
THEATRE

Dr. Miller's Transplant

By John Weightman

THE WONDERFUL THING about Shakespeare is that he is practically unbreakable. Stretch him this way and that, turn him upside down, inflate some characters and deflate others, do all the men as women and all the women as men, make him pop or baroque or existentialist, and he survives just as well as when it was the fashion to make him the perfect English gentleman, the patriot, the Christian. "Others abide our question, thou art free"—free to be turned into anything that the spirit of the times or the genius of the producer happens to be concerned with. The explanation, I suppose, is that Shakespeare operates at a quite unusual level of intellectual interchangeability; he has no opinions, prejudices, or contours, only marvelously expressed perceptions arranged in loose masses which are open to infinite manipulation. Thus Jonathan Miller is able to take *The Merchant of Venice* out of the 16th century, that is out of the violence and colourfulness of the Renaissance, and reset it in the late 19th century or *belle époque* period, the great philistine epoch following the Industrial Revolution, and it still functions up to a point. True, it shudders and jumps, and there are considerable phenomena of rejection, yet for the duration of the evening the experiment is an acceptable and fascinating one.

But why, it may be asked, was such an experiment necessary? The reason is, no doubt, that Shakespeare's one and only treatment of the Jewish question is now rather difficult to handle in a straight manner. It would be embarrassing to do Shylock traditionally, as a bearded figure in exotic garb snarling out his hatred of the Christians. Our present concern with the racial question creates no difficulty with Othello; he can be presented as a race-conscious blackamoor, because there is no irredeemable evil in his character, and in any case the main burden of guilt is borne by the enigmatic, and quite European, Iago. But Shylock, in Shakespeare's text, is clearly a diabolic pole of the action, in contrast to the strong, white radiance of Portia. He still has a great deal of the medieval monster about him, and as he whets his knife

on the sole of his shoe in ghoulish preparation for revenge, he is meant to thrill the audience with memories of all the dark sacrifices the Jews were supposed to indulge in. He is a blood-thirsty bigot, living in a state of war with the Gentiles, and only tolerated by them because he fulfils a necessary and despised role, like an Untouchable. It is true that he has a beautiful daughter who elopes with a Gentile and is received into polite society, but it is frequently the case that mythic monsters have beautiful daughters, since the fear inspired by the monster can stimulate sexual interest in the beauty that has come from the beast.

In short, Shakespeare quite frankly accepts anti-Semitism in those places where he exploits the traditional concept of the Jew. Of course, he offsets this concession to popular feeling by the big speeches in which Shylock asserts his common humanity, but the play, on a literal reading, is weighted against the Jew, as was no doubt inevitable in the religious and sociological conditions of the time. The virtuous Antonio spits on Shylock as a matter of course, the clown Gobbo is keen to leave him, his daughter abandons him without a qualm, the Duke speaks to him with dignified contempt, and Portia not only gets the better of him in the trial scene, like a virgin quelling a dragon, but also reduces him to poverty and abjuration. Then Gentile society, after expelling the Jewish monster from within its midst, enjoys a happy postlude of poetry and music, full of classical references—"In such a night as this..." The play can be read as a sort of cleansing ceremony and if, even so, Shylock rather than Portia remains the dominant figure, this is because the Devil always tends to steal the show when he gets half a chance, and Shakespeare is too good a writer not to give him a whole chance.

DR. MILLER UNDERTAKES to turn this anti-Semitic play, if not into a frankly pro-Semitic one, which would be too sentimental a thing to do, at least into an "unpleasant" one, in which all the characters are tarred more or less with the same brush. The first effect of transferring the action to the late 19th century is that the gap between Jew and Gentile is immediately narrowed. Instead of being an exotic figure from the ghetto, Shylock looks like a gentleman on the Stock Exchange, in fact exactly like the orthodox English Jews I see every Jewish holiday going past my window in their Sabbath best on their way to the synagogue. Sir Lawrence Olivier does a perfect imitation of the first- or second-generation immigrant with a business in the City and a house in Ranulf Road. This makes nonsense of a number of lines in the play about the radical difference between Antonio, who is "The Merchant of

Venice" of the title and Shylock, the usurer. Shakespeare's monster labours under the weight of the Church's reprobation, because he lives on usury. No doubt, by the time of the Renaissance, many hidden forms of usury were practised by Christian merchants, but the official condemnation still survived. At any rate, Shakespeare takes it as being fully valid. Antonio lends money without interest, and the business of the pound of flesh (which Shakespeare picked up from traditional sources, as he picked up the story of the three caskets) is more credible if we see it as a mythic reaction to the horror of usury. Antonio can accept the stipulated form of compensation as a grim Jewish/Christian jest, precisely because he is not used to thinking in terms of interest and can therefore conceive of the pound of flesh as a kind of metaphor. But by the end of the 19th century, usury was a universally accepted principle, the Jews were perfectly integrated in this respect, or rather Christian society had been integrated to them, Disraeli had been Prime Minister, Edward VII had close Jewish friends, the Rothschilds were at the height of their power, and so on. It is impossible to imagine a rich, 19th-century Jew whetting his knife on the sole of his boot to carve his due out of a Christian, and in fact Dr. Miller has to transfer the gesture from Shylock to an assistant. Dr. Miller may argue that the knife and the pound of flesh remain valid as symbols of the hostility still latent between Jew and Gentile. This is quite true, but a serious credibility gap arises from the fact that the Gentiles have to speak as if usury were foreign to them, when their dress proclaims that they are living in the heyday of capitalism. This is the major difficulty that Dr. Miller has not managed to solve. Since both Shylock and Antonio are in 19th-century dress, they cannot speak to each other as if they belonged to different worlds, yet Shakespeare's rhetoric and symbolism are based on the assumption that they do. Therefore the two actors, Sir Lawrence Olivier and Anthony Nicholls, have to give muted performances which, however interesting, impose a strain on the actual language of the text.

WHILE THUS SCALING Shylock down from the status of medieval monster to the more comprehensible role of sardonic, literal-minded, modern English Jew, Dr. Miller subtly discredits the Gentiles by undermining their poetry and introducing a strong element of "Beyond the Fringe" farce into the action. Frequently, when a character launches into a purple passage, background music strikes up in such a way as to make the lyricism just a shade too sweet to be tolerable. What, in Shakespeare's text, is presumably meant as direct enjoyment of lyrical

emotion is pushed, by the 19th-century music, in the direction of Victorian phoney-ness. A doubt is cast on Bassanio's feeling for Portia by the musical underlining of "*In Belmont is a lady richly left.*" "*Tell me where is fancy bred*" becomes a hilarious ballad sung by two simpering ladies. Even the transcendent lyricism of Act V, Scene I—

*In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand...*

is brilliantly ruined by Lorenzo being made to pace up and down with a pipe in his mouth, like an enthusiastic but slightly crass *Eng. Lit.* don quoting Shakespeare rather than acting him. In a sense, this is beautifully effective, because it emphasises the fact that Shakespeare is not at all scrupulous about where he brings in his poetry. It doesn't necessarily reinforce truth of character or situation, but may be stuffed in in handfuls simply to elevate the mood. Dr. Miller doesn't want the Gentile characters to benefit indiscriminately from such an advantage, and so he systematically sabotages their higher flights. He goes so far as to extinguish Portia's great solo: "*The quality of mercy is not strained...*" I imagine that most famous actresses of the past must have stood in the attitude of the Statue of Liberty to declaim this tirade; Miss Plowright leans across the table and, in a flat voice, develops the argument exactly in the manner used by Mrs. Barbara Castle when, as Minister for Transport, she defended the merits of the breathalyser on television.

The general effect of this process is to tarnish Shylock's adversaries. Bassanio is a rather jaded playboy who borrows three thousand ducats in order to court a wealthy heiress and so restore his fortunes. Portia is a mature, bustling lady who knows exactly which pretty young man she wants and immediately takes control of his life, although she makes a formal statement of submission. Lorenzo, Gratiano, etc., are all part of a rather heartless, upper-class set who look upon the disagreement with the Jew as an episode which interrupts the even tenor of their privileged lives. The only profoundly serious, metaphysical character is Shylock; when he has been defeated, browbeaten, deprived of his possessions and forced into apostasy, he staggers off into the wings and sets up a howl of pain comparable to the bellowing of Oedipus in the moment of tragic revelation. This howl is echoed right at the end of the play when, contrary to any indication given by Shakespeare, Jessica is left on the stage to muse alone while a Jewish chant rises in the silence. As Dr. Miller has arranged things, this chant sounds genuine, whereas the neo-Platonic ecstasy which had preceded it by a few minutes—

*Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold....*

was made to seem like Pre-Raphaelite decoration. It is really a considerable achievement to stand Shakespeare on his head in this way on the stage of the National Theatre, with the co-operation of such a body of remarkable actors.

DR. MILLER'S VIGOROUS SHIFTING of the emphasis reminds us again of some curious incidental features of the play. Perhaps they are just accidents, resulting from the fact that Shakespeare threw the borrowed elements together with more concern for immediate theatrical excitement than for fundamental coherence. But with him one can never be sure; they may be mysterious quirks of genius.

The story of the caskets is the main puzzle. Is it just a lot of nonsense that cannot be significantly related to the main action? Dr. Miller treats it as such and gets some of his funniest effects by guying the two unsuccessful suitors. The Prince of Morocco is turned into a naive, loud-mouthed barbarian (a touch of anti-wog racialism here?), while the Prince of Aragon becomes a doddering, sententious ancient who brings the house down with a lot of business about putting endless lumps of sugar into his coffee-cup. There is no need to listen to what they actually say; they create their impact merely through their comic stage presence. And since they are completely ridiculous, they devalue the whole operation. It is a foregone conclusion that Bassanio will choose rightly because, impoverished though he is, he is the only man in the running. In any case, Portia has already chosen him, and it is difficult to believe that such a strong-minded lady is really subject to an irrational condition laid down in her father's will. Moreover, the test itself is childish; how can such an international series of suitors have consistently chosen the wrong caskets? Portia dismisses the earlier ones as fools when she describes them to Nerissa, but why should she be courted only by nitwits if, as Bassanio says,

*... the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors...?*

But perhaps it is significant that, in Shakespeare's text, the two visible suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Aragon, are *not* figures of fun; they are bombastic heroes who might have come out of a tale of chivalry, and they have a touch of unreality about them, when they are compared to Bassanio.

Suppose we say that the casket business is not nonsense, to be "Beyond-The-Fringed" to the last degree to make it tolerable for a modern

audience, but myth, or perhaps more accurately a mixture of myth and realism characteristic of the transition from the medieval to the Renaissance world? Bassanio, after a hectic youth, is attracted to the lady who is going to save him both materially and emotionally, and she is the first woman who is more important to him than Antonio. She is a princess in the tower of Belmont, only to be reached by the knight who successfully passes a ritual test imposed by her father. It can happen that even a strong-minded woman has been so conditioned by her father that she is only free to choose according to the concept of maleness she has derived from him. Portia's viciousness about the earlier suitors may be an expression of her sexual impatience while she is waiting for the man she knows to be the right one. Also, all women are caskets, to be unlocked rightly or wrongly according to the behaviour of the man. One would expect an affinity between Portia and the gold casket, because her locks—

Hang on her temples like a golden fleece....

yet she does not respond to the gold and silver of high romance. The man who gets her is neither Morocco nor Aragon, who opt for gold and silver, but Bassanio (much in need of gold and silver) who opts for the workaday realism of lead. Why? Perhaps because there is a fundamental, mysterious prosiness about the sexual relationship, which is stronger than the illusions of romance. And this prosiness may not be simply economic, although economics come into it; it is a sort of resolved hostility, such as is represented by the amiable bickering about the ring, which intrudes so surprisingly on the trial scene.

IT MAY WELL BE that my suggestions are nonsense too, but I feel that Shakespeare was getting at something deeper than mere nonsense in all this. It is important for the balance of the play that Portia, like Shylock, should move between myth and realism. If she is depoeiticised from the start and turned into a straightforwardly competent, not-suffering-fools-gladly sort of person, such as Miss Plowright is bound to present in this production, she no longer comes down from the heights of allegorical sublimity to the middle ground of humanity for the meeting with Shylock, who has come up from the lower depths. She needs to be both allegorical Lady and woman, if she is to make sense of the various levels of action through which she passes. Dr. Miller shows that Shakespeare's poetry is not always to be taken at its face value, and this is a major strength; but I wonder if the pattern of ironies and sublimities is not a good deal more complex than his interpretation allows.

NOTES & TOPICS

Lenin's Heritage

By Leonard Schapiro

TYRANNY, brutality, and injustice are associated with Communists of all kinds, from China to Peru, in the past fifty years. For how much of this is Lenin to be blamed? From the days of Trotsky in the 1920s to those of the New Left in the '70s Lenin has been made to appear as the true saviour, betrayed by his epigones, who would have inaugurated the golden age of free, unalienated, socialist man. How far is this true? Now, of course, no one in his senses would equate in terms of human qualities, of intelligence or integrity Lenin, on the one hand, with a Brezhnev or a Jacques Duclos or a Walter Ulbricht, on the other. Lenin certainly invented and created the *apparatus*—the hard core of disciplined party professionals who are intended to enable the party to manipulate and control the entire country. Much of his writing after 1900 was concentrated precisely on the importance of this kind of party. But Lenin himself never became what is usually described as an *apparatchik*—the skilled, quite unscrupulous manipulator, and one who is little more. For one thing Lenin always retained, even at the most critical moments of Bolshevik power (as in 1918 or in 1921), sufficient authority to persuade and rally his colleagues without resorting either to force or to fraud. Stalin was in an entirely different position. A man with little glory to his credit in the past, apparently undistinguished both in theory and in matters of practice, with enemies on all sides who, towards the end, quarrelled even with Lenin, could stay in power only by fraudulent manipulation and ultimately, when he felt confident enough, by wide-scale terror. There is, therefore, no need to question the view, often expressed, that had Lenin lived longer things would in all probability have been very different, both in Russia and outside.

But different in what respect—in degree or in kind? Certainly, individual liberty never formed

any part of Lenin's doctrine except for purposes of polemics against the repressive character of the Tsarist régime. In 1902, in discussions about the party programme, Lenin is quite explicit: it is all right, he says, to promise the peasants all kinds of liberties during the period of the bourgeois revolution; when the socialist revolution takes place, they will turn against it, and will have to be forced. Repeatedly after 1905, he defined his idea of dictatorship as naked force, unrestrained by law of any kind. Terror was an integral part of Russian social democratic tradition, both Bolshevik and Menshevik: it was justified in the minds of these socialists by a rosy vision of the French Revolution. The class enemy would resist, and had to be destroyed. It was a natural step after 1917 to lump together as the "class enemy" the capitalist entrepreneur, the ex-police officer, the socialist who was critical of Bolshevik methods, and the peasant or worker exasperated by governmental brutality and incompetence. (The only difference was that the capitalist or ex-police officer, being more useful, stood a better chance of escaping alive.) There is no reason to suppose that Lenin thought differently in this respect, and indeed all the evidence suggests that he fully supported the need for terror right to the end of his active life.

NOW IT COULD BE ARGUED, and with some justice, that the dictatorship and the terror which Lenin envisaged before 1917 were regarded by him as a temporary necessity only. But what is to be regarded as temporary? (Forty years of terror would be needed, was what Lenin told one visiting socialist.) And, in any case, what was to succeed the temporary dictatorship and terror? In September 1917, before the seizure of power, and before the chances of it looked really promising, Lenin wrote his *State and Revolution*.¹ *State and Revolution* contains the vision of the kind of Utopia which Lenin claimed to promise. Of course, he argues, force in the form of the state, with its repressive mechanism, is necessary even after the victorious revolution: the class enemy has to be crushed. But the happy future is already in sight: the State begins to wither away immediately after the Revolution. Since the new revolutionary state power is supported by the overwhelming majority, the amount of force it has to use becomes decreasingly small. The need for rules and orders, where exploitation no longer exists, decreases: in the end there will be no need at all for rules, since all will readily and voluntarily accept the few restrictions which are required for the good life. Order will be enforced as easily as it is where passers-by intervene to protect a woman from being assaulted.

Did Lenin believe all this, Lenin, the practical

¹ He evidently attached great importance to it, because he made careful arrangements for the manuscript to be preserved "in case they bump us off." It was published in 1918, when the Bolsheviks were in power.