

# *I am a Jew: The Representation of Jews and Antisemitism in British Literature and Culture*

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to critically analyse the literary representation of Jewish people and culture and the presence of antisemitism in British literature and society through the centuries, taking into account the influence of works such as William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, the first having been crucial to define the image of “the Jew” in the socio-literary British imaginary. Written and published a few years after Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and clearly influenced by the highly negative portrayal of its main character, Barabas, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and its two-sided depiction of the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who is alternately shown as a villain and a victim, would pave the way for the subsequent portrayals of Jewish characters in British literature. The rather antisemitic, strongly stereotyped way of depicting Jews as greedy, revengeful, somewhat cruel people who purposefully isolate themselves from others and are constantly suspicious of non-Jewish people was insistently employed in 19th century novels such as Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Dickens, in particular, was known for harbouring personal antisemitic views and for being on bad terms with prominent members of the London Jewish community of his time. Such stereotypes, which are thought to have been popularised in the late 14th century, would survive well into the 20th century and permeate the works of modernist authors such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound.

**Keywords:** Jew; Jewish culture; Judaism; British literature; Antisemitism

## **Resumo**

O presente artigo tem como intuito analisar criticamente a representação literária do povo judeu e da cultura judaica e a presença do anti-semitismo na literatura e sociedade britânica britânicas ao longo dos séculos, tendo em conta a influência de obras como *The Merchant of Venice*, de William Shakespeare, *The Jew of Malta*, de Christopher Marlowe, *Ivanhoe*, de Sir

Walter Scott, e *Oliver Twist*, de Charles Dickens, o primeiro tendo sido crucial no processo de definição da imagem do “judeu” no imaginário sócio-literário britânico. Escrita e publicada alguns anos após *The Jew of Malta* e claramente influenciada pelo retrato negativo feito da personagem principal da obra de Marlowe, Barabas, a obra *The Merchant of Venice* e a representação multifacetada do agiota judeu Shylock, que é ora retratado como vilão, ora como vítima, seria responsável por orientar as representações posteriores de personagens da religião e etnia judaicas na literatura britânica. A maneira altamente estereotipada e anti-semítica de retratar os judeus como pessoas avarentas, vingativas e cruéis que isolam-se proposadamente e desconfiam constantemente daqueles que estão a sua volta foi empregada insistentemente em romances do século XIX como *Ivanhoe*, de Sir Walter Scott, e *Oliver Twist*, de Charles Dickens. Dickens, em particular, era conhecido por nutrir opiniões de caráter anti-semita e por estar em desacordo com membros importantes da comunidade judaica de Londres da sua época. Tais estereótipos, que teriam sido popularizados nos finais do século XIV, perdurariam até o século XX e permeariam as obras de autores modernistas como James Joyce e Ezra Pound.

**Palavras-chave:** Judeu; Cultura judaica; Judaísmo; Literatura britânica; Antissemitismo

## I. Introduction

Jewish characters are often found in British literary works throughout the centuries, from William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Most times, Judaism and Jewish people have been negatively depicted, especially due to the continuous antisemitic thoughts and feelings shared by the population not only in the British Isles, but in several other European countries as well. Characters such as *The Merchant of Venice*’s Shylock and *The Jew of Malta*’s Barabas are shown as extremely cruel and greedy, and *Oliver Twist*’s Fagin, one of the most famous Jewish characters in literature, is sometimes seen, by the characters around him, as the vision of evil itself. Such literary and social stereotypes are thought to have started in the Late Middle Ages and were still very present and influential in the first decades of the 20th century.

It is widely believed that the first Jewish communities of significant size came to England due to an invitation made by William the Conqueror in 1070, who believed that their commercial skills and incoming capital would make the country more prosperous. However, not much is known except that the Jews in question were merchants from Rouen and spoke a language known as Judeo-French. The new citizens were not permitted to own land and were strictly limited to the activity of money lending: back at that time, Jewish people were declared to be “property of the king” (unlike the rest of the population), which meant the monarch could appropriate Jewish assets in form of taxation.

During the reign of Henry I (1100-1135), a royal charter of protection was granted to the Chief Rabbi of London, and all his followers (Roth 10). Under this charter, Jews were permitted to move within the country without paying tolls, to buy and sell goods and property, to be tried by their peers, and to be sworn on the Torah rather than on a Christian Bible, but, although they were now free to move within the country, Jews did not settle outside London before 1135.

Every successive king after Henry I reviewed a royal charter granting the Jews the right to remain in England, but the last years of the twelfth century witnessed the beginning of persecution against Jews (most notably in 1190, when over a hundred Jews were trapped inside a tower in York and massacred by a violent mob) and the establishment of the Jewry through the so-called “Ordinance of the Jews” by Richard I in 1194, in an attempt to organise the Jewish community (though they were not confined to it by law).

Economically, Jews played a key role in the country: in the 13th century, the Church strictly forbade the lending of money for profit, creating a vacuum in the economy of Europe that Jews filled because of extreme discrimination in every other economic area: Canon law was not applicable to Jews, and Judaism does not forbid loans with interest between Jews and non-Jews. Because of this, the reputation of Jewish people as extortionate moneylenders arose, which made them extremely unpopular with both the Church and the public, and while anti-Jewish attitude was widespread in Europe, medieval England was particularly bad in this aspect. An image of Jews as diabolical figures who hated Christ started to become widespread, and myths such as the tale of the Wandering Jew and allegations of ritual murders originated and spread throughout England as well as in Scotland and Wales.

The situation only got worse for Jewish people as the 13th century progressed: in 1218, King Henry III proclaimed “The Edict of the Badge,” which required Jewish men to wear a marking badge made of white cloth at all times, including during trips, that would make it possible to distinguish them from Christians (Roth 95). The rule was constantly reinforced through the years: in 1222, it was ordered that “all Jews of either sex” should wear the identifying badge (Roth 95), and in 1275 Edward I issued his “*Statutum de Judeismo*,” which increased the size of the badge and changed its colour to yellow and ordered that all Jews older than the age of seven should wear it (Roth 96).

According to British historian and writer Cecil Roth,

every characteristic facet of medieval Jewish history, moreover, finds its reflection in England during the two centuries in which the Jews were settled in the country -

encouragement degenerating into persecution, which finally culminated in expulsion, of which England provided the first general example. (131)

For years the Jewish communities residing not only in London but in cities such as Bristol, Canterbury, Exeter, Nottingham, Oxford and Winchester as well - that is, before the decree of 1253 which limited residence to certain towns (Roth 103) - managed to live in relative harmony with their Christian neighbours and fellow citizens while being able to freely, though not without a certain degree of ever-present prejudice, work in their trades and profess their religion. The final years of the thirteenth century would bring an uncontrollable rise of antisemitic feelings within the English population and therefore an end to those years of peaceful coexistence.

The formal expulsion of Jewish people came in 1290, when Edward I, having come back from the Crusades and facing huge debts caused by the war conducted abroad, found himself in need of renegotiating a financial settlement. For that, though, he needed the Parliament's approval, and it was ready to grant the king a tax of a hundred and sixteen thousand pounds in return for the Edict of Expulsion. The king issued writs to the sheriffs of all English counties ordering them to enforce a decree to the effect that all Jews should leave England before All Saints' Day that year (Mundill 2). Jews were allowed to take their portable property with them, while their houses quickly became property of the State. Anti-Judaism, however, did not disappear with the actions taken by Edward I: it is important to have in mind that the edict was not an isolated incident, but the result of over 200 years of increased persecution.

It must be mentioned that, although the Jewish community had been officially expelled from the kingdom by Edward I, some of the so-called Marranos - Jews of Portuguese and Spanish origins who had faced forced conversion to Catholicism yet continued to practice Judaism in secret (also known as Crypto-Jews) - could be found in England in the years after the edict had been issued, the most famous of them being Elizabeth I's physician-in-chief Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese doctor of Jewish descent who had been accused by the Portuguese Inquisition of secretly practicing Judaism, which forced him to flee the country and settle in England, where he joined the Church of England and started working as the Queen's physician in 1581 (Bernard 6). Lopez was eventually sentenced to death by hanging in 1594 after being found guilty of plotting to poison the Queen, an accusation he denied until the very end and of which the Queen herself doubted (Bernard 8), and nowadays is seen as the person who could have inspired one of William Shakespeare's most famous characters, *The Merchant of Venice's* moneylender Jew Shylock.

Such persecution would last for three more centuries, and the official banishment of Jewish people from the country wouldn't end until 1656 when Oliver Cromwell, who had been ruling the British Isles as Lord Protector since 1653, overturned the Edict of Expulsion and allowed Jews to return to the lands they had been previously expelled from. Cromwell had numerous reasons to readmit the Jews back in the country, one of them (as well as possibly the most important one) being the protection and encouragement of English commerce (Roth 157): Jewish merchants had been hugely responsible for the growth and prosperity of regions such as Hamburg and Amsterdam. According to Cecil Roth, Cromwell believed that "were they persuaded to settle in London, they might do and much there as well" (158) and that "with them they would bring not only their wealth and their ability, but also their world-wide commercial connections, which must inevitably enrich their country of residence" (158). Another reason that might have motivated Cromwell, who was known as a rather tolerant man and who believed that "toleration should be stretched so far as to countenance those who deny the divinity of our Saviour" (Roth 157), to overturn the edict was the petitions made by two Marranos who visited England in the years of 1655 and 1656, one of them being Portuguese rabbi Manoel Dias Soeiro, also known by his Hebrew name Menasseh ben Israel.

On October 31, 1655, after meeting and discussing the question with both the Portuguese rabbi and Marrano trader Antonio Rodrigues Robles (who had been responsible for one of the petitions), Cromwell decided to submit his own petition to the Council of State, which called, among other things, for the official resettlement of the Jewish people in England to be allowed and for the Jews to be able to freely practise their faith. It is needless to say that the Lord Protector's petition was met with great resistance not only by his fellow statesmen but also by the civil population, who still nurtured an opinion of Jews and Judaism itself largely moulded by prejudice and false tales created and spread mainly by the Catholic church. Although facing enormous backlash even from his allies, Cromwell nonetheless decided to authorise an unofficial readmission of the Jewish community in December that year.

## **II. Of Christians and Jews: Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Elizabethan Antisemitism**

*The Merchant of Venice*, one of William Shakespeare's most famous works, is likely to have been first staged in 1598, although its date of composition is believed to be between 1596 and 1598. Considering that the Edict of Expulsion had been issued by Edward I in 1290, around 274 years before Shakespeare's birth, it is very unlikely that the writer might have met Jewish people, let alone have been familiar with them.

According to Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt, Elizabethan society would most likely have little to no contact at all with Jews or Judaism in their daily life (291). It is true that there are registers of Crypto-Jewish communities (also called Conversos) in cities such as London, and that these communities were mostly composed by Sephardi Jews of Portuguese and Spanish origins who pretended to be Christian in public yet in the privacy of their homes observed Jewish religious ceremonies such as the Sabbath and the High Holidays. However, it is not known whether Shakespeare ever came in close contact with said communities (and, again, very unlikely, though not impossible), and it would therefore appear that his portrait of Shylock, the moneylender Jew in his play *The Merchant of Venice*, is highly influenced by the antisemitic views that were shared by the majority of the public back in Elizabethan England.

Although portrayed as a villain in many different moments throughout the play, Shylock's characterisation is made up of contradictory elements which may reflect the mixture of feelings nurtured by the British citizens towards their Converso fellowmen: while he is sometimes shown as a person of extreme malice and cruelty, such as when he lends money to Antonio on the condition that the latter give him a pound of his own flesh in case he fails to pay the debt, there are also occasions in which the reader is led to believe that Shylock himself is no more than a victim to that period's prejudice (which often included acts of physical and verbal aggression) towards Jews, someone who has been hurt and who nurtures feelings of anger and hate for his aggressors, as is clear in the character's speech in the first scene of the third act when he talks about his past experiences with Antonio:

. . . He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies - and what's his reason? I am a Jew. . . . (Shakespeare, act 3, scene 1, lines 53-7)

It is important to note how, in his speech, Shylock mentions that Antonio has "scorned his nation", therefore defending that his Christian foe has offended all Jews, and not only himself: by scorning what he calls "his nation" (the word "nation" here could also be interpreted as "race" or "people"), Antonio, just as many other people had done before him, had declared war to the entirety of Jewish people. This is visibly seen in the way Shylock continues his speech by using the pronoun "us" and the noun "we": ". . . If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you

poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not seek revenge? If we are like the rest, we will resemble you in that. . .” (Shakespeare, act 3, scene 1, lines 63-7).

Even though nowadays scholars still debate whether the play is indeed antisemitic, a mere literary representation of the age’s antisemitism or even if the Bard was actually trying to fight Elizabethan antisemitic feelings with antisemitism itself, Harold Bloom defends, in his 2010 article entitled “The Jewish Question: British Anti-Semitism” and published in *The New York Times*, that the play has done “real harm . . . to the Jews for some four centuries now” (1). It is not hard to imagine the impact the actions of Antonio, who is often seen as the hero opposite to the Jewish villain, must have had on the imaginary and conscience of the English audience, such as when he tells Bassanio, while referring to Shylock, that “the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (act 1, scene 3, line 96) and when it is learnt that he has allegedly called the moneylender a “misbeliever”, a “cutthroat dog” and has “spat upon his Jewish gaberdine” (act 1, scene 3, lines 109-10). While this clearly reflects the treatment Jews received not only in Italy, where the story is set, but also in most European countries, including England, back in the 16th century, scholars such as Bloom are most probably right in affirming that the antisemitic terms, phrases and descriptions - Shylock himself is often depicted as having a big nose and big ears, which have always been common physical traits attributed to the Jews - in the play might have worsened the day-to-day prejudiced treatment received by a Jewish community who struggled to live peacefully among its Christian neighbours. The impact of Shakespeare’s work did not limit itself to 16th and 17th century Britain: hundreds of years later, *The Merchant of Venice* would prove to be a huge success in Nazi Germany, where it was staged more than 50 times between the years of 1933 and 1939 with propagandistic ends and enormous emphasis given to the negative portrayal of Shylock’s character (Heschel 291).

Conversion becomes one of the most important themes covered towards the end of the play, and although most of it concerns Jessica, Shylock’s daughter who later marries Lorenzo and becomes a Christian, renegading her father and her religious and ethnical origins, Shylock himself is also subjected to what can be understood as forced conversion, which had been a very common practice in Medieval England, especially after the promulgation of the Edict of Expulsion, when thousands of Jews had to choose between fleeing the country or giving up their faith to become Christians. When, at the end of the play, Antonio is freed from his debt without punishment and “takes mercy” upon Shylock, who would otherwise be punished for attempting the murder of a Christian, he demands the moneylender keep two

promises: the bequeathing of his property (the remaining of it, for he must also share half of his fortune with Antonio himself and with his son-in-law Lorenzo) to his daughter and her husband, and his conversion to Christianity. When he is asked by a disguised Portia if “he is contented” (act 4, scene 1, line 409), Shylock answers affirmatively and excuses himself for the last time simply by saying “he is not well” (act 4, scene 1, line 413).

In the eyes of Shakespeare’s audience, Shylock’s conversion must have meant the play was granted a kind of happy ending: both Jewish characters in the story had become, at last, Christians (even though one of them had to be forced to) and would most likely be awarded their place in Heaven when they died. The moneylender’s soul had, at the end, been saved by his Christian enemy, which only adds to the idea (a very popular one at the time) that forced conversion wasn’t a bad thing, but rather an effort to save infidels from the fires of Hell.

Something similar can be seen in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, which, although written and published a few years earlier than *The Merchant of Venice*, is often involved in debates about whether Marlowe simply meant to reproduce the antisemitism of his own age or if he actually advocated it by portraying Barabas as a cruel, heartless man who goes as far as plot his own daughter Abigail’s murder after learning she has converted to Christianity and become a nun. Abigail’s own case could easily be compared to Jessica’s from *The Merchant of Venice*: the abandonment of her father and the renegation of her religious heritage are both motivated by a sense of revenge after learning about her father’s actions concerning her love interest, Mathias, while Jessica, who feels ashamed of being her father’s daughter due to his behaviour, runs away from home and becomes a Christian so she can marry Lorenzo. It can even remain a doubt as to whether Abigail truly believes in Christian morals and principles or if her conversion was purely motivated by a desire to take revenge upon her father after learning he schemed to have her loved one killed.

Just as it happens in Shylock’s depictions and portrayals on stage, allusions to Barabas’ presumably large nose (one of the physical traits commonly attributed to Jews) are often made throughout the play, such as when his slave Ithamore says “O, brave, master! I worship your nose for this” (act 2, scene 3, line 175) and when he describes his master as “bottle-nosed” (act 3, scene 3, line 10), and just like Shylock faces severe punishment at the end of the play in the form of losing both his beloved daughter and his wealth to his Christian foes (therefore, to Christianity itself), not to mention being forced to give up his faith. Barabas also loses his daughter, who reneges

him, his wealth, and his life in which is seen by several scholars (Tkacz 47) as a kind of Biblical punishment after he sets a trap for the Turks, hoping for them to boil alive in a hidden cauldron. In the end he falls into his own trap and dies as he curses the “damned Christians, dogs, and Turkish infidels” (act 5, scene 5, line 87). Shylock and Barabas, although portrayed as ruthless, hateful villains by Shakespeare and Marlowe respectively (it must be mentioned that *The Merchant of Venice* was most probably inspired by *The Jew of Malta*, considering the latter was published around eight years earlier and taking into account the undeniable similarities between the two characters), could not escape the inevitable fall into disgrace largely motivated by sixteenth-century antisemitism, and the readers are left with a notion that a happy ending often comes accompanied by the defeat of the “other”, the “alien” or, in these particular cases, the defeat of Judaism itself.

### III. Daughters and Ducats: Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and the Perpetuation of Jewish Stereotypes

While it may seem clear to some scholars that Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Barabas himself inspired Shakespeare’s writing of *The Merchant of Venice* (which initially was known by the audiences as *The Jew of Venice*) and Shylock’s characterisation, it is the Venetian moneylender who went down in the history of literature as one of the most famous Jewish stereotypes - that is, the cruel, greedy Jew who loves money even more than his own flesh and blood - and paved the way to the future representation of other Jewish characters such as Isaac of York in *Ivanhoe*, one of Sir Walter Scott’s most famous novels.

Scott doesn’t try to hide the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock himself were highly influential in the portrayal of one of the characters of his 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*, the Jewish moneylender Isaac of York. In fact, the epigraph to chapter 22 is a quote retrieved from *The Merchant*: “My daughter - O my ducats - O my daughter!,” which means to imply that Jewish characters’ (Shylock, in this specific case) love for money is even stronger than the love they nurture for their family. What Scott does is essentially to perpetuate the antisemitic stereotypes that had already been popular long before he was born, with Shakespeare and Marlowe; by giving Isaac of York some of the same characteristics shared by other famous Jews such as Shylock and Barabas, namely avarice, suspicion towards Christians, and physical traits such as an “aquiline nose” (50), Scott makes it clear to the readers that the perception of Jewish people and Judaism hadn’t change much since the 16th century, even though by the time of *Ivanhoe* was published for the first time Jews had already been living

back in England for over 150 years, and it is estimated that the Jewish community was, in 1815, made up of around twenty to thirty thousand people, most of them living in London and working as manufacturers, exporters, jewellers, tailors, and shopkeepers (Roth 240).

The 19th century is considered the period of “emancipation” for Jews, seeing as many legislative actions had already been taken back in the 18th century in order to abolish the outstanding differences in the treatment given to Jewish people versus the one given to Christians, such as the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753 and later the Jews Relief Act of 1858, which allowed Jews to become members of Parliament (Roth 263). Although it is true that “the position of the Jews in England had in fact been ameliorated . . .” (Roth 245) and that such amelioration had been “gradual” and “spontaneous”, the antisemitic feelings and opinions nurtured by British society did not disappear overnight, and the fact that one is able to find an undeniably stereotyped representation of Jews in British literature until the first years of the 20th century (in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example) shows that hundreds of years of prejudice and preconceived notions are not simply erased with the passing of new acts and laws. When referring to the fury and antipathy, if not hysteria, with which the Naturalisation Act was received by the English people in 1753, 19th century historian John Overton writes in his book *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century* that such reaction and resentment towards the Jews indeed resembles medieval times, and that it “would really lead us to believe that the feeling towards the Jews was not much changed since the days of Front de Boeuf and Isaac of York” (Overton 396).

In his historical novel *Ivanhoe*, Scott perfectly reproduces the antisemitism of the Middle Ages through the behaviour of characters such as Cedric’s slave Wamba, who, when confronted by the possibility of having to sit side by side with Isaac of York in chapter 5, threatens to feed him “a gammon of bacon” (50), having previously said that “the swineherd will be a fit usher to the Jew” (49), and Reginald Front-de-Boeuf, who calls the Jew a “most accursed dog of an accursed race” (228) and promises to torture him in case he fails to pay a sum of a thousand pounds of silver. In chapter 33, as Robert Locksley, also known as Robin Hood, negotiates with Prior Aymer to save Isaac’s daughter, Rebecca, he tells the moneylender “do not thou interrupt me with thine ill-timed avarice” (Scott 370), implying that the Jew might actually prefer to keep his money instead of saving his own daughter. Representing Jews as greedy people was not, as mentioned before, something new in literature, and although there are moments in which Scott indeed portrays Isaac of York as a kind-hearted man and a devoted father to Rebecca, whom he eventually declares he would spend his entire

fortune to save, and reminds the readers often that the character has had to deal with prejudice and hate towards his people and religion, the idea that Jewish people are avaricious, miserly, and suspicious towards anyone who isn't a Jew is sometimes implied during the course of the novel by the quotation of lines retrieved from *The Merchant of Venice* and by the author saying that, due to the hate and persecution they suffered, the Jews had "adopted a national character, in which there was much, to say the least, mean and unamiable" (Scott 50).

Isaac of York makes a speech much alike to Shylock's when, in chapter 33, while he is being held captive along with Prior Aymer in Sherwood, he talks about the unjust treatment he receives from the people he lends money to:

*. . . I pray of your reverence to remember that I force my monies upon no one. But when churchman and layman, prince and prior, knight and priest, come knocking to Isaac's door, they borrow not his shekels with these uncivil terms. It is then, "Friend Isaac, will you pleasure us in this matter, and our day shall be truly kept, so God sa' me?" - and "Kind Isaac, if ever you served man, show yourself a friend in this need!" And when the day comes, and I ask my own, then what hear I but "Damned Jew" and "The curse of Egypt on your tribe" . . . (Scott 366-7)*

Similarly to what happens in *The Merchant of Venice*, the readers are confronted with the doubt whether Isaac is, in truth, a villain or a victim, and most deeply, whether so many years of being a victim might have shaped him into a villain.

#### **IV. The Jew: *Oliver Twist* and the shaping of Victorian Era Antisemitism**

It has been mentioned before that the 19th century was considered a period of "emancipation" for English Jews, and their living conditions improved even more in the beginning of the 1830s: Jewish people received the right to vote in 1835, two years before Queen Victoria was to be crowned, and around twenty-three years later, in 1858, Lionel de Rothschild, also known as Baron de Rothschild, became the first practising Jew to sit as a Member of Parliament due to the passing of the Jews Relief Act (also known as Jewish Disabilities Bill) in the same year and the abolishment of any statute that forbade a Jew to sit in Parliament (Roth 263); thirty-three years after being given the right to vote, Benjamin Disraeli, a convert to Anglicanism, would be the first person of Jewish origins to become Prime Minister.

Even though Jewish people were now closer to receiving equal social and legal treatment to that enjoyed by Christians, common prejudices and stereotyped views remained within most British people's cultural imaginary, and one proof of that is the

publishing of one of the most clearly antisemitic novels of the 19th century, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, which features Fagin, a Jewish thief - or "a receiver of stolen goods", as he is described in the book - who teaches children, including Oliver Twist himself, to pickpocket in exchange for shelter. Fagin, sometimes simply called "the Jew" or "the old man", is described by Dickens as a "loathsome reptile" (155) and as having "fangs such as should have been a dog's or rat's" (404). He acts cruelly towards the children he shelters, constantly beating and starving them if they do not bring back as much money as he desires, and is indirectly but intentionally responsible for the death of one of his former pupils, Nancy, after he falsely informs her lover, Bill Sikes, that she has betrayed him. American literary critic Irving Howe considered Fagin an "archetypal Jewish villain" in his introduction to the 1981 Bantam Books edition of *Oliver Twist*, and scholars often argue that Isaac "Ikey" Solomon, a Londoner Jewish criminal who was briefly famous in the beginning of the 19th century, served as inspiration for the character (Hawes 75).

The description of Fagin's physical appearance and personality traits are enough to instigate, both in the characters within the novel and the readers themselves, the idea that the Jewish thief is the image of pure evil itself, or even the Devil, for he is occasionally referred to as "the old one" by people around him. An ugly, cruel, simpering old man, Fagin seems to treasure nothing but the stolen money and goods the children bring him and have real affection towards no one; the fact that he is often referred to as simply "the Jew," especially in situations in which he behaves cruelly (such as when beating up the children), intends to link his ethnic and religious origins to his physical and psychological traits. In chapter 52, entitled "Fagin's Last Night Alive," traces of his inhumanity are mentioned as he awaits, inside a cell, for the day of his hanging: "*As it came on very dark, he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold; some of them through his means . . . . He had seen some of them die, - and had joked too, for they died with prayers upon their lips*" (Dickens 460).

As it is mentioned that Fagin joked about the deaths of men he had seen on the scaffold, including some whose deaths he had been indirectly responsible for (as happens to Nancy later on the story), his cruelty is clearly undeniable. The fact that Dickens himself made several antisemitic declarations back when the novel was first published, such as when, in a letter to Mrs. Eliza Davis, he writes that he made Fagin a Jew because "it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that the class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew" (Lane 94), proves that, although legal and social improvements had been made all through the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, antisemitism was still very much alive in literature and popular culture, with Jewish villains being found in a number of literary productions and Jews being portrayed frequently as stereotypes rather than actual human beings.

In his subsequent works, namely his last novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens portrays Jewish characters in a much more positive way: Mr. Riah (the word “riah” meaning “friend” in Hebrew), though a moneylender (here the stereotype remains), is shown as a profoundly sympathetic character who cares for and helps two girls, Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexam, and even takes a risk for one of them at one point in the novel. Some critics actually believe that the positive characterisation of Riah was Dickens’ way to apologise for Fagin’s negative portrayal in *Oliver Twist* (Lane 98). Nevertheless, like Shylock, Fagin is always remembered as one of the most remarkable Jewish villains in British literature.

## V. Conclusion

As with every kind of prejudice, antisemitism and the act of stereotyping Jewish people had numerous peaks through literary history, in different time periods and contexts. It is interesting to perceive how a nation’s hate for a particular people escalated so quickly and culminated in the persecution and eventual expulsion of said people, but also how this hate and the prejudiced notions that came with it directly played a role in the creation of some of the most emblematic, controversial, fascinating characters in British literature of all times. If one ever asked, “what do Shakespeare, Marlowe, Scott, and Dickens have in common?,” the answer would be that, although they belonged to different ages (except for Shakespeare and Marlowe, who both lived and wrote in the late 16th century), these four authors portrayed their Jewish characters in a very similar way and were responsible for defining a cultural and literary stereotype that would endure for hundreds of years and influence many other authors, not to mention helping shape British socio-literary imaginary and English identity itself. While characters such as Shylock and Fagin might have simply reflected what sixteenth and eighteenth-century society thought of Jews, the specific, stereotyped way in which they were portrayed is also likely to have incited further hate and persecution towards Jewish people.

It is historically known that such hate and persecution would eventually pave the way for the Holocaust, and that the Jewish stereotypes, both physical and psychological, depicted in several literary pieces would also be spread through propagandistic means in Nazi Germany and other European countries such as France. In 20th century British literature, it is still possible to find negative portraits of Jews,

namely in Ezra Pound's *Canto 52*, in which the author writes about Jewish people's "obsession" with money in a rather antisemitic way, and even replaces the name Rothschild, a common Ashkenazi last name, with "Stinkschuld" (257).

Although recent historical, literary, and social efforts have been made in order to erase the negative image built upon Jews and Judaism itself, the stereotypes previously mentioned have been around for a very long time and are not easily deconstructed or forgotten by those who have been brought up with preconceived notions which were largely spread by the media. One hopes that the characters mentioned will remain as important figures in literary history, but also as examples of a stereotyped vision that gradually ceases to exist as the years go by.

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