

FINDING THE RIGHT STAGE FOR THE

MERCHANT OF VENICE

A compendium of information and education material on the

presentation and teaching of the

Merchant of Venice

in Canadian high schools

Compiled by:

**Community Relations Committee
Canadian Jewish Congress**

I N D E X

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5. Article of March 23, 1985 by Robin Breon, administrative director for Black Theater Canada
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 - a) Canadian Jewish News - July 24, 1986
 - b) Finding the right stage for 'Merchant of Venice' by Bernie M. Farber
 - c) Globe and Mail - April 13, 1989
 - d) Covenant, October, 1989 - 'Merchant of Venice' dangerous



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**THE JEWISH STEREOTYPE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE:
Shylock and Fagin
by ILJA WACHS**

Note. The following text is based on the original script delivered by Mr. Wachs, professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College, N.Y., on closed-circuit T.V., and is now available on 16mm. film or videotape. For information on rental or purchase, write to: Audio-Visual Dept., Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 315 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016, or contact the regional office nearest you.

It is a curious fact that, even though they are separated in time by well over two centuries, both Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens' Fagin, the two best-known Jewish figures in English literature, are not only equally deformed and monstrous but are so remarkably alike in all their basic characteristics. This is only another way of saying that the uniqueness of the stereotype of the Jew (as distinguished from other stereotypes in literature) lies in the fact that it has tended in the past to remain essentially the same, in spite of centuries of radical social and cultural change.

The stereotypic image of the Jew inherited by Dickens can be traced even beyond Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare, after all, did not invent the stereotype of the Jewish moneylender, for by the time he wrote his play the Jews had long since ceased to be inhabitants of England, and thus could not have served him as a living model. The Jews had been, in fact, expelled from England in the late 13th century, and while there is some reason to believe that a small number of Christianized Jews managed to remain, there is no evidence that they were visible as Jews or that they continued to be active as moneylenders. By contrast, in the medieval world, the Jew had been the sole figure to fill the role of moneylender. The medieval church, accepting the Old Testament ban on lending money at interest, had strictly forbidden the practice of usury among the faithful, condemning it as a sin against nature and society. However, since there was always a need for ready cash in the running of kingdoms, and since the Jews were not subject to the laws of the faith, both Church and state had made the Jews the official purveyors of money

to their coffers. It is therefore clear why the Jew entered the literature of late medieval Europe primarily as a usurer and how, as a consequence, he soon became the butt of all the hatred and contempt of the Christian world.

At the same time, of course, the Jew was already carrying a far weightier burden: the historic charge of deicide. On the basis of the tradition that he had been responsible for the Crucifixion, there arose a mass of stories, myths and legends that vilified the Jew as the anti-Christ and as the incarnation of the Devil himself. As a result, a whole range of evil and murderous practices was attributed to Jews that often led to their wholesale massacre. As incarnations of the Devil, for example, they were often accused of kidnapping and murdering Christian children for the ritual purposes of their religion. And, when the dread bubonic plague swept over Europe, they were charged with having begun the epidemics by poisoning the wells of their Christian neighbors.

It is with this series of received images — the Jew as a hateful and greedy usurer, and the Jew as a figure of demonic evil — rather than with any observable reality that Shakespeare worked in creating the figure of Shylock. In addition, he also derived material from received models that were then current in the Elizabethan theater. A particularly vivid model existed in the person of Barabbas, the villain of Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*. In Marlowe's version, the moneylender, Barabbas, is at once a figure of monumental greed and demonic destructiveness. At the same time that Barabbas dedicates his life to the monomaniacal accumulation of gold, he openly boasts of such practices as wholesale fornication, well-poisoning, monk-murder and the like.

The extent to which this stereotypic image of the Jew had become a theatrical convention during Elizabethan days is indicated by the fact that, in playing both Barabbas and Shylock, actors (so far as we know) used the standard paraphernalia for depicting Jewish characters: a capacious cloak, a big red putty nose, claws and cloven hooves.

In the absence of any actual Jewish problem in the England of his time, one can only surmise that Shakespeare's prime purpose in reviving the stereotype of the Jewish usurer was to use this conveniently accessible figure as a means of attack on the growing acquisitiveness of many of his countrymen. From evidence supplied by a careful reading of many of his other plays, it is apparent that Shakespeare was deeply troubled by the impact of the new commercial system on the old values which grew out of Christian humanist tradition. What he has done in *The Merchant of Venice* is to concentrate in the single figure of the Jewish moneylender all the rapaciousness and greed that had become so pervasive in his own age. As the outsider, known and understood only for his usurious and demonic nature, the Jew lent himself perfectly to this role.

In the person of Shylock, the Jew becomes the ultimate stereotype because he has been made to embody a lust (in this case, for money) that is so pure and absolute that it obliterates almost everything else about him. Out of Shakespeare's desire to exemplify greed in its purest form, Shylock has been stripped, simplified and narrowed down until little remains of him as a human being — apart from his seemingly insatiable lust for wealth. Even in his sleep Shylock does not dream the dreams of ordinary human beings, but is haunted instead by visions of money-bags. In short, he seems incapable of investing his energies in anything but the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. He feels almost nothing for his daughter, and when she runs away with his jewels and gold, it is essentially their loss that he mourns:

Shylock — How now, Tubal, what news from Genoa? hast thou found my daughter?

Tubal — I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her.

Shylock — Why there, there, there, there! a diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now: — two thousand ducats in that; and other precious, precious jewels. — I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! No news of them? — Why, so — and I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! the thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief; and no satisfaction, no revenge: nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o'my shoulders; no sighs but o'my breathing; no tears but o'my shedding.

Beginning with a lust for gold that takes on the form of a merciless practice of usury, Shylock ends by equating *all of life* with a single object — money. "My daughter! O my ducats!" he cries, and with that horrifying cry he equates human love — in this case, the love of father for child — with something as impersonal as money!

Solario — I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:

My daughter! — O my ducats! — O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! — O my Christian ducats! —
Justice! the law! my ducats and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!
And jewels, — two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stolen by my daughter! — Justice! find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her and the ducats!

Salarino — Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
Crying, — his stones, his daughter, and his ducats.

And, since the possession of money rather than the experience of love, friendship and human fellowship has become Shylock's end in life, it follows that, on learning he has lost most of his wealth, his final lines in the play are a simple declaration of a sickness unto death: "I pray you, give me leave to go from hence — I am not well."

But at the same time that Shakespeare makes effective use of the inherited stereotype of the Jewish moneylender in the person of Shylock, he adds another dimension to his portrait by resurrecting the stereotype of the Jew as a demonic figure. At the outset of the play he allows us to see Shylock in more or less human terms. Thus, although the various motives attributed to him are by no means admirable, they are nonetheless *human* motives. For example, Shylock's hatred of Christians, Shakespeare suggests, is derived from their cruel and contemptuous treatment of him. And so, in explaining why he hates Antonio, the Christian merchant, he says: "You did call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, and spat upon my Jewish gabardine. You did void your rheum upon my beard. And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur." This hatred lies in the fact that Antonio has thwarted his usurious schemes by lending money free of interest to Shylock's potential customers. Yet none of these motives, however human, really begin to account for the extremity of Shylock's savagery at the end of the play. Finally, one can only conclude that Shylock's villainy cannot be understood in terms of either any single motive or any complex of motives. Something at once more primitive and deep, one is made to feel, must be responsible for Shylock's inhuman hatred of Antonio.

Evidence of this can already be seen early on in the bond that Shylock exacts of Antonio in return for the money he lends him. At first the horrible bargain, in which the Jew is to receive his pound of flesh, seems nothing more than an expression of his hatred, symbolized in terms of the eye-for-an-eye conception of justice of the Old Testament. And certainly the reader is not made to feel that Shylock's bargain is to be taken literally. But then Shakespeare goes on to make Shylock act in these literal terms — i.e., to crave actively the sadistic mutilation of Antonio's body, even though he eventually is offered far more money than Antonio owes him. So that when Shylock asks for "an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me," he can no longer be understood to be acting out of any human motive. On the contrary, he has left the human pale and degenerated into a state of bestial savagery. Similarly, when Bassanio asks Shylock, "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?" at the very moment the Jew is preparing to actually cut out Antonio's heart, what Shakespeare is saying to us is that the world of Christian culture and civilization is confronted (in the figure of Shylock) with an order of

evil and bestiality that goes well beyond the normal human and Christian ethic. Or, as Bassanio puts it to Shylock: "Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith, to hold opinion with Pythagoras, that souls of animals infuse themselves into the trunks of men . . . for thy desires are wolwish, bloodied, starved, and ravenous."

The ultimate emergence of Shylock as a bloody, ravenous wolf prepared to devour in physical terms another human being is not wholly unexpected. In the course of the action which leads up to the dramatic confrontation in front of the Duke, there are over a dozen references to Shylock as a cur or as a dog, and various characters in the play harbor serious doubts as to whether or not it is even possible to regard Shylock as a human being. "Never," says Solario, "did I know a creature that did bear the shape of man so keen and greedy to condemn a man." And where Shylock's ferocity cannot be sufficiently accounted for by endowing him with the nature of an animal, several characters offer the traditional explanation that he is a kind of devil. "Let me say amen betimes," Solario says again, "lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew."

In the final analysis, Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock as subhuman prevails over that of Shylock as the epitome of human greed. For Shylock's hatred has become so inhuman and total that he spurns the offer of twenty times the value of the original loan that should have more than satisfied his greed. What he finally wants, it is clear, is something else; something that goes much deeper: "What's that (Antonio's heart) good for? To bait fish withal — if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge."

Still another kind of stereotype emerges from the play — a stereotype that does not lie so much in the characterization of Shylock, as in the effect this characterization has upon the particular world in which Shylock moves. For precisely to the extent that Shylock has become the pure embodiment of both greed and bestiality, so the Christian characters are portrayed in equally extreme terms, i.e., as totally humane, civilized and unselfish to the point of saintliness. Thus, in sharp and almost absurd contrast to Shylock, Antonio is the embodiment of generosity — the perfect innocent who bankrupts himself and is even willing to risk death so that his friend Bassanio can secure the money he needs to marry Portia. "Be assured," he tells Bassanio, "my purse, my person, my extremest means lie all unlocked to your occasions." For Antonio, as well as for Portia, Bassanio and the other Christian characters in the play, money exists for no other purpose than to be given away as an expression of love and friendship. This Christian world which Shakespeare created bears no more resemblance to reality than does Shylock's inhuman villainy. So that, in the end, when Shylock and all he represents has been banished from the court, we are left with "the good people," and with their seemingly unending flow of wealth, generosity and love. Unfor-

tunately, however, the trouble with this kind of resolution is that we are thereby absolved from any need to reflect upon the greed and inhumanity which is in all of us and which tends to dominate so much of our lives. Instead, these qualities have been displaced onto Shylock, and *Shylock simply is not us*.

It comes as some surprise, when we consider the centuries that intervened between *The Merchant of Venice* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, that the criminal Jewish villain of the novel should reveal many of the same stereotypic qualities that entered into the portrayal of Shylock. Although Fagin is a "fence" rather than a moneylender, he shares with Shylock a pure and unqualified greed. In Fagin's intense lust for money, gold and precious objects, we find again that abstract passion for gain which is native to Jewish stage villains. Fagin's eyes glisten as he draws a stolen gold watch from his coffers, or when at night he stealthily opens his treasure chests and one by one fondles rings, brooches and other articles of jewelry. When he plans a robbery, simply the prospect of coming into possession of some family's gold plate is enough to throw him into a state of feverish excitement. ("Such a plate my dear, such a plate!" said the Jew, rubbing his hands and elevating his eyebrows in a rapture of anticipation.") On the other hand, when Fagin is forced to share with his accomplices the profits of his villainous enterprises, he counts out the banknotes with "a sigh for every piece of money," as if he were losing in this process precious parts of himself.

Although the stereotyped quality of Fagin's avarice is enough to remove him (as it does Shylock) from any recognizable realm of reality, Dickens doesn't stop short here. On the contrary, Fagin is credited with a whole spectrum of diabolical qualities that clearly link him with the Devil. When Bill Sikes' dog growls at Fagin, Sikes tells him, "Lie down. Don't you know the devil with his greatcoat on?"

Fagin makes his first appearance in a dark room blackened by age and dirt, where he is seen standing in front of a fire — appropriately enough with a toasting-fork in his hands:

The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt. There was a deal table before the fire: upon which were a candle, stuck in a ginger-beer bottle, two or three pewter pots, a loaf and butter, and a plate. In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking: and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and the clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging. Several rough beds made of old sacks were huddled side by side on the floor. Seated round the table were four or five boys . . . smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men.

Fagin's hair is described as red, and red hair, we know, was a stock method (in medieval mystery plays) of identifying the Jew as the Devil. Moreover, his kidnapping of innocent Christian children links him irretrievably to the medieval traditions of Jewish villainy, to the old belief that the Jews kidnapped and murdered Christian children for ritual purposes. Similarly, the suggestion made in the novel that Fagin had planned to poison several of his co-conspirators is a clear echo of another ancient belief that the Jew was a habitual poisoner of wells.

Fagin, it can be seen, is subhuman as well as diabolical. With his face constantly distorted in a hideous grin, the Jew mutters deep curses and shakes his fist whenever he is thwarted. In moments of rage and cupidity, his eyes glisten; whereas he appears to be lynx-eyed when he is in an especially sly and cunning mood. In endowing Fagin with fangs in place of teeth, Dickens is clearly appropriating a traditional view previously associated with *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition, the physical description of him includes such details as the fact that his nails are long and black, that his fingers are yellow and that he seems to possess claws rather than hands.

But perhaps the most sinister image of Fagin is one that combines suggestions of diabolism with sub-human bestiality. "Gliding stealthily along," Dickens writes, "creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved, crawling forth by night in search of some rich offal for a meal."

Only if one remembers that the novel strives to evoke the inward terror of a sensitive child trapped in London's hellish underworld can one place this hideous image of Fagin in its proper context. Thus, it touches not only on the traditional snake image associated with the Fall, but also on the child's terror of being swallowed and devoured. That terror is explicitly felt by Oliver, who "as he met the Jew's searching look, felt that his pale face and trembling limbs were neither unnoticed nor unrelished by that wary old gentleman."

Fagin, assuredly, is far removed from any recognizable human reality. In using him as a central figure, what Dickens has done is to appropriate the stereotypic image of the Jew for the end-purpose of creating a symbolic monster who would epitomize all the greed and malevolence of the profit-mad society that systematically exploited and brutalized the children of the poor, a society that Dickens knew only too well and hated. Unfortunately, however, the technique of exploiting the Jewish stereotype in order to allegorize the evil endemic to the real world has resulted (as in *The Merchant of Venice*) in a novelistic world that is stereotyped in all other respects as well. Mr. Brownlow, the benevolent old gentleman who takes Oliver home to tend him, and who is full of nothing but the

milk of human kindness, is no more believable, ultimately, than are Fagin and Oliver's other tormentors. Similarly, Harriet Maylie and her aunt, Mrs. Maylie (the other two characters who protect and adopt Oliver) are wholly and almost unbearably soft, kind and gentle. When Oliver becomes ill, they shed tears and look after him. They are infinite tenderness and maternal concern incarnate. Like Mr. Brownlow they give endlessly to Oliver, though he is a stranger who, as a matter of fact, they have every reason to suspect is in reality a criminal. In short, the tenderness, love and maternal concern shown by these people to Oliver are equivalent to the greed, hate and brutality that characterize the actions of the Jewish villain. But the balance is false: all black and white, with no shadows or greys.

The use of the figure of the Jewish villain as one pole of a world divided into absolutely evil and absolutely good characters has always had implicit in it something of the child's vision of a black and white world, with the child's typical denial of the complexity and ambiguity of life. Even Shakespeare came perilously close to fashioning Shylock into a kind of Jewish bogeyman, a creature out of some child's nightmare. In *Oliver Twist*, particularly, the stereotypes both of the Jewish villain and of the characters who embody Christian goodness are almost wholly compounded out of the child's simplistic view of the world. So that what we are finally left with is not so much a novel which deals on a mature level with the suffering, abandonment and rescue of a ten-year old child, as one in which everything is filtered through the sensibility and awareness of this child — the child in Dickens, the child that is in all of us. The major figures in *Oliver Twist*, both good and bad, take whatever substance they have from the imagination of the child. In effect, they are either infinitely good parents, as they might be experienced in a child's fantasy life: always loving, gentle, kind and accepting; or, like Fagin, they are a child's typical fantasy of the bad parent: powerful, sadistic and punishing. If, in teaching this novel, we were to ask our students to recall the most terrifying nightmares each of them had experienced, and were then to catalogue the traits these nightmares had in common, it would soon become evident that, in his depiction of Fagin's relation to Oliver, Dickens is much closer to the kind of larger-than-life experience to be found in the dreams and waking terrors of childhood than he is to our adult experience of the actual world.

The pedagogic conclusion that can be drawn from this brief treatment of two famous works of English literature, each of which includes a classic stereotype of the Jew, is that the emphasis in the classroom ought not to be exclusively on the invalidity and injustice of such stereotypes. An equal emphasis should be placed upon the effect that stereotypes of any kind can have on a person's capacity to perceive reality and to act

morally in the world in which he lives. By concentrating all the evil and greed in the world in the figure of a Jew, the creator of this stereotype tends to deprive his audience of the ability to recognize similar traits in themselves, and to reinforce the all-too-human tendency to project onto others one's own destructive and inhuman impulses. At the same time, by creating a world divided into either wholly good or wholly bad human beings, the author robs his readers of the ability to perceive human reality in complex and adult terms; and makes them vulnerable to experiencing the world from the standpoint of the rather limited awareness and sensibility of the child.*

* Following Professor Wachs' lecture, there was a panel discussion (the text of which is not included). Along with Professor Wachs, the participants were three English teachers from the New York area:

1. Mr. Eugene Farrelly, Fordham University Preparatory School
2. Sister Christine, Cardinal Spellman High School
3. Brother Steven Lanning, Marist College of Poughkeepsie.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

An Opinion Paper

prepared by

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The Merchant of Venice has presented a real dilemma to parents of Jewish children. It is not within our history and beliefs to restrict knowledge. Nor do we believe it is desirable to request that books be removed from the curriculum; but Shylock is portrayed as a villainous Jew throughout the play, and we are concerned that this image will be generalized to produce an ethnic stereotype. We therefore organized a discussion between high school students who are members of Temple Israel and two teachers who have taught the play (one from the Ottawa Board and one from the Carleton Board). The goal of this document is to clarify our concerns regarding The Merchant and to indicate an approach to overcoming these concerns. We hope that the end product will be some form of resource package that will be available to teachers and perhaps to students.

Problems inherent in The Merchant:

1. Shylock: There is no escaping the fact that Shylock is a Jew. He is always referred to as "the Jew" in the play, and he even quotes from the Old Testament. The plot of the play demands a villain, and Shylock the Jew is this villain. He has been given no redeeming characteristics by Shakespeare
 - his greed and money mania are never explained;
 - he is said to have mistreated his daughter;
 - he shows no mercy for his intended victim and demands his "pound of flesh".

The play leads to a negative image of Shylock and by implication to a negative ethnic stereotyping of Jews. There is a danger that a student will come away from the play thinking that all Jews are like this, particularly if he had no contact with Jewish people (e.g., Jewish classmates).

2. Religion: The story implies inferiority of Jewish belief. That Jessica converts to Christianity, and that the defeat of Shylock is capped by his forced conversion is clearly intended to be considered a happy solution to the play's problems.

This interpretation of The Merchant is reinforced in the writings of Charles and Mary Lamb. It is both remarkable and unfortunate that their summary is the only recommended reading in the Ministry guidelines on the teaching of Shakespeare.

3. The Jewish Student: It is difficult to appreciate the feelings of a Jewish child, often the only one in the class, during the teaching of The Merchant. What does anyone feel when his religion or ethnic group is being portrayed in such a negative manner? Would we want to teach that Christians or Italians are people who desire to harm their fellow humans?

The play is usually taught in grade 9. It is especially at this time that the teenager is forming his views of the world and is particularly vulnerable.

The Students' view:

Luckily, a teacher can do a great deal to ameliorate the difficulties outlined. Some of the Jewish students have experienced how a skilled and sensitive teacher can present the play. These students were against removing the play from the curriculum. They were sensitized to the humanity of Shylock, how he was wronged, and how he has been driven to act the way he does. Some of the teachers discuss the play in the context of prejudice

and use this as an example of social injustice. Therefore, it seems that The Merchant can be taught successfully, even at the grade 9 level.

Yet, not all experiences are positive. We know of several examples of Jewish children who were offended by the manner in which the play was taught. A few have even written about their feelings. Others have complained to their parents. One student had the play taught by a student teacher.

We do not know what non-Jewish children think about Jews before and after they have been taught The Merchant.

Many teachers are overburdened and cannot give much time to the research necessary for the teaching of this play; yet, if students are to be adequately informed, they have to come to grips with the issues involved: the questions of religious belief and the history of racial prejudice. Among topics useful for background reading, we suggest the following.

Resource reading recommended:

1. The history of the Jews in England:

It is unlikely that Shakespeare ever met a Jew when he wrote The Merchant. Jews had been expelled from England at the end of the 13th century and were not readmitted until 1657. The medieval treatment of Jews included restrictions on where they could live, on the ownership of land, and also on the means by which they were allowed to earn their livelihood. In some places, they could only be the moneylenders.

2. Shakespeare's choice of the Jew as villain:

Tracing the source(s) of the play may lead to a better understanding why Shakespeare chose a Jew as the villain. It is generally assumed that he used "Il Pecorone" by Giovanni Fiorentino (1378) as a source for this play. We can only assume that Fiorentino chose a Jew because through the ages, people have been mistrustful of minorities in their midst and, Jews were thus a prime target for suspicions and hatred. The history of anti-semitism in literature has to be reviewed.

3. The pound of flesh:

Jewish law never allowed for a death penalty for the non-payment of debts. The worst that could happen to a recalcitrant debtor, according to the Old Testament, was a number of years in servitude (see Leviticus 25.39).

Where, then, did the idea originate that a creditor could take as payment part of the debtor's body? We know that one of the harsh codes of antiquity, The Twelve Tables of Roman Law (450 B.C.), contained a provision under which, after various warnings and punishments had proved fruitless, creditors were permitted to hack the debtor to pieces and to divide his body. (See, e.g., Roman Civilization; a Source Book, by N. Lewis and M. Reinhold (New York, 1966, vol. 1, p. 104) for the content of the third Table.) Yet, because of The Merchant, the idea of "the pound of flesh" is widely identified with Shylock, the Jew. How do we overcome libellous stereotyping?

4. Other literature:

Perhaps the teaching of this play should be paired with modern examples of where racial hatred and racial prejudice lead. We have in mind books like The Diary of Anne Frank, or Night, by Elie Wiesel.

OUR PROPOSAL

We are quite prepared to do the detailed research and provide the reading material which we believe is relevant to the teaching of The Merchant of Venice. It seems that before we proceed with this effort, the idea must be accepted by the teachers and by the administration. The end result would be a resource package for teachers and perhaps students, which would be recommended to accompany the study of this play.



Toby Fouks, a teacher at Erindale Secondary School in Mississauga, has taught English at every grade level from 7 to 13. For the past 12 years she has taught in multiethnic and multi-racial communities. A former contributor to *Monday Morning* magazine, her byline recently appeared in the national weekly newspaper *Canadian Jewish News*.

THE WATERLOO BOARD OF EDUCATION, after intense pressure from 100 parents, both Jewish and non-Jewish, has agreed to suspend the teaching of *The Merchant of Venice* until the Ministry of Education and the Human Rights Commission make a ruling. Jewish parents had been complaining for several years that the character of Shylock in Shakespeare's play created anti-Semitic attitudes, and as the play was being taught to grade 9 students often lacking in awareness of what Jews are really like, the caricature of the Jewish moneylender fostered and increased anti-Semitic feelings and behaviors.

The point is not whether Shakespeare was an anti-Semite or whether he understood the suffering and prejudice that made Shylock what he was; "Does not a Jew bleed?" asks Shylock, and perhaps Shakespeare as well. We can't be certain, but what we can be definite about is that informed decisions in curriculum design should take place.

What we must focus on is the role of educators in choosing curriculum appropriate for students. Responsible decisions in curriculum design are not the same as book banning. Not all the books written can be taught, and the best way to make choices for our students is to use those books that will be most beneficial for their education. To do this we must look at the level of difficulty of the language itself, and then at the conceptual level and experience required to appreciate the work.

In choosing literature for students, then, we must be aware of their maturity and their milieu. Students must bring certain understandings to their reading, and if they do not yet have those understandings, they are not ready to approach the literature. Although the play or novel may prove

fruitful ground for senior study, it is often out of place in a classroom of less experienced or less mature students.

The Merchant of Venice is just one of several works that ought to concern us. In addition to teaching this play as part of a grade 9 English course, I have also taught (to enriched grade 9 students) *Oliver Twist*, in which Dickens' Fagin the Jew is far from the most deplorable character, but still presents an ugly stereotype for the uneducated or narrow-minded. Add to that Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. In this novel Duddy sacrifices integrity for the dollar, following in the footsteps of Cohen, his mentor, who advises him that we have to get them before they get us. If anything, this novel feeds the poisonous stereotype of the unscrupulous Jew doing anything to get rich.

Too often books are chosen because educators feel the plot will appeal to students, or the characters will be ones that students can "relate to." Hence the contemporary emphasis on adolescent heroes such as Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Duddy Kravitz. Certainly the fact that Duddy Kravitz moves from adolescence to young adulthood is seen as a major factor in the inclusion of Richler's book in many English programs, and the Canadian context is an added bonus.

I had never questioned teaching *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* to my grade 11 Advanced English classes until recently. I made it clear that I was Jewish and explained that although the boy is Jewish, he acts out of poverty rather than Jewish upbringing. In fact it is his saintly grandfather who represents the Jewish ideal. With these explanations I thought students would be able to understand the larger issues. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which the word "nigger" is frequently used, did not distress me, because it was obvious to me that the only truly noble adult in the novel is Jim, the black man, and Twain's intent is to satirize white hypocrisy.

I feel now that I was mistaken. In an ideal world it would work, but in the real world of prejudices and ignorance brought to class, there are better ways to work toward our common humanity than by presenting negative models or models so subtle that they are easily misunderstood.

There has to be a time and place—the proper context in which the study of these works can be a meaningful, enriching experience rather than a foray along the paths of bigotry. Even grade 11 students, who often look so sophisticated we can forget they are not yet adults, frequently have not yet developed the ability to distinguish between the fictional creation and the real person behind the caricature. They are not yet mature enough to understand we are a product of our environment, and the environment in which most of us live today differs tremendously from that in which these writers lived.

If we are to help humankind develop harmonious relationships and mutual respect for differences, then what we should be putting before our young people are *positive* models. Since we must make choices, let's choose the best with which to influence their thinking. There are many fine literary works available, and it is not necessary to teach what is better left for another time or place.

The student who reads literature with an open mind, and perhaps knows members of minority groups, will be able to make the distinctions sensitive writers expect, but the youngster who has not had the benefit of wide friendships, or who has already been exposed to bigotry, perhaps even in his own home, may only be further hardened by these works. The teacher can provide the clearest explanations, but so many of those unfortunate students will just not hear. Their ears will already have been closed by prior "education."

For these reasons, it is important that educators understand it is not a matter of book banning, and those who cry censorship are only muddying the issue. It is a matter of ethical and professional decision making in curriculum design. Libraries exist so that books not on courses are available to students, and the Ministry of Education is now stressing that students read independently. Students are free to choose to read these books, but they should not be mandated for class study.

In our multiethnic and multiracial society, the best public classroom education for our students is the issue. Educators must be aware of the totality of the situation, and see to it that wisdom prevails, for only then will harmony and justice have a chance.

Why Shylock is not for teenagers

IN the 1950s, when the Stratford Shakespearean Festival was preparing its first production of *The Merchant of Venice*, Tyrone Guthrie gave a surprising lecture on the play in Toronto.

The *Merchant of Venice* is not, he said, anti-Semitic. No, it's anti-Christian. You see, the Christians come off worse than Shylock. Consider their actions. They deceive him, they steal his daughter, they take his money, they force Christianity down his throat. The play is thus a criticism of Christian civilization.

That was nonsense, of course. The *Merchant* is written from a Gentile perspective; it is the Gentiles whose ingeniously arranged happiness provides the delightful ending. But Guthrie's thesis was not altogether unusual nonsense. Like many directors approaching classic plays, he wanted to convince the audience, as well as himself, that

The *Merchant* could comfortably fit into modern ways of thinking.

Written for an age of bigotry, it could nevertheless please a society that cherishes tolerance.

In that sense Guthrie was following tradition. For centuries *The Merchant* has drawn the most elaborate and tortured apologies as well as the most passionate attacks. There is nothing else in all of Shakespeare that has been so controversial so long. And, *Hamlet* aside, *Shylock* has proven himself the Shakespearean character most susceptible to imaginative and bizarre interpretation.

The recent decision by the Waterloo County school board to stop teaching *The Merchant* has once again put the play in newspaper headlines and once again

made it a kind of hostage in the war between civil libertarians and those who worry about the effects of literature on children and adolescents.

The controversy has brought forth silliness on both sides. Rabbi Gunther Plaut has informed us that *The Merchant* is a play "that long ago would have been relegated to dusty library shelves" were it not written by Shakespeare. Nonsense, Shakespeare's name has never been a guarantee of popularity or even production. Several of his plays — *Timon of Athens*, for instance — are rarely performed because audiences and directors find them at best marginally interesting. *The Merchant* has held the stage because its poetry is breathtaking, its plot ingenious and its central character at once repellent and sympathetic.

The reaction of John Neville — Stratford's artistic director and the 1984 *Shylock* — was equally unhelpful. He said it was preposterous that *The Merchant* had been dropped from the curriculum, and announced facetiously that he would now ban *Macbeth*: "It's very derogatory toward Scottish people." Cute, but fatuous — and off the point. Anti-Scot prejudice is not a social problem, as anti-Jewish prejudice has been for hundreds of years and still is. Nor is *Macbeth's* race an issue.

What is at issue is the use of literature and in particular its use in the schools. When educators choose a literary text for study they are making a decision with social as well as educational impact. Their role is not like that of publishers, booksellers, librarians and theatre managers. They are not offering a literary work to a public that is free to accept or reject it. They are imposing it on students who must study it whether they want to or not.

Perhaps *The Merchant* has not added to the sum of anti-Semitic feeling in the world; one would hate to think that any work by the greatest writer who ever



John Neville: Stratford's artistic director playing *Shylock*, 1984. He made a facetious counter suggestion to a call to drop *The Merchant of Venice* from school curricula.

lived could produce such a result. But *The Merchant* can provoke anti-Semitic utterance, and it can cause pain. Understanding it fully — seeing *Shylock* for the great character he is, grasping the context in which the play was written — calls for a level of sophistication that is beyond many students and many teachers. The report that the play aroused expressions of anti-Semitism among Waterloo students will surprise no one who has studied it as a Jew or in company with Jews.

A friend of mine, at age 13, was the only Jew in her small-town classroom when *The Merchant* was studied. Her memory of it, across three decades, remains uncomfortable. In early adolescence what one wants least is to be singled out. Hearing the flagrant anti-Semitism of Shake-

speare's characters, she felt isolated and exposed. Ten years later she might have been emboldened by the opportunity to state a Jewish view of the play. But an adolescent, as part of a racial and religious minority that has every historic reason to fear the majority, can hardly be expected to respond with anything but anxiety.

If ever we become so sensitive that *The Merchant* can't be produced, or read, or discussed, we will have entered an unhappy period in cultural history. But until anti-Semitism is no longer a factor in our society we should refrain from demanding that adolescents study it. Let the educators choose another great comedy by Shakespeare in its place. He wrote several.



ROBERT FULFORD

This is the original copy of an article submitted to The Globe and Mail, and printed in a reduced form by that paper on March 23, 1985.

Item: Etobicoke Board of Education hears complaints from students and parents regarding the novel Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain. Some parents believe the book should be removed from required high school reading lists.

Item: Peel Music Festival drops a selection from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice over charges of anti-Semitism.

Item: (New Zealand) - The English Club at Victoria University bans the film version of Merchant of Venice stating: "The play remains available for serious study but need not be displayed to the idly curious."

In recent months separate controversies have arisen over the use of some time honoured classics in our classrooms. Both the novel - The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain and the play The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare have been the subjects of increasing debate as to whether or not the works are downright racist and anti-Semitic respectively.

In both cases the controversy is certainly not an isolated one. The Merchant of Venice has been dropped from a growing number of core curricula programs in the U.S. and Canada. Huckleberry Finn, which last year celebrated its 100th anniversary since publication, was called "America's greatest novel" by author Ernest Hemingway. Its questionable use as an educational tool for junior division students was recently the subject of a half-hour commentary on Ted Koppel's Nightline television news program. The Council on Interracial Books for Children ^{with} headquarters in New York City, devoted an entire issue of their periodical, Bulletin, to the question of criticism and censorship regarding Huck Finn.

Historically we have certainly witnessed how racism and anti-Semitism often go hand in hand with alarming regularity and it is interesting to note certain parallels that exist between The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Merchant of Venice when trying to come to grips with these two complex phenomena. What is unfortunately lacking in most English literature courses is an accurate account of the historical context that formed the background for each work.

Scholars and other commentators have generally maintained that Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a broadly humanistic document that condemned slavery and generally portrayed the character of Jim, the slave who is befriended by Huck Finn, as a human being capable of enjoying freedom as much as anyone else.

However, it should also be noted that Twain was a great fan of "blackface minstrelsy" that was so much in vogue as entertainment during this period. Minstrel performers were an important cultural influence during the last century. A typical "performance" consisted of white actors blackening their faces with burnt cork, dressing up in outlandish costumes and then swaggering about the stage in a series of skits that usually poked cruel fun and viciously mocked what these white actors falsely maligned as "the life of a Negro."

Twain was brought up with this kind of humour and often wrote about how much he enjoyed it. Subsequently the depiction of black people generally in Huck Finn matches those of numerous minstrel plays in which black characters are portrayed as addlebrained, boastful, superstitious, childish and lazy.

In its handbook entitled Race, Religion and Culture in Ontario School Materials, the Ministry of Education states, "The language of a text or script should not reinforce inaccurate images of minority groups and foreign countries ... derogatory value - laden adjectives directed at minority groups or indigenous people (e.g., "lazy," "savage," "treacherous," "hostile," "warlike," "backward," "uncivilized") ... are examples of undesirable language."

In line with this guideline a number of parents have lodged complaints with the Etobicoke Board of Education as well as the Race Relations desk of the Toronto Board of Education expressing among other things, particular concern as to the number of times the word "nigger" is used throughout the story. In fact, one might conclude from the way Mark Twain so freely uses the term - over two hundred times during the course of the story - that it might have been considered acceptable at the time, without any derogatory implications. In fact, the word was then, as it is now, a hurtful and perjorative way to demean a black person.

English literature classes are still taught by way of student recitations

in many instances. Huck Finn is now being taught in some cases at the seventh and eighth grade levels. Do these young students carry with them the maturity and the sensitivity to understand the full impact of this racist expletive when it is read aloud? Do their teachers make a point of telling them about it? How does a young black child feel when one of his classmates reads the word aloud for the first time and then giggles softly to himself or to herself? How many times does the classroom recitation recite itself again outside in the hall "just for fun."?

In 1905 Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer were excluded from the children's room of a Brooklyn Public Library as bad examples for ingenuous youth. Asa Don Dickinson, Librarian of Brooklyn College, appealed to the author to defend himself against this slander. His reply, which was not published until 1924, said: "I am greatly troubled by what you say. I wrote Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn for adults exclusively, and it always distressed me when I find that boys and girls have been allowed access to them. The mind that becomes soiled in youth can never again be washed clean."

At least Mark Twain had the advantage of knowing some black people. By all accounts, William Shakespeare - like the overwhelming majority of his countrymen - had never met a Jew when he wrote The Merchant of Venice. The Jews had been officially expelled from England in the year 1290 by Edward I after three frightful massacres at Lynn, Lincoln and York. They were not officially allowed to live in England again until the reign of Cromwell in the mid 17th century.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare picked up on the anti-Semitic myth of the times when he portrayed Shylock as the greedy Jewish moneylender. Modern times would see this myth expand to a conspiratorial theory of Jews as international financiers bent on conquering the world. Laws on the books during the Elizabethan period forbid the Jews from owning land; they were barred from the guilds and prohibited from most occupations. By the 15th and 16th centuries the practice of money lending by the great international banking houses of Europe was certainly not Jewish. It was composed of good Christian families like the German Fuglers and the Weslers, for example, and the Italian Medici and Buonsigniori. But the myth persisted of the Jews as moneylender and unfortunately Shakespeare exploited this derogatory stereotype for the sake of his story line.

The one "known Jew" with which Shakespeare must have been familiar was a physician named Roderigo Lopez. Dr. Lopez had come to England as a refugee from Portugal in 1559. In time he established a considerable practice at the Court and was appointed physician to Queen Elizabeth. Through a strange series of events he was arrested, tried and executed for high treason on June 7, 1594. The rabid anti-Semitic campaign against him was undoubtedly a factor that contributed to his conviction and subsequent execution.

Although Shakespeare may not have had any real inclination to defend or protect the Jews, he certainly refrained from the monstrously vulgar portrayal that Marlowe created in his play, The Jew of Malta which was still enjoying a successful run at the Rose Playhouse in 1595. In fact, the great speech which occurs at the beginning of Act III in The Merchant of Venice, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, affections, passions? ... 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?", displayed sentiments on the part of the playwright that might well have been considered revolutionary. It is unlikely than an Elizabethan audience had ever before been asked to consider a Jewish person with such human qualities as these.

But the playwright giveth and he taketh away. Soon after this, Shylock has lost his wealth as well as his daughter and Shakespeare ends the final act with laughter, frivolity and some of his most beautiful love poetry with ^{the} final message being that Shylock got what he deserves and all's well that ends well.

In today's hopefully more enlightened world, we know that racism and anti-Semitism are poisonous attitudes that have done great harm to humanity when left unchecked and unchallenged. Some of the greatest literary talents in history were not immune to these tendencies and consequently we find many less than satisfactory statements, lines, references, character portrayals, etc. in plays, novels, poems and essays that simply relayed the prevailing thought of the period. Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn are good examples of this and we should not accept either work uncritically simply because they were written by two great men.

This a question that is difficult for many teachers to deal with. After all, everything they are taught within their own educational experience impels them to accept "the classics" with great reverence. To adopt a critical stance is almost blasphemous. Classics are placed on a pedestal and the WORD treated with a great respect.

It is a problem that does not present any easy solution. It is encouraging to learn that a number of concerned students, parents, educators and administrators are coming together in an effort to resolve these questions because that is the kind of positive, honest dialog that can only be beneficial in the long run. However, until we are fully prepared to deal with the historical implications of racism and anti-Semitism as they have been manifested over the years, and until teachers are sensitized and prepared to deal with these implications in the classroom - perhaps it might be best to let a few good books lay on the shelf for awhile.

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for Black Theater Canada. He holds an
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the secondary level.*

'Merchant' exposes pupils to prejudice

Globe Mail July 22/86

BY W. GUNTHER PLAUT

Dr. Plaut is senior scholar at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto.

SHAKESPEARE'S Merchant of Venice continues to bedevil us. Latest in the unhappy list of controversies over the play is a protest by a citizens' group in Waterloo which has once more focused attention on a play that long ago would have been relegated to dusty library shelves were it not that its author was the Bard himself — and he has been, and is, beyond criticism.

How else to explain that junior high school students are taught a ridiculous as well as immoral plot: Antonio borrows money from Shylock, a Jew and professional moneylender. Shylock suggests a "merry bond" (which was supposed to classify the story as a comedy) by which the borrower would forfeit a pound of flesh should he default on the loan. Not only does Antonio default, his friend Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter Jessica, who takes half her father's money with her. The embittered merchant demands the forfeit, but the judge decides that Shylock is not entitled to anything and must lose his entire estate because he sought the life of a citizen of Venice. "Mercifully," the penalty is reduced to one-half on condition that Shylock become a Christian.

Defenders of the play have gone so far as to claim that Shakespeare's real aim was to teach tolerance for Jews. After all, the author puts a memorable plea in the mouth of Shylock: "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses,

affections, passion?" But these lines hardly counter-balance the overwhelming thrust of the story, which depicts the Jew as basically greedy, a veritable anti-Christ who, accompanied by the merry laughter of the audience, gets his just deserts.

Did Shakespeare really want to teach tolerance by making the Christian response as unfair and ridiculous as possible? If that is the case, he failed badly and generations of Jewish children suffering exposure to The Merchant would testify to this.

The likelihood is that Shakespeare never knew any Jews. They had been banished from England since 1275 and, with a few exceptions, were not readmitted until the seventeenth century, which suggests that the author wrote a stereotypical tale based on popular perceptions. The 1594 execution of one of the few Jews in England (accused of seeking the life of the Queen) may have given Shakespeare his initial idea. The Merchant appeared two years later.

For a long time Jewish parents and concerned Christian citizens have characterized the play as unfit for children, especially when it is not accompanied by expert guidance from a teacher. Recently the Waterloo Coalition for Quality in Education asked the Board of Education to take notice of serious incidents during the teaching of The Merchant. The few Jewish children present had money thrown at them by fellow students who goaded them with "Pick it up, Jew!" and graffiti were smeared on their desks. One needs little imagination to divine the feelings of victims. One said the attacks made him feel that he was really no good.

Too bad, one trustee is reported to have commented, we all know there's anti-Semitism out there. The sooner Jewish kids get used to it the better. But the other trustees decided to withdraw the play from the Grade 9 curriculum, pending advice from the Ministry of Education and the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

"Censorship!" protested outraged diehards. Nonsense. No one is prevented from reading the play, and if it is to be taught in preference to better and more suitable comedies, let it be done in Grades 12 or 13. That is the suggestion of the coalition.

Three conclusions suggest themselves. (1) Teachers should never teach what they aren't qualified to teach. Unless they have adequate training in human sensitivities and understand the devastating effects of stereotypes, they have no business feeding The Merchant to students. (2) School boards have to adopt a schedule of priorities. One should think that all place good human relations near the top of their list. What good is knowledge, even of the great Shakespeare, if this knowledge is harmful to others? It so happens that in this case Jews are the focus of obloquy, but the principle applies to all groups. (3) Not only the Jewish students were harmed in the Waterloo school. All the others — Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics — were exposed to poisonous prejudice and saw it translated into direct verbal and mental assaults. Worse, some of them were led to practice it and see its devastating impact. That alone should warrant re-consideration of this painful subject.

The Canadian Jewish News, Thursday, July 24, 1986

Editorial

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Wise decision

We are pleased with the recent decision to remove Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice from the lower grades in the Waterloo, Ont. high school curriculum (CJN July 17).

Since 1966 individuals from the Jewish community of the Kitchener-Waterloo region have been trying to persuade school authorities not to ban the book (as a recent headline in the Toronto Globe and Mail suggested) but rather to remove it from the junior grades.

Twenty years after the first demarches the school authorities have voted narrowly to respect the wishes of the Jewish petitioners.

The Waterloo school board's decision is bound to raise the hackles of free speech advocates and opponents of censorship.

It should be pointed out that Jewish high schoolers in the Kitchener-Waterloo area were being vilified by their classmates as a direct result of the study of Shakespeare's malevolent classic in the classrooms.

It would be unseemly to rehearse the details of the anti-semitic harassment except to say that it caused Jewish students much distress and anxiety.

Defenders of The Merchant of Venice often argue that Shakespeare's famous play is an ideal medium through which to teach not contempt for Jews but rather respect and compassion for them. It is true, of course, that several sections of the play can be positively parsed so as to reflect this view.

The problem, however, is that The Merchant of Venice is a very tricky medium for the inculcation of humanistic values. Its subtleties are better left to the later grades when more mature students can grapple better with the prejudices and biases that informed Shakespeare's outlook.

The decision of the Waterloo board does not ban Shakespeare from its high schools (there are many other fine plays that can be studied in the junior years); it merely postpones its study until the senior years — a wise choice.

Finding the right stage for 'Merchant of Venice'

"I should stay with the Jew, my master, who is like the devil. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation" — The Merchant Of Venice, Act II, Scene II.

By Bernie M. Farber

WITH WORDS such as these, William Shakespeare speaks of the shady Jewish moneylender, Shylock. Year after year, young Jewish students in Ontario high schools are made to endure these and other painful lines in *The Merchant of Venice*, often with the result of their own classmates turning the words back on them.

Many in the literary field argue that Shakespeare was not personally anti-Semitic, but was merely reflecting a prevailing attitude of his time. Others feel the Bard was actually sympathetic to Jews, and used hyperbole in the play to point out the many indignities 17th-century English Jews had to suffer, among them, that they could not live in London. After all, did Shakespeare not pen for Shylock the famous words, "Hath not a Jew eyes? If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

However, whether Shakespeare was an anti-Semite or whether Shylock had redeeming qualities is not important to the 14-year-old Jewish student who, after viewing *The Merchant Of Venice* in a 1984 Stratford production, had pennies and gum wrappers pelted at him by other students. And it makes little difference to the dozens of Jewish students who have been referred to as "Jewish dog," "Jew devil" and "Shylock," or have had swastikas carved in their desks or coins thrown at them as a result of youthful insensitivities following the play's reading in Ontario classrooms.

The image of the Jew as literary villain dates back over 2,000 years to Judas (the original greedy Jewish businessman), to Marlowe's *The Jew Of Malta*, Shylock, Dickens' Fagin and many more. In English literature alone, some scholars have traced an unbroken sequence of almost 700 years of anti-Jewish stereotyping.

Dramatists may argue that Shakespeare presented Shylock as a fully rounded character, who, as any human being, can

be either hated or loved. Unfortunately, that contention is lost on children in Grades 9 and 10, where *The Merchant Of Venice* inevitably shows up on the curriculum. Research conducted by the Canadian Jewish Congress has proven consistently over many years that what is reinforced in the pliable minds of younger students are the negative references to Jews as "dogs," curs and, essentially, villains.

Certainly it is true that serious, mature students of literature, with the aid of a sensitive teacher, would likely be able to discern Shylock's subtle character nuances, the twists and turns of the play's plot, and all the other machinations which ultimately put a human face on the character. However, one thing is clear: that without the mature approach, Shylock becomes a tool for prejudice.

The Merchant Of Venice is of primary concern to the Canadian Jewish Congress precisely because it is usually taught to young students in Grades 9 and 10, and sometimes as early as Grade 7. Rarely does a year go by that the Congress doesn't receive a complaint about the play's teaching.

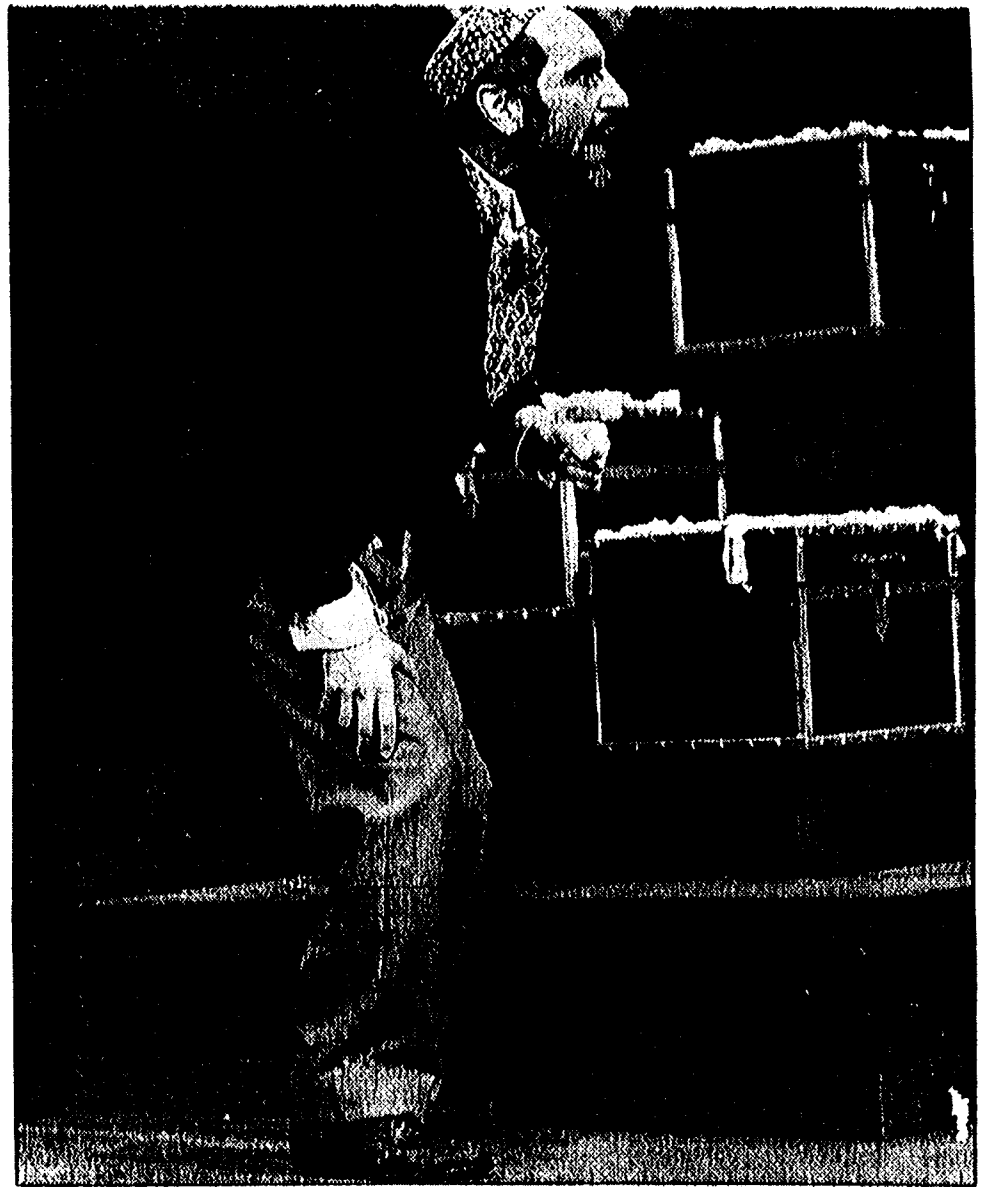
In taking a stand on the issue of sensitive literature, the Congress has urged the following:

□ That teachers' colleges and faculties of education offer training in race relations and multicultural education in order to ensure that teachers are well prepared to deal with racial incidents in the classroom which may result from the teaching of controversial literature;

□ That teachers, as part of their professional development, be given ongoing and mandatory race relations training;

□ That identified controversial literature (literature that may contain racial stereotyping) be taught to more mature students, possibly in Grades 12 and 13.

Some have argued that this is tantamount to book banning. Nonsense. Age-appropriate decisions in curriculum design is hardly book banning, nor is it censorship. The Congress does not and has never urged that *The Merchant Of Venice* be banned. It simply wants it taught to stu-



THE MERCHANT: Shakespeare's play is usually taught in Grades 9 and 10. Above, George Spurdakos in a 1982 Toronto Free Theatre production.

dents who can better handle it.

It's heartening that people of good will are finally beginning to deal with the issue of controversial literature. On May 17, Congress representatives will meet senior members of the Stratford Festival to explore ways to provide student audiences with a new perspective on the play. Schools and educators are learning that requests for teacher training, race relations and age-appropriate learning are not attacks

on a teacher's ability. Indeed, it is the Congress' hope that our educational system will strive for the day when controversial literature will be used with wisdom and sensitivity, as vehicles for understanding racial tolerance.

□ Bernie M. Farber is director of research of the Joint Community Race Relations Committee, Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region.

Shakespeare as anti-Semite

The racism in The Merchant of Venice is a sign of the Bard's biased times

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN

Mr. Cushman was theatre critic of The Globe in London for 11 years. He now writes on Toronto and writes regularly on theatre for Star and Toronto Night magazines.

HAT OLD RACIST William Shakespeare is catching it again. The Stratford Festival has announced it will present what is, in Canada, his most notorious play this year, and he seems to be causing the customary concern.

Coming from Britain, where there seems to be a major production of The Merchant of Venice every other season, I was surprised (and a little envious) to learn that this Merchant will be only the fifth in Stratford's 37-year existence. Presumably the play's rarity is not due to its being a financial or artistic risk. But it has a story of causing trouble.

Shylock — customarily the star role and technically the villain — is a Jew. Whenever the play is reviewed, it provokes at the least a sneeze and, at most, accusations of downright anti-Semitism followed by demands that it be removed from the repertoire.

This happens all over North America, but hardly ever in Britain. This is partly because the Jewish community there is less sensitive — or less vociferous — than it is here. It is also partly because of the national blood-purifier, and it would be both sophisticated and unproductive to call for the abolition of either. If they can do it — adapt themselves to the climate or, since it is rather more malleable, adapt Shakespeare to themselves.

That Shakespeare and Canada also being acclimated to one another is proved by the low-key character of this year's production. No, says the Canadian Jewish Congress, we wouldn't dream of asking for censorship — it's away from the play until they are old enough to appreciate its implications. That seems fair, though it is more a matter for the mood than for the theatre, which is hardly to be expected to turn away customers, young or old, on any grounds.

The CJC asks that teachers be cautioned by the play, particularly which, for us, it is not for the school. It is, in fact, the story of anti-Semitism. Again, respectable teachers of literature will always put words in context. It's their job.

As it happens, the Merchant was the first Shakespeare play I studied in school. I was 13 and was not in the class, and I was not aware of any ill feeling toward me. I came to think of it, I wasn't sure of any ill feeling toward Shylock at all; kids, even more than adults, love a good villain. I went to a big-city school.

The CJC seems more concerned



Shakespeare: in his plays, he was quite capable of using the word 'Jew' as an automatic, casual insult.

about children growing up in rural areas: "Shylock represents their first encounter with a Jew. Then, every Jewish child they encounter is a Shylock. This is a bit puzzling; if they've never met any Jews prior to seeing the play, why are they going to start meeting them now? But the risk of Jewish children, or any children, being taken to slaughter is just worth talking; there are 35 other Shakespeare plays for young students to cut their teeth on.

For Stratford, literary adviser Hayes has countered — as I imagine I would in his place — that although the play contains anti-Semitic lines, Shylock is no stereotype and Shakespeare himself was no bigot. I wonder how he knows: about Shakespeare, I mean. There is a distinction to be drawn between the man and the playwright. Shakespeare the playwright disdains his emotional sympathies with Spinaux-like impartiality; even Iago and Richard III, far more comprehensive rogues than Shylock, are allowed voices and feelings of their own. But in the Merchant of Venice at the Stratford Festival has occasioned much adverse comment. Director Tyrone Guthrie has been accused, as of bad timing. Many in the audience felt that, because of its anti-Semitism, the play should not have been given at this time or that Shylock might at least have been presented as a sympathetic character instead of as a practicing, apologetic comic-villain.

To the Jewish viewers especially the spectacle of Christian neighbours howling gleefully at the Jew was to put it mildly disturbing. The moral and social advisability of producing the work has been pretty thoroughly covered but that the esthetic or dramatic matricide of the production may also be disputable seems

in Elizabethan drama, Barabas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. He is far more of a monster than Shylock ("Sometimes," he remarks with engaging off-handedness, "I go about and poison wells"), and Marlowe has no sympathy for him. But then he has no sympathy for anybody; he creates a vicious cartoon world and, as a natural rebel, clearly enjoys using his villainous outsider to expose official (which is to say Christian) hypocrisy.

Paradoxically, Shylock is a more anti-Semitic creation than Barabas just because he is more human. You have to take him seriously. His opponents in the play are pretty worthless, so you can argue that Shakespeare, too, was making a point about hypocrisy. But it's just as likely that the instant his Christians do to positively likeable and didn't do a very good job of it.

Shylock has the vitality of villainy, which I perversely feel is a greater compliment to a Jew from a Christian writer than any amount of virtuous martyrdom. When he so famously inquires, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" he is not cringing or pleading or making a case for tolerance. He is leading up to the farther question, "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? With the attached threat, "The villainy you teach me I will execute and it will go hard but I shall better the instruction."

Morally this may not be admirable, and it does not have much to do with Jewish law. But it is dramatically exciting and, for Jews, after centuries of subservience, it is an emotional release. We identify with Shylock as instinctively as we do with Hamlet. It is a lesson now teaching to any age. The theatrical appeal crosses racial and religious barriers. Actors, Jewish and Gentile, dream of playing Shylock, but few live up to playing Antonio, his noble if inelegant prey. Jewish actors are ac-

generally to have been overlooked. The fact is that, once the work had been chosen, whether by him or for him, Guthrie was faced with an insoluble problem of theatre: namely, that the Merchant, manly though indirectly because of Shylock can no longer be made to yield its proper effects. Although Guthrie seems to have faced his difficulties honestly, his efforts were foredoomed to failure or, at best, to a questionable success.

Modern audiences just can't understand

Money-lending and interest-taking are now such a part of our civilization as to seem quite natural, certainly beyond reproach; enforced religious conversion and full infidelity (desertion and robbery) can rarely if ever appear any more as subjects of innocent merriment; nor does Jewishness now seem inevitably incommensurable with virtue, meekness, humane gentleness and love.

Shylock was, of course, not confined to a vacuum. First, he came to his author from various sources; a man with a history, not all literary; second, he was already known in Elizabethan England as a particular kind of creature. Both times and sources were essentially anti-Semitic; the Jew in literature and in life was known as a being whose economic practices, pathic, inhuman, immoral, ungodly and spiritual devices were, to say the least, suspect.

The advent of humanitarian sense and sensibility, the acceptance of usury as respectable and, most important, the acquisition of a most un-Jewish and rational knowledge of the Jew as a human being, have made it impossible for

modern times to see in Shylock the strange, half-real figure that he is. The role was not universal; it did not, in its conception, contain characteristics which would remain forever true and constant. Although not anti-Semitic in intent, it is both internally and externally dependent upon a peculiar kind of bias of which only the Renaissance was capable.

It is precisely because of this that Guthrie could anticipate only a limited success. He did as well as he could with essentially intractable material. But, although he could put on the play, he could not put on the audience. Although he put on the audience, he put on the Renaissance.

What Shakespeare, the audience of today is not nearly so sure. It has lost the sense of the metaphysics in its attitude toward Jews; the rational and less whole-hearted devil lurking in a human form no longer properly before the threshold of the "unkind."

But, of course, the audience is not really to blame. Here for one Shakespeare was of the age an being, have made it impossible for

ually less likely to compromise over Shylock than are Gentiles who tend to arrive full of compassion and understanding.

In the British theatre there have been two great Shylocks in the past decade. One was a Jew, David Suchet, whose Shylock was a compulsive joker who had adopted a mask of self-mockery as camouflage in an alien society and found it had stuck to him. He was so noble but he was unpedestrianly, flesh-and-blood real. On the whole you felt he got what he deserved until the final humiliating, which sent the house into a palpable state of shock.

At the other extreme there was the notably Christian Alec Guinness, whose Shylock was all believability and dignity, a walking possession on the corroding effects of persecution. You sympathize with, and lamented for him — ironically, when he received the order of the four, the audience roared to Elizabethan type and laughed.

Admittedly, he was playing a Jewish character, but he was playing a Jewish character who was drawn from England's conservative stockbroker belt and probably more in need of consciousness-raising than any Canadian school children, however rural.

Probably the most famous of poster Shylocks was Laurence Olivier in the 1970s, playing world-class Jewish attack, protruding teeth and a Rothschild accent. I wish his "I can be Jewish" performance, to match his "I can be black" Otello (a more substantial achievement) of the previous decade. Next month London will produce Dustin Hoffman, who can press the matter by the Jewishness of his name. Maybe he'll give an anti-Semitic performance. I can be a movie star but I can't be a Shakespeare performance.

Stratford's Shylock is Brian Bedford, an actor whose attitude is the borderland between comedy and tragedy. This is precisely where Shylock lives stretched between Elizabethan popular prejudice and Shakespeare's instructive commitment to complicated humanity.

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'The Merchant of Venice' dangerous

by Arnold Ages

STRATFORD, Ont. - Michael Langham's production of 'The Merchant of Venice', the subject of considerable controversy even before the first performance, undoubtedly meets the high standards of professionalism expected from Canada's (perhaps North America's) pre-eminent Shakespearean theatre.

Brian Bedford's malevolent Shylock, Nicholas Pennell's courtly Antonio, Geraint Wyn Davies' suave Bassanio and Seana McKenna's light-headed Portia are all memorable renderings of roles that demand a wide range of acting skills.

'The Merchant of Venice', however, can never be judged simply by the conventional criteria of drama criticism because of its overriding theme - a powerful polemic against Jews and Judaism, as incarnated in the portraiture of Shylock, the Hebrew usurer who demands a most unsavoury payment for a loan in default.

Months before the Stratford production was mounted, controversy began to swirl around the play. Murray Frum, the president of the Stratford Festival (and husband of Barbara Frum of CBC fame) publicly regretted the Festival's choice of the play but refrained from supporting any censorship move.

The Canadian Jewish Congress made demarches towards Festival officials asking that educational materials be made available to younger audiences in order to provide a contextual understanding of the play. The Congress' move was based on a 1984 staging of the play during which Jewish children from a religious academy were pelted with pennies by other groups of children.

The Canadian Jewish Congress wisely refrained from asking for any cuts in 'The Merchant of Venice' although early, inaccurate press accounts suggested that this was the case. The current Stratford version is the same one produced by Michael Langham more than a year ago in the United States. It does leave out two small scenes; one depicting Shylock's conversion; but these omissions do not detract in any way from the en-

semble of the play.

After viewing the current production at Stratford, Ontario, I have come to the conclusion that no amount of cuts, prunings or educational materials are sufficient to launder the anti-Semitic soiling found in the fabric of 'The Merchant of Venice'. The problem is not the interpretation of Shylock - whether it is done by Dustin Hoffman in London or Brian Bedford in Stratford, Ontario. The problem is 'The Merchant of Venice'.

Defenders of the play who cite several incidents of philo-Semitic verse or point to uncongenial portraits of Christians in the play as well, err, moreover, if they think that this neutralizes the overwhelmingly negative portrait of Jews and Judaism transmitted through the profile of Shylock. The favourable image of Jews filtered through an occasional speech -

"Hath not a Jew eyes," is inevitably lost in the odious caricature of the Jew which Shakespeare paints in his own inimitable, brilliant manner.

It is also totally irrelevant, as the play's defenders so often observe, whether Shakespeare ever knew any Jews personally. The history of anti-Semitism is studded with practitioners and theoreticians of that social pathology who never knew Jews. What is significant is that Shakespeare permitted his theatrical talent to become a vehicle for the teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism which until recent times has been an integral part of both Christian folklore and Christian theology.

'The Merchant of Venice' has two interlocking plots. One involves Bassanio and his infatuation with Portia. Bassanio's impecunious state requires him to approach Antonio for funds to help him press his love for Portia. Antonio, short on cash flow, reluctantly borrows 3,000 ducats from Shylock to help his young friend.

Angered by Antonio's ungracious anti-Jewish taunts, Shylock agrees to forego interest on his loan, demanding instead the forfeiture of a pound of flesh should Antonio default on his loan.

This idea, so grotesque in its dia-

bolism, belongs to the medieval category of the ritual murder accusation against Jews - perhaps the foulest of slanders perpetrated against Jews and Judaism.

The Merchant of Venice's subplots includes the elopement of Jessica, Shylock's daughter, with one of Bassanio's friends, Lorenzo. As Shakespeare describes it, Shylock's anger at the departure of his daughter stems more from the ducats and jewelry she has taken with her, than from the loss of his own flesh and blood. The crassness of Jewish materialism, of the hankering after money; these are the elements emphasized in Shakespeare's rendering of Shylock.

In times past it might have been possible to see the same comic relief in the Shylock episodes.

No amount of excisions, interpretations and torturing of the text, therefore, can obfuscate The Merchant of Venice's central thesis: the degrading materialism of Jews contrasted with the uplifting morality of Christians. The trial scene in which Shylock is denied his pound of flesh through Portia's astute intervention as a surrogate lawyer may be dramaturgically effective but it reeks of Christian triumphalism and base anti-Semitism.

It is said that Jews should not be so sensitive in responding to plays such as The Merchant of Venice and that defensiveness in response to it shows that Shakespeare was on to something. That's a view rooted in the past. Since the Holocaust, Jews have raised their standards of anti-Semitism. They are very high today.

There is no gainsaying that Shakespeare was a genius and The Merchant of Venice is an expression of that genius. He was too great to present a unidimensional and vulgar portrait of the Jew. That is why the finished painting is so disquieting. Sensitive people - Jew and gentile - will always be enchanted with the bard's uncanny way with words but with regard to The Merchant of Venice they will also regret that Shakespeare lent his incontestable talent in slandering Jews and Judaism.