

# Sizing Up Shylock's Name Again

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Whence the name of the Hebrew moneylender Shylock? Although Gross has a chapter title relating to this, the name sounds basically more British than anything else. Indeed, the dramatist's father was himself a lender of money and often considered a Catholic recusant, so Shylock's name connects with that of another such recusant, *Shacklock*, a name with curious associations with *Sherlock*. Suggestions of the German *scheu* and Scottish *loch* with *Shy-lock* are also possible. The name may also have connections with John Florio.

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John Gross's comprehensive new book on the moneylender of *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>1</sup> fails to come to terms with the name itself, even when an entire chapter is entitled "Shylock is My Name." Provided are the usual, suggested etymologies, including an analogy in the Old Testament and the Hebrew meaning *cormorant*, but these connections are not very close or helpful apropos of the plot; nor is there any real likelihood that Shakespeare would have had familiarity with such relatively obscure words. Because of the general lack of documentation throughout the book, no consideration of other possible, published etymologies appears. One passing hint, however, happens to point aslant to a previous consideration of which I am culpable, one which might even now be glanced at again.<sup>2</sup> This involves his passing reference to the Master Detective: "In the extent of his fame Shylock belongs with...Sherlock Holmes" (187). Although a few other forenames are mentioned, the Shylock/Sherlock correlation, however qualified, deserves at least passing reinvestigation under the lens. Let us see how.

Let us hasten to affirm at once that no pre-Shylockian Sherlock now is in the record. On the other hand, it is of curious enough interest that both Shylock and Sherlock have had their nomenclature traced to a certain Shacklock, though in the first case the name is that of a Catholic recusant and in the second that of a cricketplayer. Still, two things related to the same thing may, in some quasi-mathematical guise, relate to each other. Gross's hint therefore offers a re-examination procedure which, even if coincidentally, may be of some assistance to the alert reader open to new plausible resonances.

The most important point is that one Richard Shacklock belonged to a well-known group of British recusants who compared their alienated plight to that of the Jewish people historically, one such recusant even being on record for associating the story of Laban in the Bible that way, even as Shylock himself does later, though in a rather different context (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.71).<sup>3</sup> Shylock's having to convert to orthodox Christianity at the end (the play taking place in Roman Catholic Italy) means that his name lends a properly ironic touch to his conversion-to-be, that is if his Catholic-sounding name already prompts what is readily in store for him. It might be added then that this irony is evident also in the familiar "pound of flesh" motif: the fact that his demand, which cannot be literally obtained without the drawing of blood (and hence murder of his victim), can be met on the preternatural level through his having to accept perforce and thereby consume the Real Presence in Holy Communion. Although such a reading can enlist a "cannibalistic" interpretation of what was clearly meant to supersede such a primitivistic view, it need not be taken on such a pagan-like level, but can instead be relegated to what anthropologists and psychologists have allowed for as acceptable "omophagia." The extent to which Elizabethan playgoers may have been consciously aware of this is open to question, but then the same happens to be true of Caliban at the tail end of *The Tempest*: he, too, is obliged to "seek for grace," as he admits, and thereby live up to a sublimated form of the obvious anagram which his name calls forth. Again, theatergoers may be pardoned for ignoring this submerged meaning, but the kinship of Shylock and Caliban in such a symbolic respect augurs

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for at least subliminal significance. (Caliban, too, has Italian friends.)

Demurrers may tentatively arise owing to the possibility of other plausibly relevant onomastic associations. For example, because Shylock cites Frankfurt (3.1.84), could not his name have some sort of Germanic resonance? A modernized production I witnessed at Stratford-upon-Avon (1993) even had him uttering certain Yiddish expressions. It might be proposed that the German word for *shy* is *scheu* and that a hesitancy to indulge in battle (except when self-interest is obviously at stake) has been ethnically linked with German Jewish people all too often; to express it most decorously, the penchant might better be phrased as their "horror of war." Indeed, Jesus Himself emphasized such passivity, at least in terms of the standard pacifist interpretations of the Bible. Hence Shylock would exhibit a certain "shyness" in disdaining to keep company, on the whole, with his gentile brethren (1.3.30-38). Whether such a broad reading would be acceptable as objective enough may perhaps be questioned, at least nowadays in the wake of World War II; in any case, a similar argument could be made for his name as having Scottish rather than Hebrew characteristics, and these ought to be judged on a similar level. *Shy* can stand on its own without any recourse to German.

For instance, even *if* the first syllable of Shylock's name also might suggest a kind of Germanic origin, so the last might hint at the familiar waterway in Scotland known as the *loch*, the *OED* providing sufficient evidence of early usages of this word this way. So Shylock's concentrated concern with funds even for their own sake, as it were, might then be compared with the age-old English penchant for finding the Scots stingy and thereby money-grubbing. Their so-called opportunism has even been summoned as providing a basis for the tragedy of *Macbeth*, though too much can be made of such an analogy, admittedly.

Yet the trouble is that one such connotation (that of the German Jew) would effectively cancel out the other (that of a possible Scottish innuendo), thereby hinting at both views as being ultimately too subjective for truly serious consideration. The charge of bias could also now be leveled, but the further question

then would be whether such prejudice need be wholly on the part of the critic or whether it might not be also (or rather) imputed to the writer himself or perhaps his age, which could well have prompted his critical reactions or attempt at verisimilitude. So why get involved with this?

In contrast, the "recusant" solution here proposed again would tie in with Gross's own evidence that John Shakespeare, often himself considered a Catholic recusant, was a prototype for Shylock. In particular, the father was himself a money-lender (47); the son himself, as Gross shows, citing E. A. J. Honigmann, may even have charged interest on loans. The most curious evidence to this effect, as he points out, is the "one surviving letter addressed to him by his 'loving good friend' Richard Quiney in 1598," for Quiney, originally a fellow Stratfordian but then in London, had "requested a loan of £30" (47). As Denis Kay has also recently shown,<sup>4</sup> "recent research in the Public Records has unearthed some further evidence that John Shakespeare was a business man on a substantial scale and that, as well as trading in large quantities of wool, he was also involved in lending money" (13). The most recent confirmatory evidence for this thesis is that Falstaff's original prototype, Sir John Oldcastle, though often taken as strongly Protestant, was at times admired by Catholics. In a note on a Catholic Oldcastle, R. W. F. Martin<sup>5</sup> finds a positive reference to him in Jane Owen's *An Antidote Against Purgatory*, a Catholic work which then alludes to Falstaff as well in this connection. In the same issue of the journal in which Martin's research appears, Eric Sams, writing on Oldcastle and the *Oxford Shakespeare*,<sup>6</sup> claims that though "Shakespeare was said to have 'died a Papist,'" there is "abundant evidence he was held to have lived and thought as one too" (184).<sup>7</sup> Sams's conclusions are at odds with Martin's in a sense, in that he disputes the entire Oldcastle/Falstaff connection, but, to sum things up, any connection between Oldcastle and either John Falstaff or Catholicism works hand-in-glove with Garry O'Connor's recently stated belief that Falstaff was ultimately based on Shakespeare's father,<sup>8</sup> two of whose "associates who hid from the law and from creditors" being "William Fluellen and George Bardolphe, names which Shakespeare later revived in *Henry IV*

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and *Henry V* (19). Ironically, both Falstaff and Shylock may have a similar biographical origin.<sup>9</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Namely, Shylock. Gross's title reflects the notion that the play appeared as early as 1592, whereas it is generally thought to have been composed in 1596-7. See Halliday 311.

<sup>2</sup>See my "Key." I confess being guilty of a little titular coyness here, but perhaps Shakespeare's own flair for punning provides at least a wholesome precedent. Richard Coates, in his annotated bibliography for the special Shakespeare issue of *Names*, was definitely not captivated by my suggestion in his annotation (211), but his gloss ("Possible references to historical personages; most implausible") may be also misleading and in need of a gloss now itself. Presumably what he *meant* is that I provide such "possible references" in summary form but specifically reveal then that *most of them* are implausible. Certainly I refrain from promoting a variety of references as plausible on my own (a rather implausible thesis in itself) but rather single out *one* among the candidates as worth dealing with: my original suggestion then is that an *English* name is the most likely progenitor.

<sup>3</sup>Shakespearean references are to the Pelican ed.

<sup>4</sup>His is the most recent and liveliest of recent Shakespeare biographies, though he does also, to my mind, indulge in some unwarranted speculation (e.g., assuming that *Cardenio* is the name of a long lost play by the man from Stratford, the evidence for which is extremely sketchy).

<sup>5</sup>The title of the article can be misleading, for Oldcastle was the recognized prototype for Sir John Falstaff, whose only affinity with Catholic behavior may be in his indulgence in alcoholic beverage.

<sup>6</sup>Sams is no doubt the most controversial Shakespearean of note operative today. He rejects, for instance, new theories of the *Oxford Shakespeare* edition, in this case notably Gary Taylor's substitution of the name of *Oldcastle* for *Falstaff* in *1 Henry IV*. Taylor's purpose was to try to revert to the dramatist's original intent.

<sup>7</sup>Yet most Shakespeareans, even some Catholic ones, would still contend that the Stratford Bard was later a conformist and followed the Church of England, as seen in his prominently echoing *The Book of Common Prayer*, as is widely recognized, in *Hamlet*.

<sup>8</sup>O'Connor's authority comes from his practical work on the stage. He was former Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in England. Cf. the similar interplay of syllables in the names: *Fal(l)-staff* and *Shake-speare*. Kay provides evidence that the latter name was sometimes taken as having an unfortunate punning effect and that at least one person is on record for having changed it: "Hugh Shakespeare, a Fellow of Mertin College, Oxford, changed his name to read 'Hugh Sawnders' because it was then said 'Shake-speare' has such a bad repute" (5).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Ashley, who contends that "Florio (if Rowse is right in thinking he had *marrano* origins) may have something to do with Shylock" so that "Shakespeare obtained much" from this friend instead of from any "supposed visits to Italy" (49).

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