Chapter 8

Imagining “the jew”: Dickens’ Romantic Heritage

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Fagin, in *Oliver Twist*, is usually read as an expression of the author’s anti-Semitism or, alternatively, as an attempt to create a “representative” Jew, while Riah, in *Our Mutual Friend*, is understood to be Dickens’ attempt to correct the “bad” Jew in the earlier novel. From this perspective, Riah can be viewed as either an expression of contrition and atonement, or a reflection of changed attitudes toward the Jews and their improved socio-economic position in the period between the two novels.

This chapter attempts to avoid the fallacies of these approaches to the literary text by restoring the context of cultural discourse in nineteenth-century Britain in which the construction of “the jew” bolstered a class-determined ideology and contained response to the horrific conditions among the outcasts of London and other major cities at the height of triumphant capitalism. There were diverse and conflicting descriptions of the Jew, and these variously position “the jew” within racist and misogynist perceptions of the other, the female, the Irish, and the filthy disease-ridden inhabitants of “criminal” dens and promiscuous “sinks of iniquity.” The figure of the Old Clothes Man in particular locates “the jew” within the larger anxieties of contamination of nationhood, class, and domesticity, but it is also associated with the legendary Wandering Jew, whose condemnation to eternal banishment is open to Romantic readings such as Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner or Byron’s Cain. The legend was highly assimilable to the figure of the wanderer prominent in the Romantic poets’ creative consciousness and in their actual situation of exile and wandering.

Dickens was drawing on mythical material rooted in English and Western culture that resounded with theological meaning and cultural memory. The satanic Jew’s role as anti-Christ, for example, surfaced in “The Prioress’ Tale,” and Chaucer’s story would have been remembered
by readers of Dickens’ “Parish Boy’s Progress,” which tells of the temptation by the Jew of an innocent Christian child. The reception of Shakespeare’s Shylock, in particular, reflected historical debates over power politics, usury, equity, and money, for which “the jew” served variously as foil or scapegoat. The Jew was the international, extra-territorial evil genius, like Marlowe’s Barabas, capable of everything from poisoning wells to crooked brokering—the “trade” he teaches Ithamore—and therefore a suitable figure for the Machiavellian machinations of modern politics. In Fagin we recognize the stage Jew with his red hair, which traces his lineage to the satanic figure of Judas. The arch-villain of London’s underworld, Fagin is a spendthrift Shylock who exerts a merciless hold on his victims. A Shylock brought to judgment, the warder questions him in the condemned cell and asks if he is a man. To consider the manliness of the circumcised Jew as more than a mere question of Fagin’s imminent mortality is to recall the bawdy jokes at Shylock’s expense.

At the same time, besides Sir Walter Scott, whose figure of the Jew in Ivanhoe cannot entirely escape censure, Dickens was highly receptive to the Romantic influence of Wordsworth and Blake. The romance of a lost English pastoral makes the edenic haven of the Maylies particularly attractive as a refuge from the corrupt city and the wicked Jew who pursues the innocent parish boy. Fagin is a malicious omnipresence who reflects Romantic hostility toward urban capitalism, a hostility that breeds a new kind of literary anti-Semitism in Du Maurier’s Trilby and T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion.” Rather than see Fagin as a single, stereotyped figure outside the discourse of the city, as Murray Baumgarten does, I prefer to see Fagin as the alien outsider in the city discourse, who bears the guilt of the city. Thus, political and social emancipation might not necessarily erase an archetypal, global role for “the jew” but, on the contrary, might intensify anxieties about race and nationhood in a deterministic utilitarian or Marxist economic model.

On the other hand, Riah is as incredibly good as Fagin is irredeemably bad. He is a Wandering Jew, both cursed and blessed to wander the earth as a warning to mankind, who shows Victorian society to be failing its Christian principles of charity and humanity. That was a role Sheva played in Richard Cumberland’s The Jew (1794), in the Enlightenment spirit of Lessing, and Dickens was familiar with Thomas Dibdin’s The Jew and the Doctor (1798), which describes a similarly sympathetic Jew, Abednego. Moreover, Riah’s role fits Romantic interpretations of Shakespeare’s Jew. Granted a humane compassion (“Hath not a Jew eyes . . .”), Shylock was in Kean’s performance felt to be a wronged man. Riah becomes a foil for the wicked Christian, just as in