

A Defense of Shylock

By
Austin Sullivan, '32

MEN have been immortalized for adequate reasons and for reasons that are trivial. Deservedly and otherwise, names have borne down the flood of years stamped with fame or stigmatized with ignominy. It is a tribute to the universal renown of Shakespeare but not, I think, to his justice that in a single characterization he was able so to vilify a man that his name has become a thing of unpleasantness on the tongues of men the world over. I speak of the immortal Shylock, the money-lender of Venice, who has been abused and insulted by man since that day centuries ago when he was first presented to the world by the master dramatist. His case, as I conceive it, is one of the world's great injustices. Age after age has hissed, despised, mocked and hated him with a bitterness that is awful in its intensity. And for what cause? Because he would have what was his own!

Let us examine the facts of the case and seek to discover the cause of his ostracism, its justice or injustice. Here was a man living in the midst of a people hostile to his race and derisive of his religion; here was a man condemned for his occupation—an occupation to which he, like scores of his fellow nationals, had been driven by persecution—usury. An exile in an unfriendly country, living his life in peace and suffrance, "for suffrance was the badge of all his tribe," he could still feel the sting of prejudice and insult. And he was a man capable of devising as ingenious and as complete a revenge for that outrage and those insults as the world has ever known. Goaded to something like frenzy by the dishonorings and taunts showered upon him by a foe who showed him nothing but uncharitableness, he startled all by the measure of his reprisal.

He did not seek to disguise his purpose. With logic unanswerable and flawless, he stated his causes. He did not dissemble when he declared that the hideous exaction of a pound of Antonio's flesh,

"...if it will feed nothing else
It will feed my revenge!"

His argument and his manner of reasoning, based on Christian concepts, are erring and unsound, but why base it on principles that are foreign to his mind? Why expect Shylock to depart in this matter from that law which governed every other of his actions? No, here above all he must speak as a Jew; and it is the fundamental idea of Jewish morality that he stands upon:

"He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. 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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, 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? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his suffrance be by Christian ex-

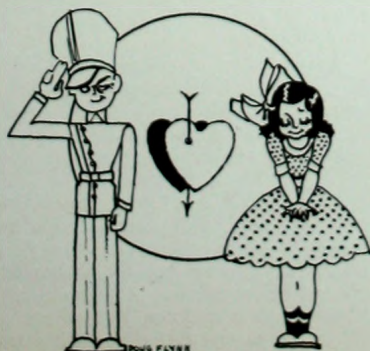
ample? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

That speech is all logic, solid and relentless, and based on the hard Jewish law of Justice.

The conditions under which Shylock lived were not designed to render him a willing convert to the doctrine of charity and forgiveness of injuries. Against the massed threat of popular hatred, liable at any moment to break out in a pogrom, against the relentless laws, well fanged to bite the Jew who sought to make himself a free citizen of the state, Shylock and his fellows had but one barrier, one source of safety—gold. The gold that he piled up with "his bargains and his well-won thrift" constituted a means of protection which the law itself would not guarantee, and with a special venom he hated the man who would rob him of that last shelter. Such a man, by his own admission, was Antonio.

Moreover, Shylock had been poorly schooled by those who might have been his preceptors in charity. Well might Portia talk of the quality of mercy knowing no limits and, like the gentle rain, carrying benediction to the giver and the recipient, but did divine charity ever form a buffer filament about the Jew, protecting him from the intolerance of so-called Christians? Heretofore he had shown nothing but a flintlike surface to the enemies of his people and had found that no deterrent to their mocking. Was it to be supposed that a generous and merciful attitude would prove a stronger shield? His reason told him that the charity they talked of but did not practice would pass unrecognized in him or be mistaken for weakness. And so he scorned it.

They had conspired to put Antonio in chancery almost in spite of Shylock. When they boasted the impossibility of a miscarriage of Antonio's wealth, nine different dangers did he enumerate—



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"He also happens to be Mr. Alton, assistant manager of the Sagusto Copper plant," spoke up Mr. Hunt, the consul. "I can vouch for him."

"But you haven't told how or where you made the money," said Yvonne with wide eyes. "Was it on the desert island? Did daddy have a hand in it?"

"Well—he had a hand in it," said Dick. "That is to say, if it hadn't been for him I doubt if I could have done it."

As in a daze Mr. Botts was scanning the papers that Dick had given him.

Dick grinned. "No question about the validity of those notes is there?"

"Oh, no! Not the least question," all three men spoke up at once.

"What about it?" inquired Mr. Botts.

Then Dick said jubilantly, "You once said that when I had made this sum I could throw it away if I chose; that you only wanted proof that I could make it. Is that right? Then you will not object to—this?"

He took the papers from the nerveless fingers of his father-in-law, tore them in pieces, and threw them into the waste basket.

"I'm glad, my boy—." He shook hands with Dick, who had unconsciously raised his left hand as though to guard his face. "By Jove! I'm glad that I was mistaken. I was wrong for once, and I don't care who knows it. You certainly win."

And for the first time Dick heartily agreed with his father-in-law. As the others stepped out of the room, he drew Yvonne to him.

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(Continued)

"ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves; I mean pirates; and then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks."

All these things did he point out to disclose the multiple face of disaster; but they persisted. Then that they might not mistake the sentiments with which he con-

tracted with them, he refused to consider it an ordinary loan. He would take from them no interest in monies. No clients but enemies he regarded them, and between enemies mere gold signified nothing. And still they agreed with him, badgering him as they accepted his uncompromising terms.

The trial! No trial at all, if we examine it seriously, for she who sat in the chair of judgment was unlicensed and a masquerader. The interpretation of the bond, to which the old man had appealed time and again, was perhaps the only honest part of his punishment. For what followed was plainly extreme and meant only as a sop to his baiters who thronged the court room and hissed and hooted at him. The crowning mockery was a gratuitous insult to their own creed, for they demanded that, unwilling and unbelieving, he become a Christian. Is it any wonder that he sickened and asked leave to depart this place where justice was so travestied?

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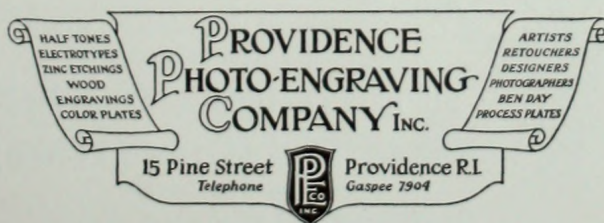
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"I pray you, give me leave to go from hence:

I am not well..."

What can have been Shakespeare's motive in constructing the drama? We glean some hint of his attitude from the designation he gave the play: "A Comedy." He cannot have failed to understand—for we credit him with greater insight in a score of passages—that as a figure in tragedy, the Jew's case would have been a ringing indictment against current English conduct. If Shylock, like Lear, had been made the central personality of a serious drama, the great dramatist might have had all London about his head. Garbed as a comedy, the same story brought him no censure and much praise. His keen mind that directed him almost unerringly to successful plots, must have understood the glee with which the pit and the gallery would hail the discomfiture of the Jew, and being a playwright

first and last, he wrote his story without scruple.

An original view, founded on the very dubious story that Shakespeare was himself of Hebrew stock, makes Shakespeare the author of a subtle exposure of the enemies of the Jews in this drama. Unable to attack their race prejudice openly, he took this indirect method of exposing it, and while seeming to pandor to their injustice, he was showing it in all its hideousness. Besides the basic weakness of the theory, for that Shakespeare was of Jewish blood there is not a shadow of proof, there is the historical record of the way the play has been received. As an attack upon the treatment Jews have received in Christian countries, it has never been produced or applauded, but solely as an expression of the popular mind toward "the villainous Jew."

Lecturing before the Jewish Historical Society in London a few

years ago, Myer Landa, a noted Jewish author, declared that Shylock was not a Jew at all, but simply an adaptation of a figure in the anonymous thirteenth century English poem, "Cursor Mundi." Shakespeare, he said, was guilty of a gross slander. It is easy to understand the lecturer's indignation and his desire to discredit Shakespeare in this regard, but the facts do not bear him out. "Cursor Mundi" as the name implies was none other than the wandering Jew, a legendary wayfarer of whom many authors have made use in framing imaginative stories. He is supposed to have been a witness of the ascent of Calvary and when he derided Christ for moving so slowly with the Cross, the Saviour is said to have replied: "I shall move on, but do thou tarry till I come." His fate is to wander over the earth, seeking death and never finding it, and the life which he cannot lose becomes his greatest burden. Connecting Shylock with this character does not make him less a Jew, and we think it a task as futile as it is impossible. Shylock pleads for himself better than can any other, and it is nothing to the credit of Avon's dramatist that he has sought success by pandering to that unreasonable and dishonorable passion, racial hatred.

Athletics

(Continued)

The only newcomer to the slate is St. Lawrence University, which replaces Norwich of this past season's card. St. Lawrence, alma mater of Owen D. Young, enjoyed a very successful campaign last fall.

The complete schedule follows: Sept. 24, Rutgers at New Brunswick, N. J.; Oct. 1, Holy Cross at Worcester, Mass.; Oct. 8, University of Vermont at Burlington, Vt.; Oct. 15, Boston University at Boston, Mass.; Oct. 22, St. Lawrence University at Canton, N. Y.; Oct. 29, Springfield College at Springfield, Mass.; Nov. 5, City College of New York at Providence; Nov. 12, Catholic University at Providence; Nov. 19, (pending).



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