To “hold the world but as the world...”

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare, directed by Michael Radford

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The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare, directed by Michael Radford, screenplay by Radford

The Merchant of Venice is considered one of Shakespeare’s more problematic and disturbing plays. Controversy primarily surrounds the dramatist’s treatment of Shylock, the money-lender who demands his “pound of flesh,” and the related question of anti-Semitism.

Literary critic Harold Bloom begins his observations on the play by declaring *The Merchant* to be a “profoundly anti-Semitic work.” Noted Shakespeare scholar Harold C. Goddard writes: “The anti-Semitism of the twentieth century lends a fresh interest to *The Merchant of Venice*. It raises anew the old question: How could one of the most tolerant spirits of all time have written a play that is centered around, and seems to many to accept, one of the degraded prejudices of the ages?”

A viewing of British director Michael Radford’s new film version of *The Merchant of Venice* reminds one that there are many possible approaches to the play, including interpretations that tend to argue against the views of Bloom and Goddard, or at least place the play in a more appropriate historical context. Radford’s film is all the more noteworthy as the first major cinematic rendition of the play in the sound era.

The film opens with titles on the screen locating the drama in Venice in 1596 and briefly describing the oppression and ghettoization of the Jewish population. Living in a confined area, Jews were forbidden to move about in the city after dark. Forced into the trade of lending money, they were held in contempt by the Christians whose religion officially forbade engagement in that facet of commercial life. Underscoring this reality, the Christian merchant (of the title) Antonio (Jeremy Irons) spits on Shylock (Al Pacino), the Jewish money-lender, on the Rialto Bridge in the film’s first sequence.

Antonio, who has invested all his wealth in overseas trading expeditions, is asked by Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes), his friend (with whom he is obviously in love) and kinsman, for money to go to Belmont, where the latter hopes to end his financial woes by marrying the heiress Portia (Lynn Collins). Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio 3,000 ducats in Antonio’s name provided that the latter signs a bond forfeiting a pound of his own flesh if he is unable to repay the loan on time.

At Portia’s estate, a continual stream of suitors fails the worthiness test devised by her father before his death. According to the latter’s will, Portia can only marry the man who chooses among three small caskets—made of gold, silver and lead—the one that contains her portrait.

Meanwhile, Shylock’s daughter Jessica runs off with Lorenzo, a prodigal Christian, disappearing into the night with a box of her father’s money and jewels. As news reaches Venice of Antonio’s fortunes shipwrecked with his vessels, a sinned-against and enraged Shylock declares his determination to take the allotted portion of the bankrupt merchant’s flesh.

Backed by Portia’s vast fortune, now that he has chosen the correct casket, Bassanio sets off for Venice to save his friend. The courtroom scene that ensues is one of the most spectacularly histrionic moments in all of Shakespeare, dramatically built around the distinction between the letter and the spirit of the law. Radford and his actors do justice to the grandeur and intricacies of the text.

All’s well that end’s well for everyone except Shylock, who is betrayed by his daughter, stripped of his wealth, his religion and hence his livelihood. The film leaves little doubt as to the bottomless character of his suffering.

Radford’s movie is an intelligent, artistically constructed work. Pacino’s Shylock is the congealed expression of the physical disfigurement and psychic scars produced by a history of oppression, an outcast who is the avenger of his people. While Shakespeare’s Shylock may be villainous, as one critic pointed out, “he is also one of the first Jews allowed to speak for himself in gentile European literature, to argue his case, to reveal his humanity.” Pacino succeeds in arguing Shylock’s case and revealing his humanity.

Shot on location and awash (perhaps overly so) in Renaissance colors, the film is visually succulent and its feeling authentic. All performances are noteworthy, with those of Pacino, Irons and Collins ranking as exceptional.

There are multiple and complex themes involved in the intertwining stories of Shakespeare’s play, and director Radford translates the work to the screen with a good deal of skill.

At the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* is the network of money relations that links all the major characters and subplots. The indebted Bassanio needs to marry Portia for money as much as for love. To attempt to win the heiress, he must borrow from Antonio, whose capital is tied up and must in turn borrow from Shylock—the scorned but vital figure in the economic pyramid. Jessica’s actions are mourned by Shylock as much for the loss of his ducats (money) as for his daughter.

It is worth noting that *The Merchant of Venice* is the only work by Shakespeare that has a profession in its name (only the titles “King” and “Prince” appear in any of the others). True to its name, the play makes constant reference to trade, profit and credit, as well as the risk of business failure and bankruptcy. As a brilliant observer of reality, how could Shakespeare not have also included a money-lender in his picture of the merchant’s life? How he treats the character is problematic, and we will return to that.

The noble, “Christian” characters in the piece are prepared to give up all their worldly goods for the sake of another. “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath,” is the inscription inside the winning casket. This is nothing short of what Bassanio has allowed Antonio to risk for him and, which in the end, he is prepared to sacrifice for Antonio’s life. On the other hand, critic Goddard asserts that Bassanio, who is not averse to receiving what he had not earned, seems in reality the living embodiment

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of the golden casket's inscription: he gains "what many men desire"—a wealthy wife.

Economic and power relations between the genders are not ignored by Shakespeare either. Portia describes herself as "the lord of this fair mansion, master of my servants, and Queen o'er myself." In marriage, she is required to cede to Bassanio "[m]yself, and what is mine, to you and yours," and for this, she anoints him "dear[ly] bought," i.e., bought at a high price—her freedom and fortune. In one of the play's many inversions, Portia, as Balthazar, proves that her gender's subservience to patriarchy is an irrational rather than a natural order of things. In Radford's film, as in the play, Portia dominates nearly every scene in which she appears.

Shylock's relentless insistence on his right to Antonio's flesh, while grotesque, bears a certain symmetrical relationship to the married couples' claims, in the final scene, to ownership of each other's bodies.

In this vein, the ability of the rich Christians to enslave other human beings is forcefully raised by Shylock during his trial: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong? You have among you many a purchased slave, Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules, You use in abject and in slavish parts because you bought them: shall I say to you, Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?" This also speaks to the hypocrisy of the supposed Christian ethics.

Radford's film emphasizes sympathy for Shylock and the suffering caused by his Christian attackers, but this interpretation is not entirely warranted by Shakespeare's text.

It does not detract from the play's moments of immense humanitarianism—as well as its extraordinary perceptiveness about the nature of capitalist social relations—to say that Shakespeare was not immune to a period and culture in which prejudice against Jews and others was pervasive and endemic. Because Shakespeare drives his creations to their limits and beyond, however, he was simultaneously able to be critical of anti-Semitism and indeed provide the most stirring arguments against it.

The Bloom approach is not particularly helpful because it is thoroughly ahistorical. If one cares to (and a parade of critics and academics have), one can also prove that Shakespeare was anti-black (believing that non-white peoples were savages), anti-woman (arguing that women should be subservient; see *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example), anti-popular (the masses are inevitably foul-smelling, cruel and fickle) and so forth, but at the end of the exercise, what has one proven except a commonplace? That the playwright lived 400 years ago, on the cusp of the modern era, and could not jump entirely out of his skin any more than any other artist or human being ever has.

(Foreigners and blacks, as in the case of Portia's suitors, also do not fare well in *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia dismisses the dark-skinned Prince of Morocco, after he has mistakenly selected the golden chest, saying: "Let all of his complexion choose me so" [in other words, choose the *wrong* casket].)

A more promising approach might be to appreciate Shakespeare's work for its astonishing insights, many of which transcend the limits of his time and place, and treat the plays, even in production, *historically* and *critically*. For example, it might be possible to stage a version of *The Merchant of Venice* in which the varying attitudes the playwright reveals, at one moment, humane, at another, prejudiced and cruel, could be treated as distinct and even opposed. In other words, one could make it clear in production that where Shakespeare falls back on the historically dated, stock character types and references, one is hostile to his viewpoint.

The "through-line" of the conventional theater, the smooth, uncontradictory arc of characterization, simply does not work in such a play. Thus, in Radford's film, for example, we are left with a Jessica (Zuleikha Robinson), Shylock's daughter, who stands around looking sullen and unhappy because the filmmaker would like her to be miserable over the desertion of her Jewish father, an artistic decision not justified by the script.

Shakespeare hints at an economic cause of the animus between Jews and Christians when Shylock denounces Antonio because "He lends out money gratis, and brings down The rate of usance here with us in Venice."

Given that Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions...?" speech is one of the most famous pleas for tolerance in literary history, it might be instructive to take a brief look at the objective, historical background to the anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Abram Leon, the Belgian Trotskyist murdered in Auschwitz, in his classic *The Jewish Question*: *A Marxist Interpretation* [online at http://www.marxists.de/religion/leon/], argues that changes in the nature of medieval economy helped to provoke hostility toward the Jews. Leon notes that Jews played a critical role as merchants in the era of pre-commodity production. However, in time, the "Jewish merchant, importing spices into Europe and exporting slaves, is displaced by respectable Christian traders.... This native commercial class collides violently with the Jews, occupants of an outmoded economic position, inherited from a previous period in historical evolution."

With the development of an exchange economy, the Jews in Europe were systematically eliminated from their previous economic position and obliged to pursue exclusively the function of money-lender. "This eviction is accompanied by a ferocious struggle of the native commercial class against the Jews.... It is no longer the Jew who supplies the lord with Oriental goods but for a certain time it is still he who lends him money for his expenses." The word "Jew" becomes synonymous, Leon argues, with "usurer."

In western Europe, the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the epoch of the development of Jewish money-lending. "Whereas Catholicism expresses the interests of the landed nobility and of the feudal order, while Calvinism (or Puritanism) represents those of the bourgeoisie or capitalism, Judaism mirrors the interests of the precapitalist mercantile class," according to Leon.

With time, he writes, "Feudalism progressively gives way to a regime of exchange. As a consequence, the field of activity of Jewish usury is constantly contracting. *It becomes more and more unbearable because it is less and less necessary....*

"The transformation of all classes of society into producers of exchange values, into owners of money, raises them unanimously against Jewish usury whose archaic character emphasizes its rapacity."

The definitive expulsion of the Jews in England took place at the end of the thirteenth century; in France at the end of the fourteenth century; and in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century.

"Now begins the era of the ghettos and all of the worst persecutions and humiliations. The picture of these unfortunates bearing the badge of the wheel and ridiculous costumes, paying taxes like beasts for passing through cities and across bridges, disgraced and rejected, has been implanted for a long time in the memory of the populations of Western and Central Europe," explains Leon.

From the outset of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare provides powerful justification for Shylock's hatred of Antonio. The money-lender reminds the merchant that he has called the Jew "misbeliever, cut-throat dog," among other insults. In fact, Shakespeare further strengthens his argument by giving the complacent Antonio an aura of obnoxious self-righteousness and superiority that further humanizes Shylock by contrast.

Clearly, there are a variety of contradictory impulses at work in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. One could not argue that Radford has navigated successfully all of the work's most contentious issues. Regardless, his sensitively fashioned version of Shakespeare's masterpiece is a noteworthy cinematic event.

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