

you propose as the ordinary daily virtue of every one. Men must indeed become more than what gods have been thought to be to attempt it; but the very idea is worth a whole philosophy. Can you lead me higher than this?"

"Oh, far!—far higher still."

"And where at length would you leave me?"

"Where your heart should tell you, that it had found peace."

(To be continued.)

THE TRUTH ABOUT SHYLOCK

(By GILBERT K. CHESTERTON in *America*.)

It is odd that among all the eulogies, often extravagant, that have been poured out upon Shakespeare in his tercentenary year no one seems to have noticed this point. For in this point the most extravagant and hackneyed compliments are really deserved. In this matter Shakespeare is really not for an age but for all time. For in this matter he told something very like the eternal truth, and the truth he told has survived three quite conflicting fashions in Europe. At the end of several centuries we seem to be coming back to it.

The story of Shylock which Shakespeare found current in his day was a popular fable: like many popular fables, coarse, comic, and somewhat barbarous; like most popular fables, possessed of a sharp point and a sound moral. In order to appreciate this somewhat rugged root of the thing, it is necessary to reduce to more reasonable proportions a common criticism of the poet. It is constantly said that Shakespeare disliked or despised the populace. This exaggeration is rooted in two modern ideas, both mistaken. The first is the attitude, notable in persons of insufficient vitality, which takes Elizabethans much too seriously, especially when they curse or swear. Shakespeare's few outbursts against the mob are flourishes and traditional flourishes, employed to express fleeting humors. He has not in the least the deep disdain of democracy which possessed the mind of Milton. It is not the poet outside the city denouncing the greasy citizens who will not follow him into the wilderness. It is much more likely the poet outside the tavern denouncing the greasy citizen who will not let him have a bite to eat and a drink on credit. His *odi profanum* is a levity like his *vanitas vanitatum* which Mr. Bernard Shaw has taken far too literally. The Elizabethan is playful even in his pessimism. Mr. Shaw is much more fundamentally solemn in his wildest satire than Shakespeare in his heaviest dirge. The other mistake that has mixed Shakespeare's name with anti-popular opinions is his undoubted tenderness for the medieval monarchy and the divine-right doctrines of Richard II. But the mental association is mere historical ignorance. The medieval monarchy was much more sympathetic with the populace than were the parliaments which succeeded it. It was Richard II. who offered to put himself at the head of the peasants. Henry of Bolingbroke would never even have offered this; he was already at the head of the lords "in parliament assembled." In so far as Shakespeare was a Royalist rather than a Whig, he was at one with the democracy of England.

Shakespeare then did not seriously despise the people, and he would not necessarily despise the grossness and fierceness of one of the popular tales. The man who contrasted the morbidity of Hamlet, the prince, with the good humor of the grave-digger was far from being unappreciative of the salt and virtue of the poor. And in the old tale of the Jew and the pound of flesh he found a primary idea which is present in all the folklore of the planet. One of the great central figures upon which ten thousand tales have turned is the figure of the man who, as the phrase goes, is too clever by half. This figure, who may be called the cunning fool, is found in all fairy-tales and

epics and anecdotes. The point of him is that he gains ingeniously some abnormal power, uses it logically and ruthlessly, and then finds that his own logic can entrap and destroy him. Midas turns all he touches into gold and finds himself starving. Claverhouse obtains a charm against all leaden bullets, but fails to protect himself against a silver button. Shylock contracts for a pound of flesh, but forgets that he cannot take it without blood. This is a central moral idea in all literature: that simplicity often wins in the long-run because subtlety becomes entangled in itself; that God has often made the foolish things of the earth to confound the wise.

This truth being the soul of an old story, its body was as grotesque and ugly as any other medieval gargoyle. The man asking for his pound of flesh is a Jew; because in the Middle Ages the Jew represented this relentless theory of individualistic bargaining amid a society that went much more by custom, by kinship, or by local loyalties. The Jew was to the medievals pre-eminently the usurer; and the usurer was to them pre-eminently the man who made an unnatural and inhuman calculation advance at the expense of natural and human facts. But while he was made a Jew, he was also made a ridiculous and impossible Jew. No attempt was made to enter into his feelings, even his bad feelings; he was exhibited as a vulturous old pantaloon with a hook nose and a carving knife, who at the end of the story was thrown about like a sack of potatoes. The sociology of the Middle Ages was like its illumination and heraldry; that is, it was clear, harmonious, ingenious, and significant, but fixed, flat, absolute, and in a sense conventional. Shylock was the usurer as the Doge was the Doge; he had a place in a plan or pattern of colors and degrees. This decorative spirit in medievalism, which was its only stiffness and its only real weakness, prevented any written appreciation of the psychology of the Jew or the subtlety of the Jewish question. With admirable mental lucidity the medievals saw that the most important thing about Shylock was that he was wrong. But they had not the type of mental pliancy which enables one to see that a man may be wrong and yet be wronged. There was much more strict justice to the Jew in the Middle Ages than superficial modernity supposes. There was a great deal of unjust favor to the Jew on the part of the rulers and the rich. But it is quite true that there was no sympathy with the Jew; he was not understood, but merely flattered or bullied, used and disliked. Whether the Jews were privileged aliens or persecuted aliens, and they were both, it is natural that such lack of sympathy should have sometimes embittered a sensitive and brilliant people; and helped to harden them in that shell of Shylock in which they were so powerful and so unpopular. To say that they were forced to be usurers is simply false; but it is true to say that there was no encouragement in the emotional atmosphere for them widely to distinguish themselves otherwise. It would, I think, be unfair to say that the Chinese mandarins have seriously persecuted commercial travellers on Brighton Road. But if a commercial traveller were to try to become a mandarin, I fear he would find himself excluded by a hundred curious Confucian obstacles. In the same way the medieval Jew could not get into a knight's suit of armor, not so much because he was forbidden as because the suit of armor had been made not to fit him. The civilisation had been built for Christians; and nowhere would it have been so irritating to a Jew as where it was unconsciously Christian. The result for the Jew was that he had for hundreds of years a real and sincere sense of being misunderstood. The result for the Christians was that they did not even try to understand him. He remained in their midst a monstrosity like the Shylock, or Gernutus, of the old ballad, a mad creature who objected to a slice of pork, but apparently had no objection to a slice of a man.

Then Shakespeare came by, and with perhaps the greatest gesture of his life opened up all the windows of that isolated soul.

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