THEATER; Shylock and Nazi Propaganda

By JOHN GROSS

Shylock has traditionally been one of Shakespeare's most provocative and analyzed characters. In his new book, "Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy," to be published this week by Simon & Schuster, John Gross traces the history of the character and the play, "The Merchant of Venice," from their origins to modern times. In this excerpt, Mr. Gross, the theater critic of The Sunday Telegraph of London, explores how Shylock was used as a propaganda tool in Nazi Germany.

We have no way of knowing what was in Shakespeare's mind when he began writing "The Merchant of Venice." Even if we had, what he intended and what he accomplished are not necessarily the same thing. "Never trust the artist, trust the tale." Still, we can take a reasonable guess at his intentions, and we can reasonably assume that they were at least partly fulfilled.

Shylock is meant to be a villain. There can be arguments about his motives and his personality, but there can be no serious argument about his behavior. Given the opportunity -- one that he himself has created -- he attempts to commit legalized murder.

He is also a Jewish villain. He did not have to be. Christians were moneylenders, too, and the story would have worked perfectly well with a Christian villain. What would be almost inconceivable on the other hand would be for him to be Jewish -- in a play written in the 16th century -- and for it not to count, except in some minor or attenuated sense. Jewishness is one of his primary characteristics; he emphasizes it himself, and it is emphasized for him by everyone with whom he has dealings.

His Jewish villainies, moreover, are strictly traditional. He is a usurer; he is cunning and cruel; he pursues a vendetta against Christians -- or against their noblest available representative. Behind his plot against the altruistic Antonio, who must face the consequences of having signed a defaulted loan, lie fantasies of ritual murder that ultimately go back to the Jews' supposed role in the Crucifixion.

As a villain, Shylock was supposed to be a hate figure. As the villain in a comedy, whose designs were thwarted, he was, paradoxically, someone to be taken seriously. Invested with Shakespearean power and, in time, with Shakespearean prestige, Shylock the Jewish villain became part of world mythology. He may not have added anything to existing stereotypes, but as the most famous Jewish character in literature he helped to spread them and to keep them vigorously alive. He belongs, inescapably, to the history of anti-Semitism.
The year 1933 was one of the great dividing lines of history. Anti-Semitism of the most vicious kind had become the official policy of one of the most advanced nations in the world. Whatever other cultural changes they inflicted, the Nazis retained the traditional German respect for Shakespeare -- "unser Shakespear" ("our Shakespeare").

During the period in which the Nazis held power, almost all his plays were produced in Germany, some of them many times over; in September 1939 he was the one author exempt from the official ban on enemy dramatists. His works were extolled for the lessons they offered in patriotism, the need for strong leadership, the overriding claims of the state. Eventually, it is true, a number of them were suppressed: "Othello," for example, on racial grounds, "Antony and Cleopatra" because it was "too perverse and effeminate." But in general the esteem in which he was held never wavered.

"The Merchant of Venice" enjoyed special popularity from the outset. In 1933 there were no less than 20 separate productions; between 1934 and 1939 there were another 30. The emphasis was in every case strongly anti-Semitic (how could it have been otherwise?), and there were commentators on hand to make sure that audiences did not miss any of the implications.

In 1935, for instance, a newspaper in Konigsberg carried an essay to coincide with a production in the local theater. The writer conceded that at first sight there was something worrying about a play in which a Jew was portrayed as hard-working and thrifty, and the Christians could easily be mistaken for irresponsible idlers. But Shylock, properly understood, was cowardly and malicious, while in the trial scene both Antonio and his friends acted with a selflessness that proved their true worth. At the climax, two opposing worlds stood revealed, and "the secret of these worlds has only now become clear to us, since we now know that they are the expression of racial opposites." Without being fully aware of what he was doing, Shakespeare had depicted the essence of the situation, "and unfurled a problem that is of the highest relevance to us today."

There was no need, after all, to resort to textual innovations or directorial tricks to raise tension inside a theater. It was enough to recall events in the world outside: the same hostile portrayal of Shylock was liable to seem far more charged after 1933 than it would have been before.

When the director Paul Rose staged the play in Berlin in 1942, he nonetheless felt it necessary to whip up additional animosity. Rose's production had a commedia dell'arte flavor; it emphasized the festive aspects of the story -- so much so that for a time the critic of the official Nazi newspaper, the Volkscher Beobachter, was afraid that the playwright's message was going to get lost in "the play of hands, feet and bodies." But everything turned out well. In the trial scene the message reasserted itself, "like an accusation against the race." Rose had scattered a number of extras in the audience, to shout and curse when Shylock appeared: "The voice of the people chimed in from the gallery, their angry cries and shrill whistles echoed from the stalls."

The most notorious "Merchant of Venice" of the Nazi years was the production that opened at the Burg theater in Vienna in May 1943. The play was put on at the express command of the gauleiter, or district leader, for Vienna, Baldur von Schirach. The director, Lothar Muthel, had been a member of the Nazi party since 1933; Shylock was played by Werner Krauss -- a great actor, probably best remembered today for his appearance in the film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari."
By 1943 there were very few Jews left in Vienna. In the course of the previous year most had been deported amid horrifying and pitiful scenes. And Baldur von Schirach was proud of the part he had played in their removal. Krauss had been a much-acclaimed Shylock in the 1920's, but even more to the point he had lent his talents to the 1940 film "Jew Suss," in which he had played all the Jewish roles -- one nastier than the next -- apart from that of Suss himself.

"Jew Suss" marked a new stage in Nazi propaganda. It had been made, on Goebbels's instructions, when the Final Solution was already taking shape; it was repeatedly shown in occupied territories on the eve of roundups and "actions" to intensify anti-Jewish feeling and dispel any possible sympathy for the victims.

Lothar Muthel claimed that he wanted to present "The Merchant of Venice" as a "fantastical comedy," and Krauss insured that it was comedy of the most sinister kind. According to one critic, his first entrance was enough to make the entire audience shudder: "With a crash and a weird train of shadows, something revoltingly alien and startlingly repulsive crawled across the stage." Another account was more specific:

"The pale pink face, surrounded by bright red hair and beard, with its unsteady, cunning little eyes; the greasy caftan with the yellow prayer shawl slung round, the splay-footed, shuffling walk; the foot stamping with rage; the clawlike gestures with the hands; the voice, now bawling, now muttering -- all add up to a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanliness, emphasizing danger through humor."

In 1948 Krauss appeared before a de-Nazification court in Stuttgart. One of the documents he produced in his defense was a letter he had received from Bernard Shaw, asserting that to hold him responsible for the crimes of the regime he had served was "vindictive stupidity." In spite of this, he was convicted as a "minor offender" and fined. But it did not take him long to work his way back to respectability. During the 1950's he received a number of high honors, both from the state and from the German theatrical profession.

Exactly where the play now stands depends on one's wider reading of European history. I personally think it is absurd to suppose there is a direct line of descent from Shylock's enemies to Hitler, but that is because I do not believe the Holocaust was in any way inevitable. I do believe, on the other hand, that the ground for the Holocaust was well prepared, and to that extent the play can never seem quite the same again. It is still a masterpiece; but there is a permanent chill in the air, even in the scenes where Portia presides, even in the gardens of Belmont.

Photos: Werner Krauss as a notorious Shylock in Vienna in 1943 -- A sinister comedy. (pg. 5); Werner Krauss, left, in the title role, with Conrad Veidt in "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" (1919) -- Later, a malignant Shylock. (Culver Pictures)(pg. 33)