Chapter VI

The Merchant, The Old Ones and The Wedding Feast

Arnold Wesker is, indeed, an accurate observer of special segments of life in Jewish families in the East End of London where he himself grew up. Wesker, like Pinter, was born in the East End of London in the 1930s and like Pinter, was the son of an immigrant Jewish tailor. Wesker commenced thinking about Jewishness when he joined Habonim, a Zionist youth group, and his Jewish consciousness was deepened and sharpened during that period which was four or five years and then it lapsed entirely and it is only recently that he felt Jewish in a belonging or protective way. There are Jewish characters and Jewish backgrounds in the majority of Wesker's plays and he has made an extended use of the religious rituals too. In an interview with Maureen Cleave in Observer Magazine, Wesker suggests, "There is a quality in my writing which makes it very un-English and which comes from my Jewish European background."¹

It is to be pointed out that Jewish writers in England started to emerge only after the World War II. No doubt, when Israel Zangwill wrote his books about the English Jews, he gained thousands of readers. His work was recognised, but it appeared strange in England and Zangwill could not start a trend. The Jewish novel in America was born in 1917 with the publication of The Rise of David Levinsky by Abraham Cahan. It is an impressive, partly autobiographical novel about a Russian Jew who
from shtelt comes to New York at a young age, fleeing from the tsarist programs of 1981-82. David eagerly embraces the new identity which Americanism offers, but as a wholly secularized Jew he becomes isolated and unhappy in spite of his wealth. As John Highman puts it, "Since he could not forget what he had betrayed, the path of commercial achievement ended in spiritual loss and emphasis." Thus The Rise of David Levinsky gave rise to a category of Jewish fiction. But in England Jewish writers started appearing only after 1945. Gerda Charles, an English-Jewish novelist whose own work has crossed the Atlantic Ocean successfully, in Elizabethan Age of Modern Jewish Literature described the Jewish breakthrough into British literature during the decade of 1950-60. She stresses the work of English-Jewish authors and compares Wesker with Paddy Chayefsky. Henry Popkin in Jewish Writers in England says, "Jewish writers of some distinction have appeared, and they have begun to access themselves and their significance as Jews." Popkin further says:

Some can be placed in reference to their American counterparts. Arnold Wesker has often, if inexactily, been hailed as a latter-day British equivalent to Clifford Odets; in his plays he examines the problems of socialism more directly than Odets ever did, and he comments more affectionately, more nostalgically than Odets on the family ties that lie at the heart of Jewish life."
The new Jewish wave in England was being discussed by other critics also. Joseph Lefwitch says:

The Marowitz group had no sooner settled than we suddenly got a new crop of young Jewish writers, mostly from the East End, including Arnold Wesker, Peter Shaffer, Harold Pinter and Bernard Kops. However most of these seem more anxious to stress their alienation from the Jewish Community than their connection with it. All the same they can't get away from it. As Wesker has said of himself: "I feel a Jew, I am a Jew, there is no logic to it, yet my roots though vague are real. And because I am a Jew I feel and write in a particular way."

Wesker has answered the question, "Why do I feel like a Jew?" by saying, "I feel a Jew because of the way my family spoke, because of the rhythms and patterns of their living, even because of the rituals I know of, though I do not perform." Wesker was not taught in a Yeshiva. In an interview with Ronald Hayman Wesker says, "There was a moment when I thought I suddenly wanted to go to Yeshiva (Rabbinical training school) and I think I stuck that out for four weeks. I was not Barmitvahed." But one of his grandfathers was a shochet, and the other was a great rabbinical scholar and it appears as if their Jewish feelings have been handed down to Wesker subconsciously. This shows in some of "the imagery I use", as Wesker himself says. At a symposium, Wesker told his audience, "You know, I suspect I am
more Jewish than I think I am."

Though Wesker himself is bothered by Jewish traits and attitudes, his Jews do not have depth as Jews. For instance, in The Old Ones, while celebrating the festival of Succoth, the characters read out of a prayer book what they are supposed to do, which shows, as I think, that they are not fully familiar with the religious rituals to be performed on that occasion. Notable American-Jewish writers like Herbert Gold, Karl Shapiro, Jay Friedman and Philip Roth depict their Jews as alienated, strange and neurotic people. But Wesker has chosen to make his Jews politically conscious rebels and his Jews are quite different from the Jews depicted by English novelists like Gerda Charles and Frederic Raphael. Jewishness as such remains a problem with Wesker. He often sounds unconvincing when he moves away from the Anglo-Jewish rhythms he handles so well. His confusion and frustration get heightened unexpectedly. Wesker says: "One of the big frustrations I suffered during a recent trip to Israel was the feeling that I was a foreigner in that land ___ and nothing will resolve that".

Most of the American-Jewish writers deal mostly with love and sexual relationship. But what Wesker endeavours to do in his plays is to wake us up. He tells us that we should learn to have opinions. Gerda Charles says:

He sees (more clearly than any other contemporary writer) that, apart from those conditions which create brute poverty (which make a special case) the real
deprivation in our social life is elsewhere; in starved characters, in stunned capacities for joy; in blindness to beauty and deafness to intelligence ... He is telling us not to be afraid or suspicious or impatient with art — or for that matter with artists. He tells us we can all be artists in greater or lesser degree if we try. He has, in fact, the typically Jewish attitude that we must shop around for the best quality ... in living as well as carpeting. And above all he is telling us that we must learn to be articulate.

II

The Merchant by Wesker is, indeed, an attack on anti-Semitism. But before making an analysis of the play it would be pertinent to comprehend the theory of anti-Semitism and the arguments of anti-Semites. The expression anti-Semitism signifies not opposition to Semites in general, but a hostile or at least an unfriendly disposition on the part of Aryans towards Jews, both socially and commercially. The expression "Semantic Languages" was used for the first time in 1781, contemporaneously by the two Gottingen Professors — August Ludwig Von Schlozer and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. The Bonn professor, Christian Lassen, was the first to give expression to the view that these people — the "Semitic" were in many respects distinct from the Aryans and other races. Lassen ascribes to the Indo-Germanic race a higher and more complete mental endowment:

The point of view of the Semites is subjective and
egoistic. His poetry is lyrical, and therefore subjective. The characteristic features of the Semitic spirit, the passionate disposition, the obstinate will, the firm beliefs in their exclusive rights, in fact the whole egoistic trend of mind, must have in the highest degree fitted their possessors for great and daring deeds. A bold spirit of enterprise, an energetic and persevering courage, great skill and a fine discernment how to take advantage of favourable circumstances and means of help among strangers, characterize first the Phoenicians, and later the Arabs. As soldiers, sailors, and enterprising traders, not only can they place themselves on a par with Indo-Germanic people, but to some extent excelled their contemporaries of this race and their predecessors.

Anti-Semitism is, however, more than two thousand years old. Alexandria (in Egypt) may be regarded as the seat of Anti-Semitism. As early as the times of the first Ptolemys many Jews resided in Alexandria. Their number increased especially during the time of the persecution of the Jewish religion by Antichus Epiphanes. This persecution resulted in the Jews becoming more exclusive than ever in relation to adherents of other religions. Hateful accusations and taunts, both to a large extent resting on ignorance, formed the answer of the heathen. Unfortunately the work of Flavius Josephus, Against Apion, is almost the only source of information we have. The earlier Anti-Semitic author
was Egyptian priest Manetho (B.C. 270-250). Among the Romans, we may mention Tacitus, Horace, Juvenal and Martial.

The chief arguments of the Anti-Semites are as follows. In the first place, the Anti-Semites maintain that the Jewish race was of late origin and had done nothing for culture. Secondly, they disliked the Jews who rejected all Divine worship, but their own, and consequently every image. Thirdly, it was in the 13th century that the "blood accusation" came to the front in its latest and most objectionable form, viz. that the Jews required "Christian blood" for ritual purposes. The most influential propagator of this accusation was Canon August Rohling in Prague in the year 1883-1892. Fourthly, there is no truth whatever in the assertions that the Jews seek every conceivable means to keep the Talmud secret, that they fear lest its contents may become known, and that they declare it a crime worthy of death for a Jew to reveal its contents. Fifthly, a very foolish but, in Western Germany and Bavaria, widely credited accusation is that the Jews, before selling meant to non-Jews, must defile it in the most loathsome manner.

In The Merchant, as in The Kitchen, the pressures of society curtail the individual's scope for development and distort human relationships. Based, as the title suggests, on Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, the play retains most of the familiar names from Shakespeare, but his characters have rather different personalities and this, in turn, contributes to different themes and personalities. In Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice,
Shylock is a miserly suspicious Jew. He is inherently wicked and fully responsible for his inhumanity. When his daughter runs away with a Gentile, his inhumanity incites him to hold his debtor — Antonio to a bond by which he forefeits a pound of flesh. But Wesker feels that in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the portrayal of Shylock offends for being a lie about the Jewish character. Wesker says, "I seek no pound of flesh but, like Shylock I'm unforgiving, unforgiving of the play's contribution to the world's astigmatic view and murderous hatred of the Jew." When Portia suddenly gets to the bit about having a pound of flesh but no blood, it flashed on me that the kind of Jew I know would stand up and say, 'Thank God!' Wesker discussed the conception of the play with Ewan Hooper, Artistic Director of the Greenwitch Theatre, who told Wesker that he would "have to do a lot of rewriting."

Wesker started by researching into the period and the history of the Jews, especially in Venice, because their situation in Venice was particularly an appropriate example of their situation everywhere. And it was in Venice that the word "ghetto" first originated (from "gettare" meaning "to cast iron.") Venice was an abandoned iron-founding district and the ghetto was an area outside the city walls in which 1400 Jews were constrictedly segregated. While teaching a course on contemporary British drama in 1974 at Boulder, Colorado, summer school, Wesker involved the students in researching the Venetian background. A girl, Lois Bhuller wrote a very long and brilliant
paper about how you could not have dealing with a Jew except through a contract. Thus she gave Wesker one of the pillars on which his case rested. Wesker also acknowledged special indebtedness to D.S. Chamber's book *The Imperial Age of Venice* and to Cecil Roth's *History of the Jews*. Shakespeare who had probably never seen a Jew and knew little about Venetian life, makes no reference to the ghetto. It is here that Wesker sets his first and third scenes which aim at establishing Shylock as a bibliophile.

Wesker makes Shylock and Antonio close friends, so that the course of the play shows social pressures that turn a joke into near murder. Shakespeare's Shylock is motivated by racial hatred in requiring the pound of flesh from Antonio if his debt is unpaid. Wesker's Shylock makes the same condition as an irritable joke against the anti-semitic laws of Venice that insist on a bond — ridiculous laws, he considers, forcing the formality of a legal contract between friends, when he would prefer to give money or, if Antonio will not permit, at least to lend money without interest. The point made here is the central one of the play — no free trust, or any other relationship, is between the Jews and Gentiles in Renaissance Venice, because the fragility of promises in business, is undermined by anti-semitic theory — the Jews deserve no trust, they are exempt from the common duties of humanity. Only the written Venetian laws, then, however irksome, protect the Jews from selfrighteous exploitation. Therefore, inexorably, when the debt is not paid,
the bond must be fulfilled — any waiving and consequent weakening of the law might be used next time as a precedent against the Jews. Shylock has involved himself not as an individual, a friend, but as the Jew, the representative of his race.

Having established a humane, tolerant, enlightened Shylock who loves Antonio, Wesker has to convince us that the situation changes sufficiently to make him insist on his pound of flesh. At first Shylock tells Antonio that the bond will not be "called upon", (p.244) but Antonio, for reasons which never become clear, insists that they "cannot, must not" drop it. (The Merchant, p.246). Shylock's sister Rivka reminds him that the ghetto's view of the bond would be:

No! Having bent the law for us, how often will they bend it for themselves and then we will live in even greater uncertainties than before. They will be divided, as you are, my clever brother. Who to save — your poor people or your poor friends? You can't see that? (The Merchant, p.243).

Knowing well that the Venetians are longing for an excuse to break through the protective laws and victimize the hated Jews, Shylock declared that he "must not set a precedent", (p.246) by bending the law. Nor does he want any explanation at the trial, even if their silence, taken as contempt of court, costs both Antonio and him their lives.

With more theatrical shrewdness, Wesker takes Shylock's
"Hath not a Jew eyes" speech away from him, giving its main substance to Lorenzo, who is arguing that it is the bond, not the Jew, that is inhuman. For Wesker, the speech was so powerful that it dignified the anti-Semitism. Enraged by Lorenzo's arrogance, Shylock angrily complains that Jews are always used as scapegoats. At the climax he draws his knife, but the stage direction asks for him to recoil from the sight of his outstretched hand. It is now that Portia intervenes, not disguising herself as a lawyer, but using the argument that Shakespeare gives her. What is different is Shylock's reaction. He is pleased, relieved. He embraces Antonio. He makes embarrassed and embarrassing jokes: "Shame on you, a disgrace to your tribe. Go down Shylock, to the bottom of the class."

(p.261) After the trial when Shylock does cry "Thank God!" (p.260) the court takes the opportunity to confiscate Shylock's goods, including his precious books, and he embittered and impoverished, banishes himself to Jerusalem. Not, then, being an overweening villain, Shylock's position at the end of the play is necessarily different from that of his predecessor's, and Victoria Rodin thought this to Wesker's disadvantage — his Shylock lacked tragic dignity. But, however, there is dignity, though not the same kind of dignity as in Shakespeare.

Having given Shylock a sympathetic personality, Wesker has to re-motivate Jessica's elopement with a Gentile which in Shakespeare's play was an understandable escape from a miserly and obviously repulsive tyrant. In Wesker's play it becomes an
element in a generation-gap rebellion. Jessica is portrayed as better educated than Shylock is, but she describes him as "an intellectual snob." (p.201) Jessica is given her father's own independent character and consequently Shylock's loving assertiveness is shown as intolerable, her elopement is a bid for escape. Shylock's very pride and love make him, too, an affectionate tyrant, here a sympathetic trait but intolerable to the similarly proud and self-willed Jessica.

The Launcelot Gobbo strain in Shakespeare's play is cut out, and Portia is presented as the simply dressed heiress of a valuable estate that has been left in chaos by an eccentric father, who has left her the same instructions that Shakespeare's Portia was left about choosing her husband by means of three caskets. But Wesker's Portia is the daughter of a peasant mother and very friendly towards her maid, Nerissa. The second act commences with the casket scene. Bassanio sees that his choice should be determined by the question of what sort of man Portia's father would have wanted her to marry: "What metal would a ruined ruinous philosopher choose?" (p.235) There can only be one answer. Simple. Portia sees that it is Bassanio's brain, not his heart, that has persuaded him to choose lead. Less convincing is the character of Portia who declares herself the "new woman" who can "spin, weave, sew", and reads "Plato and Aristotle, Ovid and Catullus, all in original!" and is moreover, "conversed with liberal minds on the nature of the soul, the efficacy of religious freedom, the very existence of God!"
She is not, however, given much opportunity to live up to this awesome catalogue within the play. In short, she is perfect, and has little to do but comments on the imperfections of others until it is time for her to intervene at the climax of the trial scene.

Though the play is based on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, yet Wesker felt that it was very difficult to write in the shadow of Shakespeare. The main criticism was that there was too much historical explanation — "a massive teach-in on historical and literary attitudes to the Jews", as Sheridan Morley called it. Victor Radin in the Observer thought that the play desperately needs a villain other than the loutish young aristocrats Wesker makes fun of. Why? Because Shakespeare's play had one. Being a twentieth century playwright Wesker was interested less in the overseeing individual villain or hero than in social pressures acting on the individual. Clive Barnes said on a radio programme: "This is Wesker's finest play, the most deeply felt theatrically, the most beautifully written."

The National Theatre did not care for this play. Its Director, Peter Hall wrote to Wesker's agent that it was "as if Arnold were really so fond of his subject that he could not bear to leave out anything that occurred to him." Another objection was that the characters "expressed too much", that every character was expressive of every single point of view that Wesker might take about every aspect of the situation. But it does not mean that the context and characters in this very play
are not naturalistic. David Nathan of the Jewish Chronicle says:

If there is a flaw in the logic of the play it is that Wesker does not explore the possibility of what would happen to the Ghetto Jews if Shylock had been allowed to use the knife. Would the Venetian mob have the same respect for the law as the Venetian patricians? Or rather would they have rampaged through the Ghetto as they have done throughout history even on the merest suspicion of Jewish involvement in a Christian death?

The most hostile review was Bernard Levin's in The Sunday Times, who found it "grimly literary." Obviously the texture and style of the language had been a major hurdle for Wesker but it did not seem to worry audiences that he was not imitating Shakespearean verse.

It is to be noted that The Merchant has the plot mechanics of elopement, courtship and trial scene inherited from Shakespeare's play, which means that there is far more classic, eventful plot development than in any other play of Wesker. But for all this The Merchant, just as much as The Friends, is chiefly concerned with the developing awareness of the characters. Antonio, Jessica, Shylock himself, are unsuccessfully trying to force their ideas upon resisting circumstances, and learning and suffering as a result. Shylock is crushed by what he knew intellectually, already, but would not accept emotionally; Jessica finds that her romance has been mere romancing; and Antonio endures, lonely, picking up the pieces of
Shylock's catastrophe. Compared with them Beatie Bryant in Roots, who learns from experience, is for most of her appearance bewildered and not really conscious of the issues confronting her. Shylock, Antonio, Jessica and even Portia, on the other hand, are fully aware of what is involved in their defiance of circumstances, though they also make mistakes.

III

The Wedding Feast derives by way of an unproduced filmscript from an adaption of Dostoevsky's short story An Unpleasant Predicament. But Wesker's play is set in twentieth-century Norfolk. In Wesker's play the social gap between master and employees is much less pronounced than Dostoevsky's play. Nor is Wesker's central character handsome or distinguished or well dressed or dignified — he does not have far to fall, and Wesker can not make the fall as painful as he wants it to be.

In The Wedding Feast, Louis Litvanov is a shoe manufacturer of Russian-Jewish working-class origin. He is a self-made, paternalistic, rich Jewish businessman, owner of a Norfolk shoe factory, who not only believes in equality and fraternity and sympathises with the intransigence of his work force, but also believes that his sympathy entitles him to loyalty, and even love from them. This delusion and the vagueness of his beliefs, are comically demolished in the course of the play, and a harsher recognition of class antagonism substituted. Louis Litvanov is really paternalistic in that he ponders that kindness, "good wages and a pleasant atmosphere" (p.128) sanctify the status quo.
But he has to lose his blindness in the face of inequalities. Hammond asks, "are all Jewish businessmen as paternalistic as you are?" and Louis objects, "That is what you call it? Give everything a name and dismiss it" (The Wedding Feast, p.128) The puncturing of Louis's delusions is more effective if the audience identifies with his wish to be loved. So Louis has his whims and anxieties; he gets carried away by his enthusiasms and then feels guilty, as when his exclamatory speeches are followed by Kate's remonstration, "You are shouting", and his subsiding with "I am Jewish, I shout". (p.122) Unusually his comic traits are linked more directly with his main comic flaw — his Ostrich-like ignoring of his boss-role. He seesaws between being overbearing and egalitarian. But it is to be noted that though Louis is paternalistic, he "does not contemplate relinquishing his position."

During the last of the four scenes in the first act, Louis's car breaks down not far from the house where a wedding party is being given for Knocker White, the brother of Louis's Marxist secretary Kate. He ponders that his boss-employee relationship makes it permissible, indeed desirable for him to drop in: "Men facing men in a human situation ... They will see two sides of me. And when they are old they will tell their children and I will be spoken of with affection, honoured, remembered." (p.138) After some comedy business of squirting soda water over several characters, the members of the family involve Louis in what they call "the shoe game." Louis is blindfolded and placed in centre
during the second round of the game. The third round begins in a friendly spirit and the members of the family play according to the rules. But soon they all take off their shoes. They stand with their shoes poised high. One by one they step forward to tap Louis. It is no longer a game. A mob mentality takes over and each tap becomes more malevolent, the sound of the whack more frequent, until all control is lost and they simply crowd in and beat him about the body, not the face. At this stage Louis wrenches off the blindfold with a howl of great rage; "What are you doing to me?" (p.176) It is after the shoe-game that Kate, who has been out, returns and tells Louis that equality between employee and boss is an illusion. The reality of power sharing is something Louis is never going to bring himself to concede. Because a lot of the paternalistic criticism levelled at Litvanov had come Wesker's way during the Centre Fortytwo period, Wesker said wryly, "I suppose I do identify with Litvanov: he is not me but I do identify with him."

Thus we note that The Wedding Feast is a comedy. There is a fair amount of slapstick — Louis falls in the blancmange twice; Stephen, the drunken local reporter is forcibly carried out and he sprays the guests with soda water in the process; the newly married couple's wedding couch collapses under them; the groom, who is self-conscious about his clumsiness, upsets a glass of champagne over Louis, who jumps to his feet; and there is the running joke of Knocker White and his disaster-prone activities. But many of the characters are not only funny in themselves but
also contribute to the central plot, as each comic figure slips a banana-skin under Louis's dignity. But it is not easy for us to believe that the bride and groom would give up their bed for Louis, or that Louis, waking up in the morning would be so resigned: "yes, that's the way it has to be." (p.180)

The embarrassment that is necessary to the drama depends much more on reactions from the family and guests, and on interaction between them. Whereas, in Dostoevsky's subtle story, none of the wedding guests wants to increase the embarrassment of their uninvited guest, some of Wesker's characters go out of their way to aggravate the situation. Dostoevsky's story ends with a scene at the office, where Ivan Ilyich at first tries to adjust his memories of his disastrous entry into the domestic life of his clerk, and then finds that his clerk has asked to be transferred. But Louis's humiliation is not solid or convincing enough for either the playwright or the audience to be interested in how he would survive it.

It is to be noted that Kate, Louis's secretary, has a smaller role than her not dissimilar namesake in Golden City, but it is probably more successful. She is a bright grammar-school lass who has acquired Marxism and cynicism in growing older, but it is her interaction with the exasperating Louis and with her even more exasperating family — and their unimpressed comments about her — that round her character out. It is Kate who spells out the message when Louis having been beaten during the shoegame passes out mercifully:
Just give them the rate for their work and the sweet, sweet illusion that they are equal to any man. Stop pretending it is a reality. (Pause). And don't be kind or ashamed or apologetic for your money. You go around behaving like that, how shall we be able to hit you when the time comes, bor? (The Wedding Feast, pp.178-79)

And it is Kate who intermediates between the master and the guests. She tells her brother to attend Mr. Louis, "Knocker! The first thing you do is to introduce your wife and then you offer Mr. Litvanov a drink." (The Wedding Feast, p.140)

The source of most reservations about the play was the prologue. In the prologue local journalist Stephen Bullock functions as a narrator commenting on Louis's background and character supplemented by illustrations from Kate and Louis's manager, David. The explanation starts with a kind of short story told by Louis about his father, then goes on to examples of Louis's extravagant paternalism from Kate and David in turn, but with Stephen adding dramatised dialogue. Robert Cushman is of the opinion that the prologue "may well have scared managments off." And this is what actually happened, as Wesker recalled, "In retrospect, I began to wonder whether I was all wrong, when people were turning down the play because they claimed that the first act was so different from the other two," but Wesker felt that it had the advantage that it "eliminated all the awful plot-making that so often prevents the process of the play from unfolding." I feel that the first act tells us what we need to
know about Mr. Litvanov. But still the fact remains that it is unlike the other two acts of the play. Wesker tries to justify his stand when he says: "I think the first act works morvellously. I do not just understand what the critics are talking about when they complain about a confusion of styles."

Actually Wesker was in favour of mixing styles, and it would be intrusive only if the mood or the texture of language was different, but in The Wedding Feast it is not so.

There are critics who point out some faults in The Wedding Feast. Gerard Dempsey called it "an uneasy play", because for two third of its we are lulled along on a warm tide of recognizable humour. The charge is almost true. Even in the last act, the humiliations are quite comic until the shoe-game. It is only towards the end of the last act that the humiliations become ferocious. Benedict Nightingale regretted "this climatic humiliation lacks savagery." But it is because Wesker has been concerned to keep the episode naturalistic and untainted by comedy of menace. On the other hand Benedict Nightingale also found in this play mental rigour, wit, humour, contemporary point, dramatic tension, the power to seize the attention and not let go until its will is done. As in Pinter's The Birthday Party, Louis is beaten by a circle of shoe-wielding players. I think that the puncturing of Louis's delusions can prove effective only when the audience indentifies with his wish to be loved and respected. John Barber called it "the work of a master of fruity character." I agree with John Barber only in case of the second act, because
here Wesker returns to his Norfolk background he handles in a good way.

IV

The Old Ones has a lot in common with The Friends, sharing not only its preoccupation with ageing and the approach of death but its method also. In The Friends, the friends are all between thirty-five and thirty-eight. It is Esther's leukemia that makes death a reality for the others. Esther's death obviously releases a flood of loquacious self-revelation in all other characters. Ronald, Esther's lover, was once, according to Macey, "a brilliant man." But now an existential terror oppresses him and he slips into catatonic panic after the death of Esther. In The Old Ones, seven of the ten important characters are between about sixty-eight and about seventy-two. No one dies, but even the characters who are not so close to death are very much aware of it. Talking to her seventy-one year old mother, Rosa, who is only thirty-two says that the most terrible fact she knows is that one day she as well as her mother will die, "one day, Sarah, we will die." (The Old Ones, p.172) She quotes Boswell's question, "But is not the fear of death natural to man?" and Johnson's answer, "so much so, Sir, that the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it." (p.172) She goes on to promise that she will not die happily, rather she "will rage... that's for sure." (p.173)

In The Old Ones, the whole play is subject to a strong gravitational pull towards the Hassidic joy. Hassidism was a
mystic development of Judaism, which commenced in eighteenth-century Poland. It stressed the immanence of God. It has influence on Martin Buber, who is quoted several times in The old Ones, which also contains quotations from the Besht, the founder of Hassidism. He said, "he who is full of joy is full of love for men and all fellow creatures." Although there are Jewish characters and Jewish backgrounds in the majority of Wesker's previous plays, he had never before made an extended use of the religious rituals. In this particular play, almost all the characters are Jewish, though this is not necessarily connected with the theme of toughness and survival. Most of them are also related, including Sarah's brothers, Many and Boomy, Boomy's wife Gerda and his son Martin, Sarah's daughter Rosa, another nephew Rudi. Teressa and Millie are Sarah's friends.

In this play, Wesker has made an extended use of religious rituals. Religious rituals always have great theatrical potential, and it is always fascinating to watch something being constructed on stage— a fact David Storey exploited in The Contractor. The Old Ones commences by tapping both these resources— we see some of the characters constructing a Succah, the ritual tabernacle used in the festival of Tabernacles, otherwise known, as we are told in the opening speech, as the season of our joy. Sarah tells her nephew, Rudi that she needs some branches to cover the Succah. Rudi points out that he cannot get branches since it is early autumn. But when Sarah is not satisfied and insists incessantly, he tells her that he would
find some leaves. Then we see Jack, Sarah's neighbour, hanging things on the Succah. He informs Sarah that it wobbles and Sarah replies: "I know it wobbles." (The Old Ones, p.150) Later on we see Rudi bringing leaves and he along with others commences laying them over the Succah. Rudi then discusses that he got those leaves in the place where he went for evening classes. There they have two big oak trees and he asked the caretaker who cut some leaves for him for a few coppers. Emanuel then starts reading from a little book: The Succah gave ample opportunity for hospitality, and in the words of the Zohar: "It is necessary for man to rejoice within the Succah and show a cheerful countenance to guests." (p.180) He continues reading: "It is forbidden to harbour thoughts of gloom and, how much more so, feeling of anger within the portals of Succah—the symbol of joy." (p.180) Then Rosa takes the little book from Emanuel and informs after reading that they must make a procession. Rosa again reading from the same book tells that Josephus in his work The Antique of the Jews stated that during the offerings of the sacrifices in the Temple, "every one of the worshippers carried in his hands a branch of myrtle and willows joined to a bough of the palm tree, with the addition of the citron." (p.180)

The Talmudic regulations which give detailed instructions as to how the branches of trees should be held indicate that the custom of waiving the branches and of bearing them while in procession during the service was widely in use before Mishnaic times. Now Rudi asks others to walk and waive the branches in
their hands. He himself begins to move and waive the branch he is holding in his hand. Everyone excepting Jack slowly, awkwardly, self-consciously follows him. They move in a circle. Since it is usually a part of the synagogue service during the festival, Teressa asks, "But where's the service? We don't know the right prayers or the right songs... In a synagogue they'd know the right prayers and the right songs!" (p.181) Then everything is brought to an abrupt halt. They put branches away, sit down to eat instead. Everyone, except Rudi, Sarah and Millie takes a place at the table. Rudi serves the wine, Sarah and Rosa fetch the plates of chopped liver and Millie collects branches to replace under the "Succah", keeping one for herself. Emanuel lights the candles. They eat and try to be happy.

The structure of The Old Ones is based on the dialect between the optimistic and pessimistic brothers—manic Emanuel and gloomy Boomy. These two seventy-year old twin brothers are seen in conflict with each other, though this conflict is one of attitudes. They are involved in a quotation competition. In the first scene, Emanuel quotes Yeats: "All things fall and are built again. And those that build them again are gay." (p.134) Boomy replies by quoting Carlyle: "For, alas, what is contract? If all men were such that a mere spoken or sworn contract would bind them, all men were then true men, and Government a superfluit." (p.135) In scene two, Martin imitates Boomy quoting Ecclesiastes. "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the songs of fools." (p.139) Rosa retorts by reading out a
benevolent anecdote about the founder of Hassidism. The third scene is actually a monologue by Teressa alone in her flat, but as the lights dim we hear Boomy and Emanuel in voice-over swapping extracts from Ecclesiastes and Martin Buber. So The Old Ones can be called a comedy "with a sting in its tail, rather than a drama diluted with too much comedy." It is to be pointed out that Wesker himself wanted to avoid the simplifying effect of a too positive ending:

The ending I had envisaged... was of a triangle of tensions between a group singing in the background and a brother who is hurling quotations of doom from Ecclesiastes and the brother he is hurling them at who is laughing.

We note that Jack, who is seventy-two, is the only old man in the play who is not Jewish. He is a neighbour of Sarah and is the least credible character of all. In scene thirteen, we see Jack staring uncertainly at Millie, who is seventy-one year old and is a friend of Sarah. Millie fascinates Jack. It is for this type of behaviour that Sarah calls Jack "a crude man." (p.161) Jack himself says, "I am wicked, wicked, always was and always will be." (p.161) He behaves as if he were mad, ringing a bell and shouting warnings in the street: "Don't come you near me, the plague is upon me, the devil is in me." (p.161) We are told that he is not mad. I feel that Jack has invented his own madness as a diversion from loneliness and boredom. Basically the conception of Jack is a sentimental one. He builds up a
picture of himself as a man who refuses water to a dying fellow-soldier, but towards the end of Act One, we see him offering help to Millie.

It is to be pointed out that *The Old Ones* is a nostalgic return to the area of *Chicken Soup*. In subject matter at least, there is such a strong continuity with Wesker’s early work that the play might well be considered as making the trilogy into a quartet. Moreover, Wesker says that, "You can imagine that all the old ones in all the plays are the same people." For example, Sarah, the seventy-one year old sister of Emanuel and Boomy, is essentially the same character as Sarah Kahn in the trilogy. She is modelled equally closely on Wesker’s mother. Sarah in *The Old Ones* moves in calmer waters than her beleaguered namesake in the trilogy, though she is too old to have to go out to work, her health and energy seem as yet unimpaired, so that she has attention for her family and neighbours, which in turn means that she is seen in action administering sympathy and advice to a stream of visitors, and, unlike some of them, is herself untroubled by the loneliness of old age. Rosa’s despair of ever communicating with the unruly school children is consoled by Sarah: “You will try again... With another lot, you will learn... Who knows about things in the beginning.” (p.172) She does not condemn Jack for having beaten his wife and driven out his children, does not even comment on it, but tells about her own guilty pleasure in scoring off her superior son-in-law. This positive attitude is, of course, an
attribute of Sarah as a character within the play, but the play as a whole is "behind her." Wesker himself calls her "the still centre of the play."

Certainly there is suffering in the play to fuel Boomy's despair. Scene eight of Act one is really a bitter scene. In this scene, Boomy and his son Martin accuse each other. Even at the age of twenty-eight, Martin is dangerously involved in student politics and is likely to go to jail. Boomy tells Martin that he "should leave politics alone." (p.151) But Boomy is unable to persuade Martin. Martin says: "You quarrel with God about important jobs—earthquakes, cyclones, droughts—I will quarrel with men about trivialities—poverty, injustice, social orders." (The Old Ones, p.152) But Boomy asks Martin: "you want to make people happy? Where's your wife, where's your child? Are they happy?" (p.152) So Martin's appeals for money, understanding and sympathy are all rejected by Boomy. In Act one, scene fifteen, Gerda is beaten up by three youths who have already threatened Millie. Emanuel, Gerda's husband, does not even go to the police. Boomy says that Emanuel is "evil blind." (p.166) Though Sarah, almost in self-parody, says: "I am glad it happened... she'll be more careful next time", (p.167) Gerda is not inclined to forgive and forget. We note that Martin is absent from the final scene. He has, in fact, been imprisoned and his absence is not strongly felt.

Of course, The Old Ones is a lot less static than The Friends, and because it flashes fairly from one locate to
another, seems a lot less static than it is. The basic theme and situation of the play are inimical to the kind of movement that the play form demands. There are twenty-five short scenes divided between seven different settings, and the movement from one place, one group of characters, one rhythm, to another greatly reduces the dangers of monotony. But the main difficulty with the raw material Wesker chooses in this play is that it is very difficult to shape. The climax of Act One is provided by a piece of narrative from Boomy. It describes how Emanuel, Boomy’s brother, at the age of sixteen, threw up a bag of diamonds into the river Thames. Emanuel threw up the bag so that they could both live by the work of their “own hands.” (p.163) In Act Two the montage which leads up to the revelation that Emanuel is speaking his own words, does not in any way prepare for it. The final scene is the longest in the play. It begins as Rosa is telling the others how she finally succeeded with her class of school-leaves: “And then I went on to talk quickly about jobs.” (p.179) The rest of the final scene describes the celebration of the festival of Succoth.

But, the reviewers have criticised the play. B.A. Young says that “It has no plot at all except in so far as the chart of a community’s emotions may be called a plot. It has no protagonist unless a community may be called a protagonist.” Some critics took the climax of the play to be Sarah’s final party with the construction and decoration of a Succah. In fact, the Succah-building, far from being planned as a basis for other
action, was itself added afterwards. Wesker himself concedes that John Dexter made a far-reaching contribution to this play. The original script was a simple juxtaposition of these scenes, one alongside the other, ending in Friday night supper. John Dexter suggested, "It is possible to start the preparation of the Friday night supper right from the beginning of the play?" But Wesker did not agree. Wesker thought that he could prepare for the Jewish festival of Succoth, that includes building little huts on the stage. Wesker also knew that Dexter liked that type of thing. The Succah is a positive element and it has highlighted the situation of the Jews in Diaspora. Had Wesker started the preparation of the Friday night supper from the beginning of the play, as Dexter suggested, the condition of the Jews in Diaspora could not be highlighted in this way.
Notes


9. Gerda Charles, "Trends in Anglo-Jewish Writing", The


