

# Of Daughters and Ducats: *Our Mutual Friend* and Dickens's Anti-Shylock

James D. Mardock, Ripon College

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## Abstract

The character of Mr. Riah, the saintly and honorable Jew in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), has long been assumed to constitute the author's apology for his portrait of the nefarious Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837), a portrait that drew upon the most insidious of anti-Semitic stereotypes. I argue that these assumptions neglect the wider context of the novel's engagement with *The Merchant of Venice*, and that rather than simply serving as an apology for Fagin, Riah functions explicitly as an anti-Shylock. The question of Dickens's anti-Semitism does not concern me here; his attitudes toward actual Jews reflect the typical complexity of liberal Victorians. *Our Mutual Friend*'s engagement with Shakespeare's archetypal representation of the evil Jew, however, does allow Dickens to expose the uses and abuses of such representations in the English tradition. If the ambiguities of Shylock's character implicitly point out the faultlines in the social project of demonizing the Jews, Dickens's adaptation of the play, in which a character in effect performs the role of Shylock, makes such faultlines explicit: Dickens uses his anti-Shylock to critique his own society's depiction of the stage Jew.

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## Introduction

Among the many idiosyncratic, often grotesquely caricatured inhabitants of the world Dickens creates in *Our Mutual Friend* is one so apparently out of place as to seem "transplanted from some unreal children's story" (Stone 1959, 247). The first appearance of Mr. Riah — an elderly Jewish man employed by the despicable Fascination Fledgeby to act as the public face of his moneylending business, "Pubsey and Co." — marks him immediately with anachronistic dress and Oriental exoticism of gesture as an outsider to Victorian London. He appears

in an ancient coat, long of skirt, and wide of pocket. A venerable man, bald and shining at the top of his head, and with long grey hair flowing down at its sides and mingling with his beard. A man who with a graceful Eastern action of homage bent his head, and stretched

out his hands with the palms downward, as if to deprecate the wrath of a superior. (Dickens 1971, 328)<sup>1</sup>

The effect is furthered by his accessories, a "rusty large-brimmed low-crowned hat, as long out of date as his coat," and a "staff — no walking stick but a veritable staff" (Dickens 1971, 328).

This "picturesque" appearance does not go unremarked by the other characters in the novel; not only does it mark Riah to them obviously as Jewish, but it marks him as an obviously artificial, represented "Jew." Riah's grotesquely virtuous behavior, as well as his appearance, smack of the artificial: he is ineffably saintly, consistently humble, merciful, generous, gentle, and forgiving, seeming not to be deeply affected at all by a London characterized by the almost universal threat of corruption.

The heightened artificiality of Dickens's portrait of Riah has caused consternation among many of the novel's readers. G. K. Chesterton's complaint that Riah is a "needless and unconvincing character" (Gibson 1966, 118) and Harry Stone's assertion that he is more "emotional gesture" than convincing character (Stone 1959, 248) are typical. John Gross aptly summarizes the critical consensus: "Dickens is so intent on emphasizing his meekness, his kindness, his noble nature, that he fails to endow him with any real life" (Gross 1992, 218). Even the similarly grotesque, disturbingly precocious child-woman figure of Jenny Wren, who makes dresses for dolls but has the mystic wisdom of a sibyl, seems to belong in the world where she is placed; in the end, Dickens must have her admit that "after all a child is a child" (Dickens 1971, 803), and she ultimately forges connections with her community. Riah not only remains an outsider (see Heller 1990, 55), but at times in the novel, he also seems to be at once superhuman and subhuman, both a saint and a nonentity, constructed only to contradict, both in word and deed, the anti-Semitic attitudes of Fledgeby, Riah's employer and chief abuser.

The traditional critical explanation for the shallowness of Riah's character, and indeed for his appearance in the novel at all, is that Dickens's reasons for creating Riah stemmed from a desire to defend himself from accusations of complicity with the socially normalized Victorian anti-Semitism, of which Fledgeby's is only an exaggerated fictional example. In the late 1950s, Harry Stone's study of Dickens traced a history of (possibly unconscious) anti-Semitism through Dickens's early career (Stone 1959); and Lauriat Lane, Jr., in a study of Dickens's 1867 revisions of *Oliver Twist*, helped to establish a narrative of apology in Dickens's career with regard to his representation of Jews, wherein he moves from frankly anti-Semitic stereotypes in his *Sketches by Boz* and in the character of the fence, Fagin, in *Oliver Twist*, to an apologetic revision of such stereotypes that culminated in the character of Riah. With the nefarious figure of Fagin, Dickens

did indeed exploit the stereotypical markers of the evil stage Jew: Dickens emphasizes his red hair, and the illustrations that George Cruikshank supplied to accompany the original serialization of *Oliver Twist* in *Bentley's Miscellany* add the traditional long gaberdine, broad-brimmed hat, and bottle nose to Fagin's portrait. Fagin's associates, Bill Sikes and Nancy, both refer to him as the devil, and, indeed, he seems to be supernaturally evil when he makes a sinister appearance at Oliver's window and disappears without leaving so much as a footprint (Dickens 2002, 2.12). What most exposed Dickens to accusations of anti-Semitism, however, is the fact that Fagin is referred to consistently by the narrator as "the Jew."<sup>2</sup>

In June 1863, twenty-six years after the first appearance of *Oliver Twist* and shortly before Dickens began *Our Mutual Friend*, he received a pointed complaint in the form of a letter from Eliza Davis, a Jewish woman whose husband had purchased Dickens's former lodgings at Tavistock House. The letter is a solicitation of funds for a "Convalescent Home for the Jewish poor" and appeals to the novelist's social conscience, suggesting politely that a donation would atone for the slight to the Jewish community that he had committed in drawing Fagin as a Jew:

It has been said that Charles Dickens, the large hearted, whose works plead so eloquently and so nobly for the oppressed of his country, and who may justly claim credit [for], as the fruits of his labour, the many changes for the amelioration of the condition [of the] poor now at work, has encouraged a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew. (Davis, quoted in "Fagin and Riah" 1921, 145)

Dickens responded quickly to both the solicitation and the criticism, defending his portrayal of Fagin by pointing out (incorrectly) that all the other villains in the novel are Christians, by asserting that his description of Fagin as "the Jew" referred to his race, not his religion and by the rather circular explanation that Fagin is a Jew "because it unfortunately was true of the time to which that story refers, that that class of criminal invariably was a Jew" (Dickens 1998, 269-70). This weak defense did not satisfy Eliza Davis, who reiterated her complaint more strongly:

Does any one designate Mr. D'Israeli as "the Jew"? I cannot dispute the fact that at the time to which *Oliver Twist* refers there were some Jews, receivers of stolen goods, and although in my own mind it is a distinction without a difference, I do not think it could at all be proved that there was one so base as to train thieves in the manner described in that work. If, as you remark, "all must observe that the other Criminals were Christians," they at least contrasted with characters of good Christians; this poor, wretched Fagin stands alone — "The Jew." (Davis, quoted in "Fagin and Riah" 1921, 147)

The Dickens-Davis correspondence has been frequently cited in discussions of Dickens's Jewish characters, and according to the traditional critical narrative, Dickens took Davis's criticism very much to heart, compensating for his alleged "great wrong" with the character of Mr. Riah. Indeed, toward the end of *Our Mutual Friend*, Riah repents for his own great wrong toward his people in allowing Fledgeby to perpetuate a hateful stereotype, and his words echo Eliza Davis's sentiments strikingly:

For it is not, in Christian countries, with the Jews as with other peoples. Men say, "This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks." Not so with the Jews. Men find the bad among us easily enough — among what peoples are the bad not easily found? — but they take the worst of us as samples of the best; they take the lowest of us as presentations of the highest; and they say "All Jews are alike." (Dickens 1971, 795)

Davis certainly saw *Our Mutual Friend* as "atonement" for *Oliver Twist* — indeed Efraim Sicher convincingly suggests that it was Eliza Davis herself who is responsible for posterity's seeing Riah as an apology for Fagin (Sicher 2002, 147). Although this narrative of authorial apology has begun to be challenged in the last decade (see Grossman 1996 and Sicher 2002), it retains a remarkable tenacity; Deborah Heller unproblematically presents the Davis correspondence as "the impetus for his creation of Mr. Riah" (Heller 1990, 51), as does Philip Horne in his 2002 edition of *Oliver Twist* (Dickens 2002, xxxix). The dominant critical explanation for Riah's overly stylized portrait can still be summed up in Harry Stone's phrase: he is "a good Jew to blot out a bad one" (Stone 1958, 253).

Dickens himself, however, gives us no evidence, in the novel or elsewhere, that he intended Riah to serve simply as atonement for Fagin, and this narrative of apology, confined as it is to Dickens's own works, neglects an important wider context: that of *Our Mutual Friend's* engagement with *The Merchant of Venice*. As John Gross points out, "[w]hen a Jew in a Victorian novel was a moneylender, a comparison with Shylock can never have been very far from the surface, in either the author's or the reader's mind" (Gross 1992, 218). Riah is clothed, after all, as Fagin is not (except perhaps by Cruikshank's illustrations), in Shylock's "Jewish gaberdine" (Shakespeare 1993, 1.3.109), and his every characteristic is calculated to counter that most culturally entrenched literary archetype, the "formidable measure" of all Jews in English literature (Cohen 1990, 25).<sup>3</sup> It is not my concern here to discuss the question of Dickens's personal anti-Semitism, or indeed Shakespeare's, but rather to argue that Dickens creates in Riah an anti-Shylock in order to produce a critical reading of *Merchant*, and thus attempts to resolve for a Victorian audience the ambiguities in that play's representation of Shylock and of Jews in a Christian society. If, as many critics assert, the ambiguities in Shakespeare's portrait of Shylock implicitly point up the faultlines in Venetian

society's project of demonizing "the Jew," Dickens, in responding directly to *Merchant*, exposes the theatrical artifice of that project, making such faultlines explicit and using his anti-Shylock at once to demonize English society in his novel and to critique Shylock as a theatrical archetype.

Even critics who have acknowledged that Dickens's portrait of Riah is intended more as a comment on representations of Jews than on Jews themselves have not considered the direct implications of Dickens's challenge to Shylock as the archetypal Jew in English culture. Sicher, for example, finds Dickens's attempt to challenge anti-Semitic attitudes troublingly stilted, reflecting that Dickens has "not so much corrected as reversed" the stereotype of the usurious Jew (Sicher 2002, 150). I would argue that correcting anti-Semitism is less Dickens's point than highlighting Shakespeare's role in determining English representations of Jews.

### Richly Left

Before turning to Dickens's exposure of Victorian England's abuse of Shylock as an anchor for English attitudes toward Jews, it will be worthwhile to trace some of the broader correspondences between *The Merchant of Venice* and *Our Mutual Friend* in terms of plot and characterization. Both of the play's tightly interlinked plots — that of Portia's wooing by Bassanio, which Shakespeare derived from medieval romances like the *Gesta Romanorum*, and that of Shylock's bond with Antonio — have their literary descendants in Dickens's novel.

Dickens's plot of John Harmon, the titular "mutual friend," constitutes an adaptation of Shakespeare's Bassanio-Portia plot, with Harmon in the role of Portia. In the play, we learn that Portia's deceased father has stipulated in his will that Portia shall only marry a suitor who can win at a sort of medieval Three-card Monte. He must choose among three chests, one made of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Choosing correctly means winning Portia's hand, but those who fail must swear never to marry. The simple, proverbial moral of the test — "all that glisters is not gold" (Shakespeare 1993, 2.7.65) — will ostensibly weed out unwanted suitors and guarantee Portia a husband whose values are not based on wealth and appearances, but Portia still chafes under the restraint that the casket test imposes on her: "I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike," she complains; "so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.22-24).

A similar circumstance binds John Harmon. His estranged, miserly father — who, unlike Portia's, is remembered as neither virtuous nor holy — attempts to determine his son's marriage for him by making his inheritance contingent upon marrying Bella Wilfer, a woman Harmon has never met. Dickens makes the connection to *The Merchant of Venice* explicit by having Harmon's father pass on his will through a version of Portia's father's three caskets. Having accrued his wealth as

a junk baron, Harmon bequeaths it to his son in the form of three enormous mounds of dust, the novel's most striking image, and one that demonstrates the casket test's moral quite literally. If a golden casket can hide a skull, then a dust mound can hide a treasure, and as the unassuming lead casket in *Merchant* opens to reveal the prize, the smallest of the dust mounds conceals the means to Old Harmon's legacy, while the greedy and villainous ballad salesman Silas Wegg is frustrated in his search for wealth hidden in the two larger, more promising mounds.

Like Portia, Harmon immediately rebels against the dead hand of his father, which oppressively determines his choice of marriage. Upon his return to England he is disconsolate:

I came back, shrinking from my father's money, shrinking from my father's memory, mistrustful of being forced on a mercenary wife, mistrustful of my father's intention in thrusting that marriage on me. (Dickens 1971, 423)

As Portia, grudgingly perhaps, accepts the conditions of the casket test, Harmon ultimately accepts the partner his father has chosen for him, but like Portia, he finds a way to make the choice of his dead father congruent with his own choice. Fearing that Bella will become "a mercenary wife," Harmon allows himself to be thought dead and takes upon himself the guise of a clerk in order to keep an eye on her. Bella goes to live with the affable Mr. Boffin, the employee of Old Harmon who becomes the famous "golden dustman" (Dickens 1971, 180) when he temporarily inherits the dust mounds, and although she seems to develop a monetary obsession, much to the disguised Harmon's dismay, in the end she proves herself not mercenary.

The Harmon plot, as Dickens's adaptive reading of the Portia plot of *Merchant*, depends on a particular interpretation of the play that highlights his novel's critique of materialism, but it is by no means an improbable one. Portia might well fear, as Harmon does, that her father's marriage game will bring her an overly mercenary spouse, and with Bassanio, as with Bella Wilfer, such fears would seem to be justified. Bassanio does, after all, value Portia in part because her dowry will render his debts meaningless, and he starts the play by describing her in terms that suggest a mercantile enterprise: "In Belmont is a lady *richly* left / . . . nothing undervalued / To Cato's daughter . . . / Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth / . . . her sunny locks / Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" (Shakespeare 1993, 1.1.161-70, emphasis mine). It can be argued that Bassanio's victory and his ultimate marital happiness, like Bella's, is also a matter of showing himself more than mercenary. He starts the play as a profligate, arguably with the same sort of monetary obsession that Bella develops when she goes to live with the Boffins, and Bassanio's marriage, like Bella's, can only occur when his priorities shift away from a preoccupation with wealth.<sup>4</sup>

After Bassanio chooses the lead casket that contains her picture, of course, Portia uses her own disguise as a clerk to save his friend from Shylock's murderous bond. John Harmon, in the Portia role, also disguises himself partly in order to administer justice to good people threatened by mercenary forces that bind them — Silas Wegg's hold over Noddy Boffin parallels Shylock's over Antonio. Dickens, however, may well have seen, in the way that the disguised Portia tricks Bassanio into giving up the ring that he had vowed to wear in her honor forever, an attempt, like Harmon's, to double-check on the materialism of a spouse feared to be mercenary. In this Dickensian reading of the play, although Bassanio, in giving up the ring, is breaking his promise to Portia, she is satisfied that it is because he values loyalty to a friend in need over material symbols, just as Harmon is ultimately satisfied that Bella's love for him is based on his merit and not on his inheritance.

The central conflict of *The Merchant of Venice*, concerning Antonio's bond with Shylock and his pound of flesh, also finds its parallels, albeit less overt ones, in the novel. The relationship between Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn, who "have long been more than brothers" (805), is reminiscent of the homosocial relationship of Antonio and Bassanio (see Sedgwick 1985, 161-79). Wrayburn, like Bassanio, begins the story dissolute and unsatisfied. Bassanio has "disabled [his] estate / By something showing a more swelling port / Than [his] faint means would grant continuance" (Shakespeare 1993, 1.1.123-24), and Wrayburn, whose "respected father" has chosen his career for him, makes a miserable figure as a barrister and has no goals in life until he meets Lizzie Hexam. When he encounters her, Wrayburn becomes as single-minded in pursuit of her as Bassanio is in pursuit of Portia; like Bassanio, he must go through a Jewish moneylender to whom he is in debt in order to get to the woman he loves, and again like him, he must cross over from an urban and mercenary world into an idyllic pastoral one in order to reach her.

Wrayburn, however, also partially embodies the role of Antonio. It is Wrayburn's life that is threatened, as Antonio's is, by the quest to win a woman, and his life, like Antonio's, is saved by the intervention of two women: Lizzie Hexam dredges his dying body from the river and Jenny Wren gives him the will to live by pointing him in the direction of marriage. Lightwood, in his relationship to Wrayburn, also recalls both Antonio and Bassanio. Like Antonio, he goes to great lengths to help his only friend and companion to marry, an act that will ultimately isolate him in the world. Like Bassanio, Lightwood flies to his friend's side when he is at the point of death and brings the means to save his life, but he returns to the Antonio role at the end of the novel, when he, like Antonio, is left alone outside the happy circle of new marriages that concludes both Dickens's and Shakespeare's works.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these correspondences of character and plot, Dickens follows Shakespeare in generating a tension between two fictive modes, a more realistic portrayal of urban mercantilism and a fairy-tale romance. Both authors, moreover, explore this tension by presenting two contrasting worlds with very different value systems. *The Merchant of Venice* separates its two interlinked plots into two geographically separate spaces; Venice is the setting for the urban plot, involving Antonio's bond with Shylock, and the more pastoral setting of Belmont serves to set apart the wooing of Portia. Venice is a city of commerce, concerned with money, acquisition, and usury; every character who operates in Venice channels his conception of the world through his purse. In the opening scene, for example, Antonio's friends try to explain his melancholy as normal concern over his commercial prospecting. Bassanio, as we have seen, describes Portia in terms of commodity. Lorenzo's plans to elope with Shylock's daughter Jessica are partially motivated by the prospects of her dowry, stolen from her father, and Shylock, in his rages at least, seems clear as to which loss discomfits him more: "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!" (Shakespeare 1993, 3.1.83-84). In Venice, even differences of religion seem secondary to monetary matters: Shylock's main grievance against Antonio is not his Christianity, but the fact that "He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (1.3.41-42); and Lancelot Gobbo jokes that the most important implication of Jewish conversion to Christianity is a distressing rise in the price of pork (3.5.21-22).

Portia's Belmont could not be farther from this mercenary world. It is a pastoral landscape, a timeless world of nature and music, where "[t]he moon shines bright" and "the sweet wind [does] sweetly kiss the trees and they [do] make no noise" (Shakespeare 1993, 5.1.1-3). Financial trouble disappears there; the three thousand-ducat debt whose forfeiture threatens Antonio's life and seems an insurmountable obstacle in Venice shrinks to insignificance in Belmont's value system: "What, no more?" Portia asks, "You shall have gold to pay the petty debt twenty times over" (3.2.296, 304-305). The only real value of gold and silver in Portia's world is symbolic, serving to illustrate the simple moral of the casket test.

*Our Mutual Friend* is also conceptually structured as two worlds, one based on money and work and the other on virtue and beauty. Like Venice and Belmont, they become associated with two different geographical spaces in the novel. London — characterized by the polluted Thames, the machinations of the Lammles and Veneerings, the criminal activities of Bradley Headstone, Silas Wegg, and Rogue Riderhood, and, most of all, by the ubiquitous image of dust — is contrasted to the paradisiacal landscape upriver, in which Lizzie Hexam eventually takes refuge, a world of clean, unadulterated beauty and honest labor that, like Belmont, comes straight from the tradition of pastoral poetry, an unapologetic echo of Arcadia:



The mingling of various voices and the sound of laughter made a cheerful impression upon the ear, analogous to that of the fluttering colours upon the eye. Into the sheet of water reflecting the flushed sky in the foreground of the living picture, a knot of urchins were casting stones, and watching the expansion of the rippling circles. So, in the rosy evening, one might watch the ever-widening beauty of the landscape — beyond the newly-released workers wending home — beyond the deep green fields of corn, so prospering, that the loiterers in their narrow threads of pathway seemed to float immersed breast-high — beyond the hedgerows and the clumps of trees — beyond the windmills on the ridge — away to where the sky appeared to meet the earth, as if there were no immensity of space between mankind and heaven. (Dickens 1971, 756-57)

In emphatic contrast to the attitudes of London's "Voice of Society," that disembodied and all-pervasive wisdom that sees workers as machines (890), this upriver idyll exists just outside a realm of work that we never directly see; populated by playing children, "newly-released workers," and "loiterers," this world is an exaggerated fictional paradise — a "living picture" of virtuous leisure.

*Our Mutual Friend* finds in Shakespeare's play an idealized reaction against the evils of pre-industrial capitalism, one that harmonizes with "Dickens's almost medieval repugnance for some of the basic institutions of capitalism" (Heller 1990, 56). Both authors establish a binary opposition between pastoral idyll and mercantile urban reality, and Dickens follows Shakespeare in marking this binary through the theme of the commodification of human beings and their bodies. The pound of Antonio's flesh that serves as the perverse collateral for his loan is the most obvious instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, of an equation between flesh and money, but the theme runs throughout the play. Instances we have already seen include Shylock's inability to distinguish between his daughter and his ducats when Jessica elopes and Bassanio's commodifying itemization of Portia's parts.

The theme of commodification is even more prevalent in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens continually "shows people turned into objects by money," as J. H. Miller points out:

Instead of being a unique and therefore infinitely valuable individual, each person becomes his monetary worth, an object interchangeable with others. To Mr. Podsnap it seems that his daughter can "be exactly put away like the plate, brought out like the plate, polished like the plate, counted, weighed, and valued like the plate." One of the potentates of Society describes Lizzie Hexam as a mere engine, fueled by so many pounds of beefsteak and so many pints of porter, and deriving therefrom the power to row her boat. Bella Wilfer has been "willed away, like a horse, or a dog, or a bird," or "like a dozen of spoons." She

suspects John Rokesmith of "speculating" in her. Her involvement in the Harmon mystery has alienated her from herself, and "made [her] the property of strangers." (Miller 1991, 71)

There is also a tendency, in both works, to assign a monetary value to offspring. Graziano and Bassanio wager a thousand ducats to the couple that can first conceive a son (Shakespeare 1993, 3.2.213), and Shylock confuses the act of procreation with earning interest; he claims to make his money "breed" (1.3.93). Similarly, the Boffins elect to buy themselves an orphan to raise in memory of the John Harmon they believe to be dead and commission Mr. and Mrs. Milvey to speculate for them in the wildly fluctuating "orphan market" (Dickens 1971, 151).

As Antonio's collateral pound of flesh functions as the central marker of this commodification of the body in Shakespeare's play, grim literalizations of the theme also pervade *Our Mutual Friend*. Gaffer Hexam's livelihood, as we see in the novel's macabre opening scene, consists of dragging corpses out of the river and claiming the reward offered for them — his twisted version of Christ's injunction to be a fisher of men inverts Shylock's offhand joke about fishing with man; Antonio's flesh, Shakespeare's money lender claims, will serve him "to bait fish withal" (Shakespeare 1993, 3.1.50). The most striking examples of the body as commodity in the novel come in Mr. Venus's taxidermy shop. The merchant of Venice forfeits his flesh for money; the merchant Venus makes his living selling body parts. His shop is one hideous extended metaphor of the flesh-money equation, with human molars in the till among the halfpence, the partially assembled skeleton of a French gentleman in the corner, three preserved babies — one Indian, one African, one English — about the room, and a hamper that he labels, with a rather sinister indifference, "human wariuous" (Dickens 1971, 126). Silas Wegg has even commodified himself, selling his amputated leg — a few pounds of his own flesh — to be included in one of Venus's reassembled skeletons. With Mr. Venus's shop, Dickens takes his recurrent theme of dust as wealth into the realm of human garbage. Showing humans literally turned into objects to be exchanged for profit places his critique of money-driven society on a very visceral level. Dickens's commodification of pounds of human flesh leads us back to his Jewish moneylender and to the clearest Shakespearean echo in the novel, Dickens's creation of Riah as his virtuous anti-Shylock. By drawing Riah as a false reflection of Shylock, Dickens adapts and inverts the most threatening elements of Shakespeare's Jew, disarming the threats he poses by demonstrating the artificiality of the archetype.

*The Merchant of Venice* establishes a Christian-Jew conflict that depends on the superiority of Christianity. The play's transference of Shylock's defeat by Venice's Christian society from the secular, legal realm into the spiritual realm justifies the forced conversion of Shylock as his ultimate redemption, an example of Christian mercy seasoning Jewish justice. Whatever ambivalence

Shakespeare allows us to feel about the justice of Shylock's conversion — and even a critic like Derek Cohen, who sees *Merchant* as a deeply anti-Semitic play, concedes that Shakespeare does transfer audience sympathy to Shylock by transforming him into a victim (Cohen 1990, 35-37) — the play overtly presents conversion, forced or willing, as the rescue of a Jewish soul from damnation.

Lorenzo's abduction of Shylock's daughter Jessica is also placed into this dynamic of conversion. The plot of elopement, with a father as *senex iratus* — a blocking figure for his children's love — is of course a familiar element in Shakespearean comedy, derived from Plautine New Comedy and the *commedia dell'arte*. In *Merchant*, however, Shakespeare charges this convention with the added significance of the Jew-Christian conflict, and so the subplot of Jessica's abduction becomes part of the emotionally, if not morally, ambiguous narrative of religious conversion.

There is no question, in *Our Mutual Friend*, of Riah's conversion to Christianity and no tacit assumption of Christianity's inherent superiority over Judaism as a religion.<sup>6</sup> Dickens does, however, engage the potentially troubling anti-Semitic narrative of conversion and its association with the abduction of daughters by making Riah a surrogate father and a morally inverted *senex iratus*. Riah serves as a surrogate father for both the actually orphaned Lizzie Hexam and the functionally orphaned Jenny Wren, taking their education into his own charge. Whereas Shylock seeks to inhibit his daughter's scope, keeping her locked in the house and away from company, Riah allows his adopted daughters a place of escape from the dismal realities of their lives. Jessica must disguise herself and elope with her Christian lover Lorenzo to escape from the strictures of her father to the pastoral world of Belmont, but in *Our Mutual Friend*, it is the anti-Shylock, the kindly Jewish father figure, who spirits Lizzie away to the pastoral world precisely to keep her safe from the unwanted advances of dangerous Christian suitors.

This is the most striking of Dickens's reversals, that the abduction of the Jew's surrogate daughter by Christians is seen as a threat, not as a rescue. When Eugene Wrayburn — whose rakish attraction for Lizzie Hexam is overtly and, at first, entirely sexual — confronts Lizzie in the presence of her "protector," Riah, just after she has fended off an offer of marriage from the violent schoolmaster Bradley Headstone, the scene reminds us directly of Lorenzo's abduction of Jessica, the more so because of Wrayburn's anti-Semitic jesting. Despite Lizzie's request that he leave her alone with Riah, Wrayburn insists upon accompanying her: "I came to walk home with you . . . I have been lingering about," added Eugene, 'like a bailiff; or,' with a look at Riah, 'an old

clothesman." (463). This reference to a traditional occupation of poor Jews in London is calculated to irk Riah, but fails:

With an air of perfect patience the old man, remaining mute and keeping his eyes down, stood, retaining Lizzie's arm, as though in his habit of passive endurance, it would be all one to him if he had stood there motionless all night.

"If Mr Aaron," said Eugene, who soon found this fatiguing, "will be good enough to relinquish his charge to me, he will be quite free for any engagement he might have at the Synagogue. Mr Aaron, will you have the kindness?"

But the old man stood stock still. (Dickens 1971, 464)

In a pointed inversion of Jessica's escape from Shylock, Lizzie, threatened by one inappropriate suitor after another, finds comfort in being held fast by a surrogate Jewish father. In this disturbing scene, the daughter's separation from the Jewish father figure is not even implicitly a good thing, not justifiable, as Jessica's arguably could be, according to *Merchant's* Christian logic, by the end of saving her soul.

That Dickens has Shylock's conversion narrative in mind when he highlights Wrayburn's anti-Semitic encounter with Riah is clear: Wrayburn later jokingly boasts that he gave Riah the epithet "Mr Aaron," "no doubt with an instinctive desire to receive him into the bosom of our Church" (Dickens 1971, 598). Moreover, Dickens highlights his awareness that the scene of Wrayburn's encounter with Riah is a Victorian engagement with Shakespeare's drama by ending the scene in dramatic terms: "now, that [Wrayburn's] part was played out for the evening," he writes, "and when in turning his back upon the Jew he came off the stage, he was thoughtful himself" (465). Phrasing Wrayburn's departure from Riah in terms of an exit from the stage implicitly leaves Riah on the stage, another reminder that Riah functions in Dickens's novel not only as a Jew, but also as a stage Jew.

Having linked the threat of Lizzie's abduction by an unwelcome suitor to the Shakespearean theme of Jewish conversion, Dickens further challenges the assumptions of the conversion narrative by bringing up, only to dismiss, Lizzie's possible conversion to Judaism. In effect, Riah has temporarily abducted Lizzie from Christendom, rescuing her from her own bad Christian father, and her continued sequestration among Jews becomes the key to her survival, as he spirits her away upriver to the protection of his friends. When her own Christian friends, the Reverend and Mrs. Milvey, visit Lizzie after she, with the Jews' help, has arranged for the funeral of the tragic and benevolent Betty Higden, the Milveys react with surprise and concern to the revelation of Lizzie's

associates' religion. The exchange again recalls the conversion of Jessica, but Dickens's Jews, it seems, do not pose the same threat to Christians that Shakespeare's Christians do to Jews:

"But suppose they try to convert you!" suggested Mrs Milvey, bristling in her good little way, as a clergyman's wife.

"To do what, ma'am?" asked Lizzie, with a modest smile.

"To make you change your religion," said Mrs Milvey.

Lizzie shook her head, smiling. "They have never asked me what my religion is." (Dickens 1971, 579)

Dickens thus raises the spectre of conversion, of the loss of a daughter to a foreign religion, only to lay it to rest. The Christian society of the novel may not be satisfied — the suspicious Mrs. Milvey still fears "Judaical interference" (585) — but for the reader attuned to *Our Mutual Friend's* intertextual discourse with *The Merchant of Venice*, the religious tolerance of Dickens's Jews stands in contrast to the conversions of Shylock and Jessica, serving as a critique of the novel's Christian society.

### The Shylock-ization of Jews

As Deborah Heller points out, this critique is Riah's function in the novel; Dickens, by establishing Riah's virtuous distance from the dominant society, puts the society itself on trial and finds it wanting (Heller 1990, 55). The critique is not a general one, however, but precisely attuned to the society's Shylock-ization of Jews. By means of the correspondences between Riah and his Shakespearean antecedent, Dickens engages directly with the libels with which Jews have been attacked throughout European history, many of which, as James Shapiro has extensively demonstrated, attached themselves to Shylock at his conception and continue to do in his afterlife, making Shakespeare's Jew the cultural anchor for English anti-Semitic sentiment. In particular, Shapiro shows that Shakespeare drew a connection between the persistent myths of Jews murdering, circumcising, cannibalizing, and drinking the blood of Christians, a myth to which Shylock's threat to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's bosom is indebted, and prejudice against Jews stemming from hatred based on their freedom from medieval church ordinances against the practice of usury (Shapiro 1996, 89-111). Both of these stereotypes Dickens shifts away from Riah, effectively critiquing Christian society by having the Christians out-Shylock Shylock. The commodification of the flesh in *Our Mutual Friend*, discussed above, owes a debt to Shylock's

claim on the pound of flesh, but as we have seen, it is entirely confined to Christian characters in the novel. Dickens removes the archetypal Jewish blood crime of symbolically consuming Christian flesh onto his Christian society, which in recycling its human garbage, cannibalizes itself.

Having established Riah as Shylock's apparent double, Dickens systematically inverts each of Shylock's internal traits. Where Shylock hates Antonio "for he is a Christian" (Shakespeare 1993, 1.3.39), Riah treats even the abusive Fledgeby with respect, calling him "Generous Christian master" (Dickens 1971, 328). The quality of mercy — a quality defined famously in *Merchant* for Shylock's personal benefit — is certainly not strained in Riah. When Fledgeby is deservedly punished by Alfred Lammler and Jenny Wren indulges her sadism, pouring pepper into Fledgeby's wounds, Riah's first instinct is to go to his employer's aid. He is as generous as Shylock is avaricious and as forgiving as Shylock is vengeful. While Shylock learns only revenge from his contact with Christians, Riah somehow manages to maintain Christ's doctrine of loving one's enemies even among Christians more mean-spirited and petty than those inhabiting Shakespeare's Venice.

While Riah's outer appearance continues to hold the memory of Shakespeare's Jew up to the reader's scrutiny, the more saintly he appears, the more obvious it becomes that Dickens has displaced Shylock's evil traits, actions, and even some of his incidental language onto several of his Christian characters. Shylock's avarice and his practice of usury, most obviously, go to Fledgeby; indeed as Heller points out, Fledgeby, a benefactor posing as a tormentor, is "cast in the 'traditional' Shylock role" (Heller 1990, 56). Shylock's violent single-mindedness to Bradley Headstone, whose seething words as he plots Wrayburn's murder — "Let him get ready for his fate, when that comes about . . . Let him look to it; Let him look to it!" (Dickens 1971, 699) — echo Shylock's rant of vengeance against Antonio — "Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer: let him look to his bond" (Shakespeare 1993, 3.1.44-45). Silas Wegg assumes Shylock's mean-spirited stubbornness and his insistence on justice. Indeed, elements of Shylock's trial scene find their way into Wegg's attempt to blackmail Boffin with a document that he believes to be Old Harmon's will. A villain, like Shylock brandishing a legal document that he (mistakenly) believes gives him power over a good character, Wegg is defeated by the very letter of the law that he tries to use to justify his case. Like Shylock, Wegg is given every chance to relinquish his power over the apparently unfortunate Boffin, and ultimately the will, like the bond for Antonio's pound of flesh, is shown to be worthless; Wegg, like Shylock, loses everything he has schemed for and is driven back into poverty and unceremoniously discarded.

Having shifted Shylock's villainies onto his Christian characters, Dickens establishes an ironic distance between the reader and the novel's Christian society by demonstrating their adherence to and manipulation of the Shylock archetype. Discussing Wrayburn's debts, for

example, Lightwood laments that his friend has "fallen into the hands of the Jews," and Wrayburn's response would seem to show an awareness of the falseness of the anti-Semitic association of Jews with grasping usuriousness: "having previously fallen into the hands of some of the Christians, I can bear it with philosophy." When the conversation turns to Mr. Riah, however, the presence of Shakespeare's Jew is inescapable; Lightwood calls him "a Jew, who seems determined to press us hard. Quite a Shylock, and quite a Patriarch. A picturesque grey-headed old Jew, in a shovel-hat and gaberdine" (Dickens 1971, 598).

If the comparison with Shylock is inescapable, it is precisely because the Shakespearean role is the one that Fledgeby forces the innocent Riah to play for his unsuspecting audience, the role of the evil usurer that Fledgeby himself is unwilling to play, even as he uses Riah's performance to bleed his clients dry. Riah's Shylockian appearance is what makes him, for Fledgeby, "such a good 'un . . . for the part" (Dickens 1971, 332), all the more believable because of the ubiquity of Shylock as a Shakespearean dramatic archetype.

The climax of the development of Riah's character, inasmuch as it develops at all, is his awareness of this ubiquity, and when he finally sheds the role of Shylock, he confesses his disgust at having played it to Jenny Wren, who had earlier been taken in, despite her better instincts, by Riah's unwilling virtuosity as Shylock: "[P]assing the painful scene of that day before me many times," says Riah,

I always saw that the poor gentleman believed the story readily, my child, because I was one of the Jews — that you believed the story readily, my child, because I was one of the Jews — that the story first came into the invention of the originator thereof, because I was one of the Jews. This was the result of having you three before me, face to face, and seeing the thing visibly presented as upon a theatre. (Dickens 1971, 796)

Riah's epiphany and his revolt against Fledgeby's stage-managing comes when he himself takes the role of an audience of "the thing . . . presented as upon a theatre — "the reflection, that is, of the role he had been playing, the role of Shakespeare's Jew.

Dickens is not merely using Riah to critique Christian society as vicious in *Our Mutual Friend*; rather, he is critiquing it as vicious precisely because it uses of the dramatic archetype of the Shylockian Jew. Jonathan Grossman defends Dickens's shallow, overly stylized portrait of Riah on the grounds that rather than attempting a mimetic representation of a Jew, Dickens is arguing for the impossibility of representing a Jew (Grossman 1996, 49). I would argue, however, that in his novel's adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, Dickens does not so much show such representations to be impossible as he shows them to be inseparable from the spectre of Shylock.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to posit this Dickensian adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* as a sort of performance, taking its place in the trend of nineteenth-century dramatic interpretations of the play, trends of which Dickens could not help but be aware. Dickens was only a toddler in 1814 when Edmund Kean, "the Byron of the stage," had begun to revolutionize the role of Shylock, finding in the character a Romantic anti-hero and presenting him as "flawed, but human" (see Page 2003, 116), rather than as a simple, diabolical villain. In his adulthood, however, the novelist became a playwright, something of an amateur actor, and a close friend of the actor W. C. Macready, to whom he dedicated *Nicholas Nickleby*. When Macready, the most prominent tragedian of the mid-nineteenth century, took over the management of Drury Lane Theater in 1841, he chose *Merchant* as his opening production. Although he was never comfortable in the role, Macready's Shylock was well received, especially by his novelist friend, who not only attended dress rehearsals, but was incapacitated with the anticipation of seeing his friend in the role: "I am so excited about tonight that I can do nothing," Dickens wrote on opening day (Gager 1996, 72). Macready, unwilling to embrace the passionate vigor of Kean's performance, made Shylock less dominant in the play than had Kean, and while he remained fundamentally evil, in the Macready version the Jew was dignified and mild-mannered (Gross 1992, 135-36).

When the American actor Edwin Booth played the role of Shylock at London's Haymarket Theatre in 1861, to popular (although not critical) acclaim, it was a significantly different Shylock from what had been seen before. Booth — the son of actor Junius Brutus Booth, who claimed Jewish ancestry and was also famous for his Shylock — had experimented with making Shylock a sympathetic character, attempting to view him as "the venerable Hebrew, the Martyr, the Avenger." Booth attempted to discard all considerations of race and religion, making Shylock a merely mercenary villain and drawing away from an anti-Semitic reading of the character, although as John Gross points out, he found a truly sympathetic interpretation of Shylock difficult to maintain (Gross 1992, 142).

After the publication of *Our Mutual Friend*, however — after Dickens had exposed the artificiality of Shakespeare's representation of the evil Jew with an equally, but self-consciously artificial, saintly one — Henry Irving could find in Shylock not just a flawed, but human anti-hero, but an actual hero, almost, at moments, a Christ figure (Gross 1992, 150). Irving's insistence on emphasizing the victimization of Shylock, in his radically sympathetic 1878 performance, made Shylock the actor's most acclaimed role, one that he continued to perform until he left the stage in 1902. Dickens did not live long enough to see Irving's performance of Shylock, whom the actor



described in 1884 as "the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used" (Gross 1992, 147), but Riah's performance of the role is surely as much an antecedent to Irving's as any performed upon the Victorian stage.

### Notes

1. Page citations from *Our Mutual Friend* are taken from the edition of Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Citations from *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from the edition of Jay L. Halio (Shakespeare 1993).
2. Although the repeated replacement of Fagin's name in *Oliver Twist* by the epithet "the Jew" continues to pain modern audiences, Jonathan Grossman finds in it more than a simple expression of authorial anti-Semitism. The use of the epithet, Grossman points out, migrates from the middle-class narrator to the novel's middle-class victors, becoming a "badge of middle-class authority" (Grossman 1996, 42-43), while the lower class associates of Fagin, including the ostensibly well-off Monks, use his name. This, Grossman argues, constitutes a more self-critical middle class stance in the narrative than critics have acknowledged (44).
3. Michael Ragussis has based his extensive work on Jews in Victorian literature on a discussion of the long shadow that Shakespeare's character casts, arguing that his influence is universal: "no portrait of a Jew can exist in English without reference to [*The Merchant of Venice*], and the English imagination seems unable to free itself from Shakespeare's text" (Ragussis 1989, 115). Ragussis identifies a literary movement, the "novel of Jewish identity," that attempts to "exorcise the powerful figure of Shylock" (Ragussis 1989, 114), and I would suggest that *Our Mutual Friend*, though not discussed by Ragussis, participates in this novelistic tradition.
4. The view I am ascribing to Dickens, that *The Merchant of Venice* serves as Shakespeare's anti-capitalist critique, with Belmont's economy of infinite generosity set against the materialism of Venice, retains its critical adherents, but Jyotsna Singh's excellent "Gendered 'Gifts' in Shakespeare's Belmont" (2000) complicates this assertion by demonstrating that the play blurs the distinction between gift exchange and the market economy, between Belmont and Venice. Singh argues that while the play does seem to prefer and advocate non-commercial systems of value, it also "repeatedly reveals the fragile and spurious nostalgia of such invocations of a pre-market world" (Singh 2000, 144).
5. Joseph Pequigney, in his study of Shakespearean same-sex love, applies to Antonio and Bassanio the category of "male homosocial desire" that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick finds in Wrayburn and Lightwood. Pequigney, however, distinguishes this desire from the frankly homosexual relationships he sees between other Shakespearean characters and uses this distinction to

contradict the critical commonplace (which I also ascribe to Dickens's interpretation of the play) that Antonio is "relegated to the outer cold" at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* (Pequigney 1992, 214).

6. In his 1989 article and the book that follows it, *Figures of Conversion* (1995), Ragussis traces the history of "figurative conversion" — Christian self-definition through the incorporation of Judaism and Jews into a Christian narrative — and the way the trope of conversion becomes part of the construction of English national identity in Victorian novels' representation of Jews. This conversion trope, however, does not seem to appeal much to Dickens, whose insistent dismissal of conversion in *Our Mutual Friend* may even be a reaction against the uses of the conversion trope in the narrative tradition.

### Online Resources

The Dickens Project / BBC. *Our Mutual Friend* [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://humwww.ucsc.edu/dickens/OMF/index.html>.

The Life & Times of Joseph Haworth [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://www.josephhaworth.com/>.

Shakespeare and the Players [cited 28 January, 2006]. [http://shakespeare.emory.edu/players\\_index.cfm](http://shakespeare.emory.edu/players_index.cfm).

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The image of Henry Irving as Shylock reproduced by kind permission of Harry Rusche and the Shakespeare and the Players Website.

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