THE YELLOW-STARRED JEWS OF ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

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Abstract: This paper will focus on several specific aspects of being a Jew in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066. For over two centuries prior to their Expulsion in 1290, the existence of the Jewish community was rather hard, and subject to its members' observance of very strict rules. It is common knowledge that, though uninvited, they followed the Norman kings to Britain, where – in numerically reduced communities – despite the fact that they were scattered all over England, they continued to practice their basic trades as merchants and money-lenders. At first sight, the English and the Jews were quite alike. This might be the reason why they were supposed to wear specific items which identified them as belonging to the Jewry. The elements which distinguished the medieval Jews from the English were not many, and included the hooded cloak and, after the edict of the 1267 Vienna Council, the so called pileum cornutum – the pointed Jewish hat. Earlier than that – according to the decision of the Earl Marshall of England in 1218, following the Lateran Council of 1215, the Jews had to wear the Jewish badge.

Keywords: Jew, Expulsion, merchants, money-lenders, Jewish badge.

Being a Jew in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066 was no easy task. For over two centuries prior to their Expulsion in 1290, the existence of the Jewish community being rather hard, and subject to its members' observance of very strict rules. It is common knowledge that, though uninvited, they followed the Norman kings to Britain, where – in numerically reduced communities – despite the fact that they were scattered all over England, they continued to practice their basic trades as merchants and money-lenders. The conditions imposed by the Norman authorities determined, more or less, the homogenous and compact nature of these communities. Statistics at the time of the Expulsion account for as many as 16,000 souls, the largest concentration to be encountered in the counties of East and South-Eastern England. There were not so many in Wales and Ireland, and none in Scotland.

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According to Cecil Roth, there were as many as twenty-seven locations in which special offices were established for the registration of Jewish debts, among them Bristol, Cambridge, Canterbury, London, Norwich, Oxford, Worcester, York; many others had no such offices, though Jewish settlements had at one time been established. In 1253, King Henry III issued a decree which did not allow the Jews to live in towns which did not have an officially established and recognized Jewish community. Otherwise such settlers without a royal license – especially those who were trying to settle in rural areas – were expelled, and their properties confiscated. [1]

As they closely followed on the steps of their former Norman masters, the origins of the Jews in Medieval England were easily traced from the North of France. Some others came from Germany (Rhineland), others from Southern Europe (Italy and Spain), from Northern Africa (Morocco), and even from distant Russia. One interesting information is provided by Cecil Roth who, citing Jacobs, mentions the presence in Hampshire of a certain Rabbi Isaac of Chernigov, "possibly the first Russian in historic times who put foot on English soil" (Jacobs, 73). [2]

Whatever the adverse circumstances, the Jews did not lose their originality, and the genuine Jewish traits of their heritage prevailed, such as the inside language they used – Norman French – and their names which actually were the equivalents of their Hebrew, original names. Cecil Roth provides an interesting list of the names used by men and women. [3]

At first sight, the English and the Jews were quite alike. This might be the reason why they were supposed to wear specific items which identified them as belonging to the Jewry. The elements which distinguished the medieval Jews from the English were not many, and included the hooded cloak and, after the edict of the 1267 Vienna Council, the so called

[1]Cecil Roth, A History of the Jews in England, (London: Clarendon Press, 1941). Online resource: http://iamthewitness.com/books/Cecil.Roth/A.History.of.the.Jews.in.England/

[2] J. Jacobs, The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records (London, 1893), cited by Roth (see note 1 above)

[3]For men: Deuleben or Benedict (Berechiah, Baruch); Bonevie or Vives (Hayyim, generally rendered as Hagin), Bonenfaund (Tob-Etem), Deulesault (Isaiah), Deulcresse or Cresse (Solomon, sometimes Gedaliah), Diai or Deu-ai (Eleazar), Deudone (Nathaniel), Benjamin). Issaac, shortened into Cok or Hak, Benjamin (Bateman); Asher (Sweteman).For women: as Hebrew equivalents were not considered necessary, we find such names as Belaset (Bellassez), Duzelina Precieuse, Licoricia, Regina, Chera Pasturella, Glorietta, Mirabilia, Brunetta, Bona. Surnames indicated place of origin (Lumbard, Peiteven, Angevin, le Francais, de Hibernia etc.), occupation (le Mire, le Scriveneur or le'Escrivein, le Pointur), or personal peculiarity, (Rufus, le Gros, Le Long, le Enveyse, le Fort, l'Aveugle). Rabbis were generally referred to, even in secular records, as 'Master' (Magister).

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The interdiction for the Jews to appear in public spaces without the Badge of Shame was subsequently renewed in 1222 (The Council of Oxford), in 1253 (by Henry III) and in 1275 (by Edward I). The result was that each and every member of the Jewish community above seven years of age, men and women alike, were forced to wear the yellow badge in public spaces.[4] Twelve years later, in 1287, the Synod of Exeter stressed the ecclesiastical interdiction.

The English Jews enjoyed the same status as their kind in Europe: servi camerae regis (that is, "servants of the royal chamber", in which the royal chamber refers to the King's treasury). This is explicitly stipulated in a document issued by King Henry III in 12 53, Mandate to the Justices assigned to the Custody of the Jews, in which we find one of the many interdictions the Jews had to observe: "no Jew remain in England, unless he perform the service of the King: and immediately any Jew shall be born, male or female, he shall serve Us in some manner".

There is also another interesting situation in which some of the Jews found themselves – being one of the King's so-called "demesne Jews", which meant being resident in the royal boroughs or Crown lands. In essence, wealthy Jews were simply conceded as personal gifts to favourites of the Court. Cecil Roth gives the example of Aaron fil 'Vives – an outstanding member of the Jewish community in London – who was offered as a gift to Edmund, son of King Henry III. This Aaron was the beneficiary of a number of special rights, such as the right to settle anywhere in England, and – in return for a nominal annual tribute – he was exempted by his master from all his financial burdens. It was one of the many special situations in which an influential Jew was invited by an aristocrat to settle on his domain ('demesne') on payment of a symbolic tribute (such as a pair of gilt spurs, or a pair of silver spoons). The wealthy Jew then received letters of protection from the Crown. There were instances when the Queen, the papal legate, or even the Archbishop of Canterbury went as far as to solicit special privileges for some particularly favoured individual.

[4]Cf., for the history of the Jewish Badge, see Ulysse Robert, Les Signes d'infamie au moyen age (Paris, 1891), and above, pp. 40, 42, 59, 71. The edict of 1222 was probably the earliest measure by which the obligation to wear the badge was extended to women.

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The problems of the medieval English Jews were not limited to this organized, state-approved financial exploitation. They were also facing apparently minor restrictions which contributed to the uneasiness that sometimes permeated their daily existence. These restrictions were directed against essential aspects of their life, such as burial rites (they were not permitted to bury their dead before settling any claims upon property), commerce (they were prevented from selling to Christians meat they considered unfit due to religious reasons), building restrictions (they were not allowed to build private houses or synagogues in the proximity of Christian churches). Moreover, the torturers and executioners, as the case may be, were recruited from the Jewry.

Apart from the restrictions, the Jews certainly enjoyed certain privileges as well. Considering their status as servi cameare regis, the King himself felt responsible for his Jews, and – as their possessions ultimately belonged to him – was protecting them and facilitating their business. Here are a few examples:

- they were granted authority to lend money at interest;
- they could freely travel about England;
- they were granted permission to settle wherever they pleased (except for those towns from which they had been excluded);
- just like the King, they were exempt from paying taxes on wine;
- they were allowed to pursue their business in the royal ante-chamber;
- it was forbidden by law to forcibly convert them to the Christian faith, ant the converts' children could choose their own religion;
- they were officially protected against any form of violence, and they could take refuge in the royal castles in case of emergency.

One mention should be made: even if the Jews were generally known as moneylenders, this profitable occupation could not possibly involve the whole community. The great financiers benefitted from a whole range of subordinates who kept the financial business on the move, and helped to the proper preservation of the Jewish faith. Thus, there were different officials and scribes employed in the synagogues, and those performing certain household services which were forbidden by the Church to the Gentiles.

Gradually, toleration and open encouragement gave way to persecution which culminated with the Exclusion. Despite this memorable event in the history of the English Jewish community, the contacts of the Jews across the English Channel with England did not completely cease. Now and then, a Jewish Magister, such as Magister Elias – Rabbi, or

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physician – was allowed to cross the Channel into England to offer personal assistance to King Edward II in health matters, an opportunity for him to ask for permission for his co-nationals to re-establish in England. The request was met with rejection. It is generally believed that, by mid-thirteenth-century, under the reign of King Edward III, a second expulsion was reinforced, which affected a few Jewish settlers who might have present at that time.

It does not mean that the Exclusion of 1290 put an end to the Jewish presence in England in its entirety. Occasional 'leaks' have been documented, and there is evidence of Jews who were accepted in England after converting to Christianity. They came, as expected, from all parts of Europe, and even Northern Africa: France, Flanders, Italy, Sicily, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and formed a rather miscellaneous community, comprising poor Jews who had been converted in England, and European converted Jews who preferred England for the material advantages. Many of them were accommodated in the famous Domus Conversorum ('the Converts' House'), which had been founded by Henry III.

Two notable presences in the fifteenth century are worth mentioning. One example is that of Alexander le Convers – parson of Letterhead, and presumably a survivor of the Expulsion of 1290 – who occupied important positions in the realm: he was, successively, agent in charge of securing money and ships for the royal service, collector of Peter's Pence in Ireland, and finally ambassador to Flanders. Another example is that of Edward Brandao, a Portuguese Jewish soldier who entered the Domus Conversorum in 1468, having been baptized by King Edward IV himself. The royal godfather ensured his access to the Court, and paved his way to his subsequent successful career during the Wars of the Roses. For ten years, starting 1472, he held a number of naval and military commands, followed by the governorship of the island of Guernsey, and even knighthood in 1483. His influential position at Court was greatly shaken with Henry VII's victorious Battle of Bosworth, and he was compelled to return to Portugal. He was accompanied by Perkin Warbeck, an ambitious Flemish young man who later made a bid for the English throne on the invaluable information provided by Brandao on life at the court of Edward IV.

The deeply established relationship of the Jews with south-western Europe was ended abruptly in 1499 – the year of the discovery of America – when Ferdinand and Isabel expelled the Jews from Spain, which triggered similar actions in Portugal and Navarre. The result was that the whole distribution of the Jewish people changed dramatically, with the centre of gravity moving from the Iberian Peninsula in the West to the Turkish Empire in the East. This

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second great expulsion of the Jews, two centuries after the first one from England, was to have an unexpected impact on the life of the Jewish community at large. The situation was different, though, from that in England. Not all of the Jews left these countries: those who remained were the Marranos (or New Christians) – converted Jews who officially professed the Catholic religion but were secretly practising the rites of the religion of their ancestors. [6] Theirs was an open conflict with the Inquisition; they were present in all walks of life, they occupied important positions in the army, administration and the Church, and more than often – when discovered by the Inquisition – they were burnt at stake.

Though officially forbidden to leave the country, some of the Marranos managed to escape, and fugitive Jews were soon found all over Europe, where they either joined existing Jewish communities or established new communities first in Turkey, and later in Italy, Holland, Germany and France. England was next. There was an unexpected consequence of the Spanish tragedy, a general shift of interest from the Franco-German (or Ashkenazi) segment of the European Jewry, to the Sephardi (Spanish and Portuguese) segment. It seems that some of these fugitives arrived in London in 1492 with bills of exchange on Spanish merchants there, and the influx of Marranos continued until 1498 when King Henry – while negotiating the marriage between the Prince of Wales and Catharine of Aragon – had to solemnly promise the protesting Catholic sovereigns that he would mercilessly prosecute any such renegades or fugitives discovered in England.

On the other hand, the Portuguese 'New Christians' were a visible presence in the Iberian communities abroad for the role they played in Portuguese commerce. One example is the house of Mendes, who controlled the pepper monopoly; it established its branch in Antwerp in 1512, extended its operations across the North Sea, and was entrusted with the loan transactions of the English treasury. So influential the company was that – in 1532, when Diogo Mendez, the head of the Antwerp branch, was charged with Judaizing – Henry VIII personally intervened on his behalf. Three years later, on the death of Diogo's elder brother Francisco, his widow Beatrice paid a short visit to England on her way to Antwerp, accompanied by her whole family. Among them was Joao Miguez, her nephew and future son-in-law who was to become – as Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos and the Cyclades – advisor at the Sublime Porte.

[6]Marrano means "pig"; the derogatory term eventually became interchangeable with the more proper converso, or "New Christian."

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The Mendes family were not alone in England, where they found a well-organized Marrano community comprising at least thirty-seven householders who observed the Hebrew religious faith and regularly held services at the house of Alves Lopes, who offered invaluable assistance and advice to the newly-arrived fugitives. Similarly, one of Diogo Mendes' local agents, Christopher Fernandes, would warn the Marranos on board the Portuguese ships docking in Plymouth and Southampton on their way to Antwerp if they were to confront any danger upon their arrival in Flanders. The spiritual leader of this group of refugees was Antonio de la Rona – also related to the Mendes family – and he was known to help the fugitives to realize their property, and providing them with bills of exchange on Antwerp. A special group was made up by the practitioners of the medical profession, among whom Dionysius Rodriguez, physician and medical author, who had previously been appointed to the Court of Portugal, and who had fled to London for safety.

During the ever-increasing campaign against them from the Catholic nations – which more than often led to arrests and expulsions – the Marranos in England were generally regarded as Protestant refugees, the only accepted guise that would prevent them from being deferred to the Catholic authorities. Nevertheless, with the anti-Protestant, anti-Reformation attitude during the reign of Queen Mary – when English protestants were burnt at stake and menacing shadow of the Inquisition was spreading over England, the Marranos' only choice was to leave the country.

Jews were banished from Venice before they were disbanded from England. They were not officially let back into Italy until the start of the sixteenth century. Moreover, after Shakespeare's time in the 1780s, a Bavarian writer, Johann Pezzl, wrote:

"there are about five hundred Jews in Vienna. Their sole and eternal occupation is to counterfeit, salvage, trade in coins, and cheat Christians, Turks, heathens, indeed themselves". [7]

There were not many Jews in Venice at Shakespeare's time, so he was writing about minority that was left. Likewise, in the Middle Ages some Jews from Paris were charged with eating Christians. Shakespeare most likely knew of this and other instances where Jews were known to drain Christians of blood.[8] It would have been hard for him to ignore these tales when writing. Additionally, Jewish converts were still considered to be stereotypical

[7]Silberstein, Laurence J. and Robert L. Cohn ed. The Other in Jewish Thought and History. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 369.
[8]Gross, John. Shylock: A Legend & Its Legacy. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 29.

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Jewish and have the essential Jewish behaviors and beliefs. Even generations later, members with Jewish ancestry that were active in Christian rituals were still "really Jewish". [9] In short, stereotypes of other cultures also played an important role in shaping Shakespeare's and England's portrayal of Jews. These overbearing stereotypes led to the rise of anti-Semitism in society. No one could stop these scandalous stories from spreading and festering in the minds of many citizens.

Shakespeare played on this fear to make Shylock a more convincing villain. A Jew was the precise bad character because no one would disagree with his development or fate at the end of the play. Moreover, "I would define an anti-Semitic work of art as one that portrays Jews in a way that makes them objects of antipathy to readers and spectators – objects of scorn, hatred, laughter, or contempt" (Bloom 306).[10] The play starts out by joking about the similarities between the Jews and the devil. As the play progresses Shylock's actions are more connected with the devil. Similarly, Launcelot even debates this connection when he decides if he should end services with Shylock. He states "the Jew is the very devil incarnation" (Barnet 308).[11] Further, the play looks at 'Jewishness' as evil and this idea of it is associated with sternness and material possessions, while on the contrary, Christianity is linked with love and mercy (306). Shakespeare's audience was, to be expected, used to the prejudice against the Jewish culture. They were most likely not shocked by Shylock's remarks about avoiding pork and wanting to charge a high interest rate. Shylock's link to evilness is his 'Jewishness'.

One final remark will contribute to our understanding of representations of Jews and Jewishness in Elizabethan times. Judaism is an orthoprax religion, which means that the correct observance of laws and rituals are emphasized over theological questions. This contrasts orthodox religions such as Christianity, in which holding the correct theological belief is of the utmost importance. Though Shakespeare would not have known these identifications by name, the precedence set by the religions and their practice was well established during his time. Shylock's understanding of Judaism is very much orthoprax; by following these laws he will assure himself salvation. Though he later decides to attend, there is no reason to believe he does not follow dietary guidelines.

[9]O'Rourke, James. "Racism and Homophobia in The Merchant of Venice." English Literary History: 2003, p. 382.
[10]Bloom, Harold. Shylock.(New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991).
[11]Barnet, Sylvan. Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970).

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More importantly, Shylock's adherence to orthopraxy extends to Venetian law, another system of values that, when followed, will theoretically yield happiness. His joy is short-lived, however, as Portia declares that not a drop of blood may be spilled if Shylock is to collect the bond, and that he may not accept Bassanio's bond money. Shylock's only sign of disagreement is his half-hearted attempt to leave the court only to be denied once again by Portia. It seems amazing how easily Shylock accepts his final sentence, but is not unbelievable in light of his orthoprax views. In the end he accepts all the terms Antonio suggests and weakly slips out of the courthouse, defeated by the system he entrusted and thought would redeem him.

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