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Shakespeare's Leap

By STEPHEN GREENBLATT

A young man from a small provincial town -- a man without independent wealth, without powerful family connections and without a university education -- moved to London in the late 1580's and, in a remarkably short time, became the greatest playwright not of his age alone but of all time. His works appeal to the learned and the unlettered, to urban sophisticates and provincial first-time theatergoers. He makes his audiences laugh and cry; he turns politics into poetry; he recklessly mingles vulgar clowning and philosophical subtlety. He grasps with equal penetration the intimate lives of kings and of beggars; he seems at one moment to have studied law, at another theology, at another ancient history, while at the same time he effortlessly mimics the accents of country bumpkins and takes delight in old wives' tales. Virtually all his rivals in the highly competitive theater business found themselves on the straight road to starvation; this one playwright by contrast made enough money to buy one of the best houses in the hometown to which he retired when he was around 50, the self-made protagonist of an amazing success story that has resisted explanation for 400 years.

How did Shakespeare become Shakespeare?

Apart from the poems and plays themselves, the surviving traces of Shakespeare's life are abundant but thin. The known facts have been rehearsed again and again for several centuries. Already in the 19th century there were fine, richly detailed and well-documented biographies, and each year brings a fresh crop of them, sometimes enhanced with a hard-won crumb or two of new archival findings. The playwright's father, a glover and occasional wool dealer, held significant civic offices in Stratford-Upon-Avon, including the equivalent of mayor, but for reasons still unclear, he lost his social position, ceasing to attend council meetings and mortgaging much of the family property, including the lands brought to the marriage by his wife, the daughter of a prosperous yeoman farmer. Their eldest son, William, may at one time have expected to attend nearby Oxford University, but in the wake of the family's decline, he did not. At the age of 18, he married a farmer's daughter, Anne Hathaway, eight years older than he, and before his 21st birthday they had three children. Precisely how he entered the London theater world is not known, but by the early 1590's Shakespeare was evidently doing well as an actor and playwright. For two decades he wrote an average of two plays per year, while also acting (less and less frequently) and helping to manage his theater company, of which he had become part-owner. He chose never to have his wife and children move to London, but the record of his property transactions -- and he was a prudent businessman -- indicates that he had long planned to return someday to Stratford. The terms of his will -- at first he left his wife of 33 years nothing at all and then belatedly bequeathed her his "second-best bed" -- do not suggest that the principal goal of his retirement was to spend more time in her company.

After patiently sifting through most of the available biographical traces, readers rarely feel closer to understanding how the playwright's achievements came about. If anything, Shakespeare often seems a drabber, duller person, and the inward springs of his art seem more obscure than ever. The work is so astonishing, so luminous, that it seems to have come from a god and not a mortal, let alone a mortal of provincial origins and modest education.

And yet one of the prime characteristics of Shakespeare's art is the touch of the real. Even before a gifted actor makes Shakespeare's words come alive, those words contain the vivid presence of actual, lived experience. The poet who noticed that the hunted, trembling hare was "dew-bedabbled" or who likened his

stained reputation to the "dyer's hand," the playwright who has a husband tell his wife that there is a purse "in the desk/That's covered o'er with Turkish tapestry" or who has a prince remember that his poor companion owns only two pairs of silk stockings, one of them peach-colored -- this artist was unusually open to the world and discovered the means to allow this world into his works. To understand how he did this so effectively, it is important to look carefully, as scholars have long done, at his voracious reading and verbal artistry. But to understand who Shakespeare was, it is necessary to follow the verbal traces he left behind into the world to which he was so open.

What is it that we can plausibly hope to find? Shakespeare was in general a sharp observer of the natural and social world in which he found himself, but is it possible to get to something more specific? His father was a glover, and we can easily take note of the density of references, even highly technical references, to leather in the plays. His father also apparently dealt (illegally) in wool -- pieces of wool were found beneath the floorboards of the family house -- and again we can observe the precision with which Shakespeare's characters, like the clown in "The Winter's Tale," speak of the wool trade. But if we go in search of particular events that Shakespeare might have witnessed or people he might have known, we encounter far greater difficulties. For his ordinary practice, no doubt shaped by the censorship under which all playwrights worked, was to distance himself from the identifiable and the historically specific. Only on rare occasions is it possible to glimpse, through a kind of screen, the outlines of something he seized upon and to catch him in the act of transforming his world into his art. On one such occasion, Shakespeare was evidently struck by the London crowd's laughter at the victim of a public execution. Brooding on that laughter, I believe, he found a way not only to undermine this cruel mockery but also to expand his own ability -- and the theater's -- to represent inner life. The result -- a significant moment in Shakespeare's development as an artist and a human being -- was "The Merchant of Venice."

Did the creator of "The Merchant of Venice" and its moneylender, Shylock, ever meet a Jew? It seems unlikely, particularly if by "Jew" we mean someone who professes Jewish beliefs and observes Jewish religious practices. There is no evidence that Shakespeare traveled outside of England (to Germany, Bohemia or Italy, for example), where meetings with Jews could have been easily arranged. And officially at least, England was a land without Jews: some 300 years earlier, in 1290, the entire Jewish community of England was expelled and forbidden on pain of death to return. Here then is a perfect test of the claim that Shakespeare's art is characterized by the touch of the real, for there seems to be nothing in the world Shakespeare personally encountered -- nothing, that is, outside of his reading -- to explain why Shakespeare's imagination was set on fire by the figure of a Jew.

Jews in England in the late 16th century existed principally as fables and as figures of speech, and Shakespeare often reflected and furthered this circulation, apparently without moral reservation. "No, no, they were not bound," says Peto in "Henry IV, Part I," contradicting Gadshill's brazen lie that they had bound a group of fighting men. "You rogue," Falstaff rejoins, "they were bound, every man of them; or I am a Jew else, an Ebrew Jew." "If I do not take pity of her, I am a villain," says Benedick in "Much Ado About Nothing," tricked by his friends into declaring a passion for Beatrice, "if I do not love her, I am a Jew." How did Shakespeare get from casual jokes to Shylock?

Around 1589, just as the 25-year-old Shakespeare's career as a playwright was beginning, Christopher Marlowe -- exactly the same age and from a similar middle-class, provincial background -- scored a great box-office success with "The Jew of Malta." A black comedy, brilliant but exceptionally cynical and cruel, Marlowe's script was repeatedly dusted off and revived throughout the 1590's. Shakespeare, who was in the business of exciting crowds, undoubtedly noted the way his rival's play drew large audiences, particularly at moments of popular agitation against London's small Flemish, Dutch, French and Italian communities, which were charged with stealing English jobs.

"The Jew of Malta" is by no means the expression of simple xenophobia. Delivering a string of double entendres with a wink or a sly aside to the audience, Marlowe's Jew, Barabas, with his homicidal Muslim sidekick, exposes not only his own rottenness but also the even greater rottenness of the play's native Christians. Yet in the course of the gleeful, sardonic exposure, the comedy gives voice to a full range of the worst anti-Jewish fantasies. His career as a murderer began, the villain explains, in the practice of medicine,

and he then turned to other professions, always with the same malevolent motive. "I walk abroad a-nights/" Barabas declares, "And kill sick people groaning under walls;/Sometimes I go about and poison wells."

The Jew may bow with a show of humility before the Christian authorities, he may speak cordially to his Christian neighbors, he may seem to allow his daughter to convert to Christianity, he may even imply his own interest in conversion, but in his heart he is always hatching murder.

Shortly before his own murder, Marlowe the playwright became an object of concern to the authorities. On the night of May 5, 1593, someone nailed up, on the Dutch Church wall in London, an incendiary placard against the city's resident aliens. In economic hard times, these groups had often been the victims of nativist resentment, targeted by gangs of drunken idlers baying for blood. The authorities, fearing another outbreak of violence, suspected that the principal instigator was Marlowe himself. The suspicion was probably baseless, but it was not motivated by idle paranoia. The placard, signed "Tamburlaine" (one of Marlowe's most celebrated heroes), complained that "like the Jews" the aliens "eat us up as bread": the image seemed to derive from "The Jew of Malta." The allusions show that Marlowe's fantasies were current in the minds of some aggrieved people, that his famous eloquence had helped them give their feelings a voice, that his plays had excited them to act.

It was probably a successful revival of "The Jew of Malta" that prompted Shakespeare, sometime after 1594 and before 1598, to write "The Merchant of Venice." As in our own entertainment industry, one success spawned another: after all, to stay afloat, each of London's theater companies had to draw some 1,500 to 2,000 paying customers a day into the round wooden walls of its playhouse, and competition was fierce. At some point in his restless, voluminous reading, Shakespeare had come across an Italian story about a Jewish usurer in Giovanni Fiorentino's "Il Pecorone." As he often did, Shakespeare lifted the plot wholesale: the merchant of Venice who borrows money from a Jewish moneylender, the terrible bond with its forfeit of a pound of the merchant's flesh, a handsome young Venetian's successful wooing of a lady of "Belmonte" who comes to Venice disguised as a lawyer, her clever solution to the threat of the bond by pointing out that the legal right to take a pound of flesh does not include the legal right to take a drop of blood. And in creating the usurer Shylock, Shakespeare borrowed heavily from Marlowe. But he also went far beyond his predecessor. His half-villainous, half-sympathetic moneylender possesses a range of emotions utterly alien to Marlowe's villain Barabas.

Very little is understood about the experiences, either then or now, that make such creative leaps possible. And yet it is possible to locate in the world Shakespeare inhabited a strange event involving a Jew that may have triggered the imaginative breakthrough. Shakespeare was in London for at least part of 1594; in that year the bubonic plague, which had caused the theaters to be shut down for much of the season, abated enough to allow theater companies to perform once again in the city. London, however, was by no means completely calm. Though the famous "Protestant wind" had scuttled the Spanish Armada in 1588, there were recurrent fears of invasion and constant rumors of Catholic plots against the life of Queen Elizabeth. On Jan. 21, 1594, those fears intensified: the queen's personal physician, the Portuguese-born Roderigo (or Ruy) Lopez, was arrested on the charge that he was intriguing with the king of Spain, who had promised him, according to intercepted letters, an enormous sum of money -- 50,000 crowns -- to do some important service.

At the trial that took place in London on Feb. 28, 1594, the physician was charged and promptly convicted of conspiring, in the service of Philip II of Spain, to poison his royal patient. Strangely enough, the agent of this Catholic conspiracy, Lopez, was not a secret Catholic. He was -- or rather, since he now professed to be a good Protestant, he had once been -- a Jew. At the time, Francis Bacon noted that Lopez was "suspected to be in sect secretly a Jew (though here he conformed himself to the rites of Christian religion)."

It is difficult to say whether Lopez was actually guilty of high treason. After initially maintaining his innocence, he finally confessed, perhaps in earnest or perhaps only to avoid being tortured, that he had indeed entered into a treasonous-sounding negotiation with the king of Spain, but he insisted that he had done so only in order to cozen the king out of his money. Whatever else he was -- innocent victim, scoundrel, confidence man or traitor -- Lopez was a pawn in tense factional rivalries of the kind that Elizabeth

manipulated adroitly.

In the prosecutor's summary, Roderigo Lopez was not only a greedy villain; he was, like the sly Jesuits he so much resembled, the sinister agent of wicked Catholic powers determined to destroy the Protestant queen. At the same time he was a Jewish villain. As the prosecutor put it: "Lopez, a perjured murdering traitor, and Jewish doctor, worse than Judas himself, undertook to poison her. . . . The bargain was made, and the price agreed upon, and the fact only deferred until payment of the money was assured; the letters of credit for his assurance were sent, but before they came into his hands, God most wonderfully and miraculously revealed and prevented it."

Lopez was, by all accounts, a practicing Christian -- an observant Protestant thoroughly assimilated into high society -- and the English generally contented themselves with outward religious conformity. But the particular profile of his wickedness -- the greed, perfidy, secret malice, ingratitude and murderousness -- seemed to call for a special explanation, one that would also reinforce the sense that the queen had been miraculously saved by divine intervention. Traditional hatred of Jews and the continuing topicality of Marlowe's "Jew of Malta" (whose antihero, one might recall, began his career as a doctor who poisoned his patients) gave Lopez's Jewish origins an important place in the narrative of his conspiracy.

Lopez and the two Portuguese agents who allegedly were his intermediaries were quickly convicted, but the queen unaccountably delayed the approval needed to carry out the death sentence, a delay that provoked what government officials described as "the general discontent of the people, who much expected this execution." Finally, on June 7, 1594, the people got what they wanted. Lopez and the others were taken from the Tower of London, where they had been held. Asked if he could declare any reason why the sentence should not be carried out, Lopez replied that he appealed to the queen's own knowledge and goodness. After legal formalities were concluded, the three prisoners were carried on a hurdle past jeering spectators to the execution ground at Tyburn, where a crowd was waiting to watch them be hanged, cut down alive, castrated and torn limb from limb.

Was William Shakespeare in this crowd? The trial of Lopez, with its factional infighting and lurid charges, had generated intense interest. Shakespeare in any case was fascinated professionally by the behavior of mobs and fascinated, too, by the comportment of men and women facing the end. If he did personally witness the execution of Lopez, he would have seen and heard something beyond the ordinary ghastly display of fear and ferocious cruelty. In the wake of his conviction, Lopez evidently had sunk into a deep depression, but on the scaffold he roused himself and declared, according to Shakespeare's contemporary William Camden, that "he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ . . . which," Camden adds, "coming from a man of the Jewish Profession, moved no small Laughter in the Standers-by."

This was, in the most literal sense, the moment of truth. The last words a person spoke were ordinarily charged with the presumption of absolute honesty; there was no longer any room for equivocation, no longer any hope of deferral, no longer any distance between the self and whatever judgment lies beyond the grave. Those who stood and laughed made it clear -- clear to one another and clear to Lopez himself -- that they did not believe the doctor's words.

Or rather, the crowd's laughter turned Lopez's last words from a profession of faith into a sly joke. "He loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ." Precisely -- since, in the eyes of the crowd, Lopez was a Jew and a Jew does not in fact love Jesus Christ, his real meaning was that he tried to do to the queen what his accursed race did to Jesus. His words took the form of a declaration of innocence, but the crowd's response turned them into a crafty admission of guilt. The crowd perceived a carefully fashioned double entendre of the kind Barabas in "The Jew of Malta" had perfected. To reassure an intended Christian victim, Barabas speaks of his "burning zeal" for the nunnery, and then adds, for the audience's amusement, "Hoping ere long to set the house afire."

These laughing spectators, in other words, thought they were watching a real-life version of "The Jew of Malta."

Lopez's execution was the last act of a comedy, or so the crowd's laughter, conditioned by Marlowe's play,

suggested. If it was cruel, it was also perfectly reasonable to laugh. A wicked plot to murder the queen -- a plot that combined the hated figure of the Catholic king of Spain and the hated figure of the Jew -- had been providentially thwarted.

Was Shakespeare attracted or repelled by what went on at the foot of the scaffold? Did he admire the way Marlowe's dark comedy had helped to shape the crowd's response, or was he sickened by it? The only evidence is the play that Shakespeare wrote in the wake of Lopez's death, and the answer it suggests is that he was both intrigued and nauseated. He wanted, it seems, to excite laughter at a wicked Jew's discomfiture -- not, to be sure, in a play about international intrigue but in a play about money and love -- and he wanted at the same time to call the laughter into question, to make the amusement excruciatingly uncomfortable.

"The Merchant of Venice" is full of amused mockery: "Why, all the boys in Venice follow him," laughs one of the Venetian Christians, giving us a glimpse of the crowd's raucous amusement, "crying, 'His stones, his daughter, and his ducats!'" And when Shylock's fiendish plot to avenge himself by cutting out a pound of good Antonio's flesh is defeated in court, the Jew's discomfiture, as he is forced to convert, is accompanied by a chorus of triumphant mockery.

Yet the mockers are probably the least likable characters in "The Merchant of Venice." They are not depicted as villainous, and their laughter echoes through the play, but their grating words are repeatedly registered as embarrassing, coarse and unpleasant. Shakespeare did not repudiate their rowdy voices -- the voices that he may have heard laughing at the Jew Lopez; on the contrary, he wanted his comedy to incorporate them into the celebration of Shylock's undoing. But the spirit of the play is not their spirit.

A comic playwright thrives on laughter, but it is as if Shakespeare had looked too closely at the faces of the crowd, as if he were repelled as well as fascinated by the mockery of the vanquished alien, as if he understood the mass appeal of the ancient game he was playing but suddenly felt queasy about the rules. Unsettling the whole comic structure that he borrowed from his Italian source, he took the risk of opening up the interior of his villain and probing more deeply than he had ever done before. It may not have been only the otherness, the foreignness, of the villain that registered on him. While Shakespeare presumably did not know any Jews, he would certainly have known usurers, beginning with his own father -- who had twice been accused of violating the usury laws. The regulations against moneylending had been somewhat eased in 1591, and when he grew wealthy from the theater, the playwright himself seems to have been involved in at least one such transaction, either on his own or as a middleman. Such intimate knowledge may have helped him to discover in his stock villain a certain music -- the sounds of a tense psychological inwardness, a soul under siege -- that no one, not even Marlowe, had been able to call forth from the despised figure of the Jew.

At moments, to be sure, the character of Shylock is something of a puppet, but even jerked upon his strings, he reveals what Shakespeare has achieved. Consider one of the more rigidly mechanistic moments in the play: Shylock's daughter, Jessica, has robbed him and eloped with the Christian Lorenzo; the merchant Antonio, who has borrowed money from Shylock, is suffering business reverses; and Shylock is pulled in radically different directions. When he encounters the fellow Jew he has sent to track his daughter, he asks him for news (of all of Shakespeare's characters, Shylock is the most obsessed with news).

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.

"There, there, there, there": repetition is one of the keys to Shylock's music. In sound and sense both, "there" seems to spring from Tubal's "where," yet it is not really about place, Genoa or anywhere else. It is the register of Shylock's disappointment, and it is an attempt at consolation, the "there, there" spoken by a friend. But a friend does not speak the words; they are spoken by Shylock himself, and their numb repetition moves beyond frustrated hope and failed consolation to something else. Repeated words of this kind are drained of whatever meaning they may have started with; they become instead placeholders for silent thinking.

How do characters in a play -- who start off, after all, as only jumbles of words upon a page -- convey that they have something going on inside them? How do spectators get the impression of depths comparable to those they can barely fathom and understand within themselves? In the course of his career, Shakespeare

developed many means for conveying this impression, including most famously the soliloquy. But his mastery of the soliloquy was gradual, and along the way he explored other devices, including repetition. What he learned in "The Merchant of Venice" he held onto throughout his career -- in such unrivaled explorations of the inner life as "Hamlet," "King Lear" and "Macbeth." In each of these mature tragedies, Shakespeare's characters reiterate certain words -- "remember," "nothing," "tomorrow" -- whose uncanny echoing enables the audience to enter a dark interior space. Perhaps the most psychologically searing line of verse Shakespeare ever wrote comes when the aged Lear realizes that his murdered daughter, Cordelia, will not return to life: "Never, never, never, never, never."

Somewhere in the background of this great tragic moment is Shakespeare's earlier aesthetic breakthrough with Shylock, but "The Merchant of Venice" is not a tragedy. When his friend contradicts Shylock's claim that he alone is suffering -- "Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa" -- the usurer interrupts excitedly, his manic repetitive phrases now signaling not inward thoughts but cruel hopes:

SHYLOCK: What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?
TUBAL: Hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.
SHYLOCK: I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?

This is the stuff of comedy, and it is certainly possible to play the scene for laughs. "The Merchant of Venice" lends itself easily to vicious anti-Semitic stereotypes -- actors playing Shylock have worn red wigs and grotesque noses -- and Shakespearean comedy understandably continues to offend and upset many people who find it anything but funny. But the play's comic spirit is in any case extremely unstable: even within this small scene, a rising tide of anguish stifles laughter at the moment the laughter forms. The audience is brought in too close for psychological comfort to the suffering figure. Spattered by Shylock's exclamations, it cannot get to the distance appropriate for amusement.

Shakespeare could easily have ended the scene between Shylock and Tubal at a point at which comedy makes a strong bid to reassert itself. But instead Tubal continues his report. One of Antonio's creditors, he says, "showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey."

SHYLOCK: Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

Suddenly the pain deepens and the laughter dries up. It is as if the ring were something more than a piece of the Jew's wealth, as if it were a piece of his heart.

Does this mean that Shakespeare thought that Lopez -- who received a valuable jewel, sent to him by the king of Spain, that figured in his trial and that the queen kept after his execution -- was after something other than money when he allegedly plotted to kill the queen for 50,000 crowns? There is no way to know. "The Merchant of Venice" is not a commentary on a case of treason; it is a romantic comedy with a villainous usurer whose principal resemblances to Lopez are his alien status and the Jewishness that Lopez himself denied. The key link, apart from a general public excitement that may have helped box-office receipts, is the crowd's laughter.

Though he was in the business of amusing a popular audience, Shakespeare was clearly not altogether comfortable with this laughter. The play that he wrote at once borrows from "The Jew of Malta" and repudiates its corrosive, merciless irony: whatever else I am, the playwright seems to be saying, I am not laughing at the foot of the scaffold, and I am not Marlowe. What sprung up in place of Marlovian irony is not tolerance -- the play, after all, stages a forced conversion as the price of a pardon -- but rather shoots of a strange, irrepressible imaginative generosity.

This quality made theatrical trouble for Shakespeare; it prevents any straightforward amusement at Shylock's confusion of his daughter and his ducats, and more disturbingly, it undermines the climactic trial scene, preventing the comedy from reaching a satisfying moral closure. But the generosity that broke through here fully for the first time in his career is also the key to Shakespeare's greatness. It enabled him to take the stock figure of the braggart soldier and create the immense Falstaff. It enabled him to transform a racist story about a jealous black warrior into the tragedy of the noble Othello. And it enabled him to discover within the

grotesque tales of New World cannibals the strange, compelling figure of Caliban in "The Tempest."

In "The Merchant of Venice," imaginative generosity provides too much insight into Shylock's inner life, too much of a stake in his identity and his fate, to enable the audience to laugh freely and without pain. For Shakespeare did something that Marlowe never chose to do and that the mocking crowd at Lopez's execution could not do. He wrote out what he imagined such a twisted man, about to be destroyed, would inwardly say:

"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?"

Stephen Greenblatt is the John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. Portions of this essay are adapted from his book "Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare," which will be published later this month by W.W. Norton.

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