

SELECTED ADDRESSES

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Selected addresses by Maurice H. Harris

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MAURICE H. HARRIS

**SELECTED
ADDRESSES**

Temple Israel Pulpit

SELECTED ADDRESSES

BY

MAURICE H. HARRIS, PH.D.,

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SHYLOCK.

Among the many forms of persecution of the Jews, that of misrepresenting him in fiction is not the mildest. From the legend of the "Wandering Jew," who eternally suffers for his brutality to Jesus of Nazareth, down to the Fagin of Charles Dickens—or, to be very up-to-date, shall we add Du Maurier's "Svengali?"—the world has always been regaled with some revolting specimen of humanity depicted as a typical Jew. And this form of persecution is the most lasting. Surely the effect of Hadrian's cruelty to the Jews of the Roman Empire was dissipated ages ago, but Chaucer's vilification in the "Canterbury Tales" will continue its influence as long as his poetry is read. One of the most notorious types created by fiction that has helped the world to misunderstand us in some respects, and yet the better understand us in others, is that of Shylock. Its importance is largely due to the genius of its creator, Shakespeare.

We find two distinct opinions about this character. When the world thought the Jew a monster, the character of Shylock was so depicted; since public opinion of the Jew has changed, it has correspondingly modified its interpretation, maintaining that it was intended as a vindication instead of a vilification. Perhaps there is reason for both of these impressions even to-day. We seem to detect two distinct currents in its delineation. On the one hand, we find Shylock fulfilling the popular opinion and satisfying the popular prejudice—a blood-thirsty miser, without conscience and without pity. On the other hand, we detect Shakespeare's protest against the cruel treatment of a class of human beings too little understood, and then Shylock appears to us as a long-

suffering creature, to whom the world refuses the commonest justice or consideration. Many would have liked this latter impression to have been so pronounced that there would be no doubt about it. This would have defeated the very purpose intended, apart from the fact that it would offend the canons of art to permit the moral to appear too plainly. Unless the picture of the Jew, Shylock was to represent, did in some way satisfy the prejudiced expectations, the character would have been hissed off the stage, and Shakespeare might either have been sent to "The Tower" or stoned to death by the savage mob of the Elizabethan age.

We must understand the condition of the times. Although the glorious reign of "good Queen Bess" and the Augustan age of English literature, it was still the rough civilization of the Middle Ages, when it needed little provocation to draw sword, and when barbaric cruelty was revealed even in punishments of the law—for mutilation was a common penalty. It was but in the preceding reign that heretics were burned at slow fires in the market-place of Smithfield, to the great delectation of the populace.

The world of the sixteenth century still knew little of the Jew, nor did it try to understand him. In the popular imagination, the Jews were a race accursed of God, who had crucified humanity's Saviour—society's outcasts, whom it was a virtue to abuse. Some of the peasantry even believed that a Jew was a four-footed animal! This ignorance had, furthermore, a better excuse in England than elsewhere, where the Jew had been nominally expelled since 1290, three hundred years before, though we now know that a few scattered Jews were in England even during the years of their presumed exile. The physician Lopez, put to death at Tyburn on the charge of poisoning, which was never satisfactorily

proven, may have come in contact with Shakespeare, and some claim he was the model for Shylock.

If, then, we are not quite satisfied with the character of Shylock, if it does not come up to our expectation of a vindication of a much-abused people, yet when we compare it with the popular representation, we can better understand what we owe to Shakespeare for attempting to give to the character of the Jew at least some human traits. The "Jew of Malta" (Barabas), by Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, is a monster to whom no evil deed is foreign, and who commits his outrages by wholesale. Gosson's "Jew" is equally repulsive; and yet these creatures who committed all crimes known to the time, seemed to please the theatrical audiences of the Elizabethan age, and to be accepted as fair representations of Jews. Shylock had his faults, but Shylock is at least a man. Furthermore, the incidents of the story of the "Merchant of Venice" were not created by Shakespeare, for you are aware that he hardly invented the plot of a single one of his plays. He simply used materials already at hand, giving, with the marvelous touch of his genius, immortality to legends that otherwise would have passed into oblivion, and making the characters of folk-lore stand forth as living beings, models for all ages. Even the combining of two old stories in this play before us, the story of the bond, the pound of flesh, and the story of the three caskets, had already been done by previous authors. Even the incident of a woman impersonating a lawyer had been introduced in a previous rendering of this story.

Since Shakespeare had few types around him from which to judge the real character of the Jew, and only the distortions of prejudice in the fictitious representations, he had largely to fall back upon the Bible for suggestions of Jewish character. His free use of Scrip-

ture in this play is seen by frequent quotation. Shylock appeals to "Father Abraham," swears by "Jacob's staff," calls his servant a "fool of Hagar's offspring," and Portia "a Daniel come to judgment." "My deeds upon my head," he says again. He compares his means of increasing his wealth to the way that Jacob multiplied the flocks he earned from Laban, calling forth the derisive comment, "The devil cites Scripture."

It is unfortunate that he should select Jacob the crafty rather than Samuel the seer, Isaiah the preacher of righteousness, or Moses the liberator, as a prevailing type from which to draw his illustrations. He was again limited to the expectations of his time. The world was not yet ready for "Nathan der Weise." He may also have had in mind the Jew as depicted in the New Testament, popularly supposed to have crucified the Savior, and usually characterized as a worshiper of the letter of the law and the ignorer of the spirit—the pseudo-Pharisee. Still Shylock is a man more sinned against than sinning, whom the inhumanity of the whole world has made inhuman. Long brooding over the shameful treatment of his people has marred his character and life and dried up the fountains of tenderness in his bosom; yet Shylock is a scholar, a man of more general knowledge than any of the other characters in the play.

I will not attempt to tell the story, and will only bring forward those portions in which Shylock is represented. Shylock is a money-lender—of course! And the outside world seeks him only when it wishes to borrow money—of course! This is the stereotyped setting of the Jew, which all the third-rate melodramatists have since followed.

In Shylock's reply to Antonio's request for the loan, Shakespeare at once skilfully brings before us the popular treatment of the Jew :

Many a time and oft
 In the Rialto you have rated me
 About my moneys and my usuances,
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
 And spit on my Jewish gaberdine,
 And all for use of that which is mine own,
 You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,
 And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
 Over your threshold.

Shakespeare is telling us how the Jew of his day was treated—how he may even have seen him treated in foreign lands.

Not only Shylock is protesting against this treatment, but Shakespeare also. When he makes such coarse and savage handling come from the hero of the story, who is otherwise an ideal character, a gentleman, one of nature's noblemen, the injustice of the world to the Jew is the more distinctly brought out. He shows us that an individual, otherwise irreproachable, has inherited a habitual contempt for the Jew, in which he indulges as second nature.

Shylock hates Antonio, because Antonio "hates his sacred nation." He represents all that is antagonistic in the Christian, and Shylock feels that there are concentrated in Antonio the enmities that have been the cause of all the woes of his race for generations. And yet, in this recital of his wrongs to the man who comes to borrow money, we detect a hidden appeal—an appeal for better treatment, for but a lull in the monotony of his contumely. For he asks again :

" Is it possible

A cur can lend three thousand ducats? Or,
 Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,