

SHERLOCK HOLMES: ANTI-SEMITE?

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Conan Doyle indulged in mild anti-Semitism, as well. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson is unpleasantly surprised to find calling at Baker Street ‘a gray-headed, seedy visitor, looking like a Jew peddler.’ In ‘The Cardboard Box,’ Holmes takes delight in having tricked ‘a Jew broker in Tottenham Court Road’ out of five hundred guineas by paying him only fifty-five shillings for a Stradivarius violin. And in ‘The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place,’ Sir Robert Norberton laments his terrible position. ‘I am deeply in the hands of the Jews,’ he complains, meaning that he is deeply in debt.¹

As this quote from the book *London 1900* shows, the treatment of Jews in the Canon can be problematic. As much as we like to think of Holmes as the “best and wisest” man we have known, the question has been raised by some about whether Holmes (or Watson) was anti-Semitic. As shown in the quote above, this is based on references to “Jew peddler,” “Jew broker,” and other terms that do not appear to be “Jewish friendly.” This analysis reviews these references, examines the times in which they were made, and considers whether there is enough evidence to conclude that the discomfort many feel is justified.

It is instructive to look briefly at the historical treatment of Jews through the late nineteenth century in England because we should be familiar with the general social context of language in a time in which we do not live.²

From the time when Jews came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066, there were restrictions on what they could do, just as in other countries. They could not own landed estates (or could not defend the plots of land they did own) and were barred from many professions. The guilds were closed to them. However, as the Christian religion did not allow its own adherents to loan money for interest, the early English economy found the Jews not only useful, but necessary for financial liquidity. Jews were encouraged, even forced by restrictions in other professions, throughout Europe to become money lenders. Certainly, not all Jews became money lenders, but the ones who did often became wealthy and visible. While it was a gross oversimplification of their role in society, Jews became known for the part they played in the money-lending profession.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the situation improved. Benjamin Disraeli (born Jewish, but baptized in the Church of England at the age of thirteen to give him more opportunities) was elected to the House of Commons in 1837.

Disraeli never hid his Jewish past. In 1855, Sir David Salomons became the first Jewish Lord Mayor of London. In 1868, and again in 1874, Disraeli became Prime Minister. There were other Jews in the British government. Jews were involved as important members of London's financial world. Many Jewish merchants had moved into respectable manufacturing, wholesaling, and retailing businesses. England finally seems to have become more accepting of Jews in roles other than money lending. However, there were still Jews prominent in the money lending and finance fields, and the terms "Jews" and "money lenders" remained synonymous.

In 1850, approximately 20,000 Jews lived in London. In 1870, there began an immigration of Jews from Eastern European countries where they suffered greater restrictions. Between 1870–1914, approximately 120,000 Jews migrated to Britain. These immigrants worked as street peddlers, shopkeepers, tailors, etc., not unlike the Jewish migrants who came to the United States. It was not unusual to find immigrant Jewish peddlers in London.

CONSIDERING THE EVIDENCE: DID HOLMES USE ANTI-SEMITIC LANGUAGE?

It is important to separate the statements of Holmes or Watson from those of other characters. I will discuss each of the statements referring directly to Jews individually. The first statement was made by Watson in *Study in Scarlet*: "The same afternoon brought a grey-headed, seedy visitor, looking like a Jew pedlar, who appeared to me to be much excited, and who was closely followed by a slipshod elderly woman."

This was a description made by Watson of a client, witness, or other participant in one of Holmes's early dramas. The question is whether the term "Jew pedlar" is a slur and reflects anti-Semitic feeling on Watson's part.

As stated above, there were many Jewish peddlers among the immigrants in London, so that reference, in and of itself, is not a slap. However, doesn't Watson's use of the term "Jew pedlar" (rather than "Jewish pedlar" or simply "pedlar") smack of anti-Jewish feeling? Complicated though it may be to discount our American twenty-first century sensitivities in analyzing language used in Victorian England, that is exactly what we must do. Any use of language changes over a hundred years. In particular, words have taken on a different meaning post-Holocaust than they had before the Nazis' genocidal atrocities. Lastly, word usage, intentions, and sensitivities in England differ from those in the United States.

In today's world, particularly in the United States, the use of the word "Jew" (as opposed to "Jewish") as an adjective is clearly offensive. Indeed, many believe the use of the word "Jew" as a noun is offensive. There were numerous recent articles in the Jewish press about this issue when the *New York Times* ran the headline "First

Jew on a Major U.S. Ticket” about Senator Joseph Lieberman being chosen as a vice presidential candidate. However, this controversy did not just arise recently. In fact, H. L. Mencken discussed the controversy of using “Jew” as a noun in 1921 in his book *The American Language*.³ In that book, he also noted the freer use of “Jew” in England. The debate rages on today.

The 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “Jew” as a noun as:

1. a. A person of Hebrew descent; one whose religion is Judaism; an Israelite...
2. a. *transf.* and *offensive*. As a name of opprobrium or reprobation; *spec.* applied to a grasping or extortionate person (whether Jewish or not) who drives hard bargains.
- b. a pedlar

In this use not depreciatory⁴

Clearly, the qualification of the definition “2.a” as opprobrious shows that the term was meant offensively, whereas in definition “2.b,” “Jew” and “pedlar” were synonymous and not used offensively. This is particularly relevant to the quote from the Canon under question, as the reference is made to a “Jew pedlar.” It is clear that, according to the *OED*, the phrase may have been redundant, but it was not anti-Semitic.

About the use of “Jew” as an adjective, the 1989 *OED* states:

3. *attrib.* and *Comb.* a. *attrib.* or as *adj.* That is a Jew, Jewish, as *Jew boy, butcher, girl, man, pedlar, physician, trooper*, (*such expressions now mainly in offensive use but not originally opprobrious*) or of relating to Jews, as *Jew bill, hatred, toll*. b. *objective, similitive, etc.*, as *Jew-drowning, -hater, Jew-dear, adj.; Jew-like adj. and adv., looking adj.* (emphasis mine).

Certainly, we may find this use offensive today, and, undoubtedly, some of these terms were meant offensively by some people, even then. However, the *OED*’s implication is clear that the use of the term “Jew” as an adjective was, at one time, common, not identified as colloquial, and was descriptive without being intended offensively. It specifically states that its use that way has changed over time. This is in sharp contrast to the use of the term as an “extortionate person” (explained above), which clearly was always deemed offensive.

The 1989 *OED* can be compared to the 1928 edition. The 1928 *OED* also stated that the use of the term Jew as a noun (“extortionate person”) is opprobrious (see definition “2.a” in the 1989 edition quoted above). When discussing the term’s use as an adjective, however, it did not include the language identifying it as

being offensive, as it did in the later edition.⁵ At that time in England, either its use was not meant offensively, or the *OED* simply did not indicate that it was. However, given that the *OED* did state that the use of the term as “an extortionate person” was meant offensively in 1928, we have to conclude that its use as an adjective at the time was not.

It is hard (perhaps, impossible) for us to put ourselves back in a time when a phrase offensive to us today might be uttered in a neutral way. However, this is clearly the case. Whether Holmes or Watson used the phrase “Jew peddler,” his use of the word “Jew” as an adjective did not hold the opprobrious meaning it holds for us today.

The next statement in question, also made by Watson, can be found in “Scandal in Bohemia”: “In this case I found her biography sandwiched in between that of a Hebrew rabbi and that of a staff-commander who had written a monograph upon the deep-sea fishes.”

Here, Watson was reflecting Holmes’s filing system in his index. The term “Hebrew Rabbi” is nearly respectful in nature. In 1890, *The Standard Dictionary* recommended “Hebrew” for the race and language and “Israelite” for one who practices the religion.⁶ Clearly, there is nothing anti-Jewish about this language.

The next reference to Jews was made by Hall Pycroft in “Stockbroker’s Clerk”:

Well, I was sitting doing a smoke that very evening after I had been promised the appointment, when up came my landlady with a card which had ‘Arthur Pinner, Financial Agent,’ printed upon it. I had never heard the name before, and could not imagine what he wanted with me, but of course I asked her to show him up. In he walked—a middle-sized, dark-haired, dark-eyed, black-bearded man, with a touch of the sheeny about his nose. He had a brisk kind of way with him and spoke sharply, like a man who knew the value of time.

“Sheeny” was an ethnic slur used against Jews at the time. In this case, this statement was not made by either Holmes or Watson, but by Pycroft. However, shouldn’t we be troubled that when Pycroft made the slur against Jews, neither Watson nor Holmes rebuked him? Let us consider the story, itself.

“Stockbroker’s Clerk” is a parable about bad judgment, and Pycroft is the fool throughout this parable. Watson continuously quoted him as saying so himself. Holmes never corrected Pycroft on anything in this story, including Pycroft’s assertions about what a fool he was. Further, Watson made Pycroft and his slur look ridiculous when, at the end of the adventure, he disclosed that the man whom Pycroft thought was Jewish was, in fact, named “Beddington” (unlike “Pinner,” not a Jewish name). There is no glorification of anti-Semitism or the anti-Semite here.

The next canonical quote was another one by Watson, this time in “Cardboard Box”: “We had a pleasant little meal together, during which Holmes would talk about nothing but violins, narrating with great exultation how he had purchased his own Stradivarius, which was worth at least five hundred guineas, at a Jew broker’s in Tottenham Court Road for fifty-five shillings.”

Here, Watson may have been repeating what Holmes had said. “Brokers” were, of course, money lenders, just as pawnbrokers are today. It is not surprising that there were Jewish brokers. As for the use of the word “Jew” as an adjective, as I have discussed above, it was an acceptably neutral figure of speech that was not meant as an opprobrious phrase. Further, is there any doubt that Holmes would have felt the same exultation upon purchasing a Stradivarius worth five hundred guineas for fifty-five shillings if the broker had been a Gentile? There is no indication that Holmes took any additional glee because the broker was Jewish.

The last three canonical quotes are to be found in “Shoscombe Old Place.” The first is made by John Mason, the secretary to Sir Robert Norberton: “He thinks of nothing but the horse and the race. His whole life is on it. He’s holding off the Jews till then. If the Prince fails him, he is done.”

Here, of course, “the Jews” means “money lenders.” Once again, this statement is not made by Holmes or Watson, and neither should be held accountable for it. However, the next canonical quotation (also from “Shoscombe Old Place”) is made by Holmes in discussing Norberton with Watson: “He is in the hands of the Jews, and may at any moment be sold up and his racing stables seized by his creditors.”

Holmes was paraphrasing the statement made by Mason about his boss. Indeed, Norberton used the *exact same phrase* (“hands of the Jews”) later in the story: “For myself, I am deeply in the hands of the Jews.”

It is clear that Holmes’s statement was not original, but rather a restatement of Mason/Norberton. But Holmes did say it, and we must analyze it. Holmes clearly suspected Norberton of being the villain in this story. Since Watson does not say so, we do not know what inflection Holmes used when he repeated Mason’s phrase. Was he being sarcastic? Did he use a sympathetic tone? It is hard to judge for sure Holmes’s intent from the statement alone. Again, we will have to consider the context of the story.

As he so often does, Watson used his own naiveté to give Holmes the opportunity to expound shortly thereafter: “Sir Robert is a man of an honourable stock. But you do occasionally find a carrion crow among the eagles.” Later, Holmes told Norberton that his behavior is inexcusable. Further, Watson reported that Norberton said: “My chief creditor is, unhappily, my most bitter enemy—a rascally fellow, Sam Brewer, whom I was once compelled to horsewhip on Newmarket Heath.”

Does any reader believe that Norberton’s whipping of Brewer (the person to

whom he owed money) was justified? I don't think so. Here, Watson showed that Norberton was a bully and a skunk. It does not matter if Sam Brewer was actually Jewish or if he was the symbolic Jew. The sympathy is with the Jew. Neither Watson nor Holmes portrayed Norberton in anything but a bad light and showed no sympathy to Norberton's plight. This episode does not glorify anti-Semitism, and I do not believe that this episode indicates anti-Jewish sentiment on Holmes's or Watson's part.

DID HOLMES SHOW ANTI-SEMITIC ACTION?

We have a nearly forty-year record of Holmes's behavior. It ranges from "*Gloria Scott*" at age twenty-one to "His Last Bow" at age sixty. Our record for Watson spans thirty years. If one or the other was anti-Semitic, it surely would have been reflected in some actions during that period. A reading of the stories does not indicate any anti-Jewish actions.

This is not because there aren't any Jews showing up in the Canon. In addition to the Jewish characters cited above, other obviously or potentially Jewish minor characters were mentioned in the stories. While I grant that it may be a capital mistake to assign a religion to a person based on the sounding of his name, a number of characters very well could be Jewish. Among these are "old Abrahams" (a client mentioned in "Lady Frances Carfax"), Penrose Fisher (a physician mentioned in "Dying Detective"), Milman and Hyam (murdered people mentioned in *Valley of Fear*), Hyams (a tailor mentioned in "Norwood Builder"), Lowenstein (a researcher mentioned in "Creeping Man"), and Godfrey Milner (a card player mentioned in "Empty House"). In none of these cases did Holmes make any disparaging remarks or take any action that could be considered anti-Semitic. Further, it is hard to believe that if Holmes was an anti-Semite, he would take a Jew as a client.

DID HOLMES SHOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ANTI-SEMITIC?

Jean Paul Sartre, in his 1948 book *Anti-Semite and the Jew*, describes the characteristics of the anti-Semite. The anti-Semite has chosen to hate, because hate is a faith he can enjoy in common with others, and he has made himself an anti-Semite to build himself up. Anti-Semitism is more than a mere "opinion" about the Jews and involves the entire personality of the anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism is the anti-Semite's feeble way of justifying his own existence.⁷

Does this sound like the personality of Sherlock Holmes? It does not to me. Holmes had such a strong, iconoclastic sense of self that he did not need the promise of riches to start his practice, he did not need knighthood to legitimize his success, and he did not need hatred of the Jews to build his self-esteem.

Further, Sartre said: "But the anti-Semite adds a new touch to the portrait: the

Jew, he tells us, is an abstract intellectual, a pure thinker. And we perceive at once that the terms abstract, rationalist, intellectual here take on a pejorative sense.”⁸

It sounds as if Holmes had more in common with the Jews than with the anti-Semite. While Watson does not share the “pure thinker” characteristic of Holmes, he certainly glorifies the quality. As Watson is often characterized as representing “everyman,” one would assume that he, more than Holmes, would be likely to reflect their prejudices. However, as discussed above, there do not appear to any examples of anti-Semitism in the thirty-year history we have of Watson’s actions.

SUMMARY

After considering the social history of the Jews in England, the statements made about Jews in the chronicles of Holmes’s forty-year practice, the actions of Holmes and Watson toward Jews during those years, and whether Holmes or Watson had the character of the anti-Semite, we find no evidence demonstrating that either Sherlock Holmes or Doctor Watson was anti-Semitic.

NOTES

1. Schneer, Jonathan. *London 1900—The Imperial Metropolis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 112.
2. This summary was generated from a variety of sources.
3. Mencken, Henry Louis. *The American Language*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921.
4. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 228, 229.
5. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, complete text reduced micrographically [using the text of the 1928 10-volume edition]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
6. *Declining Grammar and Other Essays on the English Vocabulary*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1988.
7. Sartre, Jean Paul. *Anti-Semite and the Jew*. New York: Schocken Books, 1948.
8. Sartre, p. 109.