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# THE ‘WANDERING JEW’: HISTORY, FICTION, AND ADAPTATION

*The paper discusses the figure of the ‘Wandering Jew’ in the practice of adaptation – from page to screen – and uncovers a stereotype that finds expression in both fictional texts and in accounts of real life individuals*

This paper starts with a coincidence. In 2011 I attended a presentation by Prof. Peter Luther on London’s slum landlords, and particularly Peter Rachman. The next day, through the lottery that is Britain’s ‘Love Film’ DVD rental service, I received the movie *An Education*, adapted from Lynn Barber’s memoir; a story in which the infamous property magnate Rachman plays a minor part. Luther argued persuasively that Rachman, although undoubtedly an unscrupulous landlord, was not quite the singular arch villain that contemporary accounts and posterity had made him. Using the figure of Rachman as a way into a wider examination of historical and fictional representations, I examine adaptation in more than one sense. In the first, straightforward, sense it is focused on two screen adaptations – *An Education* (Scherfig, 2009) and *The Way We Live Now* (Yates, 2001). It also employs two contemporary reviews of those texts to analyse the choices made in adaptation and the responses they foster. The selection of reviews – one from a website focused on Jewish concerns, the other from a deeply unpleasant white-supremacist website – is wilful, but hopefully illuminating. Specifically, I consider the adaptations in respect of their susceptibility to either provoke the charge of anti-Semitism or nourish an anti-Semitic reading. Adaptation is also at issue here in a less conventional way, in that the paper is concerned with stereotypes, a mode of representation which – in its patterns of repetition, difference, intertextuality, multi-media transmission, and so on – might be among the oldest (if problematic) variants of adaptive practice.



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### **Peter Rachman**

Born in Poland, the son of a Jewish dentist, Rachman had been interned by the Nazis after the 1939 invasion. Escaping to Russia, he had the misfortune to be interned again, in a Siberian Labour camp. Following Germany's invasion of Russia, he fought for the Allies and became a British resident after the war. He built a property empire in West London, notable for the driving out of the mostly white sitting tenants, who had legal protection against rent increases, and their replacement with newly-arrived West Indian tenants who enjoyed no such protection and had little choice but to accept high rents. In 1962, aged only 42, Rachman died of heart failure, probably due in large part to his wartime hardships. But it was the Profumo affair, and its press coverage in 1963, that made him – posthumously – notorious.

For Rachman had owned the house in London's Marylebone used by Mandy Rice-Davies and Christine Keeler – both of whom had also been his mistresses. As interest grew in the scandal of sex and politics, so accounts of Rachman and his property dealings emerged. MP Ben Parkin used the term 'Rachmanism' in a call to improve protection for tenants and by 1965 when the Rent Act became law, this new word – defined as 'the exploitation and intimidation of tenants by unscrupulous landlords' – had entered the dictionary. As Luther argued, although the ills of bad landlords would be conveniently embodied in the foreign and deceased Rachman, one scarcely acknowledged outcome of the media coverage was that it encouraged many wealthy British landlords to either quietly improve or quickly divest themselves of their own slum properties. We may also observe that the newly-minted term 'Rachmanism', and subsequent invocation of the name and figure of Rachman, were not unprecedented. Like the fictional figures of Fagin and Shylock, he would be loaded with negative meanings far beyond the narrative of his original appearance.

Of particular interest to me were tropes and aspects of the Rachman story that echoed earlier stories, and prefigured others. For example, the Jewish émigré who builds an empire from London; his success, excess and conspicuous consumption; the empire's collapse; his dramatic death; the subsequent unravelling of his mythology. And finally the questions... 'What did we really know about him?' 'Is he really dead?' and 'Where did the money go?' Here were narrative elements that belonged to Anthony Trollope's 1875 novel *The Way We Live Now*, and its central character, financier Augustus Melmotte. But they also applied to the life-story and representations of newspaper tycoon Robert Maxwell who died in 1991.



### An Education

Rachman's appearance in *An Education* is fleeting but nonetheless significant to both page and screen accounts. *An Education* tells how, as a sixteen year-old schoolgirl, Lynn Barber (Jenny, in the adaptation) is seduced by Simon (David, in the film), a Jewish man 20 years her senior. With not inconsiderable charm, David introduces her to the sophisticated adult world she craves – classical music concerts, nightclubs, restaurants, a trip to Paris. He is the antithesis of the staid suburban parents she hopes to escape by academic achievement, crystallised in the ambition of reading English at Oxford. He also works for Peter Rachman. In one scene we watch as Jenny observes David meeting a Caribbean immigrant family with their luggage. At an upstairs window an elderly white woman is seen, twitching her net curtain, concerned at the appearance of her new neighbours. David explains to Jenny that he helps 'schvarzers' who cannot rent 'from their own kind'. The relationship ends when, having accepted his proposal of marriage and rejected the goal of Oxford, she discovers he is already married and has a young family. Attempting to revive her university dream, she is rebuffed by her former headmistress, but tutored to the dreaming spires by a sympathetic teacher.

A review by Irina Bragin found the film wholly problematic, chiming with 1930s Nazi propaganda, and employing a variant of the centuries-old figure 'The Wandering Jew'. Originally available on the *JewishJournal.com*, a site with a range of cultural, political and social interests, the review later appeared on the more assertively political *FightHatred.com*, the website of the Jabotinsky International Center which has as its stated aim 'to stand at the forefront of the international battle against contemporary anti-Semitism'. In *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes*, Frank Felsenstein describes how the key features of the Wandering Jew stereotype are that he is a 'pariah', 'a perpetual outsider' condemned to a vagabond existence 'for his supposed crime against Christ' (Felsenstein, 1999: 35). Bragin (2009) observes that:

Jenny's values, and those of her middle-class parents, teachers and first boyfriend, are antithetical to those of the crooked Jew.

The Brits [by contrast] are refined, attractive, honest, sober and hard working.

Considered in terms of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, Bragin's reading of *An Education* is 'oppositional'. She does not misunderstand the film's intentions – how its makers would 'prefer' it interpreted – but rather she 'retotalizes the message within some alternative framework of reference' (Hall, 1980: 138).

Whilst acknowledging that the film merits analysis in terms of the problematic Wandering Jew motif (a term the film invokes twice, most pointedly to highlight the prejudices of key non-Jewish characters) I found I could not agree with much of Bragin's summary. Jenny's parents and her pre-David life are not presented in remotely attractive terms. They are deathly, comically, dull. The would-be younger boyfriend is – at best – sympathetically inept, shaded out by the suave David. The lion's share of the film is devoted to Jenny's mostly-enjoyable experiences in David's company. Viewers are encouraged to relish, to connive, in the ruses by which Jenny and David





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outwit the impossibly impercipient Mum and Dad into allowing them to spend time together. Although there are moments when David's interactions with Jenny assume a 'creepy' quality, heralding a future difficulty, these are not presented as anyhow Jewish, and are outweighed by uncomplicated representations of them as a stylish young couple. This includes a peppy foot-tapping montage of them in 1960s Paris that comes perilously close to parody. Ultimately, the problem with David is that he's not the footloose free agent he masqueraded as. He is in reality more quotidian, rooted, with a family home very much like hers. The evenings and trips with Jenny were an escape of kinds for him too, but more deluded, more unsustainable. He may be an extra-marital 'wanderer' but in most respects he does not align to the Wandering Jew stereotype at all.

Although the film's conclusion suggests that Jenny is chastened by her experience, this does not entail her reconciliation to the values and institutions which formerly contained her. The anti-Semitic headmistress is not the agent of her renewed attempt upon the Oxford entrance exam. Jenny blames her parents for not seeing through David, and returning to her studies is patently not a re-incorporation into the old order but a means to find an alternative – neither her parents' existence, nor that offered by David. For Bragin, the ending presents Jenny as 'repentant' and willing to return to 'wholesome Christian values', an interpretation for which I fail to find the textual evidence. Furthermore, it is difficult to square this reading with the extra-textual knowledge that the real-life Barber's first post-Oxford job was writing for Penthouse and her subsequent work included *How To Improve Your Man In Bed* and *The Single Woman's Sex Book*.

### The Way We Live Now

My earlier reference to Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* and Melmotte may have prompted readers to ask 'But... is Melmotte Jewish?' This very question forms one of John Sutherland's puzzles of Nineteenth Century literature from his book *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* As Sutherland argues, Trollope deliberately 'casts a pall of racial and national ambiguity around Melmotte' (Sutherland, 1998: 157). The same is emphatically not true of several other clearly Jewish characters including Madame Melmotte, Mr Brehgert, Mr Cohenlupe, and Mr Goldsheiner. But Melmotte himself is a confusion, at times a contradiction, of signs and information. For example, of his daughter Marie and her recollections of a childhood in America and Europe we hear:

Her father had married her present mother in Frankfort. That she could remember distinctly [...] and the fact that she was told that from henceforth she was to be a Jewess. But there had soon come another change. They went from Frankfort to Paris, and there they were all Christians (Trollope, 2001: 88).

This account of movement and re-invention echoes many aspects of Jewish experience from at least the Middle Ages, including: exile, expulsion, arrival, conversion (or its appearance), integration, and difference. These are among the tropes that – adapted into the legend of the Wandering Jew – would form one of the enduring means by which Christian host groups would assert and perpetuate the notion of Jews as aliens.

Where Trollope is clear is in his critical depiction of the aristocratic English characters who have dealings with Melmotte. They are mostly hypocrites. Hoping to profit from association with his business, they maintain (with various degrees of openness) a disdain for him personally, either because they think he is Jewish, or at least for his Jewish connections. Following Melmotte's suicide towards the end of the novel, Trollope describes additional speculation about Melmotte's identity:

The general opinion seemed to be that his father had been a noted coiner in New York – an Irishman of the name of Melmody (Trollope, 2001: 743).

Sutherland observes that adding Irishness to the mix allowed readers to recognise a reference to swindler John Sadleir, who took cyanide in 1856 but was widely believed to still be alive at the time of *The Way We Live Now* (Sutherland, 1998: 160). It also anticipated the rumours and theories that would follow the deaths of both Peter Rachman and Robert Maxwell a century later. Of Rachman, Parliament was told by the MP who coined 'Rachmanism' that:

All Fleet Street is full of the idea that Rachman is not dead [...]. It would be easy to switch bodies. [...] It would be a very good idea to have a substitution, and very useful – just 10 days before all hell broke loose [A reference to the breaking of the Profumo affair in the press] (Parkin, 1963).



In the case of Maxwell, who drowned after falling from his yacht, a frenzy of conspiracy theories attended, and continues to attend, the discovery of his body, autopsy and subsequent burial in Jerusalem. Several of these laboured his Israeli connections, describing as 'convenient' his death, or non-death, when his business empire was unravelling. Helpfully (for conspiracy theorists) this reading could apply whether Maxwell either a) alive and well thanks to Israel's intercession or b) murdered by Israel's secret service Mossad, having outlived his usefulness as a spy.

The 2001 BBC television adaptation of *The Way We Live Now* constitutes an intervention on the question of Melmotte's identity. Where Trollope makes him – in Sutherland's words – 'a national-racial compendium', someone who stands for 'a whole range of 'dishonesties' across 'England, Europe and America' (1998: 160), this screen version would present him in terms of a specific public figure, of someone who had been dead only a decade. In *The Telegraph* Quentin Letts observed:

Its central villain is a great financier called Augustus Melmotte, a ringer for Robert Maxwell. The way Melmotte cons investors and "polite society" is eerily familiar (Letts, 2001).

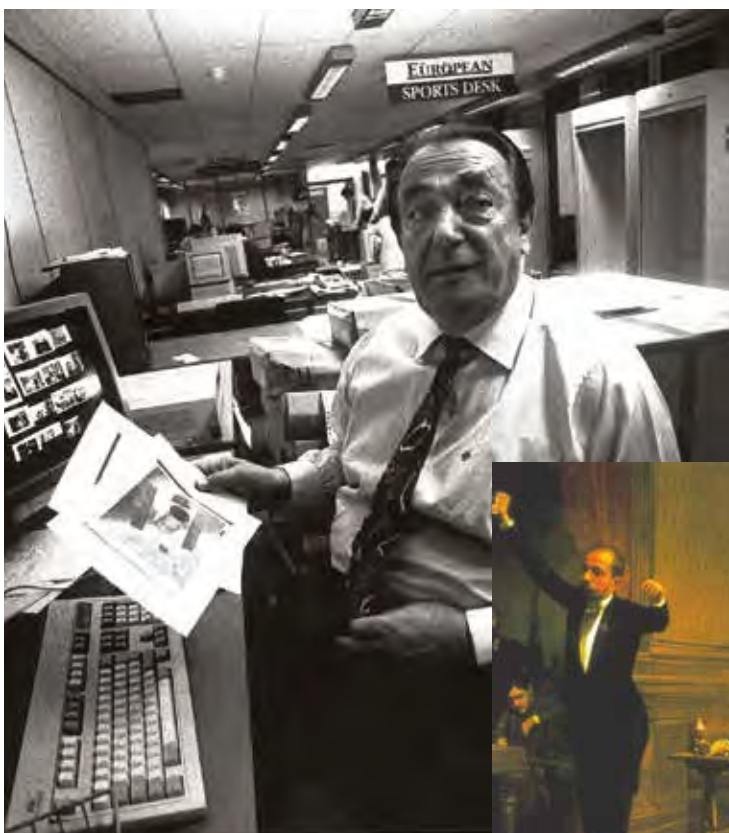
At the other end of the political spectrum, in the *Socialist Worker*, the comparison was equally apparent:

The portrayal of Melmotte is clearly modelled on Robert Maxwell, the fraudster newspaper owner who committed suicide ten years ago. [...] Like Maxwell, he finds the high and mighty prepared to extol his virtues so long as he seems likely to line their pockets (Harman, 2001).

This interpretation was not merely based on life-story parallels, but consciously developed through performance. As Letts noted, 'the cigar-smoking Melmotte is played by David Suchet and is given a Maxwellian growl.'

That distinctive Maxwell sound had been worked on hard by Suchet who listened to radio and TV recordings when preparing for the role. The Melmotte/Maxwell similarity was in no sense discovered or invented by this adaptation, but constituted an important strand of how the derived text would address its viewers. Suchet stated: 'What audiences will see, if they know Maxwell's background, is that he mirrors the life of Melmotte.' Interviewed for American TV's *Masterpiece Theatre*, Suchet stressed the Melmotte-as-Maxwell angle, returning to the topic even for questions that did not appear to invite it. To 'Do you think that someone who is a great swindler has to be a great actor?' he replied, 'Yes'. The thing about Melmotte and Maxwell is that both had enormous charm, with totally convincing, wonderfully winning ways. In addition to being good actors, both knew how to manipulate people' (Suchet, 2001).

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PENGUIN CLASSICS

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

*The Way We Live Now*

An inevitable corollary of this version of Melmotte was that, in making him Maxwellian, it effectively decided that he was Jewish, supplanting Trollope's deliberate ambiguity. The years after Maxwell's death had seen an increased interest in his Jewishness, of speculation about his connections with Israel – for example *Maxwell: The Final Verdict* (1996), *The Assassination of Robert Maxwell: Israel's Superspy* (2002) – and this could not but colour audiences' reading of a Maxwell-like Melmotte. In terms of the making and/or finding of meaning, it is notable that the Melmotte-as-Maxwell portrayal was not just a simple accretion, the addition of a further layer of meaning in this particular text. Simultaneously, it rendered this version *less* polysemic that its source, less amenable to multiple readings, and (as will be discussed later) made it more amenable to one particular interpretation.



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### Maxwell

In 2007 the BBC broadcast another drama focusing on the final days of a beleaguered public figure with a monumental fraud unravelling around him. David Suchet would not immediately appear the ideal candidate for the title role in *Maxwell*. Many inches shorter, at least a hundred pounds lighter than the real Maxwell, the role with which the actor is most readily associated is a virtual opposite, Hercule Poirot. Poirot is diminutive and dapper, whereas the ebullient newspaper proprietor was famously larger-than-life. However, in interview Suchet would reprise aspects of his description of preparing to play Melmotte, focusing on 'voice' as key to characterisation. He stated: 'in Maxwell's case, it comes from deep down within him. It's an expression of power, of self-assurance, of incredible self-confidence' (Suchet, 2007). It was also, of course, very similar to the voice with which he had earlier rendered Augustus Melmotte for the same broadcaster.

Sharing several characteristics of 'quality' television – seriousness of subject matter, a public service broadcaster, high production values, time of broadcast – the audience for the 2001 Trollope adaptation would likely have mapped substantially onto those who watched the 2007 drama *Maxwell*. Suchet's Maxwell would then have imported a host of associations from his prior portrayal of Melmotte. If his Melmotte had been Maxwellian, then his subsequent Maxwell could hardly avoid being 'Melmottian'. In particular, the 2001 adaptation seemingly deciding Melmotte's origins – removing the novel's opacity, firming up his Jewishness, his foreignness – would through Suchet's double performance emphasise that aspect of Maxwell too.

Like Trollope's Melmotte, Maxwell would become an MP. Twice elected, he owed one of his nicknames to Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who described him as 'the bouncing Czech'. Of itself, the moniker need not be interpreted as anti-Semitic. However, neither can it be ignored that in linking foreignness with untrustworthiness, it echoes a durable theme in anti-Semitic discourse and threatens an interpretation that does not limit Maxwell's foreignness to having been born in Eastern Europe, but that includes his Jewish identity too.



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### Difficult territory

Most adaptations make decisions in respect of the texts they adapt. At its simplest, the relative openness of words will be replaced by a variety of concrete visualisations – recognisable actors, physical locations, and objects. There is a parallel impulse, not confined to literature-on-screen, for any version of a well-known text to be re-contextualised, given a contemporary hook, spin or reference, in order to better engage audiences. In this respect, the BBC's *The Way We Live Now* with its Maxwell-inspired version of Melmotte did not do anything that countless other adaptations have not done before, though in intervening on the question of Melmotte's identity it inevitably set the interpretive stakes higher.

If Bragin's review of *An Education* was, in my estimation, over-eager to find and condemn anti-Semitic sentiment in that adaptation, it must be admitted that one review of *The Way We Live Now* indicated the extent to which such ugly sentiment persists. Among its varied and nasty preoccupations the white supremacist website Vanguard News Network had something to say about the BBC adaptation. Worryingly, their reviewer loved it. In a rave review the BBC would rather have avoided, VNN reviewer Gerald Morris praised the screen version as a 'candid portrayal of kikery' and opined that: 'Whether you buy it, rent it or catch it on Masterpiece Theatre... this is a **must have** for White Nationalists. I seldom recommend video over a novel but this production merits it (Morris, undated).

Clearly, this mostly tells us about the reviewer and the prejudices of the Vanguard News Network, demonstrating the axiom that stereotypes tell us little

about those who are stereotyped, but much about those who do the stereotyping. Of course, nobody set out to make an anti-Semitic adaptation, yet they produced a result capable of pleasing anti-Semites. In particular, it was noteworthy how the adaptation's innovations and emphases were lauded. Of the Maxwell/Melmotte parallel Morris wrote:

The comparison to Robert Maxwell by the jew actor Suchet is good and shows but one example of the relevance of this story to today. This is what makes a classic (Morris, undated).

Although the reviewer was unequivocal in attributing to Trollope and his original a worldview similar to his own – 'Anthony Trollope's novel offers penetrating insights into that group's [i.e. Jewish] pathologies which pertain to the way we live *now*' – the consistency with which the adaptation's supposedly heightened anti-Jewish message was identified was even more remarkable e.g. 'Melmotte's malevolence comes through stronger in the video than in the novel' and 'Trollope was a little too kind to Melmotte'. In his enthusiasm to heap garlands upon the BBC's adaptation, Morris even lists as one virtue that 'there are no 'lovable jews' in this production'. Given the reviewer's prejudices, and the context of the website on which it appears, it is ridiculous to note that this last observation seems myopic. Nonetheless, one must ask, how can Morris have failed to observe – for example – Jim Carter's sympathetic performance as the dignified Brehgert? Perhaps, like Bragin reviewing *An Education* (and in a parallel guaranteed to offend both writers), the interpretive destination is such an *idée fixe* as to obscure textual counter-evidence that does not oblige.





### A conclusion

Perhaps a great deal was overlooked or wilfully misinterpreted because the interpretive prize for Morris and his racist cronies was to claim an essentially mainstream text for their narrow grouping. If Bragin's response to *An Education* is straightforwardly oppositional, it is far less easy to bracket Morris' review and reading in terms of Hall's tripartite distinction of 'preferred', 'negotiated', 'oppositional'. He is not reading *The Way We Live Now* as its producers would wish it to be read, nor is he criticising it. Rather, readers of his review are presented with a contradictory position, a voice one might even term playful if it were not so chillingly hate-fuelled.

When Morris links *The Way We Live Now* and the Nazi propaganda film *Jew Suss* (1940), contending that they share 'educational value' he performs a rhetorical operation related to Bragin's conjoining of *An Education* with *Der Ewige Jude* (1940), despite their diametrically opposed aims. Morris, politically-aligned to the prejudices of the Nazi pictures, wants to 'find' equivalent views in other texts, especially those that enjoy the imprimatur of respectability. In this respect the status of *The Way We Live Now* is important. A classic adaptation, a screen version of a canonical literary text produced by a respected broadcaster, is significant territory to claim from his position on the nasty margin. For Bragin, it is the respectability of the mainstream text (*An Education*) that needs demolishing through linkage to unarguably offensive pictures.

Castigating reviewers who fail 'to acknowledge the film's anti-Semitism', she makes a case for the movie to be interpreted precisely as a problematic marginal text. While Morris delights in inventing/imputing the meanings he wishes to find, claiming them as historical truths, Bragin's review is a plea for interpretive vigilance against the unchallenged articulation of those longest-standing of fabrications, stereotypes. Assuming the redundancy of any need to illuminate the shortcomings of Morris' wider doctrines, the issue is that the comparatively modest innovations in the adaptation of *The Way We Live Now* have inadvertently provided a foot-in-the-door that facilitates an increased susceptibility to an anti-Semitic reading of derived and source text alike. Adaptation, as these overlapping narratives remind us, is more than decanting a story from one medium to another. It can be a matter of much higher stakes.

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