

ALAN STEWART

The Lives of Roderigo Lopez, Solomon Lazarus Levi and Sidney Lee¹

At first glance, this is a tale of two lives: one early modern and one modern. At another level, it is a tale of three lives, one early modern and two modern. I am exploring this tale not merely because all three are fascinating lives in their own right, but also as a case study that throws light on one of the supreme achievements of modern biographical practice, *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

On 1 November 1879, Henry Irving's production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* opened at the Lyceum Theatre in London. Its talking point was Irving's Shylock, played—despite the actor's conviction that he was playing “a bloody-minded monster”—as innately noble, “the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and most ill-used.”² In the midst of its two hundred and fifty consecutive performances, a precocious twenty-year-old student from Balliol College, Oxford, seized the moment to publish an essay on the play, paying particular attention to the character brought into the limelight by Irving. “The Original of Shylock” by S. L. Lee was published by the high-profile *Gentleman's Magazine* in February 1880.³ In it, Lee sets

out to recapture a topical allusion in William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, suggesting that the character of Shylock is in some way indebted to the contemporary real-life figure of Dr Roderigo Lopez, th

(191), but a falling-out with Antonio's ally Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, led eventually to Essex's hounding of Lopez, and his ultimate downfall.

Many of the alleged facts in this account were later shown to be garbled—Lopez was in fact of Portuguese stock, born and educated in Portugal before emigrating to England in 1559; his wife Sarah was born in England; and Antonio Pérez, the exiled Spanish secretary was emphatically *not* the same person as Dom Antonio, the exiled pretender to the Portuguese throne. Nevertheless, for Dr Roderigo Lopez, Lee's article constituted something of a Renaissance. After its initial impact—Lee's article was cited within months by the German scholar H. Graetz⁴—“The Original of Shylock” provoked later scholars led by Arthur Dimock and Martin Hume to re-examine the case and write lengthy articles, mostly exonerating Lopez of the charges against him; in recent years, David Katz devoted an entire chapter of his magisterial *The Jews in the History of England* to the Lopez conspiracy, against the tide of those taking the accusations against him more seriously.⁵

For S. L. Lee too, the article was the beginning of what was to develop into a spectacular career. Two years after that first article and sponsored by the influential antiquarian scholar-editor F. J. Furnivall, Sidney Lee became sub-editor to Leslie Stephen when George Smith founded his hugely ambitious *Dictionary of National Biography*. In March 1883, he rose to become assistant editor, and after Stephen suffered a breakdown in the autumn of 1889, Lee was called on to become first joint editor (in early 1890) and then sole editor of the *Dictionary*, a post he held from 1891 to 1901, and then from 1910 to 1912, throughout retaining the general oversight of the project. From his success in publishing, Lee moved sideways into the new Cinderella discipline of English, becoming

the first professor of English at the University of London's East London College (now Queen Mary). By the time he died on 3 March 1926, Sidney Lee was firmly ensconced in the British Establishment and recognised in North America—chairman of the executive of Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust from 1903, registrar of the Royal Literary Fund from 1907, member of the royal commission on the public records (1910), Fellow of the British Academy, trustee of the National Portrait Gallery (1924), member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, of the Massachusetts Historical Society, awarded honorary doctorates at the universities of Manchester (1900), Oxford (1907) and Glasgow (1907), knighted in 1911, and elected to the Atheneum Club in 1901 under Rule II (for “distinguished eminence in science, literature, or the arts, or for public services”).⁶

It is an enviable career, but not one that the undergraduate writer of “The Original of Shylock” might have anticipated for himself. For when Sidney Lee matriculated at

“were not ‘Jewish’ writers or intellectuals in the sense of exploring Jewish concerns and themes in their work and identifying themselves with Anglo-Jewry.”⁸ Endelman’s list is headed by Sidney Lee, and it is undeniable that, for the last forty years of his life, Lee showed no explicit interest in Jewish concerns and themes nor in identifying himself with Anglo-Jewry. However, what I want to argue toward is that Endelman’s verdict is too sweeping, and misses the point of what Lee was aiming to do in his literary and scholarly career. For the supposed cover-up of Solomon Lazarus Levi and the subsequent slow “revelation” of Sidney Lee operates in neat counterpoint to the critical impetus of that original article, “The Original of Shylock.”

In building his case that Lopez was “the original of Shylock,” Lee argues that Shylock is “the living semblance of a *Jewish* trader,” bearing characteristics “distinctive of his race,” namely “[s]trong domestic affections,” “deep-set sympathies with the fortunes of his ‘tribe,’ and firm faith in the sacredness of its separation from the Gentiles:” this set of features, “combined with a pious horror of eating or drinking with Christians and a fondness for Scriptural illustration, leaves little doubt in the minds of those acquainted with the peculiarities of Jewish character that they have been drawn directly from a contemporary model” (185-6). Lee points out that in the years before *The Merchant of Venice*, there was an unprecedented interest in Jews displayed by London playwrights:

It is certainly significant that, rarely as the Jew has made his appearance on the English stage, he was the hero of no less than three plays, all written and produced within the same fifteen years of the sixteenth century,⁹ and that during those very years a Jewish doctor—Roderigo Lopez by name...—held a very prominent position in London and at court, and shared with the actors an intimacy with those noblemen who proved themselves the warmest patrons of the drama (188).

He continues: “It is, perhaps, a more remarkable coincidence that in the same year, and just before the earliest form of the *Merchant of Venice* was first produced” (188), Lopez came to prominence, to such an extent that “No one living in London at the time could have been ignorant of Lopez’s history and fate” (195).¹⁰

This means, Lee continues, that “Shakespeare was himself acquainted with Jews, and obtained an intimate knowledge of them from personal observation;” and if—as critical consensus would have it—Shakespeare did not travel abroad, then he must have personally observed Jews in England. Much more important than the (highly debatable) analogy between Lopez and Shylock, then, is Lee’s assertion that there were Jews in England—an assertion which insisted that the contemporary historiography that blithely claimed that England was free of Jews between the expulsion in 1290 and the “readmission” of 1655 was wrong-headed. Backing his argument with archival references from the State Papers, then newly available in accessible calendar form, Lee concludes: “we can safely assert that Jews were residing in England throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime, and that opportunities of more or less intimate intercourse with them were for many years open to him” (186). Lee continued his project to establish the existence of a Jewish community in early modern England in another important article, “Elizabethan England and the Jews,” published in the *Transactions of the New Shakspeare Society* in 1892.¹¹ Since Lee, the Jewish Historical Society of England, and in particular the work of Lucien Wolf, Cecil Roth, C. J. Sisson, Edgar Emmanuel and others has endorsed his claims and revealed much about an early modern Jewish presence in England.¹² But I would argue that Lee also used the *Dictionary of National Biography* to advance something of the same agenda.

Although he was not its founder, Lee's influence on the *DNB* should not be underestimated. Like most general editors, he was prone to the temptation of reserving the best commissions for himself, and it was Lee who plucked the two plum entries of this turn-of-the-century *National Biography*

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Twenty-two years later, when the *Dictionary of National Biography* had gone through its first edition, Lee returned to this theme in his 1918 English Association lecture “The Perspective of Biography.” “[I]n the workaday world ... biography does not confine its attention the master spirits,” he claims, quoting with approval Sir Henry Newbolt, who “once wrote of biographers when he was poring over the pages of the *Dictionary of National Biography*:”

Not of the great only [they] deign to tell
The stars by which we steer,
But lights out of the night that flashed and fell

that the admixture of Jewish and English blood is larger and of older standing than is commonly assumed.¹⁸

This “admixture of Jewish and English blood” is, however, very specific in its age and

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with “the great movement of Christianity,” but “the great movement which goes by the name of the Renaissance” —and Arnold’s spelling was deliberately meant to denote “an English form” of the Renaissance— “was an uprising and re-instatement of man’s intellectual impulses and of Hellenism” (159). Hebraism’s contribution to the English Renaissance was the Reformation, “often called a Hebraising revival, a return to the ardour and sincereness of primitive Christianity” (159-60), but definitely the “subordinate and secondary side” of the Renaissance.

In his analysis of Arnold’s concept of “Hebraism,” Bryan Cheyette points out that there is “an inherent instability at the heart of his construction of Hebraism.” Arnold’s “purveyors of culture” were “constructed as ‘aliens’.... The Jew as ‘alien’—a semitic race ‘other’ to the Indo-European English—was to signify both the ideas of cultural perfection as well as an unchanging racial difference.”²¹ In this context, then, Lee’s assertion that “there met, notably in the great literature of sixteenth-century England, the

closing weeks of that month. But Lee was not alone in turning his attention to Lopez in 1879. As Max J. Kohler noted in 1909, a New York Jewish jurist, Judge Philip J. Joachimsen, had published a “Historical Vindication of a Martyrized Jew against John Lothrop Motley” in *The Reformer and Jewish Times* in January 1879, although admittedly “with but little of Mr. Lee’s historical material at his command.”²³ Why should it be that Joachimsen and Lee turned to Dr Lopez in late 1879?

To answer this, we have to turn to another strand in Lee’s argument: that Lopez was despised because of his Jewishness. In Lee’s account, the prosecutor, Attorney-General Sir Edward Coke “laid especiall stress on the fact that Lopez was a Jew. This ‘perjured and murdering traitor and Jewish doctor,’ he said, ‘is worse than Judas himself.’ His judges spoke of him as ‘that vile Jew.’” Lee also rehearses a near-contemporary account by antiquarian and historian William Camden of how Lopez cried out on the scaffold that “he loved the Queen and Antonio as well as he loved Jesus Christ. The irony called forth loud peals of laughter, and as the bolt fell the people shouted, ‘He is a Jew!’” (195). With his footnotes larding his claims with scholarly authority from other seventeenth-century texts by churchmen Godfrey Goodman and George Carleton, Lee insists that Lopez’s degradation proceeds from his instant, unavoidable recognition *as a Jew*. But on further investigation, Lee’s assertions prove misleading. Bishop Goodman’s account of the execution speaks of Lopez trying to be heard by the crowd challenging his sentence to the bitter end, but never mentions his Judaism.²⁴ George Carleton excludes details of the execution from his account, but does include another redaction of the story, in which Lopez, being “examined in the Tower” swore “imprecations vpon him if ever he intended any evill against Queene *Elizabeth*. For *I loue Queene Elizabeth*, said he, *better*

then I loue Iesus Christ;” as Carleton notes, this seemed to some possibly true, “for he was a *Jew*.”²⁵ William Camden does in fact write of the crowd’s laughter and Lopez’s Judaism: “They were all of them condemned, and after three moneths put to death at *Tiburne*; *Lopez* affirming that he had loued the Queene as hee loued *Iesus Christ*, which from a man of the *Jewish* profession was heard not without laughter.”²⁶ But even here the dramatic cry of ‘He is a Jew!’ is missing. The cry is not the crowd’s, nor Camden’s, nor Goodman’s, nor Carleton’s: it is Sidney Lee’s.²⁷

Lee’s insistence on Lopez’s Jewishness as a determining factor in the hostility towards him has influenced critics to the present. Most recently, Jonathan Gil Harris has shown how representations of Lopez feed off existing anti-Jewish stereotypes, still being mobilised in late sixteenth-century fiction: as a poisoner, Lopez follows the supposed Jewish well-poisoners of medieval tales.²⁸ Recently Christopher Marlowe had presented on stage in *The Rich Jew of Malta* the Jewish villain Barabas who tells his slave Ithamore that “Being young I studied Physicke,” boasts “Sometimes I goe about and poyson wells,” and then does indeed poison a nunnery.²⁹ *The Rich Jew of Malta* was revived and played in London several times during 1594, leading Margaret Hotine to argue that “[d]etails of the Lopez case and theatre performances given in Henslowe’s Diary suggests that the *Jew of Malta* revival could have been used to help create anti-Semitic prejudice.”³⁰

While I am convinced by Harris’s reading of these representations, and tempted by Hotine’s account of the social power of Marlowe’s play, I want here to depart from their reading, at least as a working strategy. The poisoning Jew can be more productively read as a strand of what Miri Rubin, in her recent work on the host desecration

accusation, calls the “narrative assault” on Jews.³¹ These narratives are so well embedded, so potent, that it is too easy to employ them to read off any historical or fictional Jew, a critical strategy that, while highlighting the historical persistence of a fixed anti-Judaism, syllogistically delimits the scope of the enquiry. Lopez was a Jew, Jews were considered poisoners, therefore Lopez was accused of poisoning, QED: that is the narrative logic. But this logic is importantly not dominant in contemporary writings dealing with Roderigo Lopez: in these Lopez most frequently appears typed *not* as a Jew, but as either a cozening physician or as one in a litany of heretic Roman Catholic traitors in the pay of Spain threatening the life of the Protestant Virgin Queen. This is certainly the case in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* (1604); Thomas Nashe’s *Have with you to Saffron walden* (1596) and *Nashes Lenten Stuffe* (1599); a lost entertainment entitled *England’s Joy*; Thomas Robinson’s *The Anatomy of the English Nvnnery at Lisbon in Portvgall* (1622); John Gee’s *The Foot out of the Snare* (1624) and Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* (1624).³² Similarly, even the “official” printed version of the case, orchestrated by the Lord Treasurer, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, *A Trve Report of Svndry Horrible Conspiracies of late time detected to haue (by Barbarous murders) taken away the life of the Queenes most excellent Maiestie*, at no point identifies Lopez either explicitly or implicitly as a Jew—but as a heretic Roman Catholic.³³ This identification gave no little annoyance to real Catholics such as Father Henry Garnett, who wrote to Robert Persons on 6 September 1594 to complain that Lopez’s fall had been “greatly derived to the discredit of Catholics, although most unjustly.”³⁴ Hearing that Lopez had been incited to poison the Queen “by the instigation of the Jesuites,” Garnett exclaimed indignantly: “Lopez was a Jew... and knew no Jesuit in the world, nor was acquainted

with any Catholics in England that I know of.”³⁵ Lopez does admittedly appear as a Jew in a few seventeenth-century writings: in a bizarre German touring version of an amalgamated *Jew of Malta* and *Merchant of Venice*, entitled *Das Wohlegesprochene Uhrtheil, oder Der Jud von Venedig*, the Jew is called (in passing) “Lupus,”³⁶ John Taylor the Water-Poet’s “The Churches Deliuerances” identifies him as “by descent a Jew;”³⁷ and Jonathan Gil Harris has argued convincingly that the treatment of the doctor ‘Ropus’ in Thomas Dekker’s *The Whore of Babylon* draws on the tradition of the *foetor Judaicus*.³⁸ But these date from significantly after Lopez’s death.

So why might Lee insist on this identification 1(si)-3.3(st)-8(h)a7aTT4p(;g4.8(T4p(;g4.8(T4p(;gW6s

now argue, “evoked a marked display of anti-Semitism on the part of the London populace.”⁴² Might it not be that Lee’s identification of Lopez not only as a Jew but importantly as a victim of anti-Semitism draws on very current and pressing concerns within the Anglo-Jewish political and intellectual culture of late 1879?

Within Shakespeare studies, the “was Shylock based on Lopez?” conundrum has become somewhat sidelined, with editors feeling it is *de rigueur* to trundle it out in a footnote, more out of respect for tradition than for its scholarly relevance. But in “The Original of Shylock,” I would argue, and especially in Lee’s account of the death of Dr Lopez, we can see the emergence of a tenacious strand of Anglo-Jewish history, and of a Jewish-English literary criticism that reached

to Sarah Hutton and Patricia Brewerton for inviting me to speak, and to participants for the helpful comments and suggestions generated.

² Henry Irving quoted in W. Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage* (1912), 175, cit. John Russell Brown, "Introduction" to his edn., *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Methuen, 1955), xi-lviii at xxxiv-xxxv; Joseph Hatton, *Henry Irving's Impressions of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1884), 1.265, cit. Jay L. Halio, "General Introduction" to his edn., *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1-83 at 68.

³ S. L. Lee, "The Original of Shylock," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 246 (1880), 185-200.

⁴ H. Graetz, *Shylock in der Sage, im Drama und in der Geschichte* (Krotoschin: B.L. Monasch & Co., 1880), 23, 26, 29 and 30.

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⁹ In addition to *The Merchant of Venice*, Lee refers to Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and the lost play *The Jew*, cited by Stephen Gosson.

¹⁰ Lee cites "four important points" giving "unexpected confirmation" of his theory (196). First, "the name of Antonio:" Shylock's opponent shares a name with Dom Antonio, the pretender to the Portuguese throne, whom Lopez befriended then betrayed; second, "the date and construction of the play," which he dates to

"not much more than three months after Lopez's famous exe67.7(f)67.7CGyi8e-2g1. 011 (64e0.00yi8e-f)11.9 ex2iTen8(ous)7.(6

¹⁸ Lee, "Elizabethan England and the Jews," 161.

¹⁹ Lee, *Great Englishmen of the Sixteenth Century*, 13-14.

²⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869). Further references in the text are to this edition.

Hibernicarvm, regnante Elizabetha, ad annvm salvtis M. D. LXXXIX (London: typis Guilielmi Stansbij, Impensis Simonis Watersoni, 1615), L2^f.

²⁷ Recently Edgar Samuel has attempted to explain Camden's story, and salvage Lopez for Judaism, by suggesting that Lopez in fact said "I love the Queen as well as I love Our Lord," referring not to Jesus Christ but to the God of Israel. See Edgar Samuel, "Dr Rodrigo Lopes' last speech from the scaffold at Tyburn," *TJHSE* 30 (1987-1988), 51-3.

²⁸ Jonathan Gil Harris, "Public Enemas: The Disjunctions of the Excremental Jewish Pharmakon" in *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79-106, citing Tho[mas] Nash[e], *Christs Teares over Iervsalem. Whereunto is annexed a comparatiue admonition to London* (London: Thomas Thorp, 1613), D^v; and *The Vnfortvnate Traveller. Or, The life of Iacke Wilton* (London: C. Burby, 1594), N^f.

²⁹ Christopher Marlo[we], *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Iew of Malta* (London: Nicholas Vavasour, 1633), E2^f cit. Harris, "Public Enemas," 98.

³⁰ Margaret Hotine, "The Politics of Anti-Semitism: *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 38 [236] (1991) 35-8 at 35.

³¹ See Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

³² Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus* (London: T. Bushell, 1604), E2^f; Nashe, *Have with you to Saffron walden. Or, Gabriell Harueys Hunt is vp* (London: John Danter, 1596), C4^f; Nashe, *Nashes Lenten Stuffe* (London: for N.L. and C.B., 1599), I4^v; Thomas Robinson, *The Anatomy of the English Nvnnery at Lisbon in Portvgall* (London: Robert Mylbourne, and Philemon Stephens, 1622), C^{f-v}; John Gee, *The Foot out of the Snare: with a Detection of Svndry Late practices and Impostures of the Pirests and Iesuits in England* (London: H.L. Robert Milbourne, 1624), G2

³⁶ *Comoedia Genandt Dass Wohl Gesprochene Uhrtheil Eynes Weiblichen Studenten oder Der Jud Von Venedig* (V.iii) in Johannes Meissner, *Die Englischen Comoedianten zur zeit Shakespeares in Oesterreich* (Vienna: Carl Konegen, 1884), 131-89; Ernest Brennecke with Henry Brennecke, *Shakespeare in Germany 1590-1700 With Translations of Five Early Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 174. I am grateful to Kirk Melnikoff for this reference.

³⁷ John Taylor, “Gods Manifold Mercies in these miracvlovns deliverances of our Church of *England*, from the yeare 1565 vntill this present, 1630. particularly and briefly Described,” in *All the Workes of Iohn Taylor The Water-Poet ... With sundry new Additions, corrected, reuised, and newly Imprinted* (London: James Boler, 1630), 3