

## FAGIN, RIAH, AND THE POWER OF MYTH

Charles Dickens's second novel, *Oliver Twist*, tells the story of a frightened orphan boy's encounter with evil in the slums of London. Through the young writer's "unrestrained imaginative power", what seems to be "objective" and "normal" is "strangely enlarged and reflected", and is given "darker life and meaning".<sup>1</sup> None of the novel's memorable characters better exemplifies this "darker life and meaning" than does Fagin, its specifically Jewish villain. For he is drawn less from contemporary reality than from a potent blend of fairy tale and nightmare with a literary and dramatic myth going back to the Middle Ages.

Brought to England by William the Conqueror, the Jews were at first tolerated for their usefulness as bankers, then termed "usurers," an employment forbidden to Christians by the Church. In a community still largely bound by the primitive economics of barter, the Jews were as necessary as they were hated. Increasingly persecuted, as time went on, they were ruthlessly expropriated and occasionally massacred. Finally, in 1290, they were expelled from the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Except for a handful of ostensible converts and a few physicians allowed into the country to treat some wealthy and noble patients, there were no Jews in England from 1290 until the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although he could not prevail upon Parliament to repeal the edict of expulsion, Oliver Cromwell favored their readmission, both as a means of extending English trade abroad, and in the hope of effecting their eventual conversion to a "purer form of Christianity" than Roman Catholicism. Charles II and James II and their successors continued Cromwell's policy of protecting the small community of Sephardic merchants, mainly from Holland. Gradually their numbers grew, mostly through the immigration of Ashkenazic Jews from Germany, Holland and Poland. By 1830 there were about 25,000 Jews in England, almost all of them in London.<sup>3</sup> Though never persecuted by the government, and allowed to practice their religion openly, they suffered from a large number of civil and political disabilities. They could not open a retail shop in the City, or be called to the Bar, or sit in Parliament, or take a university degree, for all those privileges required the applicant to take the sacrament or swear on his "faith as a Christian."

While a tiny fraction of the Jewish community attained great wealth, and a somewhat larger number were able to rise to the middle class during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority remained desperately poor. Destitute Jews from pre-Emancipation European ghettos gave Englishmen the impression that they were frighteningly inhuman and alien. They were depicted as ragged beggars and dirty old-clothes men, bearded, strangely garbed in long caftans, and with foreign accents. In *The Universal Songster*, a three-volume collection published in 1834, fifty of the songs are about Jews. Though not virulently anti-Semitic, they are decidedly malicious.<sup>4</sup>

Since most immigrants arrived penniless and unskilled, they turned to hawking goods in the streets, buying and selling old clothes, and peddling wares in the countryside. Equally important, these occupations did not require much acquaintance with the English language. A man needed only a few phrases to be able to sell lemons or buttons. At a time when the urban poor were unable to purchase new clothing, the buying and selling of used wearing-apparel was a thriving and necessary business, though one that had a bad reputation.

The actual number of Jewish old-clothes men in London is relatively unimportant. What is significant is that they were strikingly visible and highly vocal. Many of them continued to wear the long dark caftan and broad-brimmed hat of Central and Eastern European Jewry. They filled the streets in which they were working with the continuous cry of "Old Clothes". As a group, they made an extraordinary impression, generally a negative one.<sup>5</sup>

The second-hand clothes dealers of Rosemary Lane and Holywell Street were anathematized by Dickens in his *Sketches by Boz*:

Holywell-Street we despise; the red-headed and red-whiskered Jews who forcibly haul you into their squalid houses, and thrust you into a suit of clothes, whether you will or not, we detest.<sup>6</sup>

Two of the most common escape routes from poverty – education and apprenticeship in a trade – were blocked for lower-class Jews. They could neither afford to give their children more than a year or two at school nor to obtain skilled training for them. Children of the Jewish poor, like those of the Gentile poor, were sent into the streets to work at a very early age. Eight or nine year-olds had to help support their families. And from hawking goods on the streets it was easy enough for a youngster to fall into crime. In fact,

... a very visible portion of the [lower-class Jewish community] engaged in criminal activity.... As dealers in secondhand merchandise of every description, they frequently purchased stolen goods for resale. But most of the crimes for which they were arrested, such as picking pockets, shoplifting, and breaking and entering, in no way reflected... their historical experiences as Jews... Some stole to keep from starving.<sup>7</sup>

From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the 1830's and probably beyond, Jews were among the most active fences in London. One such fence was Ikey Solomons (1785-1850), generally thought to have been the historical prototype of Dickens's Fagin. He began as a street-peddler at age eight; at ten he passed bad money; at fourteen he was a pickpocket and a seller of sham goods. Arrested for stealing, he was sentenced to transportation, but did not get beyond the hulks at Chatham. An uncle there gave him a job as a "barker" (salesman), and he realized £150 in a few years. With this money he returned to London and set up as a fence, a business for which he had a great aptitude.

Imprisoned in Newgate in 1831, he was eventually transported to Hobart, Van Diemen's Land.<sup>8</sup>

He seems to have had a good deal more talent than Fagin, judging from the latter's decidedly substandard living-quarters! At the height of his career Solomons "had as much as £20,000 worth of goods sometimes secreted in his premises... at Rosemary Lane and another establishment at Lower Queen Street, Islington."<sup>9</sup>

A minor playwright, William T. Moncrieff, had recently written a melodrama called *Van Diemen's Land*, in which one of the characters was a Jewish convict named Barney Fence. The Solomons trial induced Moncrieff to change Barney's name to Ikey Solomons. The play was so popular that Dickens must have seen or read it.<sup>10</sup> An unimportant but unpleasant character in *Oliver Twist* is called "Barney", while a much more sinister version of Ikey became Fagin.

There is historical evidence that some criminals actively coached children in their trade. In 1765, an accused thief, Robert Byfield, told the court that one Abraham Terachina, a well-known fence

...used to give us diamonds to cut windows, and he said, if we got into trouble, he would bail us. He had encouraged several little boys to thieve.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of this unscrupulous practice, boys of ten or eleven, many of them the associates of hardened criminals twice their age, were frequently arraigned at the Old Bailey. Sentences were savage.

In February, 1814, Henry Wolf, age twelve, was sentenced to death for stealing a threepence knife, and Moses Solomon, age nine, was also sentenced to death (but recommended for mercy) for breaking into a house and stealing a pair of shoes.<sup>12</sup>

The most common offense for which young boys were tried was picking pockets.

The nimbleness of youth made them well-suited to the task of removing billfolds, watches and handkerchiefs from the pockets of gentlemen who lingered a moment too long in front of a shop window.<sup>13</sup>

Besides plotting with Monks to deprive Oliver of his inheritance, Fagin was placing him – and the other boys – in grave danger. As depicted by Dickens, he is far more villainous than any Ikey Solomons. Many of the author's Jewish readers were troubled by this portrayal. In 1863 he received a letter from Mrs. Eliza Davis, reproaching him for having "encouraged a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew" and stating that "Fagin, I fear, admits of only one interpretation." To her complaint, Dickens replied:

Fagin... is a Jew, because it unfortunately was true of the time to which that story refers, that that class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew. But surely no sensible man or woman of your persuasion can fail to observe – firstly, that all the rest of the wicked *dramatis personae* are Christians [Dickens had forgotten the “vile and repulsive” Barney]; and secondly, that he is called a “Jew”, not because of his religion, but because of his race. If I... described a Frenchman or a Spaniard as “the Roman Catholic”, I should do a very indecent and unjustifiable thing; but I make mention of Fagin as “the Jew” because he is one of the Jewish people...

This was an odd way to disclaim prejudice! Mrs. Davis rebutted his explanation by pointing out that “the Jewish race and religion are inseparable.” She went on to protest that, while the other criminals in the novel were Christians, they were at least “contrasted with characters of good Christians,” while “this poor wretched Fagin stands alone as ‘the Jew’”.<sup>14</sup>

Dickens had written *Oliver Twist* in a period marked by a good deal of anti-Semitism. Sir Robert Peel, who some years later, would champion the cause of Jewish civil liberties, was still, in 1830, opposing their emancipation on the grounds that even the native-born were “aliens” who would not “amalgamate with us in any of their usages and habits.”<sup>15</sup>

*Punch*, founded in 1841, was a liberal journal which usually espoused humanitarian reforms. Yet it was anti-Jewish during most of the period.

It opposed Jewish emancipation, drew cartoons of bloated and bejeweled Jews, made jokes at the expense of Disraeli’s Jewish origins, and poked fun at Jewish occupations. Leech, in a representative cartoon, drew a picture of the House of Commons populated by a grossly caricatured array of pudgy, thick-lipped, dusky-chinned Jews. ...Many members of its staff – G.A. à Beckett, Leech, Thackeray, Jerrold and Brooks (all friends of Dickens) – had exhibited in varying degrees the pandemic anti-Semitism of the period.

Songs about Jews were popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; one of them went, in part:

I once was but a peddler, and my shop was in my box,  
As sure as I’m a smouch [Jew, thief], and my name is Mordecai;  
And I cheated all the world, in spite of whipping-posts or stocks,  
For I never sticks for trifles when dere’s monies in the way.<sup>16</sup>

Mordecai presents himself as a thief, cheat, and money-grubber – the usual attributes of the Jew as he appeared in the literature, drama and popular consciousness of the time. Dickens reflects this anti-Semitism in his early writings. The Jews who appear in *Sketches by Boz* (1833-37) are old-clothes dealers, costume suppliers, sheriff’s officers, sponging-house proprietors and the like. He does not care for these men and despises

their occupations and methods. “His feelings never flare up into active hatred” but they “smoulder fitfully in a vague hostility.”<sup>17</sup>

He expressed this prejudice in some of his letters. “No news as yet,” he wrote in 1837, “from the ‘infernal, rich, plundering, thundering old Jew”, borrowing this description from *Oliver Twist*. He was applying it here to his publisher, Richard Bentley, a Gentile, but it represents the distasteful associations which “Jew” called up in his mind. In 1843, commenting to Thomas Hood on another Christian publisher, Colburn, he wrote: “There can be no doubt that he took a money-lending, bill-broking, Jew clothes-bagging, ...pawnbroking advantage of your temporary situation.”<sup>18</sup>

As late as 1860, in letters to his friend, Thomas Mitton, occasioned by the imminent sale of his London home, Tavistock House, to a Jewish banker, James P. Davis, husband of the Mrs. Davis of the 1863 correspondence, Dickens wrote:

Unless there should be any hitch, (which I don’t expect), the purchaser will be a Jew Money-Lender. An odd change in occupation!

Three days later he wrote again:

If the Jew Money-Lender buys (I say “if”, because, of course, I shall never believe in him until he has paid the money), I purpose living here [at Gad’s Hill] during seven months of the year.

Bankers make loans, but Dickens never refers to Mr. Lorry of Tellson’s Bank as a “money-lender!” When the sale was completed, he again wrote to Mitton:

I must say that in all things the purchaser has behaved thoroughly well, and that I cannot call to mind any occasion when I have had money-dealings with anyone that have been so satisfactory, considerate, and trusting.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently, he felt a little ashamed of his earlier remarks. It is clear from these, however, that Dickens was not exempt from the typical anti-Jewish prejudice of his day. He expressed it without much thought; it was a stock response to a hoary stereotype that he had inherited from the distant past.

For Fagin is no mere fictional representation of an Ikey Solomons; he goes straight back to the plays and folk tales and ballads of the Middle Ages. Precisely during those three and a half centuries from 1290 to 1656, when there was no Jewish presence in England, the Jew

...forces himself upon us everywhere, in ballads, in religious allegory, in drama, in sermons. He functions as a well-established and necessary myth, ubiquitous, coloured (in the plays he wore red hair and a distinctive garb), unmistakable, ...declaring himself in grotesque gestures...<sup>20</sup>

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Mystery plays, based on the Gospels, which were presented by the trade guilds and acted upon moveable stages in important towns during religious festivals

...the chief Jewish character... was Judas. His name was sufficient to identify him with the Jew in general (Judaeus); and he is depicted not merely as a traitor but as an usurer as well! In these plays the Jew is not merely odious but comical as well. Judas's red beard ...becomes a semi-comic melodrama feature; also the grotesque gesticulations of the actor ...serve to degrade the Jew in the eyes of the spectators. But the Jew in the Mystery plays was not just a figure of fun. If he inspired derision, he also inspired fear, the fear that is associated in the medieval imagination with the Devil. ...not merely are the Jews regarded as devilish, but the Devil himself becomes a Jew and is depicted as such on the stage – he too... has red hair and a long nose.<sup>21</sup>

Just as vivid as the plays, and far more frightening, were the occasional rehearsing of the age-old blood libel. The accusation that the Jews kidnapped and murdered young boys originated in 5<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Syria, revived during the Crusades, it spread all over Europe. The story of William of Norwich, a twelve-year old, said to have been crucified by the Jews during Passion Week, was told and retold. Eight-year old Hugh of Lincoln, supposedly killed by Jews in 1225, was the hero of a story popular enough to appear in twenty-seven versions in 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts. It is referred to in Chaucer's Prioress's Tale – another story of an innocent Christian child martyred by the wicked Jews for singing a hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary.<sup>22</sup>

Although there are no obvious Jews in the 15<sup>th</sup> century allegorical Morality plays, they are represented in the figures of the Devil and his Vice, the villain and the clown, respectively, of these dramas. Both were generally costumed as Jews and given their supposed habits of speech.

Together they serve to perpetuate in the popular imagination that Judas-Judaeus-Satan combination which is eventually bequeathed to the secular drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare and to the nineteenth century novelists. The Devil and the Vice of the old Morality Play provide the essential link between the medieval and the modern manifestations of the myth.<sup>23</sup>

When the Black Death epidemic of 1348-9 killed one-quarter of the population of Europe, the Jews were suspected of having caused it by poisoning the wells. Entire communities were massacred as a direct result of this accusation. It is reflected in Christopher Marlowe's poetic melodrama of 1592, *The Jew of Malta*. In Act II, Scene 3, the villain, Barabas, typically costumed with red hair and beard, artificial long nose and distinctive garments, boasts:

As for myself, I walk abroad o' nights  
And kill sick people groaning under walls;  
Sometimes I go about and poison wells;  
Then after that I was an usurer,  
And with extorting, cozening, forfeiting,  
And tricks belonging unto brokery,  
I filled the gaols with bankrupts in a year...

Marlowe's villain never achieved the resonance of Shakespeare's Shylock. A true understanding of *The Merchant of Venice* (1594) allows us to see Shylock "both as the heir of the monstrous, bloodthirsty, usurer-murderer of medieval legend and also as... a figure of tragic dimensions, hated and hating, but above all things, human." But in Shakespeare's time Shylock was presented on stage as a "comic character, a devil in the likeness of an old Jew, a crafty, bloodthirsty villain, crying out for revenge upon a decent Christian gentleman.

As a Judas figure he is a medieval relic ...but as the alien Jew demanding equal rights, fiercely impeaching his enemies in the name of their common humanity, and seeking power through the new economic forces, he is essentially a symbol of the future.<sup>24</sup>

With the revolutionary presentation of Shylock by Edmund Kean, which stunned London theatergoers in 1814, the stereotypical interpretation of this role began to give way to a deeper psychological portrait of a greatly wronged man.

It took courage and imagination to dress Shylock in a black wig and to remold him so that his character would conform to his new appearance. It required an interpretation that would infuse credibly human qualities into what had become a mythical figure. Kean succeeded in accomplishing this.<sup>25</sup>

William Hazlitt, who saw Kean's performance in 1817 with great admiration, noted that he had expected to see:

...a decrepit old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance...<sup>26</sup>

And this version of the Shylock Hazlitt was happy not to have seen is exactly what Dickens has given us in Fagin, his caricature portrait of the evil Jew of legend.

The medieval details are curiously correct: his red hair and beard ... his penchant for drugs and poisoning, his blood guiltiness, and his grotesque humor... Fagin is always "the Jew, and Dickens is ... clearly not so much exploring a contemporary type... as working on a stock figure.... Thus his characterization ... testifies to the continuing vitality of the Judas-Devil myth

in spite of the new liberal atmosphere which ...Dickens himself in other respects helped so much to diffuse.<sup>27</sup>

Fagin is a corrupter and endangerer – if not a murderer – of children. He arranges for the capture and execution of members of his gang who have outlived their usefulness to him. He incites Bill Sikes to murder Nancy, after failing to persuade her to poison Sikes. He is “dishonest, thieving, treacherous, avaricious and ultimately cowardly.”<sup>28</sup>

Dickens describes Fagin as a

Very old, shriveled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with a bare throat...

When Oliver first sees him, he is standing over a fire, cooking sausages, with a toasting-fork in his hand. A large number of silk handkerchiefs are hanging on a clothes-horse; Fagin tells the boy that these are about to be laundered. This statement was “hailed by a boisterous shout from all the hopeful pupils of the merry old gentleman....” (*Oliver Twist*, 60-1)

Defending Dickens against the charge of anti-Semitism, Edgar Johnson remarks:

For all the frightful power with which Fagin is conceived, Dickens did not offer him as a realistic portrait... He is based neither on ... living Jews nor on the clichés of the theater. Instead, “the merry old Jew” took form from an image in his creator’s mind that Dickens regarded with an emotion of half-horrible enjoyment; an image of hilarious evil exultant in cunning self-applause. Daniel Quilp, the deformed dwarf of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is a grotesque mutation of the type... [Yet] nobody has deduced from Quilp that Dickens believed in the malignance of all dwarfs.<sup>29</sup>

But Johnson, in my opinion, failed to comprehend the dark appeal of the anti-Semitic myth which Fagin perpetuates. Dickens himself did not fully understand how loaded his weapon was. Certainly, at the time he wrote *Oliver Twist*, “his attitude towards the Jews was negligent at best, and he probably gave little thought to Fagin’s anti-Semitic ramifications.”<sup>30</sup> As he bends over the fire, Fagin’s toasting-fork, in Cruikshank’s illustration, “bears a close family resemblance to a pitch-fork.”

The fire can be seen as symbolizing Hell Fire. Dickens also refers to Fagin in a number of places as “the merry old gentleman”, a description that denoted the devil.

Both Sikes and Nancy refer to Fagin as “the devil” in several of their speeches. This idea is reinforced by his function in the novel, that of enticing Oliver into crime.

Fagin is playing for no less a stake than the boy's immortal soul. His aim is to win Oliver over through the boy's deliberate choice.... He tries to involve him in a robbery. "Once let him feel that he is one of us; once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief, and he is ours! Ours for life!" To which Sikes objects, "Ours!... Yours, you mean." "Perhaps I do, my dear," said the Jew with a shrill chuckle.<sup>31</sup>

At times Fagin lacks even the humanoid aspect of the devil.

As he glided stealthily along... the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved, crawling forth, by night.... (*Oliver Twist*, 139)

His reptilian slithering is reminiscent of Satan turned serpent in *Paradise Lost*.

But it is as an enticer and kidnapper of children for his own evil purposes that Fagin echoes the medieval blood libel. Thinking that Oliver has observed him gloating over his hoard of stolen jewelry, he grabs a bread knife in a menacing manner. "Even in his terror, Oliver could see that the knife quivered in the air." This quivering knife, though never used, "remains emblematically poised in the reader's... and doubtless in Oliver's... imagination."

A figure of primordial and ubiquitous evil, Fagin conveys a sense of overpowering and almost supernatural horror that gains force through his being frequently seen through the eyes of defenceless childhood innocence, against which he is perpetually conspiring.<sup>32</sup>

When Oliver startles Fagin into picking up the bread knife, the boy is half awake and half asleep. He is in the same state while, later in the story, he is recuperating at the Maylie home. He sees Fagin and Monks at his bedroom window, but by the time he is able to call for help, they have vanished without a trace. In both these episodes Fagin takes on the aspect of the bogeyman-ogre of a child's nightmare.

Charles Dickens had his own nightmare, connected more with a place than with a person: Warren's Blacking, Strand, Hungerford Stairs. This was where, as a boy of twelve, he spent four or five miserable months while his father was in a prison for debt. Years later he described it in the autobiographical fragment he confided to his closest friend, John Forster:

It was a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting, of course, on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, and the grey old rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs, at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise visibly before me, as if I were there again.<sup>33</sup>

It is not difficult to see the resemblance between this decrepit building that, in later years, Dickens could not bear to pass by, and Fagin's filthy den, with its "dark and broken stairs".

The walls and ceiling ...were perfectly black with age and dirt... Several rough beds, made of old sacks, were huddled side by side on the floor. Seated round the table were four or five boys... smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men. (*Oliver Twist*, 59-60)

There is another, odd, connection between Warren's Blacking and *Oliver Twist*. Dickens told Forster that, before long, he was working side by side with an orphan named Bob Fagin. On the first morning of Charles's employment this boy had come up "in a ragged apron and a paper cap" to show him how to use the string and tie the knot around the bottles. Dickens suffered from what he called "spasms", and when an attack of these occurred at the warehouse, he recalled:

Bob Fagin was very good to me.... I suffered such excruciating pain that they made a temporary bed of straw in my old recess at the counting-house, and I rolled about on the floor, and Bob filled empty blacking-bottles with hot water, and applied relays of these to my side half the day. I got better and quite easy towards evening; but Bob (who was much bigger and older than I) did not like the idea of my going home alone, and took me under his protection.<sup>34</sup>

And this was the kindly boy of whom Dickens later wrote, "I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in *Oliver Twist*." In what recesses of his subconscious mind did the traumatic associations of Warren's Blacking become personified in the "aging Lucifer" Fagin, that descendant of medieval devils and Judases, and, simultaneously, as the "grotesquely magnified bogey out of a fairy tale"?<sup>35</sup> And what deep-seated prejudice led him to demonize his helpful young co-worker's Jewish name?

Yet times were changing, and Dickens was changing with them. Between 1830 and 1860 there was a steady improvement in the situation of English Jews.

Legal barriers were swept away, commercial restrictions lifted, and social antagonisms lessened.... The growth of toleration was accompanied by noteworthy intellectual conversions.... Sir Robert Peel... who had opposed Jewish emancipation in 1830 was urging Parliament in 1848 to liberate the Jews.... *Punch*... could still in the 1860's lash out against the Jews, but such outbursts were decreasing.... Even the popular "Jew's Song" [had shifted from] out-and-out anti-Semitism... to humor and finally to pleas for tolerance.<sup>36</sup>

Already in the 1850's Dickens's attitude towards the Jews was shifting. In 1854, the *Jewish Chronicle* in a leading article deplored the "despicable and hateful" role he had assigned to the Jew in his fiction, and asked "why the Jews alone should be excluded

from the sympathizing heart” of such a great author and humanitarian. Perhaps in answer to this charge, when replying to an invitation to the anniversary dinner of the Westminster Jewish Free School, Dickens wrote:

I know of no reason that the Jews can have for regarding me as “inimical” to them. On the contrary, I believe I do my part towards the assertion of their civil liberties, and in my *Child’s History of England* I have expressed a strong abhorrence of their persecution in old times.<sup>37</sup>

Nine years later, in his first letter to Mrs. Eliza Davis, responding to her remark that Jewish readers considered his portrayal of Fagin “a great wrong”, he wrote, with evident irritation, that, if they did, they were a “far less sensible, a far less just, and a far less good-tempered people” than he had always supposed them to be. He concluded his letter by saying:

I always speak well of them, whether in public or in private, and bear my testimony (as I ought to do) to their perfect good faith in such transactions as I have ever had with them.<sup>38</sup>

He had erased from his own mind the references he had made, only three years earlier, to her own husband as “the Jew Money-Lender”, preferring to remember some of his less prejudicial writings. But Mrs. Davis was not completely satisfied with his rebuttal of her charge, and, in a second letter, suggested a possible method of redress:

I hazard the opinion that it would well repay an author of reputation to examine more closely into the manners and character of the British Jews and to represent them as they really are.<sup>39</sup>

Although Dickens never examined Jewish life very deeply, he did resolve, in his next novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, to counter the wicked Fagin with a good Jew, Mr. Riah. Like Fagin, Riah has some earlier dramatic prototypes, though these do not antedate the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Cumberland’s 1794 play, *The Jew*, was popular enough to have been revived throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its protagonist is an apparent usurer, stingy and avaricious, named Sheva, who turns out to be altruistic, generous, and forgiving. In 1798 Thomas Dibdin’s drama, *The Jew and the Doctor*, depicted another good Jew, Abednego, also supposedly mercenary, who brings up a young Christian foundling and gives her his love. Dickens is known to have read this play as a child, reread it as a man, and considered using it as an afterpiece for one of his own amateur productions. He utilized some of its elements in *Our Mutual Friend*, most notably Riah’s role in relation to both Lizzie Hexham and Jenny Wren.<sup>40</sup>

For, whereas Fagin was a menacer of children, Riah is a protector of their innocence. He offers shelter, moral support and book learning to Lizzie and to Jenny. In direct antithesis to Fagin as Oliver’s bogeyman-ogre, Riah is Jenny’s “fairy godmother”. As Edmund Wilson pointed out in his great essay on Dickens, “The Two Scrooges”:

This dualism runs all through Dickens. There always has to be a good and bad of everything... pairs of characters sometimes balance each other from the casts of different books... a bad old Jew Fagin, and a good old Jew, Riah.<sup>41</sup>

But Dickens uses Riah not merely to balance Fagin but to plead for toleration and understanding of the Jews. Riah exhibits almost every traditional Jewish virtue to its extreme: he is loyal, generous, charitable and patient. He hides Lizzie, when she wishes to flee from Eugene Wrayburn's amatory pursuit, and refuses to divulge her place of refuge to his scoundrelly master, Fledgeby. He demonstrates the supposedly Christian virtue of humility in the face of Fledgeby's taunts, allowing himself to be used as a front for that young gentleman's extortionary money-lending business.

Riah arranges for Lizzie's employment by a Jewish couple who own a paper mill some distance from London. In speaking of these people to a clergyman and his wife, Lizzie says:

"The gentleman certainly is a Jew, ... and the lady, his wife, is a Jewess, and I was first brought to their notice by a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world.... They most willingly and cheerfully do their duty to all of us who are employed here, ... Indeed, they do much more than their duty to us, for they are wonderfully mindful of us in many ways." (*Our Mutual Friend*, 535)

Eventually, Riah refuses to act as Fledgeby's front any longer. As he explains himself to Jenny Wren:

"... I was hateful in mine own eyes.... But more than that, and worse than that, ... I reflected that evening... that I was doing dishonour to my ancient faith and race. I reflected... that in bending my neck to the yoke I was willing to wear, I bent the unwilling necks of the whole Jewish people. For it is not... with the Jews as with other peoples. Men say, 'This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks.' Not so with the Jews. Men find the bad among us easily enough ... but they take the worst of us as examples of the best;... and they say 'All Jews are alike.' .. It is a little hard upon us, but it is the truth. I would that all our people remembered it!" (*Our Mutual Friend*, 751)

Even in the context of the 1860's when a substantial number of English Jews had risen into the middle class, both as businessmen and as professionals, and were thoroughly assimilated to the majority population in dress and manners, Dickens still costumes Riah anachronistically as an alien. He describes him as

... an old Jewish man in an ancient coat, long of skirt, and wide of pocket. A venerable man, ...with long grey hair flowing down... and mingling with his beard. He wore a rusty, large-brimmed, low-crowned hat, as long out of date as his coat. (*Our Mutual Friend*, 283-4)

Could this be another way of coupling Riah antithetically with the outcast Fagin of almost three decades earlier? Or is it simply that, unlike Trollope, Dickens never depicts middle class Jews mixing socially with Gentiles, even though his good friend, Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*, most certainly did so?

In any event, to Mrs. Davis, reading the monthly installments of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens's good intentions were clear. On November 13, 1864, she wrote to him again, thanking him for the "great compliment paid to myself, and to my people" in his creation of Riah, but pointing out that the latter was not an entirely realistic portrayal. Dickens replied that he had received her comments with "great pleasure", admitted some errors, and remarked that some of the "peculiarities" of Riah's dress and manners were "fixed together for the sake of picturesqueness." The irritation and touchiness of his earliest letter to her were gone as he concluded: "I hope to be (as I have always been in my heart) the best of friends with the Jewish people."

This assurance convinced Mrs. Davis that Dickens had undergone a genuine conversion of feeling towards the Jews. On February 8, 1867, she sent him a sumptuously bound copy of the new Benisch edition of the Bible, containing the first complete English-Hebrew text. In it she wrote:

Presented to CHARLES DICKENS ESQre, in grateful and admiring recognition of his having exercised the noblest quality that man can possess: that of atoning for an injury as soon as conscious of having inflicted it, by a Jewess.

Dickens was delighted. In thanking her for the Bible, he replied:

The terms in which you send me that mark of your remembrance are more gratifying to me than I can possibly express to you; for they assure me that there is nothing but goodwill left between you and me and a people for whom I have a real regard, and to whom I would not willfully have given an offense for any worldly consideration.<sup>42</sup>

In 1867-8 a new edition of his works, the "Charles Dickens Edition", was being issued by Chapman and Hall, the text of which has been followed in almost all subsequent reprinting of his books. To this edition Dickens made many revisions and corrections, besides supplying new and modified prefaces. In *Oliver Twist* he made hundreds of changes, the most important and numerous of which concern Fagin. Beginning with Chapter XXXIX, he eliminated most of the references to him as "the Jew", replacing that term with "he" or "Fagin". The title of the last chapter is changed from "The Jew's Last Night Alive" to "Fagin's Last Night Alive". In that chapter he canceled eleven references to Fagin as "the Jew", leaving only one such reference. The last third of the revised version, which in previous editions had emphasized in page after page that "the Jew" was behaving villainously, now merely reported that Fagin was doing so.<sup>43</sup>

Since the 1860's were years in which Jews, though free of most civil and political disabilities, were still struggling for social recognition and understanding, Dickens's attempts to help them were important. He was, after all, the most popular novelist of his time, and an unquestioned liberal and humanitarian.

In terms of his intentions and his attempts to influence the public, he had come full circle; not merely because he created a good Jew to blot out a bad one, but because he reinforced in many ways – in his letters, books, magazines, and emendations – the doctrine of [tolerance.] ... In his new understanding he was mirroring the new times, just as in his earlier anti-Semitism he had reflected the old. And yet... he was not merely mirroring. For in his relationship with the Jews, as in other areas of his life and work, Dickens was a maker as well as a creature of his times.<sup>44</sup>

Why, then, does the image of the villainous Jew persist, while that of the virtuous one fades? An obvious reason is that Riah is only a minor character in a less-read novel while Fagin is a major character in one of Dickens's best-known ones. Movie and television versions of *Oliver Twist*, as well as a Broadway musical, have impressed themselves upon the minds of viewers who may never even have read the book. The most memorable of these was the 1948 David Lean film, starring the late Alec Guinness in a Satanic virtuoso portrayal of Fagin. It was so controversial that its screening was banned in post-war Germany. At the other extreme was the musical "Oliver" in which Fagin appears more comical than sinister. The latest version, adapted for television by Alan Bleasdale in 1999, offers Robert Lindsay's Fagin in the guise of "a Czechoslovakian conjuror" – an anachronism, incidentally, as that country did not exist in Dickens's day – who just happens to be Jewish. "The fact that he's foreign is beguiling and romantic to the children; he lures them to him with some kind of exotic charisma."<sup>45</sup>

As for Riah, he is simply too good to be convincing. Like most incarnations of virtue, especially those in Dickens's novels, he is pallid. In Edgar Rosenberg's pungent critique:

Riah and his type will not bleed if you prick them... He remains a blank in the memory – vapid, depersonalized, a disembodied voice testifying to the author's high principles.... He is less an imaginative figure than an editorial.<sup>46</sup>

Fagin, the all bad, is as unbelievable as Riah, the all good. But with Fagin Dickens had tapped into an ancient, insidious, and persistent myth – that of the Judas-Devil whose criminality separates him from humanity. Unlike Riah, Fagin lingers in the imagination, villainous but vital, unreal but unforgettable.

**Joan Freilich, 2001**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Smiley.
- <sup>2</sup> Fisch, 9-10.
- <sup>3</sup> Endelman, 341.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-6.
- <sup>5</sup> Endelman, 180 & 182.
- <sup>6</sup> Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 96.
- <sup>7</sup> Endelman, 187; 192-3.
- <sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, 134.
- <sup>9</sup> Giddings, 69-70.
- <sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, 134.
- <sup>11</sup> Endelman, 197.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.
- <sup>14</sup> Stone, 30.
- <sup>15</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 21.
- <sup>16</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 22.
- <sup>17</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 24.
- <sup>19</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 29.
- <sup>20</sup> Fisch, 9.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13,14.
- <sup>22</sup> Modder, 11; 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Fisch, 17-18.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 31; 35.
- <sup>25</sup> Lelyveld, 39.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>27</sup> Fisch, 59.
- <sup>28</sup> Heller, 41.
- <sup>29</sup> Johnson, 48-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Stone, 25.
- <sup>31</sup> Heller, 44-5.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-7.
- <sup>33</sup> Forster, 25.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>35</sup> Rosenberg, 118-19.
- <sup>36</sup> Stone, 25.
- <sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Loc.Cit.*, 49.
- <sup>38</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 50.
- <sup>39</sup> Stone, 30.
- <sup>40</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 26.
- <sup>41</sup> Wilson, 53.
- <sup>42</sup> Stone, 33.
- <sup>44</sup> *Loc.Cit.*, 37.
- <sup>45</sup> Giddings, 69.
- <sup>46</sup> Rosenberg, 6.

## References

### Literature

- Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Harper & Row: New York, 1958.  
*Our Mutual Friend*. Dodd, Mead & Co.: New York, 1951.  
*Sketches by Boz*. Penguin Classics: London, 1995.

### Books

- Endelman, Todd M. *The Jews of Georgian England (1714-1830): Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society*. Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1979.
- Fisch, Harold. *The Dual Image: A Study of the Figure of the Jew in English Literature*. Lincolns-Prager: London, 1959.
- Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. 2 Vol. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1905.
- Heller, Deborah. "The Outcast as Villain and Victim: Jews in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Our Mutual Friend*" in *Jewish Presences in Literature*. Derek Cohen and Deborah Heller, eds. McGill-Queens UP: Montreal, Kingston, 1990.
- Lelyveld, Toby. *Shylock on the Stage*. Western Reserve UP: Cleveland, Ohio, 1960.
- Modder, Montagu Frank. *The Jew in the Literature of England*. Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1939. Meridian Books and the Jewish Publication Society, 1960.
- Rosenberg, Edgar. *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction*. Stanford UP: Stanford, California, 1960.
- Wilson, Edmund. "The Two Scrooges" in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux: New York, 1978. (Originally pub. 1941.)

### Periodicals

- Giddings, Robert. "Oliver Twist dramatized by Alan Bleasdale" reviewed in *The Dickensian*, No. 450, Vol. 96, Part I. Spring 2000, 68-70
- Johnson, Edgar. "Dickens, Fagin, and Mr. Riah." *Commentary* IX, 1950, 47-50
- Smiley, Jane. "The Secret Life of Charles Dickens." *N.Y. Times Mag.*, 3 Dec. 2000.
- Stone, Harry. "From Fagin to Riah: Jews and the Victorian Novel." *Midstream* 6 (1960): 21-37.