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2007

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Shakespeare ON SCREEN

Locating the Bard: Adaptation and Authority in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*

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Michael Radford's recent adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) starring Al Pacino and Jeremy Irons returns feature film Shakespeare to period setting and costuming after roughly a decade of radicalized adaptative strategies such as those of Baz Luhrmann, Michael Almereyda, and Julie Taymor. Radford underscores this return to "authentic" Shakespeare with a heavy directorial hand that begins the film with superimposed text recounting the sixteenth-century Venetian context of the original play setting. The watery landscape of Venice, the brothels and courtesans that entertain the Christian inhabitants, and the gates that separate Jew from Christian lend a topographical specificity to the film's meditation on racism. Through this attention to cultural and historical precision, the film legitimizes itself by pursuing the context named in the play title. Radford's *Merchant* strives for correctness of locale, language, and ideology, and by its very aspiration returns viewers to the questions of authorship and its etymological cousin authority that have long informed Shakespeare studies and performance criticism. Radford's deliberately "correct" approach raises interesting questions about what exactly generates directorial authority in adaptations of Shakespeare and what "authentic" Shakespeare can look like on screen. The film testifies to the perpetually seductive siren call of absolute, intentional meaning that tempts undergraduate, critic, and film director alike.

While performance criticism constructs the contest for interpretive authority as a battle between page and stage, its complicated take on authority enriches an exploration of Radford's cinematic bid for narrative legitimacy. W. B. Worthen's formulation of Shakespearean performance criticism begins by acknowledging the instability of both a written dramatic text and its embodied performance. Pointing to the layers of me-

diation that have complicated the relationship between a literary work and its birth at the hands of a creator, Worthen questions the status of literary artifact as absolute source of authorial meaning (10–11). Similarly, for Worthen, although theatrical performance represents the intended mode of delivery for a Shakespearean drama, modern theatrical practice bears such slight resemblance to the staging and performance strategies of Shakespeare's theatre that it can hardly claim much greater access to authorial intent (12). In theoretical debate, the written text and theatrical performance battle for status as the locus for meaning-making and source of an absolute authority, the "seminal intention, an instigating structure of meaning" that derives from the author himself (5). Worthen summarizes: "The relationship between texts, textuality, and performance is deeply inflected by notions of authority—not so much professional authority, but the stabilizing, hegemonic functioning of the Author in modern cultural production" (2). The interpretive mediation of film further complicates this contest over authority.

Although the rich history of filmed Shakespeare reaches back to the turn of the nineteenth century, film-makers still appear to doubt their own legitimacy and seek to validate their strategies for story-telling in opposition to both the page and the stage. While Shakespeare as book enjoys centuries of institutionalized validity, and theatrical performance earns status as intended artistic mode, film can access neither academic legitimacy nor performative accuracy as it is an artistic expression unimagined by Shakespeare's world. Driven by demands for box office profit, filmed Shakespeare suffers further contamination by its proximity to financial capital. Without the imprimatur of institutional credibility or theatrical exclusivity, filmed Shakespeare bridges the divide between high and low art, and often does so with some measure of self-doubt or self-aware discomfort: it distributes the West's most recognizable high-art literary icon in the identifiably low-art form of mass popular entertainment, the cinema.

Radford's promotional interviews heralding the premiere of *The Merchant of Venice* and his commentary track accompanying the DVD release of the film underscore this attendant anxiety over legitimacy. Again and again in his commentary, Radford identifies the ways in which film techniques make improvements on Shakespeare's text and upon the conditions of theatrical performance. Radford notes that he can film persons in scenes where they do not have lines simply to show their reactions and to alter the unspoken interpersonal dynamics of a scene—demonstrated, for example, in Jessica's silent presence when Portia leaves Belmont in

Lorenzo's care. In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs, he explains: "my attempt is to bring this alive as a movie, and you have the capacity in movies to bring things alive in ways you just can't in the theater. You can film people listening, you can bring attention to who's listening. You have the ability to bring a subtext." Radford responds to a *Groucho Reviews* question about cuts to the text: "You see, you have the camera, as well. You don't just have the stage; you have the camera. At the same time, you can't cut Shakespeare's text completely because this is what it's about; it's about the beauty of those words. But they were written for the theatre, so you have to streamline them."¹ His repeated efforts to highlight the interpretive paths opened by film technique indirectly invoke the two looming sources of narrative authority that threaten the desired correctness of Radford's project—the traditions of theatrical performance and the ultimate validation of authorial intent.

What does Radford's film offer to counter, claim, or overgo those forms of authority? First, he opts for a hyper-realism that replicates the spectacle of Renaissance Venice in a way not even the most extravagant of Victorian stage productions could have achieved; and second, he crafts a persona of William Shakespeare as liberal humanist, a non-racist, non-anti-Semite who, for example, anticipated abolitionist rhetoric hundreds of years before the end of slavery in the West. The film's initial efforts at historical contextualization pave the way for a more extensive reliance upon this liberal humanist conception of Shakespeare that dominates the majority of the narrative. In an earnestness to build artistic authority on the foundation of a humanitarian Shakespeare, the film contextualizes historically the anti-Semite question and motivates Shylock's hostility so thoroughly that it ignores or fails to pursue the subtler discourse of racism articulated by the play and centered on Portia herself who constructs the world in racialized categories. The film's adaptative authority rests on its ability to record an explanatory context not possible in the theatre and, more importantly, to access authorial intention by advancing an anti-racist interpretation.

One byproduct and failure of this approach is the film's tendency to locate the author function in the character of Portia. Because her finely tuned articulacy and stage-managing skills come to dominate the drama's second half and climactic courtroom scene, her character serves in the logic of the film as a vehicle for authorial intent. The courtroom scene captures Radford's imagination so thoroughly that he devotes 20% of the film's total running time to that single scene, and by shaping Portia as a grand impresario and unencumbered agent scripting much of the court-

room action, he reads his heroine as a stand-in for the author himself. This is particularly evident in Portia's final rescue of Antonio; the merchant sits gagged and belted, awaiting Shylock's upraised knife when, with the utmost in dramatically calculated timing, Portia at last calls, "Tarry a little" (4.1.305). Just as the playwright draws out the scene to heighten audience suspense, so Radford's Portia controls the scene and her performance in it to maximum effect. Portia's centrality to this moment of metatheatre requires that her incipient racism throughout the play be ignored, rendered humorous, or explained away. The film's opening title sequence initiates Radford's contest for authority by grounding the work in historical and topographical authenticity while the characterization of Shylock voices an ideological correctness closely aligned with the director's understanding of Shakespeare's greatness.² These two authorizing gestures founder, however, at key moments centered on Portia—her expository assessment of the would-be suitors and her management of the courtroom scene, a scene that generates the greatest flurry of explanatory and self-justifying commentary on the DVD release.

"True to the epoch": The Title Screen Prologue

In his DVD commentary, Radford explains the principles of historical and cultural verisimilitude governing his adaptation of Shakespeare: "You have to be true to the epoch because one of the bets of this film is if you set it very very [sic] naturalistically in its period, it will somehow flower. And we'll say that people 400 years ago are like ourselves. That's the subtext of this story." Here Radford links the two forms of authority staked by the film—historical accuracy and Shakespeare's universality. According to Radford, greater historical specificity increases the likelihood that a contemporary viewer will connect to the issues raised that transcend historical contingency.³

The elaborate title screen prologue Radford constructs utilizes strategies that announce the film's approach to appropriation and authorization. The opening title screens of this six-minute prolegomenon scapegoat fanaticism as the true source of injustice and ethnic inequity, expose a basic hypocrisy in Christian morality, and propose an alternate and unifying appreciation for the richness of multiple forms of religious practice. As the sequence opens, ominous lower-register orchestration accompanies an opening shot of a rustic boat on the Grand Canal in which a menacing priest stands shadowed by a wooden cross. A title line quickly announces "Venice 1596," and the excesses of European Inquisitions provide

immediate context, tapping into, by contrast, the viewer's own sense of contemporary enlightenment and tolerance. After the shot fades to black, a closeup appears of a torch setting alight a pile of Hebrew language texts. As the second shot fades, a sequence of rolling titles commences, explaining that Venice, although one of sixteenth-century Europe's most cosmopolitan cities, practiced religious and racial prejudice against its Jewish inhabitants, locking them each night into a walled portion of the city or "Geto."⁴ While this information scrolls upwards, a singer's voice emerges on the soundtrack in an identifiably Semitic lamentation.⁵

An extended interpolation directly targets religious fanaticism as the source of social injustice. Provoked by the crusading priest's exhortation, an incensed mob attacks a Jewish businessman. Shouting "usurer," the mob necessitates another title screen explaining the reasons Jews practiced usury in Renaissance Europe. A particularly directive title declares, "The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it [the Jewish practice of usury] but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter. . . ." Thus the film immediately opposes sophisticated tolerance to the malevolence of fanaticism and simultaneously launches its reassuring claim that Shakespeare could be nothing but a sophisticate. Because the film singles out fanaticism as the cause of racial cruelty in the play, it inadvertently allows the quieter injustices that also brutalize and maim humanity to go undetected, undiagnosed, and uncured.

The opening titles also direct attention to the hypocritical disconnect between the priest's words and the practices of a decadent Venetian culture. As the priest rails against usury, the camera records a number of Venetian courtesans gathered to witness the attack, their wares displayed amply with dresses cinched in beneath exposed breasts and their hair stylized into phallic coiffures. This sexually promiscuous world is later invoked when a raving Shylock visits a brothel searching for his lost daughter and delivers his "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech to Solanio and Salario who have had their dalliances at a brothel interrupted.

The opening sequence presents the major characters and highlights the mistreatment of Shylock at the hands of Christians. As it does so, it designates the opposing religious worlds of the two men whose antagonism drives the plot—Shylock and Antonio. But even as it demarcates the lines of difference between these two men, the subtle workings of film technique return to the liberal humanist conception of a world where the differences of religion can be transformed into shared humanity. The main players of the text appear for the first time at the moment when the mob tosses the Jewish victim's goods into the canal. Just after the Jewish man

has been thrust headfirst after his possessions, Shylock (Al Pacino) turns to a passing Antonio (Jeremy Irons) and addresses him. Antonio responds with a full-bodied spit and moves on through the crowd. With head cast slightly down, Shylock wipes his face and garments, and the loud pitch of an organ heralds another mode of worship as a Latin chant begins. The film then crosscuts between shots of nighttime Venetian revelers and Antonio at mass, again highlighting a hypocrisy latent in this good-times city that fails to consider its own morally compromised practices as it targets the infidel Jewish usurer for its righteous ire.

The rest of the prologue films Lorenzo's foray into the ghetto for a glimpse of Jessica (he is accompanied by Bassanio and Gratiano), and another worship scene plays out for viewers. From a distance the three Venetian revelers Lorenzo, Bassanio, and Gratiano watch the Jewish synagogue. Framed by a building structure on the left, the canal and a building behind them, and the pillar of a courtyard on the right, the three Christians stand in a box that oddly resembles the recesses of a large proscenium stage—the very theatrical context that Radford's film is already busily opening out. They remain at a distance from the synagogue as the camera cuts to an interior shot of Shylock and Tubal uttering prayers and kissing their prayer shawls after touching the passing Torah. The juxtaposition of worship scenes insists that the viewer note similarity: a holy space, the chant of sacred text, physical gestures, and ritual acts of devotion. The Jewish worshipers kiss their prayer shawls or hands much as the previously seen Antonio genuflects and crosses himself before the officiating priest. Likewise, the ritual procession of officiant and sacred objects, whether the cross or the Torah, links the two scenes of worship. Thus, the camera records an inherent similarity in religious form that counters the scapegoated fanaticism of the priest and assures the audience that Shakespeare's play urges a religious tolerance ahead of his time. The film's soundtrack confirms this inherent interconnection between religious traditions when the Jewish lament gives way to Catholic chant. The visually mysterious flickering torchlight of Antonio's Catholic worship and the warm gold-tinted candlelight of Shylock's religious observance likewise convey the numinous wonder of spiritual practice and point to something that should transcend difference.

“His first great tragic character”: The Sufferance of Shylock

Radford's interpretive emphasis on an ethnic and religious tolerance which he believes is advocated by the play finds elaboration in the ensuing highly sympathetic portrayal of Shylock. The film makes no inter-

pretive choice that would position the Jewish moneylender as a comic foil nor as the Jew of Medieval and Renaissance nightmares rapacious for Christian flesh.⁶ Instead, as directed by Radford, Shylock becomes the great Shakespearean voice pleading across the ages for social justice. Cuts to the text and several interpolations produce a sympathetic reading of Shylock and of his estranged daughter Jessica who in the logic of the film comes to lament the choice to abandon father and religious identity. Despite his antagonistic relationship with the authority of stage performance, Radford's commentary track reveals a close affinity with the well-established stage tradition that transformed the play into the *Tragedy of Shylock*.⁷ Radford describes Shylock as a "great tragic figure" and labels the "Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats" (1.3.121–22) interrogative as a "plea for humanity in people's treatment." Given its tragic take on Shylock's character, the film makes textual cuts and interpolative additions at fairly predictable points. The previously mentioned inserted moment in the opening titles when Antonio spits on Shylock renders visually literal Shylock's later reminder to Antonio: "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine, / And all for use of that which is mine own" (1.3.111–13). The film also follows a well-established theatrical tradition in cutting Shylock's aside at the entrance of Antonio in act one, scene three: "I hate him for he is a Christian" (1.3.42).⁸

Pacino plays Shylock with a stooped and coiled intensity that, at times, works at cross purposes to the sentimental schema established by Radford's interpolations and textual edits. The underlying menace of Pacino's highly deliberate line delivery never quite purges the Bronx from his speech, a verbal residual that conjures for viewers the New York gangster roles which made the actor famous. Pacino's performance in *Scarface* provides another intertext for his interpretation of Shylock as the immigrant outsider scrapping for power and touched by an element of paranoia produced by a lifetime of vigilant self-preservation and opposition to the enfranchised. Even comedic lines are delivered in a threateningly dead-pan manner that never lets the viewer forget this is a victim whose fangs, as Shylock puts it, we should beware. However, Radford's filming tends to neutralize that repressed intensity, particularly as Pacino's shorter stature is constantly accentuated by the film's high angle perspective; much of the bond agreement between Shylock, Antonio, and Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes), for example, takes place with a camera at Irons's or Fiennes's eye-level and thus always higher than Pacino's. Later, in the courtroom scene, the *mise-en-scène* marginalizes the smoldering anger of

Pacino by sidelining him in the picture plane and emphasizing his status as essentially powerless victim of Venetian prejudices. Although Pacino's performance might access the doubleness of victim and aggressor to be found in the text's characterization of Shylock, Radford's handling of the script and camera denies that complicating perspective and continually relegates Shylock to the more straightforward role as a suffering cultural type.

The most extensive of Radford's alterations designed to create fellow-feeling with Shylock is found in the lengthy interpolation depicting his arrival to an empty home after Jessica's elopement.⁹ Following his return from Bassanio's feast, Pacino's Shylock seeks his daughter with increasing urgency, looking out the opened window through which Jessica escaped and repeatedly calling out her name. The camera follows Shylock closely over the shoulder as he moves in the confined warren of his home, a point of view that forces the viewer to see the world from Shylock's perspective. Editing provides another layer of thematic direction as Radford crosscuts Shylock's frantic search with Antonio's separation from Bassanio who departs for Belmont.¹⁰ By crosscutting the two men's losses, the film suggests a Shakespearean wisdom unacknowledged by the characters—these great antagonists share the common pain of deep loss. When the editing returns viewers to Shylock's home, he clings to bed curtains and cowers on his haunches; an inarticulate moan escapes from him, and he doubles over in agony, the scene lit by the occasional flash of lightning outside the window. With pensive scoring undergirding the shots, the film switches to an exterior long shot of a much diminished Shylock who wanders the dock from which Bassanio's ship departed. Shylock now stands drenched in rain where Antonio similarly stood soaked, and the film's choice of location stresses again their shared pain.

Solanio's voiceover next describes much of what has just been seen, and his words would be redundant save for the fact that they reveal the cultural callousness of average Venetians. This technique contrasts the natural sympathy aroused in enlightened viewers with the brutish glee of Solanio who declares, "I never heard a passion so confus'd, / So strange, outrageous, and so variable / As the dog Jew did utter in the streets. 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!'" (2.8.12–15). The epithet "dog Jew" rings in the ears as the film cuts from a final shot of a despairing Shylock at the abandoned dock and records a tracking shot of Solanio and Salerio walking along a canal and gossiping intimately about Shylock. It soon becomes apparent their goal is a brothel with balustrade adorned by more half-clothed and bare-breasted women soliciting their custom-

ers. This film tactic provides such visual and verbal material evidence of Christian cruelty and misplaced self-righteousness that the viewer may fail to register the famously vexing elision Shylock makes between his daughter and his ducats. Because the film asks the viewer so insistently to judge the inadequacy of its Christian characters, evaluation of the potential complexity and perhaps less sympathetic aspects of Shylock himself becomes nearly impossible. Furthermore, the extended interpolation of Shylock's desperate search for Jessica softens the insistent vengeance sought in the scenes that follow, implying that his loss alone fuels such hostility.

Echoing the moral register of the film's opening titles, Pacino delivers Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech to Solanio and Salerio outside the brothel, and the moral and social superiority these minor characters assume for themselves is undercut both by Shylock's words and the fact of their interrupted leisure activities. In the DVD commentary, Radford describes Shylock's speech as one of the great "pleas for humanity if you like and for racial equality. . . . It's all about humanity and the greatness of language," a scope of social vision Radford asserts as authentically Shakespeare's in contrast to the myopic point of view Solanio and Salerio represent. This call for tolerance finds an interesting visual equivalent in a crucial gesture by Pacino. At "If you prick us, do we not bleed," Pacino raises both his outstretched hands towards Solanio and Salerio, imitating iconic depictions of Jesus Christ's extended and nail-pierced hands. Thus in Pacino's gesture, the ethnic group that suffered centuries of persecution for their treatment of Christ now finds a fitting emblem of its own humanity in his sacrifice. The film labors to characterize Shylock with unambiguous sympathy and in so doing insists that Shakespeare intended to use the powers of language to preach the perils of racism and the need to disregard difference in light of common human experience.

"But she's immensely sympathetic": Portia and the Suitors

The film's reading of Shakespeare's play as an easy, unalloyed critique of racism stumbles, however, on the character of Portia. Faced with the textual problem of Portia's often barely concealed racism, Radford suppresses dissonant possibilities and tunes scenes to foreground the comedic potential of her lines. While the text forces the reader to grapple with the more complex problem of a generally decent character who remains complicit with her culture's tainted values, the film anxiously closes down this fuller engagement with the insidious problem of racism by making light of Portia's categorization of her suitors.¹¹ Readers first observe

Portia's limitations when she catalogues for Nerissa and the audience her multitude of suitors; these scenes in the film utilize humor to diffuse any possibility that Portia articulates a troubling doctrine of racial superiority. Any hints that her perspective may not conform to modern standards of tolerance are suppressed by capitalizing on the humor of racial stereotyping already embedded in the play text itself.

As Portia (Lynn Collins) and Nerissa (Heather Goldenhersh) catalogue the suitors in act one, scene two, a series of corresponding shots record the national stereotypes at play, with no effort on the part of the film to ironize or evaluate the statements made by Portia. Portia and Nerissa look down on the prospective suitors from a second-story window, a position mimicked and validated by the placement of the camera. At Portia's dismissal of the French lord Monsieur Le Bon, "God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man" (1.2.56–57), the Frenchman appears replete in blue and white ornamental splendor, carefully manicured goatee, and mustache. The Frenchman is fastidiously aided by an attendant who places food in his lord's mouth and subsequently wipes it gingerly. Next, the oddly suited English baron who "bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behavior every where" (1.2.74–76), appears much as the play describes him sporting incongruous fashions and displaying his *gaucherie* by sipping punch directly from the bowl's ladle. When the camera turns at Nerissa's direction to the Duke of Saxony's nephew whom Portia characterizes as a "sponge," he slouches red-faced, already far gone, and demands more wine be poured into his glass. The camera never varies its position, shooting all prospective mates in this scene from a high angle that diminishes their power and significance and undermines them visually as well as verbally. Because the suitors fit so neatly Portia's descriptions, little room is left to question her prejudiced assessments or to wonder at the correctness of her judgments. The scene is treated as comedic exposition, a fact underscored by the camera angle, the sonorous lute music, and the lightness of the performances by Collins and Goldenhersh.

Similarly, when filming the two suitors who precede Bassanio, the director treats these as comedic set pieces that temper the far more serious matters unfolding in Venice. The humorous tonality of these moments again prevents a richer, more fruitful consideration of how Portia's seemingly idyllic Belmont is compromised by the same mercantilism and racism that plague Venice.¹² The first encounter with Morocco highlights differences of skin tone by beginning with a shot of Morocco's black hand holding the white hand of Portia. As he comments on his complexion, a

shot of Portia and Nerissa shows them studiously attempting to maintain straight faces, to look engaged and welcoming when already their dismissive opinion of Morocco has been formed. Morocco arrives accompanied by a large entourage of turbaned men with swords prominently hanging from their sides. In the casket scene, he and his men approach the enclosure, scimitars waving in the air, embodying a ferocity meant to appear distinctly out of place in Belmont. They march through the gardens to the sounds of desert, nomadic music that identifies their cultural origins and directs the viewer to categorize them easily. At the midpoint of the scene, when Morocco reasons that he deserves Portia because of his “qualities of valor,” the men draw their weapons and wave them in the air as Nerissa moves to protect a startled Portia. This moment is notable also for its subtle alteration to Shakespeare’s language; in the text, as Morocco weighs his deservings, he deliberates, “I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes, / In graces, and in qualities of breeding” (2.7.32–33). However, the film substitutes “valor” for “breeding” and highlights a physical aggression characteristic of Morocco’s language and threatening to Portia’s world. A steady low-range drum beat and woodwind provide a musical motif that ends in a stereotypical North African run of notes vaguely reminiscent of snake-charming music as Morocco unlocks the gold casket.

Most of the director’s commentary track accompanying this scene points to the comic abilities of the actor playing Morocco (David Harewood) and confirms that humor was the guiding principle of scene direction. Unacknowledged directorial discomfort with the textual portrayal of Portia may be observed, however, in the screenplay choice to eliminate Portia’s rhyming couplet uttered at Morocco’s departure: “A gentle rid-dance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78–79). Like many productions determined to establish Portia’s moral irreproachability, Radford’s film censors this crucial and revelatory comment. If left intact, the passage complicates the heroine’s characterization and fosters probing questions about racism whether it come in the form of the “dog Jew” epithet or the metered good humor of “let all of his complexion choose me so.”¹³

The wooing of the Prince of Aragon adheres to similar interpretive strategies and opens by confirming his otherness: facing the caskets, he calls for “musica” in heavy accent and pinches from his snuffbox in preparation for his selection. Played with an effete air emphasized by his all-female entourage, Aragon makes his choice accompanied by the strains of distinctly Spanish guitar music. At one point when he takes a sniff from the snuffbox, his glance falls to the lidded mirror, and his hand

quickly moves to adjust a curl to the right of his face. Moments later, a female attendant holds a golden receptacle to Aragon's mouth as he spits daintily to the bemused disgust of Portia and Nerissa. When he discovers the fool's head in the silver casket, Aragon's simpering self-importance turns to affronted rage as he rails at his undeserved rejection. Yet even this burst of feeling suffers humiliation as he cannot storm out in steps choreographed to match his words but must hobble off camera, aided by a cane. As in the Morocco scenes, Aragon's basic unsuitability as a match for Portia is visually and aurally linked to his nationality and ethnic identity. The discontinuity between the film's sedulously sympathetic treatment of Shylock and its wholly stereotyped depiction of Portia's suitors endures without comment or tonal adjustment. This careless staging of the wooing scenes compromises the authority Radford stakes on his film's faithful replication of Shakespeare's assumed racial tolerance.

"That's what they did to any Jew": Portia Judged and Defended

While some may excuse the wooing scenes as harmless comedic set-pieces, Portia's stage-managing of Shylock's judgment in act four creates logical cross-currents that prove more difficult to contain. In fact, discontinuities arise precisely because the viewer has not been amply directed towards the bigotry inherent in Portia's earlier actions. The logical dilemmas created by the film's failure to acknowledge the complexities of both Portia and Shylock earlier in the drama emerge in the courtroom scene and prompt the most telling portion of the director's commentary on the DVD. Early in the scene, Shylock reminds his auditors,

You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them. (4.1.90–93)

As Pacino delivers the lines, Radford asserts, "This is one of the great great [sic] speeches about racial tolerance." Here Radford fails to consider that Shylock's statement does not condemn slavery but merely uses the practice as an analogy of ownership that confirms his right to cut the flesh from Antonio. At best, Shylock's statement asserts the hypocrisy of Venetian society but does not urge social justice. The lines continue:

Shall I say to you,
"Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!
Why sweat they under burthens? Let their beds

Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
 Be season'd with such viands"? You will answer,
 "The slaves are ours." So do I answer you:
 The pound of flesh which I demand of him
 Is dearly bought as mine, and I will have it. (4.1.93–100)

At first glance, Shylock's comments seem to point out a basic prejudice in Venetian society whether it be its treatment of Jew or slave. However, his speech appropriates the master/slave hierarchy not to alter the social fabric but to justify his own claims in the insistent monosyllables of "I will have it." Radford naively turns this passage into yet more evidence of Shakespeare's liberal humanist intentions.

Much as he has absolved Portia of racism earlier in the film through comedy, Radford protects her from the taint of cruelty during the courtroom scene through the techniques of shot framing. The courtroom scene's filming asserts Portia as the morally legitimate mouthpiece for the practices of tolerance Radford identifies as Shakespeare's intention. Radford prefaces the courtroom appearance of Portia with a brief interpolation in which the heiress visits her learned "Cousin Bellario." In a two-shot, Portia sits next to her older, bearded relation and scrutinizes a legal document, asking "Is it not so, Cousin Bellario?" Portia points with a quill towards the text, and her cousin nods in assent. Radford's interpolation constructs Portia as a clever amateur student of the law who has found the solution to Antonio's forfeited bond before the courtroom scene unfolds. The camera underscores Portia's ingenious wit and moral rectitude once she takes command of the courtroom proceedings. In its management of *mise-en-scène*, Radford's film repeatedly places Portia in a position of visual dominance. She is overwhelmingly shot occupying the center of the picture frame, and when she moves to the margins of the frame, she remains in focus (something not true of Shylock, for example). A high percentage of center-frame medium shots of Portia are also often filmed from a lower angle, which magnifies Portia's stature and power. These shots are not extreme enough in angle to create a towering and malevolent force out of Portia; rather, the slight lower angle quietly yet potently insists again on a straightforward reading of Portia as crucial spokeswoman for the humanitarian message of Shakespeare.

Portia's first exchange with Shylock establishes these filming patterns. At, "Of a strange nature is the suit you follow," Portia faces the camera in medium shot near the center of the frame while Shylock stands in profile on the left (4.1.177). For the next few lines, this perspective on the two characters is maintained with an important addition: when Portia moves

to the right, the camera follows closely to preserve her central position, while Shylock, as a result, is pushed further towards the left edge of the frame. The camera moves similarly during the “Quality of Mercy” speech, over the course of which Portia fully circles the stationary Shylock. Beginning alone in the center of the frame, Portia delivers her lines with the camera following her from right to left as she moves, bringing the profiled Shylock back into the frame. However, as Portia continues to circle Shylock, the camera eventually forces him to the extreme right margins of the frame. While the camera repeatedly confines Shylock so that he is shot tightly from the shoulders-up, cutting off his arms and limiting an accompanying freedom of movement, it remains at a comfortable mid-shot distance from Portia and records her full range of movement around the courtroom. To highlight her role as an active agent of change, the film often includes Portia’s hands within the frame—holding the bond, leaning on the authorizing lectern, gesturing towards her auditors, and signaling a halt to the court official who would remove a supplicating and disruptive Bassanio. The film utilizes sound in addition to *mise-en-scène* and movement to emphasize the significance of Portia and the mercy she advocates: as she speaks, her words earn a hushed and reverent silence from the crowd and an absence of extra-diegetic musical scoring. These are words to heed and a speaker who urges the Bard’s own principles of merciful tolerance. This filming technique manages to capture Shylock’s victimization by Venetian society without blaming Portia for that suffering as Collins’s gentle voice and genial sincerity insist.

Nonetheless, Radford must still deal with the judgment that Portia administers and that contradicts the principles of mercy central to Radford’s claims about the playwright’s intentions. Portia’s vexed relationship to that foundational authority of Shakespearean humanism experiences greatest logical pressure when the same voice who celebrates the “quality of mercy” sentences Shylock to loss of property and self. As the scene unfolds on the DVD, the director’s awareness of this problem becomes clearly evident in the increasing vehemence with which he defends Portia’s actions and Shakespeare’s play, dismissing as “ridiculous” any claim that the drama might be anti-Semitic.¹⁴ He asserts:

There’s nothing anti-Semitic about this. Nobody who thought so deeply as Shakespeare could be an anti-Semite. What happened here was that he started off writing a comedy . . . but actually he found this character, and he created his first great tragic character who precedes Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and yet he’s a minor character in the story. He’s only in five scenes. It’s kind of strange, but it works. . . .

We see in Radford's statements the illusive intention of Shakespeare himself emerging as the final authority to be accessed when viewers discover a contradiction between Portia's doctrine of mercy and her summary judgment of Shylock. Even though Radford is recorded in another interview dismissing Shakespearean intentionality, at crucial moments when defending his film, he contradicts that claim, revealing an underlying preoccupation with authorial intent.¹⁵ Radford's DVD commentary echoes much of the material in his promotional interviews at the original feature film release; but one repetition in particular deserves special attention. In the Huttner interview for *All About Jewish Theatre* which focuses intently upon the question of anti-Semitism, Radford asserts much the same line as recorded on the later DVD commentary track:

Let me tell you what I believe. It's pure theory. Christopher Marlowe wrote *The Jew of Malta*, and it was hugely successful. I believe Shakespeare thought: 'Well, OK. This is what makes money, so I'm going to write one too.' So he's writing, and something changes. For some reason or another in this light comedy which he's writing, Shakespeare creates his first great tragic figure. That's what Shylock is. Shylock should die [at the end], as Hamlet and Lear and Macbeth and Othello die. He doesn't because Shakespeare hasn't quite got that yet.

Here he conjures an image of the author at work as evidence that Shakespeare's greatness of soul and talent could not be hampered by the prejudices of his own time and of the contemporaries he imitates and surpasses. Radford goes even further in the Huttner interview, asserting that Shakespeare may very well have designed *Merchant* as a response to the wrongful conviction and execution of the Jewish physician Roderigo Lopez for an alleged plan to poison Elizabeth I. Thus, when under pressure to explain the play's difficulties against the charge of anti-Semitism, Radford finds his best support in a claim to Shakespearean intentionality that pervades much of his film's interpretation of the play.

The challenge to Radford's approach comes unexpectedly in the form of Portia herself whose creed of mercy goes unpracticed. Because the film has treated Portia in such an uncritical and favorable light, the viewer must rapidly assimilate new and jarring information about her character, information that prompts a series of questions damaging to the racial tolerance claimed as the core of the drama: Does the play actually condone Portia's cruel treatment of Shylock? Is it possible that the harshness of Portia's judgment aligns with the playwright's own less-than-enlightened view of Judaism? Does the agreed-upon decision to force Shylock's conversion

reflect the great poet's underlying prejudices? The director's unspoken anxiety about these troubling questions finds expression in a remarkable effort on the DVD commentary track to shift agency from Portia in order to preserve her moral status in the film. Radford acknowledges that some have argued Portia deprives Shylock not only of Antonio's flesh but also of his own dignity. Radford counters that it is, in fact, Shylock who denies himself dignity in this scene "because he knows he's gone too far" in pursuing revenge; thus, Portia is absolved of any active complicity with her culture's prejudices. In Radford's interpretation, Shylock punishes himself for a breach of humanity. Similarly, Collins, who also contributes to the DVD commentary, chimes in to assert that Portia's treatment of Shylock "has nothing to do with creed, race, or religion . . ." Radford adds: "It has nothing to do with that [anti-Semitism]; it has to do with the fact that Shylock himself . . . she [sic] offered him an out and he wouldn't do it because he's in a rage." At this point, Radford again resorts to his universalizing vision of Shakespeare by insisting somewhat ambiguously that this scene does not validate racism but is "about humanity." In addition to shifting agency from Portia to Shylock, Radford and Collins offer another interpretive frame to justify her actions—the limits of the law and the advocate's obligation to win her case. They admit that Portia goes far in her punishment of Shylock but that she stays within the law, adding that "as far as she's concerned, she's winning a case." They further justify Portia by citing her personal motivation to extricate Bassanio at any cost from his ambiguously erotic relationship with Antonio.

And, finally, in a move that returns the viewer to the film's legitimizing historical context, both Radford and Collins defend the enforced conversion of Shylock with the simple statement, "That's what they did to any Jew. . . ."¹⁶ In these final moments of the film, the director asserts once again the validating authority of Shakespearean intention and historical context. The play cannot be anti-Semitic because William Shakespeare clearly intended to write a text sympathetic to the victims of racial prejudice. But if a viewer might suspect the lurking presence of anti-Semitism, the carefully grounded historical and geographical specificity of the film provides the ultimate explanation—that less enlightened eras may have treated ethnic others in such demeaning ways but Shakespeare himself remained unimplicated in and wholly critical of that cultural practice. So eager to offer viewers a sanitized and "correct" version of *The Merchant of Venice*, Radford misses out on the far richer possibilities of a text that dramatizes prejudice in a range of registers and that in its unsettling ambiguity problematizes the very notions of absolute authority that the film chases with such vigor.

Worthen offers a final perspective on questions of authority and Shakespearean production: "The only thing we can be sure of is that as audiences change, as a culture and its theatres change, Shakespeare will speak in different accents, in different forms of visibility and embodiment that may (or may not) assert their own (in-)authentic claims to 'Shakespeare'" (15). Even as Radford's *Merchant* anchors so visibly in the past, his film profoundly reflects our own moment in global history, a post-9/11 world in which the director strives to articulate connections that harmonize cultural differences and point to human commonality. In several promotional interviews, Radford refers to a viewer who addressed the director after a preview screening in London and declared, "I am a Muslim, and I totally identify with Shylock in this picture . . . I am a Muslim, and I identify with a Jew in this picture" (*Groucho Reviews*). As Radford continues to explain, one can't help but hear the press of current events: "The whole thing [*Merchant*] is a rail against fundamentalism. And I'll tell you why: because what this play is about is about human complexity. And fundamentalism doesn't allow for human complexity. It says the world is sortable-outable [sic] in five sentences." That Radford's film never fully engages the complexity of key central figures remains the disappointing irony of his efforts to translate Shakespeare for the present moment. While Radford's own intentions may be grounded in a thoughtful recognition of the play's less-than-perfect characters, the execution of those intentions veers dangerously close to a fundamentalism of a different sort that appropriates Shakespeare too insistently for an uncomplicated vision of religious and ethnic tolerance. Radford's film resists acknowledging the possibility that those cultural icons we cling to for a kind of secular salvation cannot offer fully satisfying answers to our human ills, cannot propose a wholly viable solution to conflict, and, quite humanly, still may be implicated in the limitations of their own cultural moment. Perhaps admitting such limitations, that there are some things we cannot know, is the better and desperately needed antidote to the perils of fundamentalism in our own time.

Notes

¹Radford follows up this statement to the *Groucho Reviews* interviewer with a reference to the play's opening concern over Antonio's melancholy: "Then it goes on for a couple of pages of metaphors about sadness and, y'know, speculation about this and about that. And it's all very well in the theatre when you can pause for a moment or two and you can appreciate the acting, but in the cinema, you want to get on with it. And you also—you can see Antonio's face.

You're close in on it. You can see what's going on. You can see that he's in love with this man [Bassanio]."

²For example, when asked by *Groucho Reviews* about the anti-Semitism of the play, Radford declares, "Shakespeare is greater than that."

³Radford's assertion of Venice's topographical importance to the play's treatment of racism finds confirmation in Ralph Berry's performance critique of *Merchant*. Berry argues that the ambiguities surrounding questions of race and Shylock's characterization can be more fully explored in the context of Renaissance Venice: "There is, I believe, a very strong case for recapturing the essential ambivalence of *The Merchant of Venice*. This is achieved by returning the play to its historical origins, a Venice where the uneasy collaboration of Christians and Jews offers something to all parties" (56).

⁴Radford admits in his interview with *Groucho Reviews* that the title sequence telescopes history since "the riots and the fulminating of Franciscan Friars against the Jews really stopped around 1540; it didn't happen in 1596. By that time, everybody was actually getting along famously."

⁵The importance of the prologue to Radford's project is testified to in his DVD track comment: "These titles, I spent hours and hours and hours poring over."

⁶James Shapiro's work on the Jewish history of Renaissance England confirms the significant presence of Jews in Shakespeare's London and acknowledges the persistent myth at the root of the pound of flesh bond in *Merchant*—the belief that Jews practiced ritual murder of Christians and employed their blood in acts of worship (100). Most critics assume that this and other myths translated on the Elizabethan stage into the stereotyped Jewish villain in bright red wig and false bottle nose; however, citing evidence of more moderate dramatic portrayals of Jews as well as eyewitness accounts of the London Jewish population, Charles Edelman questions the certainty with which previous scholars make this claim for an unalloyed anti-Semitic portrayal of Shylock on the Elizabethan stage (100). Regardless, as will be seen, Radford's construction of Shylock bears much closer resemblance to traditions of the nineteenth-century stage Shylock.

⁷England's great Victorian Shylock, Henry Irving, played the part as "the tragedy of the noble Jew victimized by an insular, hypocritical society" and edited the text accordingly (Bulman 33). One nineteenth-century practice designed to concentrate sympathy and attention on Shylock was the elimination of act five's romantic resolutions. Irving also omitted aspects of Shylock's language that cast the Jewish usurer in too grasping a mercantile light (Bulman 32).

⁸For example, a National Theatre production (1970) directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Laurence Olivier purged this prejudicial aside (Perret 266).

⁹This interpolative choice likewise derives from theatrical tradition. Irving staged Shylock returning to the abandoned house as an "image of the father convulsed with grief" (Bulman 33).

¹⁰In this sequence, editing functions very much as Sarah Hatchuel has explained in her recent discussion of filmed Shakespeare: "Editing produces mean-

ing, whether it expresses an idea or an emotion by the shock of two images put together, or acts subtly to generate diegesis. Juxtaposition of images gives birth to a denoted meaning (the story in itself) and a connoted meaning (effects of comparison, parallelism or causality between the shots) at the same time" (38). In the case of Radford's film, editing insists the viewer recognize an inherent likeness between the two opponents Shylock and Antonio.

¹¹In Fuchs's interview of Radford, the director acknowledges Portia's limitations while justifying the film's less critical portrait: "Portia is rather a spoiled creature, but she's immensely sympathetic, because she's fighting for the cause of women." Radford does not admit to Portia's racism but repeatedly points to the privileged life which has groomed her to somewhat imperious self-satisfaction.

¹²As Karen Newman observes, "any simple binary opposition between Belmont and Venice is misleading, for the aristocratic country life of Belmont shares much with commercial Venice: the matter and mottoes of the caskets suggest commercial values, and Portia's father's will rules her choice of husband. . . . what is important is the *structure* of exchange itself which characterizes both the economic transactions of Venice and the love relationships forged at Belmont" (19). Radford, however, repeatedly distances Belmont from Venice not only visually through an altered lighting and set design but also tonally through the shift to genial comedy in the wooing scenes.

¹³Kim Hall draws attention to the incipient racism of Portia manifest in her dealings with Morocco and all of her potential mates: "The Morocco scene is only the most obvious example of the exclusionary values of Belmont. Portia derides all other suitors for their national shortcomings, reserving her praise for her countryman, Bassanio (a man who at first glance seems to have little to recommend him)" (98). Building upon Hall, Mary Janell Metzger asserts that "the connection between blacks and Jews as alien others helped construct the racialized notion of Englishness" in the Early Modern era (55). Alan Rosen similarly argues for the importance of reading the Jew and the Moor as related figures of Otherness in *Merchant*: "In Shylock the Jew and the Prince of Morocco the Moor, *The Merchant of Venice* presents these two kinds of infidels and thus brings together within this problem comedy two groups for whom Renaissance England felt a special fascination and repulsion" (67). These twin figures of Otherness appear by no accident in Shakespeare's play, and yet Radford's film version, despite its seeming historical verisimilitude, disallows any serious connection between the racism latent in the Morocco wooing and that found in the brutal treatment of Shylock in Venice.

¹⁴In a publicity interview with Jan Lisa Huttner, Radford acknowledges this popular criticism of the play, never more thoroughly on display than in the courtroom scene: "I have been quoted as saying I don't care about the anti-Semitism, which is absolutely not true. My mother is Jewish and one half of my family members are refugees [from Vienna], so it's not something I take very lightly. But what I actually feel about this play is that there's a reason why so many great Jewish actors have played Shylock. There's a reason why this play is constantly interesting to us, and the reason is because it's actually about humanity."

¹⁵In the interview with Fuchs for *PopMatters*, Radford responds to a question about the play's cross-dressing with, "Well of course, it took place in Shakespeare because female roles were played by boys. But once again, I have no idea what Shakespeare intended, but it doesn't matter to me at this point."

¹⁶This argument for historical validity finds a parallel in the rich apologist interpretive tradition associated with *Merchant*; for example, Barbara K. Lewalski's reading of the Biblical allegory at work in the play relies upon a similar explanation for the forced conversion and impoverishment of Shylock: "It ought to be noted that Shylock's pecuniary punishment under the laws of Venice precisely parallels the conditions imposed upon a Jewish convert to Christianity throughout most of Europe and also in England during the Middle Ages and after" (341).

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