

FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT: ESSAYS AND MINORITY REPORTS

Christopher Hitchens

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reviewed by MATTHEW SCULLY

What to make of someone who describes Mother Teresa as the "Ghoul of Calcutta"? This woman "calling herself 'Mother' Teresa," writes Christopher Hitchens in one of his *Nation* columns collected here, is "a dangerous, sinister person who properly belongs in the caboose of the Pat Buchanan train." Having once in his journalistic roving "scheduled a stop-by at the Missionaries of Charity in Bose Road," Hitchens gives this account:

Instantly put off by the mission's motto ("He that loveth correction loveth knowledge"), I none the less went for a walkabout with M.T. herself and had a chance to observe her butch style at first hand. There was something in the way she accepted the kisses bestowed on her feet, taking them as no more than her due, that wasn't quite adorable.

What's more, this same "hell bat" took donations from Charles Keating, "prostituting herself" for "the worst in capitalism":

How has the extraordinary deception of M.T. come to be perpetrated so widely? As far as one can determine, the M.T. myth began after a British poseur named Malcolm Muggeridge found himself on the steps of St. Paul's. . . . Ready to spend time—but not *too* much time—among the lepers and beggars, Muggeridge got himself to Calcutta and struck pay dirt with a flying visit to Bose Road. And a star was born.

One's first reaction is to ask simply if Hitchens's "stop-by" qualifies him to

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fault others for not spending "*too* much time" among the afflicted of Calcutta. One's second reaction is to point out that the woman had labored in obscurity and self-imposed poverty about thirty years before Muggeridge arrived with his BBC cameras. This would have been about ten years before Chris Hitchens began his own earthly mission as comfortable social critic and champion of the poor and oppressed.

A little more investigation into the M.T. deception, moreover, would have revealed that Muggeridge quietly donated all that lucre from his Christian writings to charity, chiefly to this same mission where Hitchens spent all of half an hour on his inspection tour. And one wonders how the motto "He that loveth correction loveth knowledge" should so offend a professional critic who certainly loveth *giving* correction.



But none of these reactions quite does justice to Hitchens, who is much more than the brazen little snob he seems in this passage. From a certain angle the column actually reflects one of his more admirable qualities—a scorn of cliché and equivocation. After all, a lot of us breathlessly invoke Mother Teresa the metaphor without ever really modeling our lives on hers. Here at least is someone who discards the pretense.

You can't help but admire that intensity. Hitchens is a sharp one, all right. Much like Muggeridge, in fact, he has a fluency beyond the reach of most of us, and on television is a ferociously articulate debater. Nor is it just glibness. Along with a first-rate mind he has a disorienting stock of historical knowledge—accounting, when overused, for that slightly overstuffed quality to these otherwise model essays.

The problem is figuring out exactly to what end all that intensity and anger are directed. Three hundred and fifty pages of fury and scorn make for lively reading, but the sum effect is to leave even an admirer wondering about the critic himself. His attachments can usually be discerned only through the prism of his hatreds.

Maybe this is because Hitchens is forever absorbed in secondary matters, grubby little leftist quarrels which make up the closest thing the book has to a moral theme. So in just about every other column, no matter what the topic, Nixon, Kissinger, Reagan, North, William Casey, Lee Atwater, et al., are dragged in for a dismissive roughing up. So often, indeed, as to exhaust Hitchens's resources of irony and wit and reduce him to uncharacteristically dull insults, like calling Reagan an "unashamed vulgar fraud," or Nixon a "wretched, warped, dishonest individual"—"vulgar," "vile," and "low-minded" being his stock taunts. "Allowing for the low mentality and the degeneration of the white gene pool under the influence of a decade of Reagan/Bush . . ." is typical of his strained put-downs.

True, the bitterness is relieved now and then by moments of self-deprecation, as when he writes of P.J. O'Rourke that "his efforts to be funny about Nicaragua were more successful than my efforts to be serious." But his introspection never extends to matters of substance. It would have been a nice

gesture of humility, for instance, to include here one or two of his devastating revelations on the "October Surprise" conspiracy—just to remind us that not only those vulgar fools on the right are capable of being duped. "It's not that we won't find out," he wrote of that sinister conspiracy last December. "It's that we won't find out in time," meaning before Bush left office. Lucky for Hitchens that *he* found out in time—in time to discreetly withdraw these prescient exposés from his collected works.

Likewise, there is something surreal in the air of vindication with which Hitchens writes of the "Cold War nostrums" now so clearly discredited. "The Soviet Union," he writes matter-of-factly in a July 1990 piece for *Harper's*, "did not intend to move its massed armour across the north German plain into Western Europe." Here his luck runs out, though. For it was only in March of this year that the German government released detailed plans by the East German and Soviet armies for the seizure of Western Europe—right down to ready-made maps with new street names for occupied cities, printed currency, even medals to pin on heroes of the conquest.

A world in which "vulgar fools" and "mediocrities" like Reagan are right, and properly educated sophisticates like himself wrong, is, one suspects, too unbearably mundane to contemplate. Maybe he loathes Reagan so much for the same reason he finds Mother Teresa so distasteful: they both have in different degrees the one gift he clearly lacks—the gift of simplicity.

Strange, given the range of his own resentments, to hear Hitchens fault conservatives for their "rancid pessimism about human nature." It's never clear which particular human beings he himself likes or trusts. Indeed, reading his reflections on all the mediocrities, simpletons, fools, vulgar capitalist "fat cats," liars, bores, and pious frauds who surround him, one is reminded of Newman's observation that the sinner wouldn't enjoy heaven if he went there. Hitchens takes himself to be writing in the tradition of Orwell, opposing all "smelly little orthodoxies." As a stylist he may measure up to Orwell; as an observer of men he lacks the charity and—a virtue he touts without ever quite displaying—the empathy.

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smelly little orthodoxy more than in Hitchens's treatment of ex-leftists, which sound like one of those Peoples' Meetings of old where doctrinal infractions were exposed, denounced, and swiftly dealt with. Ronald Radosh, for reporting an alarming conversation he overheard between Sandinista officers (about progress in America on the propaganda front), is a "fink" and "patriotic eavesdropper." For abandoning their post at *Ramparts*, ex-radicals David Horowitz and Peter Collier are "breast-beating recusants." For examining the faults of socialist intellectuals, ex-leftist Paul Johnson is a "would-be informer and stool pigeon"; like Muggeridge, he became a *poseur* the moment he renounced socialism.

Even Bill Clinton earns a rebuke for having second thoughts about his letter of 1969 expressing a "loathing" toward the military. Hitchens, it turns out, was an anti-war activist attending Oxford at the same time. For him the letter "breathes with much of the same spirit of those most defensible of days," though alas it was "obviously wasted on the colonel to whom it was addressed." Yes, what could an ignorant bumpkin of a colonel know of such refined sentiments?

The one time Hitchens really acted in the tradition of Orwell was in an April 1989 "Minority Report" about abortion. There were the obligatory references to the "hypocrites" and "religious cretins" on the pro-life side. But then this:

I have always been convinced that the term "unborn child" is a genuine description of material reality. Obviously, the fetus is alive, so that the disputation about whether or not it counts as "a life" is casuistry. . . . The same applies, from a materialist point of view, to the question of whether or not this "life" is "human." What other kind could it be? . . . Anyone who has ever seen a sonogram or has ever spent even an hour with a textbook on embryology knows that emotions are not a deciding factor. In order to terminate a pregnancy, you have to still a heartbeat, switch off a developing brain and, whatever the method, break some bones and rupture some organs.

The column attests to a deep, if often hidden, intellectual integrity. And its absence from the book attests more eloquently than anything included to the intimidating power of smelly little orthodoxy. □

SHYLOCK: A LEGEND AND ITS LEGACY

John Gross

Simon & Schuster/386 pages/\$25

reviewed by DONALD LYONS

Like Oedipus, Shylock is a character who has leaped out of the play that gave him birth to symbolize a disorder in the human heart. So it amounts to much more than an academic survey when John Gross, in *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, maps the theatrical, cultural, historical, and moral vibrations of Shylock over the more than 400 years since his appearance in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Gross, now theater critic of the London *Sunday Telegraph*, is the author of the superb *Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, which traced a phase of cultural history with perfect respect for the values of the mind and of the marketplace.¹

Merchant's plot derives from an obscure and brief Italian tale featuring, in skimpy detail, an unnamed Jewish moneylender who wants to exact a pound of flesh from a Christian creditor in Venice and is foiled in court by a clever lady in disguise. The most famous Jewish character on the English stage prior to *Merchant* had been Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*; Barabas was a Machiavellian monster who goes about cackling and poisoning wells (Barabas is rather a precursor of Shakespeare's Richard III than of Shylock). But behind all such tales was the medieval stereotype of the red-haired, "demonic, deicidal Jew" out for Christian blood.

Gross punctures such caricatures by introducing us to contemporaneous "real Jews, living in the real world"—that is, the Venice of the late sixteenth century (there was virtually no Jewish life in

Shakespeare's England). We meet Leone da Modena, a learned Rabbi, poet, and director of a musical academy (Shylock is presented as anti-music). Modena's colorful and very unidealizing autobiography surfaced only in the nineteenth century. "You can't help wishing that Shakespeare had been able to read it," dryly comments Gross.

Shylock was a usurer. The author briskly punctures all the theological and economic cant about usury, which is merely a quaint and hypocritical name for the movement of money—the economic engine of early capitalism. Certainly there was more Christian "usury" than there was Jewish; in *Merchant*, for instance, the high-minded high-seas merchant Antonio is far more a venture capitalist than Shylock, who is more candid, but also more conservative, about what he is doing. And Gross reminds us, even more drolly, that William Shakespeare was the son of a notorious moneylender and was likely one himself. As Stephen Dedalus cynically puts it in *Ulysses*, "He [Shakespeare] drew Shylock out of his own long pocket. The son of a maltjobber and moneylender he was himself a cornjobber and moneylender."

But, of course, Shylock becomes in the course of the play much more than the Jewish usurer of tradition. He stands forth as a highly individualized and suffering and sympathetic (to a point) human being. "I am a Jew," he says. "Hath not a Jew eyes?" The profound humanity of these words has altered—or at least complicated—the stereotype forever. These and similar moments in the play represent, in Gross's opinion, a greater achievement in the sixteenth century than a courageous gesture like George Eliot's Zionist novel *Daniel Deronda* was in 1876. Shylock is

¹Recently re-released in paperback by Ivan R. Dee, 361 pp., \$14.95.

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