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JAMES SHAPIRO, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 317 pp.

In his new book, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro points out that stories can tell us as much about the people who tell them as they tell us about the people of whom they are told. This statement informs his study of a variety of narratives about Jews through which he claims to gain "unusual insight into the cultural anxieties felt by English men and women" during the early modern period (1). The resulting work contains a tremendous number of references, some extremely obscure, to Jews and Judaism by predominantly English writers from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, and Shapiro's bibliographic references will be extremely useful for anyone interested in the characterization of Jews and Jewish behaviors as portrayed by early modern English writers. While these predominantly negative references may indeed tell us something about the cultural anxieties of the English population during the early modern period, it remains unclear at the book's end whose cultural anxieties precipitate these representations. Do concerns about Jews and "Jewishness" spring from the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities or, as Mr. Shapiro's study inadvertently demonstrates, from attempts by the Christian communities to determine their differences from one another with the Jew functioning as a marker of otherness.

The lack of any specific conclusions regarding the relationship between these representations of Jews and the development of a specifically English identity derives from Shapiro's overdetermination of Jews and Jewishness in his examination of English cultural and religious texts. Stubbornly maintaining the importance of Jews as a *sui generis* influence in the development of English cultural identity, Mr. Shapiro's suggestion that "to speak of race and nation as primarily class-based, or as emerging independent of each other, or for that matter, independently of conceptions of Jewish racial and national identity is to arrive at a very distorted notion of early modern thought" demonstrates the burden he places upon Jewish identity and its influences (226; my emphasis). The problem with such a proposition is two-fold. First, by making this claim Shapiro establishes a particular minority population as central to the development of identity in general which prevents him from investigating the more general problem of developing a vocabulary of identity, be the orientation political, religious, or sexual. As presented by Shapiro, Jews play an

inadvertently large role in shaping the identity of non-Jews. But Shapiro's "privileging" of the Jewish position appears to be more a reaction to than an interpretation of the anti-Jewish argument which insists that Jewish otherness be specifically marked and made distinct from English Christianness. In effect, Shapiro validates the very issue he claims he is attempting to explicate. The result is a continuation of the cycle of Jewish distinctiveness marking off Christian distinctiveness and vice versa.

Secondly, while Mr. Shapiro's investigation includes the observations of some early modern Jewish writers he does not provide a historical context for reading the writings of Jews in early modern England and Europe, an oversight which weakens his argument here. Mr. Shapiro's assumption that Jews and non-Jews desired to participate in a common legislative and judicial system, something which was virtually inconceivable, and in fact unavailable, to any Jewish community prior to the Emancipation in France in 1791 is a case in point. It is not clear that such "equality" was something that was desired by the Jewish community. Certainly Salo Baron, in his article "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?" argues quite cogently that the modern Jewish assumption regarding the oppressive nature of the feudal system requires reconsideration. Jewish communities in Europe did not find their separate status wholly disadvantageous, Baron suggests, and they ultimately paid the price of their "equality" by relinquishing their right to forms of self-government within the larger state. Such an option, however, was not available to the Jews of Shakespeare's England, or to the Jews affected by the Jew Bill of 1753. In not recognizing the significantly different legal realities for Jews and non-Jews in the early modern period (a historical designation which has only recently gained viability in discussions of Jewish history), Mr. Shapiro's conclusion ignores a fundamental difference in the way that Jewish communities saw themselves in relation to their non-Jewish contemporaries, and this sense of self-perception seems essential in developing a context for creating identity—be it the identity of the Jewish community or the English community in response to a Jewish presence. If Mr. Shapiro's references to "racial and national identity" mean to suggest parity in legal terms, certainly this was not being considered as a possibility by either side, and this difference in outlook needs to be reflected in Mr. Shapiro's comments. In fact, if Salo Baron's work is to be taken seriously, Jewish communities of the seventeenth century had at least some incentive for maintaining their difference (national?, racial?,

clearly religious). Since Jewish religious practice was already considered foreign and illegal in England, one remains perplexed regarding the continued anxiety caused by the apparently ambiguous status of Jews. Perhaps, if Mr. Shapiro's inquiry had included a contextualization of the early modern Jewish writers he cites, a productive contrast could have been established in order to demonstrate the difference between issues of exclusion and inclusion, specifically how representations of Jews by both Jewish and English writers articulate an anxiety about Englishness as an exclusive category (since the idea of Jews as outsiders really does not seem to be a problem for either community), while the specifically negative representations of Jews by English writers articulate anxieties of inclusion or a lack of distinctiveness and difference, at a time when a variety of English religious movements find themselves confronting issues of religious tolerance and the development of a secular world.

Additionally, the fact that Jews appear as radically "other" while their Jewishness remains so difficult to define further complicates Shapiro's argument here by leaving the reader unsure whether his goal involves defining Jewishness in addition to Englishness. The problem of defining Jewishness is even further complicated by the fact that the meaning of the word "Jewishness" changes at some point between its appearance in the mid-sixteenth century and its use in the early nineteenth century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word "jewishness" makes its first appearance in print in 1549, but only as a way of referring to "the religious system of the Jews." It is not until the early nineteenth century that the term takes on an extra-religious character, referring to the vaguer notion of a "Jewish quality or character." It is plausible that the more ambiguous sense of the word "Jewishness" as Mr. Shapiro employs it—"Even as England could be defined in part by its having purged itself of Jews, English character could be defined by its need to exclude 'Jewishness,'" (7) or "English anxiety that Jewishness was on the verge of reasserting itself from within intensified in the decades following the Reformation..." (8)—did not exist in early modern England, given the dictionary parameters. When Mr. Shapiro invokes the term as the character which embodies the antithesis of "Englishness" he seems to mean it in its second and anachronistic sense.

But why would Mr. Shapiro, an excellent scholar and sensitive reader, introduce this term in an inappropriate context? Perhaps because the issue his book addresses, an issue implicitly present but never explicitly mentioned and which lurks behind the very "Jewish

question" of *Shakespeare and the Jews*, is the Holocaust and not early modern interpretations of Shylock or that character's influence in rescinding the Jew Bill of 1753. While Mr. Shapiro may be correct in assuming that the modern conception of "Jewishness" was developing in early modern England, it seems unlikely that this connotation served as the foil for Englishness per se; rather, Mr. Shapiro imports the questions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Who is a Jew?, What is a Jew?, Is Judaism racial, cultural, credal?—into the early modern period when the more relevant question raised by the Reformation and counter-Reformation is clearly who and what was a true Christian. And while the existence of Crypto-Jews or Marranos may have further complicated this question, Mr. Shapiro's argument far overstates their influence in determining such concepts as Englishness and authentic Christianity. While the Jewish community may have offered the English an agreed upon "other" upon which to project particular expressions of anxiety, it seems far more likely that definitions of identity were being determined *vis-à-vis* other Christian communities and nations rather than through comparisons with the Jewish population.

That Mr. Shapiro seems unable to disentangle contemporary Jewish issues from those raised by early modern polemicists speaks profoundly to his rereading of the early modern period from a post-Holocaust perspective, although he never acknowledges the profound effects of these modern events on his own intellectual pursuit. Shapiro's describing of Edward I's policies as "*Judenrein*" (53), without pointing out the problematical application of this term to medieval historical events speaks to Shapiro's projection of contemporary anti-Jewish sentiment onto the early modern period. Similarly, Mr. Shapiro indulges in his own polemical forms of interpretation. While he steadfastly maintains that English writers project their cultural anxieties onto Jews, he makes no such claim for Jewish depictions of Christians. In his reading of Samuel Usque's "wildly inventive account of the Expulsion" from *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* he points out that "Usque hits on a number of fears—especially of being seduced by Jews and of turning Jewish—that continued to trouble the English well into the eighteenth-century" (50), but such a position ignores the fact that Usque was himself a Jew writing in Portuguese. Usque's audience was not the English public (possibly not even the Christian public, since Ferrara, where the book was originally published, had a large Jewish population after the Expulsion), and the anxieties he expressed are more likely those that Jews

felt about Christians than those which Christians experienced about Jews.

"Stories retain their currency," Shapiro remarks in his conclusion, "because they tell us what we want to hear, even if at some level we know them to be untrue" (225). In reading *Shakespeare and the Jews* one comes to realize that the anti-Jewish narratives of the early modern period still retain an unsettling effect, regardless of the fact that we do know that they are untrue. This is the most profound and disquieting lesson of Mr. Shapiro's work—that we are still familiar with and continue to contend with the anti-Jewish representations of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries. Mr. Shapiro's compilation of sources is vast and impressive, his reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* intelligent and complex. It is the absence of any acknowledgment of the historical complexities of his approach to the subject at hand which complicates this book. The terms of the debate are so contemporary and the issues raised in the very invocation of "the Jewish question" so profound for late twentieth century thinkers that to neglect a discussion of their presence is to avoid confronting the ever-present shadow of the Holocaust on the contemporary Jewish intellectual scene.

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