a crescendo of turmoil, the party continued on ground level, with Shylock unwillingly caught up in it, jostled from one boorish reveller to another, now crying out in panic for his lost daughter:

⁷¹⁰ Most strikingly the 1997 RSC version (see below, page 250).

...he is seen going round the twist as a pandemonium of rock music violates his sober house and bestially-masked revellers mock the frantically searching father.⁷¹¹

The brief sequence very effectively and economically established Shylock's now desperate isolation and the depraved society of the people who had stolen his one living embodiment of the dead Leah.

Like Olivier's Shylock, Calder's largely assimilated Jew clearly felt the need of his ancient faith as soon as things turned against him:

When Shylock next appeared in 3. 1, the news of the fruitless search for his daughter made him tear open his shirt, revealing a Star of David on a chain... After this, Shylock's carefully cultivated urbanity left him; the assimilation had been revoked. Now he wore a plain white shirt under a long black coat and a yarmulke on his head.⁷¹²

The actor himself saw Shylock's reversion to Judaism as an escape from the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of a society whose acceptance he had attempted to purchase:

'When his daughter is stolen from him by a Christian the profound pain, insult and shame push him onto a road from which there is no return. He believes that any attempt to alleviate racial intolerance is actually a mockery and what he must do is to become more Jewish and assert himself in that clear way.'⁷¹³

This ties in with John Peter's view of Calder's Shylock as a man 'of immense dignity',

⁷¹¹ Wardle, *op cit*. His phrase 'going round the twist' is interestingly echoed by Philip Voss who feels that, at this point, Shylock 'goes slightly nuts - very nuts, perhaps' (see below, page 239, footnote 3).

⁷¹² Jackson, p. 342.

⁷¹³ Calder in the 1993 Production Pack, p. 12.

...a shrewd and polished public man whose psychological defences are meant to guard both his prestige and his soul. Jessica is his treasure and his anchor; when he loses her he has nothing left to be protective about.⁷¹⁴

Holland, however, saw Shylock's interpretation here of what it meant to be a Jew as a perversion, and felt that, by the trial scene,

...Shylock had turned himself into the image of a religious jew, with skullcap and gabardine and with the Star of David now worn outside his collarless shirt. His use of the symbols of religion was now demonstrably an abuse of religion and race, becoming a jew only because it focused his traumatised existence. It was Shylock himself who now appeared the anti-semite.⁷¹⁵

The most interesting feature of III i, however, was Thacker's decision to insert the second half of the scene (with Tubal) immediately after the opening conversation between Salerio and Solanio⁷¹⁶. This permitted Shylock to demonstrate (again in the footsteps of Irving) that his distress was occasioned by the loss of Jessica, rather than by the theft of his ducats. In addition, he showed that he clearly had not been thinking of Antonio at all: when Tubal informed him that '...other men have ill luck too...' (92), he seemed unconcerned and hardly took in what he was being told, only becoming a little thoughtful when Tubal reported that one of the Christian's argosies had gone down (95). There then followed an extremely influential cut to the exchange which in the text⁷¹⁷ reads:

⁷¹⁴ John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 13 June, 1993.

⁷¹⁵ *Op cit.*, p. 165. (Holland prefers lower-case for 'jew' and 'anti-semite'.)

⁷¹⁶ The section from 'How now, Tubal!', usually lines 75-123, was inserted after lines 19-20 ('...lest the devil cross my prayer.'). cutting 'For here he comes in the likeness of a Jew.' (Calder prompt book).

⁷¹⁷ The prompt book used the *New Penguin Shakespeare* (W Moelwyn Merchant [ed.], Penguin, 1967), the text of which is taken from Q1.

TUBAL Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one
night fourscore ducats.

SHYLOCK Thou stick'st a dagger in me. I shall never see
my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting!

Fourscore ducats! (101-105)

Calder's Shylock interrupted Tubal's 'Your daughter -' (101) with 'Thou stick'st a dagger in me...', removing from the text not only the remainder of Tubal's speech, but also the second half of his own response ('I shall never see my gold again...' [103-105]). This permitted him to underline not only that money did not feature in his concerns, but that the loss of Jessica was so painful to him that he could barely bring himself to hear about her.

The long pause after Tubal had given him the news of the turquoise was broken by a shouted '...wilderness of monkeys' (113-116) speech, a level which Calder maintained for his response to the reminder of Antonio's imminent bankruptcy: 'Nay, that's true, that's very true...' (118). Then, as if to excuse his outburst, he lamely offered, by way of a plainly fabricated rationale, 'For were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will' (120-121), giving the impression that he would rather stand accused of avarice than of a personal vendetta.

By placing this conversation before the meeting with Salerio and Solanio, Thacker reinforced for the audience the idea that Shylock was motivated at this point solely by the loss of his daughter, and that his feelings were those of a bereft widower deserving of our sympathy. When the Christians entered, and their first action in the re-organised scene was to bait Shylock about Jessica's flight, our support for him was intensified.

In keeping with many Shylocks before him, Calder decided to signal that it is here, in III i, that Shylock conceives the idea of using the bond in earnest. But, rather than experiencing a sudden dawning, as we saw with Olivier, Calder's Shylock displayed a more gradual creeping realisation that he had the Christian in his power. Starting with the first utterance of 'Let him look to his bond...' (44), Calder's tone became increasingly angry, so that by 'To bait fish withal' (50), he was already the avenger, if without any clear idea of how he might act. Perhaps if there were identifiable moments in his growing awareness that he could satisfy his desire for revenge by punishing Antonio, the first came during the long pause after 'If we are like you in the rest -' and the heavily underlined continuation '-we will resemble you in that' (63-64); and the second during his silent approach of Salerio preceding the fiercely delivered 'If a Jew wrong a Christian...' (64-65). By the end of the speech, Salerio and Solanio were in no doubt about his seriousness: as he stormed out, they stood looking after him in speechless horror.

III iii was especially interesting for the rôle played by Nick Simons's Tubal. Present on stage earlier in I iii, he was then given one of Shylock's speeches - 'Ay, he was the third' (71) - which established him as a minor religious authority to whom Shylock deferred, and more than merely 'a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe'. When Shylock reluctantly admitted that he could not 'instantly raise up the gross Of full three thousand ducats' (52-53), Thacker had the Christians marching to the exit in disgust, until Tubal whispered to Shylock, who was then able to call them back with 'What of that?...' [53]. This enabled audiences to believe that, far from harbouring a long-smouldering plot against Antonio, Shylock would have been perfectly willing to let him go without a bond of any kind: it was only Tubal's accommodating presence which made the offer of a loan possible. Tubal was further useful in III i, showing palpable dismay at Shylock's threat to 'have the heart of him if he forfeit' (120). The message was clear: if we wanted to

judge Jews by their behaviour in *The Merchant of Venice*, the model we should follow was that of Tubal's humane piety, rather than Shylock's vengeful murderousness.

In this respect Tubal's most impressive silent contributions came in III iii. To begin with, instead of playing the opening line as an *in medias res* response to Antonio, Calder's Shylock directed it at his friend (for good measure, adding his name):

Tell me not of mercy, *Tubal*. (III iii 1; my italics).

Thus Tubal the Jew was shown to have been pleading for mercy, a quality normally in this play the preserve of Portia and the Duke. Furthermore, sitting by Shylock's side behind his office desk, Nick Simons's Tubal signalled increasing discomfort at his fellow Jew's determined refusal to be moved by Antonio's pleadings; displayed shock at Shylock's placing of his hand on a holy book to accompany 'I have sworn an oath...' (5); listened with dismay as Shylock directed at him (again, rather than at Antonio) the assertion that 'The Duke shall grant me justice' (8); and then finally, unable to take any more of Shylock's irreligious intransigence, stormed out, leaving his friend to shout after him, in self-justification,

I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool

To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield

To Christian intercessors... (14-16)

Tubal's final contribution might be said to have been made in IV i, when his absence from the trial strikingly conveyed Shylock's isolation, not only from humanity generally, but from the Jewish community in particular.

In this scene, Calder's Shylock was notable for his quiet restraint and total lack of triumphalism when it appeared from Portia's pronouncements that things were going in his favour. When he said 'I crave the law...' (203), it came across as an appeal to our sense of fair play; when he cried 'I have an oath...' (225), he seemed to mean it quite genuinely; and in the middle of 'I have a daughter -' (292-294), he broke down, a powerful reminder of the loss that had driven him to this position. Although plainly baffled and defeated when Portia threw in the blood clause, he was only really rocked when she referred to him as an alien (345). Penny Downie's Portia seemed fully aware of the power that this word would have in the now studied destruction of the Jew; she paused before uttering it, and then did so as if to imply: 'you will realise the full import of what I am saying.' Accordingly it was at this point that Calder's physical collapse began, to culminate in what appeared to be a stroke or heart attack after he begged leave to go, uttering 'I am not well' (392) in a surprised tone, as though he could not work out what had happened to him. The rest of the court dispersed, and Shylock was left alone in a spotlight. Then, as he struggled up on to a chair, Gratiano's final taunting words - 'far from jubilant'⁷¹⁸ - were heard coming out of the darkness. Shylock nodded, struggled to his feet and then turned and glared out defiantly and challengingly at the audience as the lights dimmed.

Reviewers were mixed as to the purpose or effect of this final image. Holland felt that Shylock 'glowered threateningly', and wrote:

I realised it was offered as a parallel to the prim and smug authority of Antonio at the very end of the play but the look was too enigmatic.⁷¹⁹

For Geckle, it was

⁷¹⁸ Jackson, p. 342.

⁷¹⁹ *Op cit.*, p. 167.

...a silent tableau that [said] all that [needed] to be [said] about Christian mercy.⁷²⁰

Although the scene - as represented in the text - had not finished, the moment was reminiscent to some degree of many of Irving's productions, which ended at this point, leaving the great man to take his curtain-call. Calder's performance regularly drew enthusiastic applause as the lights dimmed on the defeated Jew, and then the scene re-started on the upper floor of the set; but, such had been the tragic dimension to Shylock's fall, that there was a sense in which the real business of the play was completed.⁷²¹

Following up his cut of 'Let all of his complexion choose me so' - conventionally Portia's relieved response to the departing Morocco (II vii 79) - Thacker made several important changes to Portia's speeches in IV i, so that throughout the trial scene she addressed Shylock by name - or did not refer to him at all - instead of calling him 'Jew'. These emendations had a powerful effect in absolving Portia from the taint of anti-Semitism and incidentally helped to reduce the impression that the man in front of us plotting murder was doing so simply because he was a Jew. As well as cutting Gratiano's taunt 'Not on thy sole but on thy soul, harsh Jew' (122), Thacker also instituted the following changes to Portia's lines:

Shylock

~~The Jew~~ shall have all justice (317)

do you

Why ~~doth the Jew~~ pause? (331)

⁷²⁰ Geckle, *op cit.*, p. 12.

⁷²¹ Smith wrote: 'After this trial scene the rest of the play seemed anti-climactic.' (*op cit.*, p. 92).

To be so taken at thy peril Jew. (340)

Tarry Jew. (342)

Art thou contented Jew? (389)⁷²²

The Production Pack explained cuts such as these in the following way:

To make any sense of the person that [Portia] is in this 1993 version any signs of cynicism or prejudice have been jettisoned. This has involved a certain amount of cutting of the text. David Thacker didn't want the issue of Portia being considered racist - as she sometimes is - to affect the reading of the character he wanted for the production.⁷²³

Whether the particular interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* that Thacker wanted would have been achievable without such cuts, or those to Shylock's aside in I iii, is debatable. This and related questions will be returned to in the concluding chapter.

⁷²² Prompt book.

⁷²³ Pennie Downey in the 1993 Production Pack, p. 13.

CHAPTER 13
**SUBSERVIENT SHYLOCKS:
GARY WALDHORN & PAUL BUTLER**

1994 marked the appearance of two productions of *The Merchant of Venice* which did not originate in either London or Stratford and which were also linked by the fact that their Shylocks were in each case markedly subservient to the larger designs of the interpretation.

Jude Kelly's production of *The Merchant of Venice* for the West Yorkshire Playhouse opened in London in January 1994 while David Thacker's version was still in repertory with the RSC. This was possibly one reason - the non-metropolitan venue no doubt being another⁷²⁴ - why it received less critical attention than it deserved⁷²⁵. Like Thacker's production, Kelly's was centrally concerned with anti-Semitism, and in response to anxieties expressed by Francine Cohen⁷²⁶ and others from Leeds's 10,000-strong Jewish community, Kelly (as the theatre's artistic director) convened a public meeting. As Cohen explained:

I know how Jewish people feel about this play... I challenged Jude: 'Why are you doing this in Leeds?' At the end of the day with this play you cannot escape the language. We don't feel comfortable with a play which has anti-Semitic language in it.⁷²⁷

Thus anti-Semitism became a major issue for the West Yorkshire Playhouse's production, not least by virtue of its historic location and the community within which it was being performed. Charles Hutchinson also saw the play in the context of 'this month's release of

⁷²⁴ After a few preview performances in the Bridewell Theatre, London, it opened in the Quarry Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, on 14 March, 1994.

⁷²⁵ Only three national newspapers reviewed it. There was also a review in the *Shakespeare Bulletin*.

⁷²⁶ A local writer and correspondent for the *Jewish Chronicle*.

⁷²⁷ Cohen reported by David Lister (*Independent on Sunday*, 17 April, 1994). In Lister's article, 'Shylock, unacceptable face of Shakespeare?', he relates how: '...issues ranged from the theological to the bizarre. Two orthodox ladies questioned Shylock's spirituality and religious observance; and at one point the doctors present discussed whether it was actually possible to live after having a pound of flesh cut from the torso. A woman would, they concluded; a man probably would not.'

Spielberg's holocaust movie *Schindler's List*...⁷²⁸ while the reviewer in the *Express* referred to the fact that it was being performed 'in a time of bitter British National Party and Anti-Nazi League conflict...'⁷²⁹

Helping to keep the issue in the foreground for audiences was the fact that Jewish actors were cast in the rôles of Shylock and Tubal⁷³⁰, while a cast of amateur actors was recruited to create the picture on stage of a densely populated Jewish ghetto whose people felt bitterly the indignities heaped upon one of their number:

In keeping with its usual practice, WYP has a community chorus in this production, made up of a group of local people who provide a significant presence on stage for much of the action. One such is a black woman court usher who finds herself unexpectedly dragged into the limelight by Shylock as a living illustration of his point about the prevalence of slaves in Venice. The chorus is also used in the courtroom scene to provide a sizeable body of Jewish spectators, who listen attentively as the trial progresses and finally collapse in moans and lamentations as Shylock is forced to accept baptism. Their presence is typical of the production's relentless desire to foreground the issues of anti-semitism.⁷³¹

Enhancing the picture of Jewish suffering at the hands of the Christians, Jessica -

...ignored by everybody but Lorenzo and spat at by Bassanio when she tells him of her father's determination to exact the bond, is left weeping as she reads the letter informing her of her father's enforced conversion. Clasped sobbing in Lorenzo's arms, she provides the final image of the play.⁷³²

⁷²⁸ *Yorkshire Evening Press*, 18 March, 1994.

⁷²⁹ *Express*, March 24, 1994.

⁷³⁰ Shylock was played by Gary Waldhorn and Tubal by Andrew Nyman. Lisa Hopkins wrote that 'Contrary to the usual stage practice in Britain in recent years, neither Shylock nor Jessica is obviously Jewish' (*Shakespeare Bulletin*, Summer 1994, p. 34), a curious statement given that the two most recent mainstream Shylocks at that time - the 1990 ESC interpretation by John Woodvine and the then current RSC Shylock of David Calder - were both studiously 'non-Jewish' in the sense implied by Hopkins.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. The business with the court usher recalls Sher's similar use of a black attendant in the RSC's 1987 production.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

These closing moments, as described by David Lister, in which -

...Kelly invented a moving scene placing Shylock's daughter ...beside a Jewish menorah, ...crying
inconsolably as traditional music plays...⁷³³

were powerfully reminiscent of the final scene of Jonathan Miller's 1970 National Theatre production, in which, as the other characters left Jessica alone on stage, sadly holding the deed of gift, we heard an offstage voice intoning the kaddish:

It is the dirge for the father who is now dead to her; it is a dirge for the daughter who would retreat
from a world to which she, like Shylock before her, has tragically committed herself.⁷³⁴

An ironic dimension to the production's perspective on Judaism was provided by the portrait of Portia's lawyer father, which dominated the Belmont scenes -

...the thrust being that it was to prove herself to him that [Portia] dressed up as a lawyer and
humiliated Shylock in the court scene.

The picture was of the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Taylor. Lord Taylor is Jewish.⁷³⁵

Interestingly, it was Nichola McAuliffe's Portia who dominated this production, rather than Gary Waldhorn's Shylock, giving the part an unusual semi-tragic dimension as 'the resentful and embittered prisoner of her late father's monstrous will',⁷³⁶:

⁷³³ Lister, *op cit.*

⁷³⁴ Bulman, p. 98.

⁷³⁵ Lister, *op cit.*

⁷³⁶ John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 20 March, 1994.

Who would have thought of Portia as Hedda Gabler? Yet there she is..., pistol in mouth, playing Russian roulette under the stern stare of her late father's huge picture. He was a judge - law runs in the family. Her need to shape up to him is seen just before the interval as she holds out the marriage contract, as if saying "Will this do you?"⁷³⁷

...The picture [of Portia's father] is a constant of the Belmont scenes, and Portia glances significantly at it as she plans her escapade as Balthasar. The caskets appear at the back and on either side of the platform as three stylized rib-cages impaled on long poles...⁷³⁸

So worldweary is she, so tired and angry at the fetters placed upon her by the conditions of her father's will, that she is swigging wine and firing an unloaded gun into her own mouth when first we see her. This is Portia as Dorothy Parker. She can still be Portia the great lady and Portia the dangerous wit - even Portia the huntress - but she achieves that poise only on the brink of despair. And she learns that her father is not the only man whose wishes will confront hers.⁷³⁹

Unusually too, she was not immune from the racism which infected the Venetian Christians. But, while unabashedly rude in her behaviour to both Morocco and Jessica (she studiously ignored the latter), her attitude to Shylock himself was altogether more complex, especially inasmuch as his fate was tied up with that of Antonio, a man whom she had come to see with sudden clarity as the rival for her husband's love:

In the trial scene she hears Bassanio tell Antonio "Life itself, my wife and all the world Are not with me esteem'd above thy life". And, even after trumping Shylock with her superior command of the law, she still urges him "Prepare thee to cut off the flesh", not without a spasm of malice against Antonio. To Shylock she is not vindictive, merely precise; and the more she observes him, the more reluctant she is to use the law against him.⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁷ Timothy Ramsden, *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 April, 1994.

⁷³⁸ Hopkins, *op cit.*

⁷³⁹ Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 26 March, 1994.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Ramsden observed: 'She is unusually helpful to Shylock, giving him every chance to back off... Portia realises for herself what we have seen in Bassanio's tactile relationship with Antonio.' (*op cit.*)

Neither did her relationship with Shylock end with his departure from the court:

...when she leaves the courtroom to seek Shylock's house, only to find herself pelted with stones by the women and children in the ghetto, she shows a saddened comprehension of their resentment.⁷⁴¹

Gary Waldhorn's Shylock, though played as 'sympathetic and resigned to the evil around him',⁷⁴² and 'eloquent as both oppressed and oppressor',⁷⁴³ was not the main source of interest in this production, as the character often is, but was thus seen as simply one embodiment of

...a play about repressions. Antonio... and Bassanio... are bound together by a love-bond which cannot be acknowledged. Portia... is the resentful and embittered prisoner of her late father's monstrous will, and just when she thinks she is free, she realises the price she would be paying for her freedom. Shylock... is a ghetto Jew who ventures beyond the iron gates to brave the loathing of the Venetians. The repressiveness of this society is part and parcel of its obsession with money and of its heartless and rabid racism. Kelly's direction spares nobody: everyone is implicated, and the freedom and forgiveness of the ending casts no rosy light on what had gone before...⁷⁴⁴

Summarising his impressions of the production, John Peter wrote:

Above all, it retells the tale of Portia.⁷⁴⁵

⁷⁴¹ Hopkins, *op cit.*

⁷⁴² Lister, *op cit.* Charles Hutchinson saw him as 'loathsome yet inducing compassion' (*op cit.*); Jane Tadman 'a figure of compassion rather than fun' (*Sheffield Telegraph*, 25 March, 1994); Jim Greenfield felt that Waldhorn's Shylock kept the audience 'delicately balanced between dislike and compassion for him' (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 16 March, 1994).

⁷⁴³ Macaulay, *op cit.*

⁷⁴⁴ Peter, *op cit.* Hopkins considered it to be 'a production that saw in the play not comedy but a confrontation with anti-Semitism and a complex treatment of... interrelationships...' (*op cit.*).

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Comments on Nichola McAuliffe's performance dominated all the reviews.

Such an approach offers one way in which to deal with the interpretation of Shylock, seeing him as only one element in a complex social framework, and re-balancing the play by directing the audience's attention elsewhere. In reducing Shylock's domination by contextualising him in this way, Jude Kelly seems to me to have negotiated one of the gulfs which Worthen identifies as existing between new historicism and performance. He writes:

The actors' commitment to character... suggests a fundamental resistance to the kind of discursive interplay typical of new historicist enquiry, in which the subject is conceived less as an "identity" or "self" than as a shifting site where the claims of competing discourses - of the state, religion, the economy, class, gender, sexuality, and so on - are focused.⁷⁴⁶

Kelly's direction and the actors' performances in this production offer a basis upon which to question the reality of such a 'fundamental resistance' as Worthen describes. Alfred Hickling wrote:

By shaking it free from its performance history, Kelly detonates the encrusted prejudice which has clung to this piece, and leaves us surveying the aftermath in a bewildered state of shock.⁷⁴⁷

Audiences could also leave the West Yorkshire Playhouse feeling that they had seen a play which was not *about* Shylock.

In concluding his review of the Goodman Theater production⁷⁴⁸ of *The Merchant of Venice*, which the following month was to visit London (in November, 1994), Michael

⁷⁴⁶ WB Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 135.

⁷⁴⁷ Alfred Hickling, *Yorkshire Post*, 17 March, 1994.

⁷⁴⁸ This production, by the Goodman Theater, Chicago, Illinois, directed by Peter Sellars, opened in Chicago on 10 October, 1994, and then played from 16-19 November at the Barbican Theatre, London. Performances also followed in France and Germany.

Shapiro referred to director Peter Sellars's view that the play exposed the urge in people to exploit others, adding:

One wonders if straitjacketing actors in a thesis-ridden, media-besotted production, tapping into Rodney King's pain, and rewriting the Jessica-plot also count as acts of exploitation.⁷⁴⁹

Shapiro's conclusion contains most of the major criticisms which were subsequently to be levelled at the production during its four days at the Barbican⁷⁵⁰: it was ideologically overbearing; it used technology distractingly and untheatrically; it inappropriately exploited emotions stirred up by the then recent Los Angeles race riots; and it distorted the text.

Many reviewers echoed Shapiro's first charge that the production was 'thesis-ridden'.

Comparing this production with others by Sellars, Alastair Macaulay wrote:

As usual, Sellars is bending works of art to suit his own unyielding agenda: i.e. to broadcast his own PC guilt at white supremacism, and to express his own convictions that the Americanisation of world culture is destructive.⁷⁵¹

Also condemning the interpretation for its 'daft, kiss-me-quick philosophy', Sheridan Morley considered it to be:

⁷⁴⁹ Michael Shapiro, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Fall 1994, p. 33. (The video-recording of Rodney King's beating by the Los Angeles police was one of the sequences shown on the television monitors. [See below, pages 226-229].)

⁷⁵⁰ He also condemned the performance for its 'funereal pacing and lugubrious line delivery', continuing, in the vein of several other critics, 'At the performance I saw, spectators wanted to laugh, but, given no encouragement, stopped trying. Many left at the interval.' (*ibid.*, p. 32).

⁷⁵¹ Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 18 November, 1994. Macaulay's hostile review concluded: 'I do not exaggerate when I say the following: to watch Sellars's work ...is to feel that the next dark age is already upon us.'

...just terrible: living proof of what can come from a director who thinks he matters as much as the playwright, and that it is his mission to make a timeless and ever-topical piece 'mean something' to a contemporary audience.⁷⁵²

In justifying his approach to the play, and thereby apparently validating the criticisms concerning ideology voiced by Shapiro, Macaulay and others, Sellars himself explained:

Shakespeare was writing when the entire capitalist, colonialist system was being put in place... England is the economic and military superpower. The Spanish are second tier. 'How will you use this?' is Shakespeare's question. If you set up exploitative relationships with people - or peoples - what is the karmic result? Shakespeare is profoundly asking that question as four centuries that have shaped our world are getting under way.⁷⁵³

...the play is the most astute and shockingly frank analysis of the socio-economic roots of Third World racism and the European ghettos that we have.⁷⁵⁴

As John Cornwell wrote in an article published before performance:

What Sellars himself brings to his productions, he conceded, is decidedly ideological rather than personally experiential. Whether he is tackling Sophocles, Shakespeare or Wagner, his interpretations rarely stray from sociopolitical reflections on contemporary America.⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵² Sheridan Morley, *Spectator*, 26 November, 1994.

⁷⁵³ Peter Sellars, quoted in 'Venice Champion' by Michael Billington (*Guardian*, 16 November, 1994). Billington, who was later one of the few critics to give the production a broadly favourable review, added: 'You can argue about how far Shakespeare was consciously aware of these geo-political concerns. But the Merchant is undeniably a play about money, capitalism and oppression.'

⁷⁵⁴ Peter Sellars, quoted in 'No holds bard', John Cornwell, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 16 October, 1994, p. 82.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

If reviewers were unhappy about the explicitly ideological approach, the production's use of technology attracted even more widespread criticism:

What you see on the TV screens dotted about the theatre is every bit as important as the events on stage. During the trial scene, for instance, there is footage of the horrific police assault that sparked off the riots, of burning shops and of looting. Throughout the production, minor characters scuttle around the stage with hand-held cameras, while Salerio and Solanio come across as a grotesquely jocular double-act on TV.

All this is quite intriguing for about 10 minutes...⁷⁵⁶

Peter Holland took the widespread criticism of the distracting nature of the technology a stage further, seeing its use as conflicting fundamentally with the nature of stage performance, 'an explicit denial of the audience's place in the theatre', given that 'film defines what may be seen, selecting and thereby manipulating...' For Holland:

Such control is deeply contemptuous of the audience's intelligence, its ability to watch the play, but it is equally deeply distrustful of theatre itself. Since the actors seemed far more comfortable when acting to camera than on the space of the Barbican stage, especially when cluttered with camera cable, it was far from clear why Sellars had bothered to direct the play for stage at all...⁷⁵⁷

This view was echoed by John Peter, who felt that the use of television monitors 'looked exciting at first, but in the long run ...became both a distraction and an artistic short cut':

It weakened the dramatic and psychological focus of the performance by giving you too many things to look at... The use of mikes and amplification gave the voices an artificial, studio-managed quality.

⁷⁵⁶ Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November, 1994. Paul Taylor wrote 'Perhaps these TV screens, hitherto obligingly fascinated by the somewhat Martin Luther King-like face of Paul Butler's black Shylock, are going to flash up the odd reminder of this defeated character, however briskly the Christians contrive to air-brush him out of the picture. Sadly, nothing so imaginative happens...' (*Independent*, 18 November, 1994).

⁷⁵⁷ Holland, *op cit.*, pp. 258-259.

It took away that special sense of live spontaneity which still distinguishes the theatre from a karaoke arcade or a computerised heritage outlet.⁷⁵⁸

The *New York Times* reviewer, David Richards, felt that

What Mr Sellars sees happening to society at large - a pulling apart of the races and a general breakdown of humanity - happens to his performers as well, who become less than the sum of their parts. Frequently, a conscious effort is required to match voice and body, face and feeling.⁷⁵⁹

There is another view, however. Worthen considers that

...to move from the stagey intimacy of realistic acting to the intimate voyeurism of a televised talking head is not to eliminate the individual but to imply its constitution in different means of production.⁷⁶⁰

while Sellars himself said:

With the mikes and the cameras I'm regaining an intimacy that is nowadays lost on the stage... It should be like a movie with close-ups of people whispering to each other. Then the poetry is free to be itself. It doesn't have to be forced into this public 'Hey, my liege' Stratford-on-Avon stuff... These modern communication aids are no longer a decorative element... They are about power, access, ideas, understanding. They create presence on the stage; they charge the atmosphere.⁷⁶¹

In their enthusiasm to condemn the use of video and amplified sound, none of the reviewers seemed to pick up any of the less obvious points that Sellars was trying to convey with the audio-technology in particular. For example, while audiences might not

⁷⁵⁸ John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 27 November, 1994.

⁷⁵⁹ David Richards, *New York Times*, 18 October, 1994.

⁷⁶⁰ *Op cit.*, p. 92.

⁷⁶¹ Cornwell, p. 82.

have perceived that Portia's and Bassanio's voices were being deliberately modified ('processed differently on digital computers') the use of the very visible microphones in certain scenes was striking and worthy of comment. In the elopement scene, for example -

...the mike is this satellite dish kind of thing, a parabolic microphone used by the CIA to eavesdrop on conversations, to get that illicit sense of counterespionage. Salerio, who is a kind of media reporter, is crouched with one of these things, eavesdropping on Lorenzo and Jessica hanging out of the window.⁷⁶²

Shapiro complained that

Body microphones (supposedly invisible) are used, unnecessarily in a hall like the Goodman, but frequently characters sit or stand where they can speak into mikes quite visibly affixed to tables or floor stands.⁷⁶³

As I recall from my own experience of the production in London, the mikes could be intrusive; but the fact that they could be seen was not sloppy stage management. Sellars had used microphones in the Belmont scenes to say something about the relative status of resident and visitor: while Portia and Nerissa had personal mikes secreted in their clothes, Morocco and Arragon were obliged to use stand-up mikes. As Sellars explained:

Basically the microphones are creating all these hierarchies behind the psychological infrastructure - who is privileged and who isn't...⁷⁶⁴

These two examples - II vi and the early casket scenes - seem to me to typify Sellars's use of technology in this production. While both instances demonstrated wit and originality,

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷⁶³ *Op cit.*, p. 33.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

only the second was actually consistent with the overall interpretation of the play; for why should Salerio be elaborately spying on Lorenzo when the latter had just explained exactly what he was about to do? Whether this use of microphones and miked speeches actually did have something to say about the interpretation of the play - and there were many factors, not least the low standard of acting and desperately slow pace, which militated against success - it seems to me to have been an experiment worth trying, one that achieved sporadic success and one that reviewers at the time might have judged more on its own terms. Looking back at the production, WB Worthen came to feel that

...using sound and video environments as part of the *mise-en-scène*, and miking the actors and repeatedly distorting their delivery, the production called into question not only the staging of the text, but the ways acting evokes relations of authority, impersonates “Shakespeare” so to speak. In this sense, the production urged a dialectical engagement between the discourse of *The Merchant of Venice* and racial and economic aspects of contemporary American society, a confrontation registered paradoxically less in Sellars’s racialized casting than in the strategic subversion of “character” itself.⁷⁶⁵

A constant back-drop to Sellars’s interpretation, and featured throughout the trial scene on the television monitors, were the Los Angeles race riots of 1992, the focal point of a production which saw Shakespeare’s play in the context of modern America and the interaction between ethnic groups:

The setting was Los Angeles: the Venice scenes, with seascapes and people playing ball on the television screens suggested Venice Beach; the Belmont scenes, with shots of lush gardens and classico-vulgar architecture, suggested Bel Air. Shylock was a Negro; Bassanio and his friends were

⁷⁶⁵ *Op cit.*, pp 78-79.

Hispanics; Portia and Nerissa were Chinese; the Prince of Arragon was a Hindu; Antonio, the merchant of the title, and the Duke of Venice were white.⁷⁶⁶

Someone at the Goodman told me that these particular equations express the text's insistence on demonized visions of Jews, on the veneration of ancestors in Belmont and on the tight bonding of Venice's men. Sellars ...claims that he has touched the texture of life in contemporary America.⁷⁶⁷

Sellars's analogy, however, failed on three counts. The first was that the hierarchy of races simply did not match Shakespeare's presentation of Jews and Christians, rich and poor:

In the director's incoherent scheme Shylock, Shakespeare's Jewish outsider in anti-Semitic white Venice, becomes a black money-lender at his desk. This analogy works fairly well...

But why are Shakespeare's prime white, bourgeois anti-Semites, Bassanio and Antonio, here played by representatives of another minority group, the Latinos? And further, why should Portia, whom Shakespeare characterised as a gracious white aristocrat in the world of the ruling majority, be played by another minority card-holder - a Chinese-American?

To fulfil his dramatic function Shylock (and his daughter Jessica) need to be the only authentic outsiders. But this Venice teems with minority groups. And so the play's dramatic focus is dangerously blurred.⁷⁶⁸

The second problem was that, by focusing broadly on race, the production gave confused messages about anti-Semitism. Michael C Kotzin felt that, by rendering Jewishness 'only as some sort of figure of speech', the production had removed anti-Semitism as a perceptible entity⁷⁶⁹; while John Peter observed,

⁷⁶⁶ Peter, *op cit*.

⁷⁶⁷ Michael Shapiro, p. 33.

⁷⁶⁸ Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 17 November, 1994.

⁷⁶⁹ Michael C Kotzin, 'Modern-day *Merchant* leaves little to hold on to', *JUF News*, November 1994, pp. 77-79, cited in Worthen, *op cit.*, p 82.

...Shakespeare did not write a multi-racial play. The situation of racial minorities in America is far more complicated than that of the Jews in Shakespeare's Venice... In Shakespeare's play Shylock is indeed an alien, whereas an American negro is in a much more complicated predicament...⁷⁷⁰

While Peter might be accused of adopting an over-literal attitude to an interpretation based on an analogy which, by its very nature, can never hold in all respects, his point is a fair one, given that these inconsistencies undermine the central parallel on which the analogy is founded.

Thirdly, the choice of the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a specific commentary in the trial of Shylock was historically and morally confusing:

Look, the comparison implies, those to whom great injustice has been done will inflict it in return. If you ponder this for a few seconds, though, the parallel collapses.

To begin with, looting and pillaging are a far cry from Shylock's subtle revenge-tactic - sardonically seeking justice within Christian institutions and by pedantic literalism turning their own legal tenets against the enemy. Breaking into a shop and running out with an armful of video equipment doesn't quite make the same statement. Then again the looters' principal victims were the neutral Koreans. It's hard to see how they could fit into the pattern here.⁷⁷¹

In one particular respect, however, the racial casting did strike a chord. When Shylock was finally brought to his knees by an alliance of Latinos and Chinese, the final image was not the conventional one of powerful establishment Christians defeating an alien Jew, but of one minority persecuting another. In this respect, the parallel of the LA riots, when blacks attacked neutral Koreans, was inadvertently apt.

⁷⁷⁰ Peter, *op cit.*

⁷⁷¹ Taylor, *op cit.* He added that, far from giving the story a contemporary relevance, Sellars's interpretation displayed 'an inability to imagine any form of life but that of modern America', drawing a comparison with the director's production of Aeschylus's *The Persians* (Edinburgh Festival, 1993). Spencer (*op cit.*) also queried the appropriateness of the racial parallels, as did Neil Smith, who was troubled by the absence of an 'internal logic' in Sellars's production (*What's On*, 23 November, 1994).

The final criticism levelled at the production in the evaluation by Michael Shapiro quoted at the outset was that Sellars had effectively rewritten the plot. Benedict Nightingale's elaboration of this theme centred upon the portrayal of Portia, Jessica and Old Gobbo:

One might argue that, when [Portia] is putting the prosecution case, her jealousy adds a dimension to the scene. But it cannot long be reconciled with the text. And there are other moments when Sellars's battle with Shakespeare verges on the freakish. Some awfully odd things happen to and around Portia Johnson's Jessica, for instance.

Jessica is a tricky character to play nowadays... But would Lancelot Gobbo, here presented as a rabid anti-Semite in yuppy attire, lecherously pinch her butt as he bids her adieu? Has Jessica really been having a love-affair with her father's servant, as Sellars implies? And why does she come to dislike Rene Rivera's painfully harmless Lorenzo so much and so quickly? This is not just a distortion but a reversal of what the poor bruised Bard actually wanted.

So I might go on, asking if Old Gobbo should be a mad beggar with a sandwich board quoting the Book of Revelation, or questioning the American literalism that turns Portia's "caskets" into coffins, or... but let me end positively.⁷⁷²

Comments such as these undoubtedly say as much about the reviewer as the production. It is a bold critic, or director, who is prepared to declare with certainty 'what the poor bruised Bard actually wanted'. A number of Portias have displayed jealousy at the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio⁷⁷³; Lancelot and Jessica clearly have a great affection for one another and, while there is nothing actively to suggest it, the text does not explicitly rule out a sexual relationship; Old Gobbo is frequently played lugubriously and might just as well be a sandwich man foretelling doom as anything else. The general point, however, that Sellars distorted the text in order to fit his particular interpretative needs, is a sound

⁷⁷² Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 18 November, 1994.

⁷⁷³ The most potent expression was given by Nichola McAuliffe in Jude Kelly's 1994 West Yorkshire Playhouse production (see above, pages 221-222).

one. It looked, for example, as though Jessica's sexual frolics with Lancelot Gobbo had been included solely so that Lorenzo's accusation to the servant concerning 'the getting up of the Negro's belly' (III v 35-36), could apply to her⁷⁷⁴; certainly they did not seem to serve any other purpose. It was difficult, furthermore, to justify an ending in which

Gratiano throws his ring back at Nerissa and stalks off stage, while Antonio carries Portia's ring to Bassanio with prolonged solemnity... [and] there is no mystery about the restoration of Antonio's argosies: Portia writes a check and hands it to him...⁷⁷⁵

a cheque which he subsequently screws up and throws away. My own recollection of the production is that it was perversely gloomy; as Charles Spencer observed:

There is light as well as shade in Shakespeare's play, but it doesn't suit Sellars's purpose, so he simply ignores it.⁷⁷⁶

The one element of Sellars's production to remain immune from widespread criticism was Paul Butler's Shylock, a performance which drew almost universal praise⁷⁷⁷. Played 'with Robesonian weight'⁷⁷⁸, and recalling Martin Luther King⁷⁷⁹, Butler's 'exceptionally fine Shylock... [was] sardonic, cautious, full of impassive power'⁷⁸⁰, 'laconic and abrupt'⁷⁸¹, 'dignified'⁷⁸², behaving throughout with a 'gentle gravity'⁷⁸³. Undoubtedly one of the most sympathetic of all Shylocks, his stillness was often imposed by the need to

⁷⁷⁴ See Michael Shapiro, p. 32.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33. Guy Boquet described this ending as 'mal justifié par le texte' (*Cahiers Elizabéthains*, April 1995, p. 116). It was in keeping with Sellars's simplistic and distorted view of Portia as 'a snotty little bitch' (Cornwell, *op cit.*, p. 86).

⁷⁷⁶ Spencer, *op cit.*

⁷⁷⁷ Alone among the national daily critics, Alastair Macaulay disliked Butler's Shylock, describing him as 'a solemn, orthodox bore' (*op cit.*).

⁷⁷⁸ Irving Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*, 20 November, 1994.

⁷⁷⁹ Taylor, *op cit.*

⁷⁸⁰ John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 20 November, 1994.

⁷⁸¹ Boquet, p. 115 ('...en complet strict bien coupé': my translation).

⁷⁸² Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 18 November, 1994.

⁷⁸³ Kate Kellaway, *Observer*, 20 November, 1994.

remain in frame while the cameras were on him, or to use one of the standing microphones (given that, as an underclass Jew, he did not have a remote mike of his own). ‘Hath not a Jew...?’ was spoken direct to camera (upstage, so that the audience could not see the live performance, but had to rely on the televised ‘coverage’), a point at which he was at his most Martin Luther King-like, and his calm self-possession broke down only when Tubal revealed the news of the lost turquoise. Like David Calder’s Shylock, he plainly could not control his daughter: she lay sprawled on the floor watching a cartoon on the television while he was talking to her in II v and, in an action which epitomised her lack of respect for him, he had to bend down to hand her the keys.

In a performance which again recalled Calder’s, and was later to be echoed in Kentrup’s⁷⁸⁴, his demeanour throughout the trial scene was notable for a complete absence of triumphalism - there was no gloating in his praise of the young lawyer’s judgements (IV i 220, 243, 247, 301) - and he seemed sincere in declaring that his pursuit of justice was motivated by ‘an oath in heaven’ (225). A moment which recalled Sher, but which here had a different cutting edge, was his delivery of the speech ‘You have among you many a purchased slave...’ (89-99) direct to camera; with Butler’s four added repetitions of ‘Let them be free!’, it was one of the few moments in the production that made the audience feel genuinely uncomfortable.⁷⁸⁵

One particular piece of business stands out as representative of the way in which the interpretation went as far as any production can in protecting Shylock from charges of personal vindictiveness against Antonio. Many Shylocks, even those presented as having a real and understandable grievance, have nonetheless forfeited audience sympathy when they approach the merchant with intent to take their pound of flesh. Even David Calder, jointly with Paul Butler the most sympathetic Shylock since Olivier’s, seemed to relish the

⁷⁸⁴ See below, pages 257-259.

⁷⁸⁵ Billington wrote: ‘The court-room drama, pitched halfway between Welles’s *The Trial* and Shakespeare’s trial scene, is played in creepy silhouette and becomes a display both of judicial corruption - the Duke has already decided that Shylock is “an inhuman wretch” - and private angst.’ (18 November, 1994, *op cit.*).

moment, delineating the flesh to be removed, by drawing an outline with a marker pen on the hapless Antonio's bare chest. Butler's Shylock eschewed all such personal satisfaction: in a stance that recalled Othello's insistence that the killing of Desdemona should be a sacrifice and not a murder⁷⁸⁶, he remained seated behind his desk - as he had been throughout the trial - while two courtroom guards made ready to perform the operation. As though presiding over a lawful execution, Butler's Shylock barely looked up until Portia was heard to stay the guards' hands.

If the aim were to give us a sympathetic Shylock, Paul Butler had the dice loaded more heavily in his favour than any actor since Irving: with a director anxious to atone for white guilt; the casting of Jews as blacks; the back-drop of the LA riots; a deserting Lancelot Gobbo played as a physically repulsive lecher; a Lorenzo who was clearly about to abandon Jessica for Portia⁷⁸⁷; a Bassanio whose affections were plainly going to be transferred back to Antonio as soon as he had secured his wife's fortune; and a merchant who seemed to have fabricated the whole story of the lost ships in order to prove his love..., Butler's Shylock was always going to show up rather well. In terms of his performance, perhaps Benedict Nightingale summed up the majority view when he said: 'I only wish he was in someone else's *Merchant*'⁷⁸⁸.

⁷⁸⁶ '...And mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.' *Othello* (V. ii. 67-68).

⁷⁸⁷ Before 'The man who hath no music in himself...' (V. i. 83-88), he slapped Jessica's face. Then, having offered Portia his handkerchief in Act V, he held it to his nose and smelled it ecstatically as she handed it back.

⁷⁸⁸ Nightingale, *op cit.*

CHAPTER 14

RESTRAINT & AUTHENTICITY: PHILIP VOSS

The approach I have adopted to the study of Philip Voss's Shylock will be different from that taken to earlier interpretations, given that I have had the opportunity to understand something about the actor's and director's approaches during the rehearsal period. This chapter, therefore, will focus upon the ways in which the actor prepared for the rôle and the fundamental attitudes which were shaping his interpretation in the early stages of rehearsals⁷⁸⁹.

Philip Voss prepared for the rôle of Shylock as he prepares for all rôles, firstly reading the play carefully and then writing down everything of importance:

...what I say about other people, and what other people say about me, and what I say about myself, and also the facts, of which there are - considering it's not a large part - a huge number on Shylock. And I look at that... and I come to my conclusions.

All this is recorded meticulously in an A4 notebook, carefully organised and frequently consulted. The notebook is also the repository for his developing ideas about how to approach the part, initially conceptualised in terms derived from the Stanislavski method:

The choices I came to... The most difficult to arrive at is always the *Super-objective*, and this was particularly difficult. And I don't know whether I've got it right now. It's better encapsulated in a very simple phrase and I finally put down 'To win'. That doesn't mean 'To win *the bond*' or 'the pound of flesh'; that means 'his life is to win.' The long version, which I first wrote down: [*reads from notebook.*] 'To live with 3,000 years of humiliation and exclusion and to cope with being an outsider by the strength of his faith and his ability to make money.' So I feel that he takes on all that

⁷⁸⁹ The interview on which these observations are based took place on 25 October, 1997, four weeks into rehearsals and just under six weeks from the first public performance. All quotations from the actor in this chapter are from that interview.

the Jews have suffered for 3, 4, whatever - however many thousand years it is, and that he has to survive; not only that he wants to win. I did at one time write down 'To suffer'. But that would have led me in a very strange path, I think, had Shylock had *that* as a super-objective. Interesting, but it's too weird. So at the minute it is 'To win'. Of course, he loses. And the *Objective* is [reads] 'To avenge his hatred of Antonio and all Christians'. The *Line of Action* is [reads] 'To lend money on a merry bond, to extract revenge by calling in the bond'; the *Obstacles* against it: 'His ignorance of Venetian law, Portia's fooling him; his own emotional hatred; his daughter's betrayal'.

This exposition was extremely illuminating. With a super-objective of winning, his ultimate defeat was likely to be all the more devastating - it would permit a spectacular crash in Act IV; and, while suffering is inevitably something we witness in almost every portrayal of Shakespeare's Jew, it had clearly been rejected as underpinning the character's motivation: this was not to be Shylock the martyr. Perhaps the most interesting choice, though, was of the objective, since it would seem to influence particularly the way in which the actor approached the reaction to Antonio's entrance in I iii and his subsequent offer of the bond.

Developing these broad, underlying conceptions of the character, and describing him as the human type of 'thruster', he added:

I have an animal - always - and, in Shylock's case, which I'm sticking with - although he wouldn't wear astrakhan! - is a hyena, as it seems to me that baying is right.

The implications of selecting the hyena are particularly interesting, given its associations in our mind with feeding off the scraps that other animals leave behind. It is not, in that respect, a 'proactive' animal: it waits and then takes advantage of whatever opportunities come its way. The text, of course, offers a more obvious choice in the wolf, but this seemed too direct and limiting to the actor as a helpful image with which to inform early approaches to the part:

Well, I stick with hyena. Of course, wolf is the obvious one, and maybe it should be wolf. But there's something cackling and scavenging... It's that terrific argument between thrift and usury, isn't it?

What is, to him, how he makes his money, how he lives, is to the Christians 'usury'. And that, look at it how you will, that is to me a scavenging animal. To Shylock, that's it; there's nothing wrong with that; that is how he lives.

The choice of the scavenging hyena, rather than the attacking wolf therefore parallels Shylock's own profession of parasitic usury as distinct from bold Renaissance mercantilism.

These, however, are the broad brush-strokes of preparation. Other details were also beginning to be filled in at this early stage in the rehearsal process, and they were to do with, among other things, the nature of Shylock's relationship with his daughter. For Philip Voss and director Gregory Doran, Jessica's attitude to her father had to be connected with the death of her mother.

We've sort of worked out - or decided - that Shylock's wife died about five years before⁷⁹⁰, making Jessica, I think about thirteen. To explain how Jessica has come to loathe her father so much, you need a certain amount of time for his oppressive behaviour to have affected her to that degree; because, I mean, I see Shylock as a perfectly nice man; I don't see anything wrong with him at all. The reason that Jessica hates him, I think is because he is oppressive, because he is a widower, because he has lost his wife, and that she is the woman in the house and he has just demanded too much of her, both in her religion and domestically and then in every way he has absolutely fed off her, I think. And, if she's that age, she just wants to get away - the house *is* hell, because it's no fun...

⁷⁹⁰ It is interesting to compare this with David Calder's interpretation of Shylock's family circumstances: '...I've thought about him a lot. He has, for instance, no wife. Well, I feel she can have only recently died - that throws an enormous light on the bond between Jessica and her father.' (Calder, interviewed by Liz Gilbey in *Plays International*, May, 1993).

Perhaps the most noticeable and important detail in that account was the actor's statement that he viewed Shylock as 'a perfectly nice man'; and did not 'see anything wrong with him at all'.⁷⁹¹

There are two features of Shylock which an unsympathetic portrayal will seek to play up in the early stages of the play: the greed attached to his usury; and an oppression in the treatment of his daughter which borders upon cruelty. Philip Voss excuses him on both counts: the money-lending is his means of survival; the behaviour towards Jessica derives from the absence of a mother's moderating influence. In this respect, as indeed with his striving for authenticity (see below), he was following broadly in the tradition of Irving and Olivier. The differences were to come in the detail. But at this stage there were further similarities, not least in his decision about the key moment at which Shylock decides that the bond is to be used against Antonio:

Yes, that was established, funnily enough, only yesterday morning, and it was helped no end by this stock-market crash... because one saw that the whole scene is about the crash, Antonio's crash. One ship's going down, another ship's going down, and the first thing they ask me when I come on is 'What news among the merchants?' So, in fact, *they want to know*. I mean, the baiting is one thing; but they actually want to know if news has reached the Rialto about Antonio's losses. And that can go right through the scene... And so I respond - and I have heard, I have been to the Rialto, I have heard - and I inform them, I tell them he's a bankrupt, he's a prodigal, he's a beggar. *And I realise during that*. And then I have three 'Let him look to his bond's, just before 'To bait fish withal.' And I'm sure we'll stick with that...

Taking this view - that Salerio and Solanio stay to listen because they are stunned by the threats to Antonio - would permit the actor to deliver 'Hath not a Jew...' as he wished to

⁷⁹¹ He went on: 'When the money goes and his daughter goes, then he flips, and then he becomes vengeful and slightly nuts - very nuts, perhaps - but until then...'. For the manifestations of this loss of control, see below (page 251).

deliver it, without fuss or particular drama, and without having to fight off the attentions of a pair whose only motivation was baiting.⁷⁹²

Choosing this moment (immediately following ‘...so smug upon the mart.’) as the point at which Shylock decides to enforce the bond, of course has implications for his behaviour earlier in the play. If Shylock decides that the bond is for real only after he has lost his daughter, how does the actor deliver the aside on Antonio’s first entrance in which he expresses his hatred for Antonio? What exactly is the nature of that hatred?

That aside contains possibly my strongest - or Shylock’s in my version - strongest motivation. ‘I hate him for he is a Christian’ - that’s given - ‘but *more...*’ because he makes me look a fool on the Rialto. That is my driving emotional force. Greg⁷⁹³ kept saying to me: it’s marvellous to go for all the humour and the emotional loathing of Antonio, but you have to - and Greg has spent a whole session with me on this - you have to make sure that the business side of him was to the fore, that he is a damned good businessman. So to cut that speech, I think, or anything that reflects what he’s about, is a serious mistake. It’s about Judaism, but it’s also about how good Shylock is as a businessman, and this man thwarts him.

This was an unusual interpretation of Shylock’s ‘driving emotional force’ and consistent with the fact that the first line of the aside (‘How like a fawning publican he looks’) makes a mocking allusion to Antonio’s professional status and demeanour. Such an interpretation could also offer opportunities for some interesting nuances in lines such as ‘Antonio is a good man.’ (l. 12), and would undoubtedly colour the exchanges between the merchant and the Jew about the former’s treatment of the latter in public.

It also has implications for the moment at which Shylock makes the offer of a ‘merry bond’. What is in his mind? What attitude does he have towards Antonio? And why does

⁷⁹² As was the case with Warren Mitchell’s Shylock in the 1980 BBC television version (see above, pages 124-125).

⁷⁹³ Gregory Doran, director.

he select as penalty a pound of the merchant's flesh? For Philip Voss, these questions were all bound up with a particular quality that he was beginning to perceive in Shylock:

I don't know how far I'm going to go. But the most offensive aspect of my Shylock - I just don't know how far I'm going to push it - is a salaciousness. It seems to me he can't help talking about breeding, urine, the ewes... all of that to me is salacious. And he does it in the trial scene as well. He seems to enjoy that; whether it's for shock, or not, there is an element in him of salaciousness. So, when he comes to the pound of flesh - the thing about Jews, as opposed to Christians is that... the idea of flesh being taken from a man is in their thinking, in their psyche. So I link the two ideas... And you can say, 'OK, it's a pound of flesh, but it is like circumcising that bastard that I loathe...' But I don't know - who knows how far I will go. I don't wish to offend people, Jews in the audience, but it seems to be there to me, there's a quality of a dirty old man in there; he relishes that Laban story.

As James Shapiro has shown⁷⁹⁴, it is almost inconceivable that Elizabethan audiences would have failed to link the cutting of a man's flesh by a knife-wielding Jew with their fears, as Christians, of forcible circumcision. What was new about Philip Voss's perception of this connection was its link with Shylock's 'salaciousness'.

As a balance to this side of Shylock's character, Voss was already seeing two distinctly appealing features of the man's make-up: his sense of humour and his love for Jessica. Talking about his early discoveries of Shylock's humour, he said:

You see why he was played as a comedy part. I mean, he *is* witty: you can get laughs all the way through. Oh yes 'To eat of the habitation which your prophet...' That's a joke. Jokes, jokes, jokes - all the way through.

⁷⁹⁴ James Shapiro *Shakespeare and the Jews* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1996), pp. 113-130.

Humour was straightforward; but having also decided that Shylock was a loving father, Voss's problem was how to demonstrate that love in the few lines allowed by the text in II v:

Well, [*laughs*] *what can we do?* It's such a short scene. And there must be a reason in it; he was no fool, Shakespeare: *why* is it such a short scene? And, you know, I long for the audience to see how much I love her and what she means to me... But I have said, oh, why isn't it [II v] longer? *How* can I convey how much I love her in this very short scene? And, not only that, now, for a lot of the part - in every scene, I think, I will be talking to the audience at some point for two or three lines. Whenever it is something of that nature [like 'How like a fawning publican...'] I will be talking direct to the audience. So that shortens my time with Jessica even more...

His resistance to added business - such as the possibility of returning to find his jewels scattered - was typical of the restraint with which he seemed determined to play Shylock as far as the text permitted it. Of the character's final moments on stage, for example, he said:

I'm not going to have a heart attack, as David Calder did, or anything like that. He says 'I am not well'. I mean, it's a banal line. But I will be finding it difficult to get up. We've only done it once. It *is* difficult to get up. Even in an early rehearsal, one's legs turn to jelly, and if my simple super-objective is 'to win', my God, do I lose! I mean, it is unbelievable. But he'd been so successful: all those jewels that he had, those ducats; he'd been so successful, and for this revenge, for this stupid hatred, which wasn't even fully against Antonio - it was shifted on to Antonio - he loses everything. But there's no need to do anything.

This kind of preparation for rehearsals is matched by a passionate striving for authenticity. Still mortified by a letter received during the previews of *The White Devil*,⁷⁹⁵ pointing out that the Cardinal's ring was on the wrong finger, Philip Voss was determined that all aspects of costume should be appropriate to the character as he had conceived him:

I do a huge amount of work before the first day of rehearsals, so I know exactly what the author's put into the text... By that time I had done quite a lot of research on Jews in Venice... And it seemed to me that he was a rich Jew and... must be respectable. You know, one has seen so many Turkish Jews and cringing... and I thought, no, I don't see that he is that. I think he meets them on their own terms and they abuse him. So... I thought it would be more telling to be spat upon and kicked, looking good and respectable, than otherwise.

The conception had therefore been formed of a rich, respectable businessman and it was the actor's determination that Shylock's costume should indicate this. This meant denying himself certain uses of costume which might have created very powerful stage effects:

I long to pray in the street and have the tassels and hold up the equivalent of the Torah. But if it's not authentic, I won't do it.

In pursuit of authenticity, however, there were to be hiccups, not least in the more detailed decisions about this Shylock's origins and ethnicity. Both the actor and director, Gregory Doran, were agreed that Voss's Shylock should be a Sephardi Jew, his Spanish background still evidenced by an accent. This choice, however, appeared to create two problems, the first to do with money-lending:

In the meantime I had read masses and masses of stuff which said that only Ashkenazi Jews were allowed to be money-lenders. So that obviously came as a blow. But since then I have spoken to

⁷⁹⁵ Royal Shakespeare Company, the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1996.

Rabbi Levi of the Lauderdale Synagogue⁷⁹⁶ who said he'd never heard of it. Lisa Jardine also seemed to think it was not insurmountable that a Sephardi Jew would lend money. Well, because everything else about playing a Sephardi Jew is just perfect, we are going with Lisa Jardine and Rabbi Levi... Historically Sephardi Jews were rich, but they were craftsmen more, musicians and cabinet-makers and things like that. But, according to those two sources, they did lend money as well.

The money-lending historical inconsistency seemed, therefore, to have been solved. There remained, however, a problem with costume.

With Sephardi Jews at that time, there was no external sign of wealth, so the ring which is on the design, which I gather Greg still has, I think should go. Shylock might wear it in the house or something... But this only came up yesterday when I had a costume fitting and the designer said 'What's the ring like?' and I said 'I don't think he wears one: they would wrench it off his finger.' He would never wear any jewellery out: it would be too unsafe. So that is something to be resolved: I don't think he would wear one. I still go with the astrakhan, though. I mean the look, I think, is perfectly acceptable...

Given the importance that rings play in *The Merchant of Venice* - from Leah's turquoise to the love-tokens given away by Bassanio and Gratiano - this is a detail that has to be got right; and it is easy to see why an actor should be so concerned about it. It is interesting, though, that the astrakhan collar was deemed acceptable. Strictly speaking, it was as anachronistic as a show of jewellery would have been; but it was permitted because 'the look' fitted the overall conception of Shylock as a respectable and wealthy businessman. These decisions say much about the nature of the authenticity for which Philip Voss was striving. Details of costume and behaviour could not be tolerated if they were blatantly - or even subtly - unhistorical; but a designer's interpretations could be accepted if they tuned in with the key elements of the basic conception.

⁷⁹⁶ This is the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Lauderdale Road, London.

Authenticity is a challenging watchword for a play whose plots are among the furthest removed from reality in the Shakespeare corpus. It has often been pointed out, for example, that the bond drawn up between the merchant and the usurer could never have carried legal force in Venice, or indeed any part of the civilised world.⁷⁹⁷ The authenticity that an actor strives for in this theatrical context might therefore usually have more to do with ‘artistic truth’ than historical veracity, given the inconsistencies that are bound to surface.

Attitudes towards usury are a particularly difficult area in this context. In the world of the play, money-lending is viewed by Antonio and his friends as an un-Christian perversion of normal business transactions, the inevitable originator of oppressive debt-collecting and ruinous terms; yet we know that usury was widely employed by the counting-houses of Renaissance Europe, and that, even though the churches continued to condemn it, it was for most people in Shakespeare’s playhouse, a common enough activity:⁷⁹⁸

Yes, well also there was a bank set up at the same time. Yes, it is hard to come to terms with that in the play, that Antonio causes that amount of hatred because of usury, which was quite a common practice - very common.

The challenge that the actor set himself, therefore, was to create an authentic character within a world which contained distinctly unauthentic legal practices and rather more extreme views of usury than were common in Shakespeare’s time. Might it actually be the case, therefore, that the striving for authenticity and the unreality of the plots are pulling in opposite directions?

⁷⁹⁷ The legal impossibility of the bond has long been recognised. Furness cites the German jurist Rudolf von Ihering, who declares the bond to be *contra bonos mores* and therefore unacceptable to any civilised legal system. (Rudolf von Ihering *The Struggle for Law* [1872]; cited in Furness, pp. 410-411.)

⁷⁹⁸ By the 1590s ‘agriculture, industry and foreign trade were largely dependent on credit’: RH Tawney; introduction to Thomas Wilson’s *Discourse upon Usury*, 1572 (1925, p. 19).

Well, I think they are. I mean, one has to ignore that that bank was there, in a way, because Shylock would be invalid. Also all those arguments, of 'why did they go to Shylock?' - you have to put them to one side, otherwise there would be no play. But, because so many of the arguments are pivotal to Shylock's money and Antonio not liking usury, you have to justify them. And justify the fact that Antonio has this bitter hatred of him. So, to get that kind of hatred going in what is supposedly a very nice respectable man is hard to believe without the attitudes to usury that Shakespeare portrays.

The degree to which the production would succeed in marrying authenticity with the essential unreality of the plots would become apparent only in performance.

While it would not be productive to examine every angle of Voss's preparation in the light of the subsequent performances⁷⁹⁹, there are nonetheless certain features of particular interest. These are: the actor's striving after authenticity; his vision of a Shylock with both a sense of humour and a quality that Voss described as salaciousness; the development of the relationship with Jessica; and Voss's convictions concerning the character's motivation in offering the bond. It will also be necessary to make some observations upon the treatment of III i and IV I.

As a general introductory point, it is important to establish that, in accord with director Gregory Doran's intentions, the production as a whole was one of the first for some years which was studiously *not* about anti-Semitism. Writing in the *RSC Interactive Education Pack*, the director explained:

The play has often been seen more as a piece about racial prejudice, particularly in the post-Holocaust society in which we live today. I don't think Shakespeare saw it as a play about prejudice at all.

⁷⁹⁹ First performance 4 December, 1997, in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

I wanted in a sense to remove the swastikas and stars of David from the play.⁸⁰⁰

His interest in the way Shakespeare ‘saw it’ tied in conveniently with Philip Voss’s striving for a degree of historical authenticity. ‘Authenticity’ in theatrical terms is an awkward concept to define and the search for such a quality in preparing for performance may well be, as Worthen suggests, ‘an attempt to specify and concretize the character’⁸⁰¹, rather than a true striving after historical verisimilitude in the Victorian sense. Certainly ‘authenticity’ was not a quality referred to by a single reviewer of Voss’s performance, despite the praise bestowed upon it for other features; and it is tempting to draw the conclusion that it was a helpful tool for the actor in preparation, rather than something to be realised and communicated in performance. It *is* the case, however, that Voss’s Shylock looked and sounded Jewish⁸⁰². Alastair Macaulay wrote:

From the relish of his opening words - “Three thousand ducats” - on, Voss stamps his emotion, his diction, his gestures, with Jewishness. It is not just his rolled Rs and slight lisp, it is the very rhythm and cadence of his speech (those repetitions, like verses from the Old Testament) that set him apart.⁸⁰³

This, however, was not universally viewed as contributing to ‘authenticity’. In fact, Susannah Clapp in the *Observer* felt that Voss began the play

...with too pantomimic an impression of Jewishness: rolling shoulders, wringing hands and swooping voice...⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰⁰ Maria Evans (ed.), *RSC Interactive Education Pack* (RSC Education, 1997), p. 11. Confusingly designer Robert Jones begins his contribution on the following page with the assertion: ‘It’s a play about prejudice.’ (*ibid.*, p. 12).

⁸⁰¹ *Op cit.*, p 129.

⁸⁰² The pronunciation ‘Yacob’ was among the more noticeable accent traits. Interestingly, though, Emma Handy’s Jessica had a more pronounced accent than her father.

⁸⁰³ Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 15 December, 1997.

⁸⁰⁴ Susannah Clapp, *Observer*, 14 December, 1997.

and, while Jane Edwardes praised the actor's 'memorable, central European Shylock'⁸⁰⁵, this was not, in fact, the effect after which he was striving, having been very specific about his Shylock's Sephardi, rather than Ashkenazi origins.

The effect of Voss's determination to bring out the character's sense of humour was easier to see. He entered in I iii, greatly amused by Bassanio's request, and elicited a good deal of audience laughter with the increasingly incredulous repetition of 'Well!' (1-6) He remained genial on Antonio's entrance and inserted a scoffing chuckle at the merchant's 'Did he take interest?' 'Of course not,' his actions seemed to imply, 'don't be ridiculous!' Then, admitting the possible justification of Antonio's challenge, he back-tracked slightly, and delivered 'No, not take interest...' as if to say, 'Well, I suppose he did in a way...' [72-73].

As for the salaciousness, it seemed to me to be there, in the performance, but only rarely revealed and always linked to the humour. The account of the 'work of generation' in the story of Laban's ewes was relished, certainly, but hardly in a dirty-minded way, and certainly not with the physical thrusting gestures with which Sher accompanied the description.⁸⁰⁶ (Voss's restraint in this respect was in contrast to Andrew Maud's Solanio, whose crutch-grabbing accompaniment to 'rebels it at these years?' (III i 33-34) was an exact copy of Alan David's in the BBC television production of 1980).⁸⁰⁷ Where the salaciousness did serve a clear purpose, however, was in the moment when Shylock, in a merry sport, required the security of -

an equal pound

Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me. (146-148)

⁸⁰⁵ Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 17 December, 1997.

⁸⁰⁶ See above, page 168.

⁸⁰⁷ See above, page 124.

As he made this stipulation, Voss's hand swept down the length of the merchant's torso (with what Billington called 'a flickering charm'⁸⁰⁸), to end with a flourish around the genitalia. Whether this was salacious or not, it certainly conveyed the message that, if Shylock were to remove a pound of Antonio's flesh, it would not necessarily come from 'nearest his heart'⁸⁰⁹, and the subconscious fears of Elizabethan audiences were once again well and truly activated.⁸¹⁰

In discussing his preparation, Voss expressed a concern that there was too little time in the play for his Shylock to express the love he feels for Jessica. In the event, this love was a feature of his interpretation which came across very strongly. The actor took every opportunity in II v to demonstrate Shylock's tenderness, holding and stroking his daughter's hand for a long while during the opening speeches and hugging and kissing her on 'Well, Jessica, go in...' (50). That this was an oppressive love, however, was evident in his reluctance to let her go, and in an almost paranoid obsession that she should be kept away from the masque⁸¹¹. Illustrating the rôle that the daughter played in this widower's household, Emma Handy's Jessica wrapped her father up in his overcoat - a service, we felt, that she had performed many times before - and hastened him on his way. But the sincerity of these actions was infected by our knowledge of her desperation to get him out of the house. As he finally made to leave, she pulled him back - presumably experiencing a flicker of conscience, aware that this would be the last time he would see her - and gave him a peck on the cheek. Clearly unaccustomed to such spontaneous demonstrations of affection, Voss's Shylock interpolated a surprised and touched 'Oh!', before himself touching her tenderly on the cheek and departing. In these ways the actors succeeded in

⁸⁰⁸ Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 11 December, 1997. The gesture was a further reminder of the 1987 production (see above, page 169).

⁸⁰⁹ IV. i. 251.

⁸¹⁰ The one other occasion on which Voss's Shylock might have been accused of salaciousness came when recounting how a bagpipe-phobic will 'offend, himself being offended;' (IV. i. 57): here, he touched the inside of his thigh, as if indicating the resulting damp patch, much to the disgust of his courtroom audience.

⁸¹¹ A further powerful visual indicator of this oppressiveness was the black tower which was moved on to the stage to represent Shylock's house. When turned round to present the interior, its dark, shiny walls and bare ladder recalled a twentieth century prison - *pace* the designer Robert Jones's intention that Shylock's house should be 'not a prison' (quoted in the RSC education pack [*op cit.*, p. 12]).

establishing very powerfully and economically the love which, in rehearsals, Voss had almost despaired of being able to convey⁸¹².

In the spirit of Irving, Doran made the decision to show the audience, not Shylock's return to the empty house, but his witnessing of Jessica's elopement in the raucous and nightmarish carnival which had modulated from the same masque that Shylock had watched (placidly, though hardly unamused) as an entertainment laid on for his meal with Bassanio and Antonio⁸¹³. Apparently coming home after leaving the Christians, Voss's Shylock stumbled into the wild and noisy carnival. Attempting without success to avoid the lunging pigs' heads, the old man was jostled and pushed around the stage, until, at a point when the goading was at its height, the music stopped and he suddenly saw his daughter, dressed in boy's clothes and carried high on a Christian's shoulders. Screaming her name, he was dragged into his house and spun around as it revolved in a nightmare sequence which saw him thrown from one wall to another⁸¹⁴ as his daughter made her escape. When we next see Voss's Shylock, he is spattered with blood, presumably from the efforts of the stone-throwing boys of Venice⁸¹⁵, and is being manhandled by Salerio and Solanio.

Benedict Nightingale describes the turning-point in Shylock's attitude to the bond thus:

Not until the second time that he delivers the warning to Antonio, "let him look to his bond", does he realise what this might mean, and not until the third time does a plan begin to form in his mind.⁸¹⁶

⁸¹² Writing later about Shylock's treatment of Jessica, Voss said: 'I don't know how my constraints are affecting her: I'm doing it for her own Jewish good. But I hope we've found a way of showing, even in a short scene, the complex and loving relationship that we have.' (*Ibid.*, p. 14).

⁸¹³ 'Lorenzo and his friends have conspired together to present a masque after the feast to which Bassanio has invited Shylock' (Doran, *Interactive Education Pack*, page 11).

⁸¹⁴ Billington's impression was that he 'proceed[ed] to beat his head against the walls.' (*op cit.*).

⁸¹⁵ Benedict Nightingale intriguingly offered the possibility that the scratches on Shylock's face were ones 'that he may or may not have made himself.' (*The Times*, 12 December, 1997).

⁸¹⁶ Nightingale, *op cit.*

Billington feels that Voss ‘pins down the crucial turning point in the action as decisively as Olivier’⁸¹⁷. This is true: the audience were left in no doubt that the appalling realisation had dawned. The one subtle difference is that Olivier chose to register his dawning before the first ‘Let him look to his bond’; by waiting until the second, Voss was able to establish the idea in the audience’s mind and then let them get there ahead of him while he paused in the delivery.

Thrusting a blood-stained fist in the now alarmed faces of Salerio and Solanio, Voss’s Shylock uttered ‘The villainy you teach me...’ (67-68) slowly and deliberately, underlining every detail of the threat, and then turned to the audience on ‘and it shall go hard...’ (68-69). With Tubal he made it clear that his grief was centred upon the loss of Jessica - pausing heavily in the middle of ‘I shall never see my... gold again’ (103-104), as though correcting himself in an effort not to give way to unbridled grief - and in a powerful final image, walked towards the audience, mourning the loss of his beloved turquoise and stroking the bereft finger. On an otherwise darkened stage he stood down-centre in a spot from above; then, Lear-like, he gave a great howl which voiced his grief and invoked the wrath of heaven. Confirming the motivation that Voss himself had worked with in rehearsals, Michael Coveney wrote:

Shylock is driven by the loss of his wife and elopement of his daughter. The first half ends on a great gaping howl in which he registers this domestic deprivation over his financial disasters.⁸¹⁸

In the October interview⁸¹⁹, four weeks into rehearsals, Voss had been passionate in his assertion that Shylock should not be played as a seedy, cringing usurer, but as a wealthy business-man. In such a representation, Voss felt, ‘it would be more telling to be spat upon

⁸¹⁷ Billington, *op cit.*

⁸¹⁸ Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 11 December, 1997.

⁸¹⁹ See above, page 236, footnote 1.

and kicked, looking good and respectable, than otherwise.’⁸²⁰ This image was powerfully realised in performance, not least when Shylock arrived in the impressive surroundings of the Doge’s palace. He entered a little like an expensively dressed Renaissance Willie Loman, clutching his case and looking around uncertainly, a travelling salesman arriving at an unfamiliar, and surprisingly sumptuous department store. Placing his case down right, he sat upon it to whet his knife and would return to it as a secure base throughout the scene. Tired of hearing the arguments, maintaining a resilience which manifested itself as ‘a sort of pedantry’⁸²¹, he wearily covered his eyes when Portia asked him to be merciful and, in an unusual and suddenly impressive reaction, broke free of his accustomed restraint to sneer at the Christian lovers:

Would any of the stock of Barabus

Had been her husband rather...

(pausing to look with obvious disgust at the embracing Antonio and Bassanio)

...than a Christian!⁸²²

Voss had said that his super-objective as Shylock was ‘to win’. It was clear that, with such a super-objective, the Jew’s defeat would be devastating; and so it proved. Almost unable for a long time to accept that he had lost, he kept hold of the legal book which had been his undoing, and glanced down at it when told ‘Take thy forfeiture’ (331). On ‘To be so taken at thy peril, Jew’ (340), he even approached Antonio for a second time, and it was possible to believe that, despite the capital penalty hanging over him, he would actually kill the Christian, until, groaning painfully at his inability to proceed, he finally admitted defeat.

⁸²⁰ Voss later wrote: ‘From the play I had come to the conclusion that Shylock should look presentable. So often Shylock is cringing and browbeaten but he’s referred to as a rich Jew all the time. The key line is when Portia comes in and asks, ‘Which is the Merchant here? and which the Jew?’ This can often get a laugh and I thought, ‘No, Shylock goes to the Rialto, he trades, he has to be a respectable business man.’ (RSC Education Pack, p. 14).

⁸²¹ According to Helen Schlesinger, who played Portia (*ibid.*, p. 15).

⁸²² IV. i. 293-294. I must, incidentally take issue with Nicholas de Jongh, who saw ‘no frisson of sexual strain’ between Bassanio and a ‘paternal’ Antonio (*Evening Standard*, 11 December, 1997): the delicate and subtle way in which Julian Curry’s repressed Antonio gently but purposefully rejected any physical approach from Bassanio was the clearest of indications that he *dared* not permit it.

His 'I am content' (389) was cold and bitter, and, in a spectacular *coup de théâtre*, he scabbled on the floor in a pool of golden ducats, unable to get a foothold, before finally scrambling to his feet and instructing that the deed should be sent after him. In a final act of cruelty, Bassanio and Gratiano brutally snatched the yarmulka from Shylock's head -

in other words, the stereotype of jew and money was followed by the pain of the jew being denied his religious identity.⁸²³

James Treadwell wrote:

There's nothing either noble or demonic about Philip Voss's enthralling interpretation of the role. His domestic and religious loyalties are real and deeply felt, but his feeble avarice and his genuine malice are real too.⁸²⁴

John Gross saw in Voss's performance

dynamism, quickness, incisive mockery, a deep capacity for hatred, an equal capacity for being hurt⁸²⁵

while Michael Billington considered that Voss's portrayal of Shylock as an 'authentic tragic hero' placed him

in the front rank of Shakespearean actors.⁸²⁶

Taken with other comments of a similar kind, it is possible to concur with Alastair Macaulay, that

⁸²³ Peter Holland, correspondence with the author, 15 October, 1998.

⁸²⁴ James Treadwell, *Spectator*, 20 December, 1997.

⁸²⁵ John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 December, 1997.

⁸²⁶ Billington, *op cit*.

Voss returns us to many aspects of the essence of Shylock more truly than any other recent interpreter.⁸²⁷

⁸²⁷ Macaulay, *op cit.*

CHAPTER 15

SHYLOCK AT THE GLOBE: NORBERT KENTRUP

In a study of this kind, there will inevitably be a degree of arbitrariness in the choice of end-point, but it is fitting to conclude with the first ever production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the new Globe Theatre on Bankside.⁸²⁸

This play was always going to be something of a test-case for a theatre which, as part of a policy to replicate what they considered to be the actor-audience dynamic of Shakespeare's own time, had in its first full season encouraged audiences to boo the French in *Henry V*. After nearly four decades of productions which had either inadvertently laid themselves open to charges of anti-Semitism, or had offered highly sympathetic Shylocks in an attempt to make the play acceptable, it seemed unthinkable that the Globe would encourage audiences to hiss a villainous Jew. At the same time, they would be open to charges of inconsistency and anachronism were Shylock to be presented in the kind of sympathetic and even semi-heroic light that we have come to think of as being distinctly post-Irving, and latterly, post-O'Toole.

In the event, Richard Olivier opted for anachronism, while retaining the hissing, a combination of choices which seems to me to have offered him the worst of both worlds.⁸²⁹ Norbert Kentrup's bear of a Shylock was humorous, genial and impossible to hate. With his native German accent augmented by 'Jewish' modulations, he contrived to make us understand that, while he had good cause to hate Antonio for the shames that he had stained him with, he was absolutely sincere in offering the bond as an act of friendship, and clearly thought up the flesh clause as a genuinely merry absurdity which

⁸²⁸ First performance, 20 May, 1998; directed by Richard Olivier.

⁸²⁹ It is possible that Mark Rylance's injunction to the audience: 'have no concern if you don't know how good the actors are *or how authentic...*' (programme note; my italics) indicated a shift away from claims for 'authenticity' which, the previous season had been supported by the much-vaunted fact that the actors in *Henry V* were sporting Elizabethan underwear. While this is not the place for a continuation of the debate, it should be said that a drive for authenticity seemed not to extend to readings of lines such as 'he had a kind of taste...' (II. ii. 16-17), which were given a distinctly twentieth-century meaning.

was the occasion for considerable mirth from both him and the merchant. In keeping with many notable recent Shylocks, he expressed great affection for his daughter - it was extremely difficult to see in what ways the house could conceivably be considered 'hell' - stroking her cheek affectionately on 'Say I will come' (II v 39) and, in a manner reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman, chuckling indulgently about Lancelot's supposed shortcomings (45-47), his only flash of oppressiveness being sparked at the mention of masques (28 ff.). When he appeared in III i, it was obviously the loss of Jessica which had destroyed him and not the stolen ducats. Audiences who had enjoyed booing Oliver in *As You Like It* a few hours earlier were given no grounds for indulging that pleasure on Shylock's entrance.⁸³⁰

The sympathetic portrayal was maintained throughout. While there was no clear point at which the potential power of the bond dawned upon him, it was clearly somewhere during the three 'Let him look to his bond's (III i 44-47), as, by the third, he had become ominously thoughtful. Much of 'Hath not a Jew...' (55 ff.) was given straight to the audience, rendering his excuse for revenge extremely plausible, and the love expressed to Tubal for his lost daughter was highly reminiscent of that displayed in 1970 by the director's father in its evocative use of props (in Laurence Olivier's case, Jessica's dress⁸³¹; here, her white cap); the playing down of the money motive; and such details as weeping after 'I would she were hearsed at my foot...' (84-85).

It was in III iii that Kentrup's Shylock began to offer the strongest clues as to his overriding motivation. Taking full advantage of the five occasions in which he denies Antonio on the grounds that he will have his bond, he pursued the suit into Act IV as a kind of religious duty, an observance to be carried out strictly and to the letter.

⁸³⁰ Throughout a large part of the season, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* alternated afternoon and evening performances.

⁸³¹ Laurence Olivier entered caressing her dress in the stage production and a photograph in the version for television. See above, page 127.

Shylock's entrance in Act IV is a key moment and the staging reveals much about the overall interpretation of the character and his place in the play. David Suchet's Jew entered into a gentlemen's club, where the Duke was taking sherry with Antonio, and Shylock was strikingly an outsider; David Calder's had thrown off his city-financier's clothes and appeared in collarless shirt and yarmulke, indicating a return to his Jewish roots. Kentrup's Shylock had not visibly changed: throughout he had worn a black Elizabethan outfit similar to those worn by the Christians, and was distinguished only by a yarmulke and a black over-gown (presumably to represent his 'gabardine'). A further factor which militated against his being seen as an outsider or alien was the casting: he entered to a courtroom in which the Duke, Gratiano and Solanio were all non-white⁸³² and he looked extremely at home as he took his stand by the down-stage left pillar. Perhaps this was one reason why the hissing which greeted his entrance seemed distinctly half-hearted and motiveless: there was simply nothing about him which warranted treatment as a pantomime stage villain. To me it was false and a serious misjudgement: by this time, the audience were very largely on Shylock's side and, while willing to pick up the prompt on the Jew's entrance, they did not hiss him thereafter.

Watching Kentrup's Shylock as it were undermining the theory underlying Globe performance offered a powerful support for Anthony Dawson's belief that theatre is 'inescapably practical, concrete, anti-theoretical' and that 'the very contingency of performance in whatever venue generates uncontrolled interpretations.'⁸³³

Kentrup's Shylock remained sympathetic to the end. His apologia ('I have possessed your grace of what I purpose...' [IV i 34-61]) was convincing in its restraint; he engineered a laugh, turning to the audience to ask (very reasonably, given Portia's peremptory demand) 'On what compulsion, must I?' (180); and throughout the scene, he very powerfully conveyed the sense that he was acting according to the obligations imposed upon him by

⁸³² Elsewhere in the play, Lorenzo was played by a black actor (Clarence Smith) while Marcello Magni's Théâtre de Complicité inspired Lancelot was distinctly non-British both in accent and physicality.

⁸³³ Anthony Dawson, 'The Impasse over the Stage' *English Literary Renaissance* 21 (1991), p. 310.

an 'oath in heaven'. Most interestingly, he was clearly having to steel himself to go through with it all.⁸³⁴ Unusually, Kentrup's Shylock became quieter and more hurried as the trial went on, giving the clear impression that he wanted to get it over with. Questions such as 'Shall I lay perjury to my soul?' (226) were demanded of the audience, rather than of Portia, and there was no note of triumphalism in the repeated 'O learned Judge...!'. Asked whether he had provided a surgeon - a moment when many Shylocks take the opportunity to peruse the document with comic intensity - he returned the bond as though unable to look at it and his reply, 'I cannot find it...' (259), was delivered with a haste and aversion of the eyes which spoke of embarrassment and shame. In contrast to actors such as Voss, who sneered at the behaviour of the Christians when given the chance, Kentrup turned (tactfully?) away from the leave-taking between Antonio and Bassanio, and then reminded us of his real motive for revenge by delivering a passionate 'I have a daughter...' (292-293).

If there was one moment which set Kentrup's Shylock apart from others, however, it was in the attempted execution. He engaged in an elaborate and blood-curdling dance in his attack upon his victim; Calder marked out the lines of incision with a felt-tipped pen; Voss squeezed Antonio's flesh and tried the knife at several angles to ensure maximum effect (and, incidentally, the extreme of terror for Antonio). Kentrup's movement across stage to place the knife on the merchant's chest was so quick that Portia had to be alert with her 'Tarry a little.' It was totally in keeping with a performance which had made it perfectly clear that this was a job that had to be done, but which gave the agent no enjoyment whatsoever. In so behaving, Shylock maintained a sympathy which was even enhanced for many of the audience when Antonio, in the safety of Portia's blood clause, crudely goaded his adversary into taking the pound of flesh if he dared, and then inflicted the punishment of enforced conversion in a spirit of palpable triumph. Unmoving and slumped in his

⁸³⁴ In these respects, he resembled Wesker's Shylock (see above, page 199).

defeat, Kentrup's Shylock made a quiet and controlled exit, pulling his white scarf, or possibly tallith, over his head as though in mourning.

There are two particular features of interest to emerge from this portrayal. The first is that, unusually, Kentrup and his director contrived to present us with a thoroughly sympathetic Shylock without recourse to the familiar methods: there were no strategic cuts to the text, no added business such as the return to the empty house, and no portrayal of the Christians as obsessively materialistic, sexually depraved or viciously bigoted. The sympathy for the character was engendered by the actor's charm, fostered by the portrayal of a bereaved father and maintained to the end by a clear sense that Shylock was, without rancour or vindictiveness, fulfilling some holy mission - and even then much against his deeper instincts.

The second concerns the relationship of this interpretation with the developing Globe style. It was very difficult to see Kentrup's performance as that of an authentically Elizabethan Shylock (even allowing for the serious doubts over how the character might have been played): everything about it, from the care taken to avoid negative stereotyping to the stress placed upon paternal grief, was redolent of post-holocaust sensibility. Hissing, in such a context, was totally inappropriate. Michael Billington's response to the hissing was to wonder

...whether one effect of this new theatre is to morally simplify Shakespeare's plays and turn them into a form of Victorian melodrama... simple contests between heroes and villains.⁸³⁵

He went on:

⁸³⁵ Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 1 June, 1998.

I would argue that *The Merchant* is still morally complex. It is the Globe style that simplifies it... when you come away from a production of *The Merchant* in which Gratiano has been cheered and Shylock hissed, something disturbing has occurred.

Billington is absolutely right. The first *Merchant* at the new Globe offered an unusual and effective Shylock, but the performance sat very uneasily in front of a groundling audience who had been whipped up to hysteria by Marcello Magni's *entr'acte* antics⁸³⁶ and who were discouraged from dealing in the kind of moral ambivalence that this play almost uniquely demands. As an experiment in replicating the actor-audience dynamics of the Elizabethan playhouse, it proved only that we should be think very carefully indeed before concluding that Shakespeare's actors and audiences engaged in the kind of crude pantomime behaviour that the Globe seemed to be encouraging. To me it rendered extremely implausible the notion that an age which demanded the kind of sensitive and attentive looking and listening required for the appreciation of works of the subtlety of Hilliard's miniatures and Byrd's masses, might have performed one of their foremost dramatic poet's more ambiguous creations in a red wig and a funny nose.

⁸³⁶ Magni played Lancelot Gobbo, but also fulfilled the rôle of audience-inciter between acts, whipping the younger members of the audience into a frenzy. In the three performances that I attended, he showered people with water, and, at one point, dragged a teenage boy on to the stage and engaged in some kind of parody simulated sex act.

CHAPTER 16

CONCLUSIONS & SPECULATIONS

A continuing strand of this study has been an examination of the many ways in which interpretations of Shylock have succeeded in presenting the character, to one degree or another, in a sympathetic light. It will be clear, however, that such a question cannot be considered in isolation, but has to be viewed in the context of a multiplicity of factors, some dramatic (the portrayal of the other characters, for example); some socio-historical (such as the changes in attitude coincident with the growth of nineteenth century humanitarianism); and some technological (in that television and film have opened up new ways in which meaning can be explored and expressed). The most obvious of these many factors, however, and the one which, at least since Macklin, has been most strikingly apparent, is that the performance history of this character is indissolubly linked with the history of, and with audiences' changing attitudes towards, the Jews; and that, sooner or later, every production of this play has to face the question: is *The Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic?

The struggle for an answer has been bound up in debates about what kind of play this is, and particularly about how a production can reconcile the seemingly disparate elements of fairy tale and reality. Writing about the play in 1971, Irving Wardle said:

It is the case with this play that, while its form is that of a fairy tale, its characters are open to realistic analysis; but as soon as such analysis begins, it appears that none is sympathetic enough to deserve a place in any fairy tale.⁸³⁷

The realistic analysis to which Wardle alludes cannot fail to compass the virulent anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by all the leading male Christians in the play save Lorenzo;

⁸³⁷ Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 31 March, 1971.

and, once a director begins to explore this bigotry, the production is in danger of being about little else, so passionately do actors and audiences feel about racial prejudice, the treatment of minorities and the history of the Jews. In a reaction against such thematic domination, some directors will choose to deny altogether that the play is in any sense 'about' anti-Semitism. Gregory Doran, for example, director of the RSC's 1997 production, was of the opinion that he was dealing with a play 'which has been hi-jacked by history... a fairytale disrupted by the real world'⁸³⁸, echoing a view taken as long ago as 1930 by Harley Granville-Barker.

But this is not a perspective that many directors in the last four decades of the twentieth century have felt able to sustain. If only in an attempt to forestall allegations that a given production might be anti-Semitic, theatre programmes tend to include lengthy and well-documented sections on the history of the Jews, usually culminating in accounts of the Nazi atrocities; and many productions, as has been demonstrated, have explicitly addressed anti-Semitism as a central issue - if not *the* central issue - of the play. Almost every major production willy-nilly gives occasion for a re-opening of the debate about whether the play is indeed anti-Semitic, and there are even some calls that it should not be performed. David Thacker's 1993 production for the RSC⁸³⁹ - ironically one that went out of its way to avoid giving offence, featuring one of the most sympathetic Shylocks imaginable in David Calder - incensed the playwright Arnold Wesker sufficiently for him to publish his feelings and subsequently enter into a newspaper debate with the director concerning the play in general and Thacker's production in particular.

While making it very clear that he 'would defend the right of anyone anywhere to present this work'⁸⁴⁰, Wesker declared

⁸³⁸ RSC *Interactive Education Pack on The Merchant of Venice* (RSC Education, 1997), p. 11.

⁸³⁹ See above, Chapter 12.

⁸⁴⁰ Arnold Wesker, 'A nasty piece of work', *Sunday Times*, 6 June, 1993.

...but nothing will make me admire it, nor has anyone persuaded me the holocaust is irrelevant to my responses.

Citing arguments which have by now become familiar - that 'Hath not a Jew...' is a reflection of a deeply offensive Christian arrogance 'which assumed the right to confer or withdraw humanity as it saw fit'; that Shakespeare did not have to make the cruel money-lender a Jew; and that at no point does any character suggest that there might be a distinction to be drawn between his being a Jew and his being a murderous villain - Wesker concluded that any production of the play - and perhaps especially the well-intentioned ones - can inflame audiences with the anti-Jewish sentiments inherent in the text. Thacker, in my opinion, got the worst of that particular debate. Claiming, for example, that

This production doesn't buck the fact that the Holocaust happened⁸⁴¹

he failed to answer Wesker's riposte that

A young audience who may not know what the Holocaust is would not know that the Holocaust happened from your production.

(my own worry, incidentally, about the 1998 Globe production in which school parties were encouraged to hiss Shylock on his entrance in Act IV). Moreover the director failed to defend his explanation that, in Calder's interpretation,

...for reasons that we understand and can sympathise with, this man is behaving in an individualistic and appalling way...

⁸⁴¹ 'The trial of Shylock', *Guardian*, 13 April, 1994.

the playwright replying:

After six million Jews have been killed, you simply cannot justify it by saying what's wrong with letting one individual do this. You're putting him on the stage so you're magnifying a personality and a characteristic and making a statement about a group. To say that it's justifiable to do this when you have this awful history behind you is a kind of naivety.

Thacker, of course, has not been the only director to believe that the key to presenting a Shylock who is acceptable to modern sensibilities lies not merely in making the character sympathetic, but in establishing with as much conviction as can be achieved that the wickedness of the man is the wickedness of an individual and not of a whole people. But he did go further than most in tampering with the text in order to facilitate the interpretation that he wanted (as I have demonstrated in chapter 12). Responding to Wesker's challenge 'I think you've invented a fantasy about what you would have liked Shakespeare to have written', Thacker replied: 'That's correct.' When Wesker continued 'What you've done is cut the text around to make it fit a notion which you feel very strongly about', Thacker again disarmingly answered: 'You're absolutely right. It's dishonest in that it is subverting the text'; asked 'You never worry that you're imposing your own view?' the director's response was, very simply: 'What's the alternative?'

These extremely candid and direct responses help us to make a clear distinction in dealing with the performance history of this troublesome play: namely, that there are, to use Thacker's own word, 'honest' performances and 'dishonest' ones. Thacker and Wesker go some way towards implying a definition for these terms; but, if I might be allowed to express my own view, a dishonest interpretation is one which cannot be sustained without cutting the text strategically, or without knowingly distorting meanings, 'fright[ing] the word out of his right sense'⁸⁴². Thacker's has to be judged dishonest, evaluated by my

⁸⁴² *Much Ado About Nothing* (V. ii. 48-49).

criteria (indeed, he admits it is), as does Sellars's in 1994⁸⁴³ and Miller's for the National Theatre in 1970⁸⁴⁴; while the ancestor of all dishonest interpretations was, of course, Irving's in 1879⁸⁴⁵. Whether the concept of 'honesty' has any place in performance criticism is certainly open to debate; and whether such a categorisation is helpful, remains to be seen; but it does allow me to express something here about the principles of interpretation and performance which directors and actors since Irving have brought to bear upon the play. While Irving's motives for distorting the play were very largely to do with professional self-aggrandisement, and Sellars's were wholly ideological, Miller and Thacker seem to me to have demonstrated a failure of nerve. Unable to face the prospect that their interpretations might be considered anti-Semitic, or simply unwilling to trust the text, they each recreated 'the play that Shakespeare ought to have written'⁸⁴⁶. Paradoxically, Miller's was condemned in some quarters for its 'bolt-on Judaism', while Thacker's, as has been shown, gave rise to some rancorous public exchanges with Wesker.

But even substantially honest interpretations tend to conveniently ignore clear directions in the text if it suits their purpose. For example, the common excuse for Shylock's behaviour has in many productions been that, while starting off as a perfectly decent man, he becomes suddenly warped and driven to distraction by the loss of Jessica, and that it is this that impels him to enforce the bond, realising that it can be used in earnest only at some point in III i. In company with many other actors before them, both Voss in 1997 and Kentrup in 1998 took this line, demonstrating by their actions in II v how much they actually cared for Jessica, and vividly portraying in III i the effect of her loss. This interpretation has three advantages: it is impressive on stage; it is an attractive prospect for the actor; and it seems to a modern audience to be psychologically plausible. The element of dishonesty lies in the fact that, to make such an interpretation work, the audience has to be encouraged to ignore two key speeches. The first, of course, is Shylock's aside in I iii in

⁸⁴³ See above, pages 223-235.

⁸⁴⁴ See above, Chapters 8 and 9.

⁸⁴⁵ See above, Chapter 3.

⁸⁴⁶ Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 8 May, 1970 (writing about Miller's production; see above, pages 128-130).

which he declares his hatred of Antonio and his intention to wreak his revenge upon him if the opportunity arises; the second is Jessica's statement in III ii that Shylock had always intended to kill the merchant if he could, and had expressed that intention *before* her elopement:

When I was with him I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him; and I know, my lord,
If law, authority, and power deny not,
It will go hard with poor Antonio.⁸⁴⁷

Neither of these speeches can be easily buried. Shylock's is the first aside in I iii, is almost eleven lines long, and is delivered while there is nothing else of interest happening on stage - indeed, when the playwright seems quite blatantly to have moved Bassanio and Antonio out of the way. Jessica's interruption is the only thing she says in that daunting Christian assembly and, whether it comes across as an act of courage or betrayal, it is extremely noticeable. Interpretations which take the line that Shylock acts badly only after the loss of his daughter have these two speeches to account for.

It is impossible, in my opinion, for an interpretation which is, in my terms, honest, not to portray Shylock as a man who is planning revenge from the first time we see him. He can be presented attractively (like Kentrup), we can feel angry on his behalf for his past treatment at Antonio's hands (like Sher or Hoffman), extend unqualified sympathy to him over the loss of Jessica (Voss) and receive 'Hath not a Jew...?' as a compelling plea on behalf of our common humanity (Suchet). But ultimately, we have to confront the fact that

⁸⁴⁷ III. ii. 282-288.

this is a man who plans legalised murder and would have got away with it had he not been stopped.

In my opinion the only production to have grasped this nettle uncompromisingly was John Barton's in 1978 with Patrick Stewart as Shylock⁸⁴⁸. Refusing to take any easy options, Stewart's Shylock was an unattractive man, mean, unpleasant to his daughter and a born survivor, one of the few Shylocks to give the impression that, although defeated by the Christians this time, he will be back. True to the undistorted text, no character actually states - to pick up one of Wesker's arguments (after Gross⁸⁴⁹) - that Shylock is a bad man who happens to be a Jew. And yet this was exactly the impression that Stewart conveyed. Such an interpretation is, in my opinion, neither a distortion nor dishonest: it arises from an understanding of Shakespeare's method - which both Wesker and Thacker ignore: namely that audiences may infer from what they see and hear, facts and interpretations which are never made explicit in the text. To take a parallel example: at no point does any character ever suggest that Henry V is saddened or, indeed, in any way moved by the news of the imminent execution of his former companion, Bardolph. His reaction, if we judge solely by the text, is cold in the extreme:

We would have all such offenders so cut off. And we give express charge, that in our marches through the country...⁸⁵⁰

And yet, given that we have followed Bardolph's fortunes both in England and at Harfleur; that we are constantly being asked to think about the tension between Henry the man and Henry the king; and that Fluellen has given us a cue in his '...one Bardolph, *if your majesty know the man...*'⁸⁵¹, it is a highly plausible interpretation that he is horribly torn by this event and is covering his emotions to maintain discipline among his troops. A

⁸⁴⁸ See above, Chapter 10.

⁸⁴⁹ Gross, *op cit.*, from whom Wesker quotes in his *Sunday Times* article (6 June, 1993).

⁸⁵⁰ *Henry V*, III. vi. 112 ff.

⁸⁵¹ *Henry V*, III. vi. 103-104 (my italics).

performance can signal this, as Kenneth Branagh's film version⁸⁵² does very successfully, without in any way compromising the integrity of the text or engaging in 'dishonest' direction. This is what Barton and Stewart managed to do: without excusing Shylock's villainy, or even highlighting the mitigating circumstances, they created a Shylock who was a villain who happened to be a Jew; and thereby a *Merchant of Venice* which avoided both the Scylla of dishonesty and the Charybdis of anti-Semitism.

But there is actually a deeper problem with the portrayal of the Jew who demands his pound of flesh than the issue of whether or not the play is anti-Semitic. William Frankel recalls reading *The Merchant of Venice* in school as the only Jew in the class, and asks how long Jews have to go on suffering 'this old infamy',⁸⁵³ David Nathan, the astute drama critic for the *Jewish Chronicle*, believes that 'Is the play anti-Semitic?' is the wrong question to ask, the answer being 'only as far as is strictly necessary',⁸⁵⁴:

Ask another question - "Is it offensive?" - and the answer is an unequivocal "yes".

He goes on:

...it hardly matters whether the play is produced as an anti-Semitic or an anti-Christian tract. What emerges in either case is a Jew so rancid with hatred that his ringing declaration of a common humanity in blood is forgotten. The positions are reversed; the Jew has become the bigot who has dehumanised his object of hatred⁸⁵⁵; the bigot has become the Jew.

An implacable Jew, as immune to pleas of mercy, or appeals to reason or self-interest as any racist, sharpens his knife on the sole of his shoe, the better to cut into a pound of human flesh. He has no

⁸⁵² *Henry V*, Renaissance Films, 1989, directed by Kenneth Branagh.

⁸⁵³ William Frankel, *The Times*, 17 April, 1984. See above, pages 162-163.

⁸⁵⁴ David Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 26 December, 1997.

⁸⁵⁵ This dehumanisation is particularly noticeable in 'sympathetic' interpretations which, in an attempt to represent Shylock as deeply pious, rather than vengeful, portray him in III iii and IV i as dedicated to the fulfilment of 'an oath in heaven'.

more compunction than an SS man would show in shooting down a rabbi, or a Ku-Klux-Klan member in looping a rope over a branch to lynch a black man...

In the past 10 years, there have been 15 productions in various parts of the country of “The Merchant of Venice”, of which I have seen eight.

I have had enough of this damned play. There can be no question of banning it or of even campaigning for its less frequent exposure. But actors and directors should be left in no doubt that, to a large number of Jews, probably the majority, and not a few Christians, it is deeply offensive, no matter how it is done.

I have no easy answer to Nathan’s argument. To say, as many apologists do⁸⁵⁶, that the play is frequently performed in Israel, misses the point: it may well be easier for a Jew to cope with the portrayal of Shylock when sitting in an audience of Jews, than isolated in the auditorium at Stratford-upon-Avon; and infinitely easier than standing exposed in a school classroom. I also believe that there is a higher good than artistic freedom. The only observation I can make is that, if Philip Voss (from the review of whose Shylock, Nathan’s comments were taken) is typical, then actors most certainly are aware of the offence that this play can cause, in Voss’s case leading him to lengthy research into the history of Judaism and repeated discussions in a London synagogue. Describing the sensitivity required as ‘treading on egg-shells’, he said:

Well, the secretary to the rabbi, who’d obviously seen nearly every production of *The Merchant of Venice* going and can quote the ones she liked and the ones she didn’t like - she said she would bring tomatoes and throw them at me if she didn’t like it. But all I could say to her was that I hoped to present a rounded human being. I mean, he’s got that speech, anyway: Shakespeare made him rounded...⁸⁵⁷.

⁸⁵⁶ *Inter alia* John Barton (see above, pages 135-137).

⁸⁵⁷ Philip Voss: interview with the author, 25 October, 1997.

Ultimately we have to trust actors and directors to be aware of the potential for offence (as Voss was - and productions in the fifteen years after the liberation of Auschwitz decidedly were not) and use their skill to create interpretations which are sensitive without compromising artistic integrity.

Judging from the last ten years, it is difficult to see how the interpretation of Shylock will develop in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Possibly, after its initial foray, the Globe will attempt a bolder interpretation, less obviously influenced by modern sensibilities; certainly it is to be hoped that the Royal Shakespeare Company will stage *The Merchant* in the Swan, bringing out the deeper personal meanings so successfully elucidated in its last outing in *The Other Place*. Two certainties are that reinterpreting Shylock will be continue to be one of the most formidable challenges in the classical theatre; and that there will be no shortage of major actors waiting for the opportunity to play him.

APPENDIX

A list of Shylocks referred to, in chronological order

Dates are of the first performance in the named theatre and refer to the performance run studied in the work. In some cases this will not be the actor's earliest interpretation of the rôle.

- Thomas Dogget, Lincoln's Inn Fields; 1701
- Charles Macklin, Drury Lane; February, 1741
- Edmund Kean, Drury Lane; January, 1814
- William Charles Macready, Covent Garden; 1823
- Charles Kean, Princess's; 1858
- Edwin Booth, Haymarket; 1861⁸⁵⁸
- Henry Irving, Lyceum; November, 1879
- Barry Sullivan, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1880⁸⁵⁹:
- William Creswick, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1883⁸⁶⁰
- Jones Finch, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1885
- Frank Benson, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1887⁸⁶¹
- E Lyall Swete, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1897
- Hermann Vezin, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1900
- Arthur Bouchier, Garrick; October, 1905⁸⁶²
- Herbert Beerbohm Tree, His Majesty's; April, 1908
- Henry Ainley, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1909
- Oscar Asche, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1915⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁸ Booth first played Shylock in Sydney, during his Australia tour of 1854.

⁸⁵⁹ This was the first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in this theatre. Reference is also made in the text to Sullivan's 1849 performance.

⁸⁶⁰ A prompt book exists for an earlier performance by Creswick, thought to be in 1857 (though an inscription refers to 1877).

⁸⁶¹ Benson next played Shylock in the Comedy Theatre, London, in 1901. He continued to play the rôle in London and Stratford at different periods until May, 1932.

⁸⁶² Bouchier gave a command performance of his Shylock in Windsor Castle in November, 1905, and played the rôle in the Memorial Theatre in April, 1907.

⁸⁶³ Prompt books exist for earlier performances by Asche during tours of Australia and South Africa in 1909-1910 and 1912-1913 respectively.

Matheson Lang, St James's; December, 1915
Ernest Milton, Old Vic; September, 1918
Maurice Moscovitch, Court Theatre; October, 1919⁸⁶⁴
Louis Bouwmeester, Court Theatre; October, 1919⁸⁶⁵
Murray Carrington, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1920
Baliol Holloway, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; August, 1921⁸⁶⁶
Henry Baynton, Savoy; January, 1922
Augustus Milner, Duke of York's; November, 1922
Hay Petrie, Old Vic; April, 1924
Arthur Phillips, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1924⁸⁶⁷
Randle Ayrton, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1926⁸⁶⁸
Lewis Casson, Lyric, Hammersmith; October, 1927
George Hayes, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; May, 1928
Lucille la Verne, Little Theatre; September, 1929⁸⁶⁹
Brember Wills, Old Vic; October, 1929
Malcolm Keen, Old Vic; December, 1932
Mark Dignam, Croydon Repertory Theatre; December, 1935
John Gielgud, Queen's Theatre; April, 1938
Donald Wolfitt, People's Palace; October, 1938
Frederick Valk, New Theatre; February, 1943
Myer Zelnicer, Folk House, Stepney; September, 1946
John Ruddock, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; July, 1947
Robert Helpmann, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1948

⁸⁶⁴ Moscovitch had earlier played Shylock in America, as well as in Yiddish in the East End of London.

⁸⁶⁵ Bouwmeester took over from Maurice Moscovitch and the production transferred to the Duke of York's Theatre in March, 1920. He also played Shylock in Stratford in August, 1921, speaking the whole part in his native Dutch.

⁸⁶⁶ Holloway played Shylock throughout the autumn 1921 season, except on the one occasion on which Bouwmeester took the rôle. He played the part in the Old Vic in 1925 (with the young Edith Evans as Portia) and returned to the part during 1940 and 1942.

⁸⁶⁷ Phillips first played Shylock in the Court Theatre, London, in 1910; his final Shylock was in the Lyric, Hammersmith, in 1935.

⁸⁶⁸ Ayrton's most noteworthy interpretation of Shylock was in Komisarjevsky's 1932 Stratford production.

⁸⁶⁹ This female Shylock also performed a month later on the temporary stage in Stratford.

Paul Rogers, Old Vic; January, 1953
Douglas Campbell, Old Vic; February, 1953
Michael Redgrave, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; March, 1953
Emlyn Williams, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; April, 1956
Peter O'Toole, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; April, 1960
Eric Porter, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; April, 1965
Laurence Olivier, National Theatre; April, 1970⁸⁷⁰
Emrys James, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; March, 1971
Patrick Stewart, The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon; May, 1978
Warren Mitchell, BBC Television; 1980
David Suchet, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; April, 1981
Ian McDiarmid, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; March, 1984
Antony Sher, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; April, 1987
Dustin Hoffman, Phoenix; June, 1989
John Woodvine, Arts Centre, University of Warwick; November, 1990
David Calder, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; March, 1993
Gary Waldhorn, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds; March, 1994⁸⁷¹
Paul Butler, Goodman Theater, Chicago, Barbican, London; November, 1994⁸⁷²
Bob Peck, Channel 4 Television; 1996
Philip Voss, Royal Shakespeare Theatre; December, 1997
Norbert Kentrup, The Globe, London; May, 1998⁸⁷³

⁸⁷⁰ Filmed for Associated Television and broadcast in 1973.

⁸⁷¹ After preview performances in the Bridewell Theatre, London.

⁸⁷² The production opened in Chicago a month earlier and, after London, toured France and Germany.

⁸⁷³ The first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in this theatre.

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1909-1910: Australian tour (director not named; Oscar Asche as Shylock)

1912-1913: South African tour (director not named; Oscar Asche as Shylock)

1981: The Aldwych (director: John Barton; David Suchet as Shylock)

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