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Director, adapted screenplay: Michael Radford. Producers: Cary Brokaw, Barry Navidi, Jason Piette, Michael Lionello Cowen. Director of photography: Benoît Delhomme. Editor: Lucia Zucchetti. Music: Jocelyn Pook. © 2004 Shylock Trading Limited, UK Film Council, DeLux Productions S.A., Immagine e Cinema. U.S. distribution: Sony Pictures Classics.

Released in the wake of the controversy about the representation of Jews in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Michael Radford's version (also 2004) of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*—the first completed film adaptation in English—arrived not so much spoiling for a fight as flinching in anticipation of one.[1] As if to head off any possible confusion as to where its sympathies lie, the film begins with a didactic account of the bitter economic and social restrictions imposed upon the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto in early modern Venice. We then see the titular Christian merchant Antonio (Jeremy Irons) spit upon Jewish moneylender Shylock (Al Pacino); this act of everyday prejudice is intercut with scenes of anti-Semitic violence as well as the burning of sacred Hebrew texts. Not a word of Shakespeare's play has been spoken. The film's opening montage preempts the play with dramatizations of Jewish oppression.

This preliminary sequence no doubt serves to contextualize the play for a contemporary film audience, but it also betrays a protective anxiety. This is understandable given that the play's recent production history is overshadowed by its use as Nazi propaganda. According to historian Gerwin Strobl, there were fifty productions of the play just before World War II in Vienna alone and the play was popular with the official propagandists of the National Socialist regime in Germany and occupied France.[2] After Auschwitz, the case can be made that one has an ethical duty to stage the play only if one does so precisely in order to exorcize these troubled spirits. But can one do that and still stage the comedy written by Shakespeare? Watching the film that follows these uneasy introductions and comparing Radford's screenplay to Shakespeare's text, the strain is obvious. It is as if, in order to bear witness in an acceptable manner, Radford felt that the audience had to be protected not only from the danger of a misreading, but from the text of the play itself—when that play presents a Jewish villain, makes a Jewish character the butt of jokes, or seems to urge us to admire characters who express troublingly anti-Semitic or racist views. The result is a film so at odds with the text it adapts that, far from establishing the endlessly renewable relevance of Shakespeare's work to our own historical moment, it seems instead to index the intractable gulf that separates us from contact with that work.

Before assessing Radford's transformations, it is worth noting that Shakespeare's play was itself an act of adaptation. *The Merchant of Venice* fuses together two folk tales, the tale of the pound of flesh (based upon a contemporary Italian source) and the tale of the three caskets (from Roman antiquity), into an intricate dramatic structure; its two settings, masculine Venice and feminine Belmont, mirror and critique each other.[3] Profligate Venetian playboy Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes), already in debt to the melancholic Christian merchant Antonio, asks to borrow yet more money in order to woo the heiress Portia (Lynn Collins) and so repay his friend. Acting on his behalf, Antonio, whose fortunes are tied up at sea, takes a loan from Shylock, who reminds him of the anti-Semitic abuses we have already witnessed. Shylock half-jokingly proposes that if Antonio fails to pay his debt on time, he must grant Shylock a pound of his flesh "to be cut off and taken / in what part of your body pleaseth me" (1.3.146–47). But wealth alone cannot guarantee Portia's hand. Bound by her father's will, Portia can only wed the suitor that correctly guesses which of three caskets (gold, silver, and lead) contains her portrait. Following a sequence of comic scenes in which a parade of caricatured suitors try and fail to solve the riddle, Bassanio arrives, pays court then chooses correctly, winning Portia's hand and her fortune. When Antonio's ships founder and he cannot pay the debt, Bassanio must return and struggle to prevent Shylock from collecting his gory collateral. In the play's climactic trial scene, Portia, disguised as the wise young Doctor Balthazar, famously intervenes, at first granting Shylock's suit but urging him to show mercy and then, when he insists upon the strict terms of his bond, reversing Shylock's fortunes in a witheringly literal application of precise legalism. Portia's sermon upon the universality of mercy jangles harshly with the cruelly selective protections that the laws of this Christian society afford: Venetian law specifically forbids the shedding of Christian blood. In seeking the terms of his bond, the "alien" Shylock is deemed to have plotted to kill a Christian. His own life and wealth are therefore forfeit. The scene ends with Shylock's property transferred to his daughter Jessica, who has eloped with a Christian; Shylock himself is sentenced to forced conversion.

Modern film adaptation of Shakespeare must, before anything else, deal with both the sheer length of

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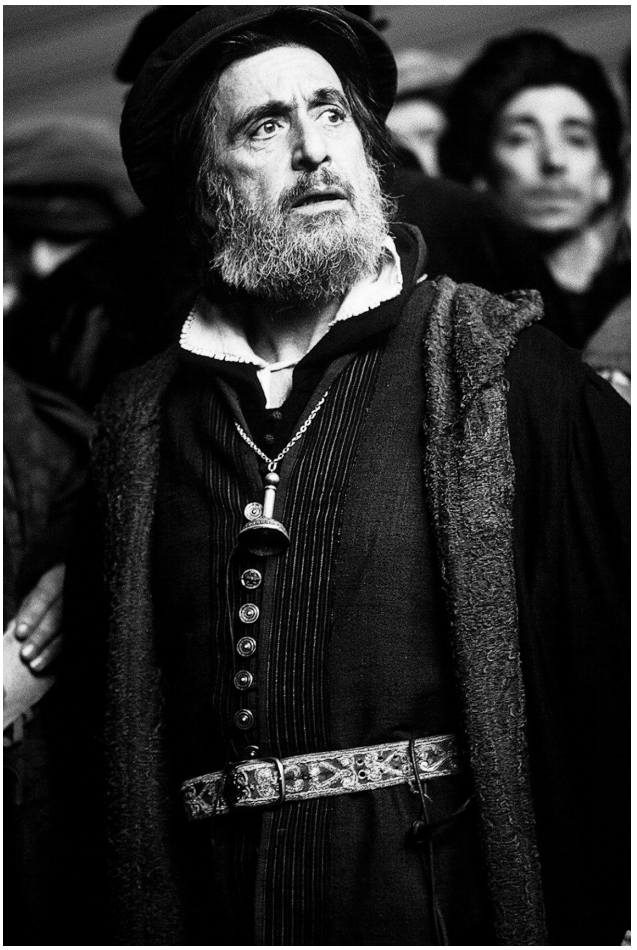
the plays and the density of their language. Radford's film omits elaborate set pieces (particularly from minor characters) in the interest of narrative flow. Shylock's fascinating but confusing retelling of the parable of Laban's sheep and Antonio's "I am a tainted wether of the flock" (4.1.114) speech during the courtroom scene are both cut. These notorious cruxes have launched a thousand close readings, but they hinge upon either scriptural familiarity or abandoned vocabulary (a wether is a castrated ram) and so risk baffling a contemporary audience. These are cuts which help translate the play to the screen.

That said, omissions are never neutral and when we factor in both the subtractions from the text and Radford's additions to it, the film's problematic agenda becomes apparent. Radford's adaptation enforces a strong distinction between comic scenes and dramatic scenes, in opposition to Shakespeare's insistent mixture of the two modes. This is an age-old difficulty. Indeed, for the many eighteenth-century critics of Shakespeare, this mixture is *the* primary problem with him as a writer. Even his contemporaries felt that his tendency to combine low comedy with high drama was a sign that he lacked control, that he was, in the words of Robert Greene, a "rude groome" who either did not know what he was doing or was simply striving to please a vulgar audience.[4] This assessment of a powerful but unruly and loose imagination is epitomized in Ben Jonson's quip: "His wit was in his owne power, would the rule of it had beene so too."[5]

In *The Merchant of Venice*, this somewhat dusty quibble about genre has real force because what is objectionable is its combination of anti-Semitism and comedy, something much harder to stomach than mere clowning in a graveyard. What is a contemporary adaptation to do? The obvious solution is to turn this anti-Semitic comedy into a comedy *about* anti-Semitism. It has certainly been possible to selectively edit Shakespeare's play in order to expose and critique the religious and political ideology of anti-Semitism. Productions in Yiddish at the People's Theatre in 1901 and in Tel Aviv in 1936 vividly testify to this possibility.[6] But it is worth noting that two distinct boundaries are superimposed in such progressive adaptations. There is, firstly, within the play itself, Shakespeare's own continuous disruption of the distinction between, on the one hand, comic, light-hearted, and festive elements, and, on the other, suspenseful, dramatic, and, in the implications of the removal of the pound of flesh, fatally serious ones. Then, secondly, in the historical chasm that separates us from Shakespeare, there is a distinction between what could have been, and indeed would have been, played for laughs, and the bitter aftertaste which those same comic scenes and characters produce in us today. On the Elizabethan stage, Jews were stock villains, caricatures left over from the "Vice" tradition of medieval Passion Plays, frequently outfitted with comedy noses and grotesque curly red wigs, proudly boasting of poisoning wells and murdering sick people in their beds. Barrabas, the energetic villain of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, exemplifies this tradition.[7] So a generic division within the text between its comic and its dramatic elements is intensified by a historical division between the early modern and modern definitions of what can and cannot be laughed at. What was already jarring in its day is doubly so in our own, for if Shakespeare's willingness to interweave humor with deeply unpleasant suspense poses an artistic problem, his willingness to deploy a Jewish stage villain to inspire laughs and jeers from an implied anti-Semitic audience compounds the damage by posing an ethical problem.



Al Pacino as Shylock in *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (Michael Radford, 2004)

The particular kind of anxiety triggered by *The Merchant of Venice* derives from a broader anxiety about our access to Shakespeare; more awkwardly, beneath this longing for access, there is a deep-seated and narcissistic longing to culturally resemble Shakespeare. To take a cue from the title of Jan Kott's influential book, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1965), there seems to be a cultural longing for a Shakespeare who is, somehow, already one of us: we want a Shakespeare who shares our inclusive humanist values, a Shakespeare who is condemning intolerance, not endorsing it. The trouble is that this particular play is to some degree intractable and so modern critics and viewers often seek to find a way to reconcile their admiration and their revulsion. After seeing a production in 1839, Heinrich Heine wrote that: "Shakespeare perhaps intended originally to please the mob . . . but the genius of the poet, the spirit of the wide worlds which ruled in him, was ever stronger than his own will . . . and so Shylock, despite the glaring grotesqueness, expressed the justification of an unfortunate sect which was oppressed by providence."[8] More recently, the French literary critic René Girard has argued that Shakespeare acted as a kind of double agent by providing a cartoon Jew for the anti-Semitic mob, while sneaking into his text a subversive thread of critique—an anti-anti-Semitism for the educated viewer to decipher.[9] Radford's film tries to occupy this same shakily optimistic position. Radford's selective screenplay and Pacino's urgent performance work in concert to transform the text's meaning and reassemble the play, wrenching Shylock away from the context of the Jewish stage villain and, somewhat ironically, moving him closer to the position of Christ, enduring martyrdom at the hands of a mob.

Despite the film's anxious revisions, Shakespeare's original play relies upon and at least partially reinforces the anti-Semitic prejudices and ugly stereotypes of its era. The play's poetics repeatedly align Jewishness as a trait with the inhuman, imagining Jews as subhuman animals or even demons. From the mutterings about his master from the clownish servant Lancelot Gobbo ("certainly the Jew is the very Devil incarnation," 2.2.26) to Antonio's impassioned speech in which he describes Jews as wolves and asks rhetorically if there could be anything harder than a "Jewish heart" (4.1.80), there is a wild profusion of depictions of the Jew—but these disparate voices are united in their negativity, which is not merely descriptive, but categorical. The mere word "Jew" is itself used as an insult. Revisionists may claim that such sentiments do not correspond to the overall impact of the play itself, but are merely distinct lines within it. Yet when we survey the course of the plot as a whole, and in particular when we recall its generic status as a comedy and consider the punishments and rewards meted out in its conclusion, there is an inescapable sense in which the anti-Semitic energies of *The Merchant of Venice* are neither peripheral nor ironic, but central to its meaning. Consider the implication of Jessica's conversion: she is a virtuous pagan and a "sweet Jew" (2.3.11) precisely to the extent that she willingly repudiates her Jewishness and abandons her heritage; that she and Lorenzo have Shylock's wealth bestowed upon them at the close of the play as a reward for their betrayal is the crowning insult.

In order for the play's depiction of Jews to count as substantively ambiguous, one would need to see Jewish traits or qualities not only being denigrated and scorned but also, at least occasionally, being praised: but the "hath not a Jew eyes" speech, the *locus classicus* for those who hope to rescue the play from the charge of anti-Semitism, when read closely, not only fails to elevate the Jew above the level of sentient animal (for even pigs and goats can also see and bleed) but, at its zenith ("if you wrong us, will we not revenge?," 3.1.56), it hinges upon an ethical declaration which would have functioned as a clear confirmation for its intended Christian audience of the irreducibility of a specifically "Jewish" moral error. Rather than confirming the ethical equivalence of Christian and Jew, this equation of justice with revenge is meant to signify Shylock's stubborn adherence to the Old Testament *lex talionis*. It is intended to mark a fatal—and fatally "Jewish"—difference for its Christian listener.

The most obvious pleasure this film adaptation affords is the cumulative gravity of its lead actor's performance. And yet this very performance constitutes the most glaring example of the film's struggle with the tone and meaning of the play it adapts. Inevitably influenced by his definitive turns in *Scarface* (1983) and *Carlito's Way* (1993), we already see Al Pacino as the embodiment of a struggling ethnic minority whose will to survive at all costs leads to criminal excess and tragic over-reaching. This character template configures Pacino's American Yiddish-accented Shylock; its rise-and-fall narrative logic guides his interpretation of the role. His performance commences with the clammy, guarded shoptalk of contract negotiations then rises to the righteous Jericho-blast of the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech (which he delivers with absolute conviction and considerable power), and finally reaches a crescendo in the manic, bloodthirsty repetitions of Shylock's demand for the pound of flesh in the courtroom scene. There, repeating Shylock's "Tis mine" (4.1.99) three times, Pacino's relentless pursuit of his bond risks inad-

vertently calling to mind not only Tony Montana and Carlito Brigante, but Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001–3). Finally broken by the order to convert to Christianity, Pacino's Shylock falls on his knees and rocks pitifully back and forth in an eerie echo of the impassioned *daven*-ing of an Orthodox Jew.

Much must be disavowed or simply cut out in order to make this more sympathetic Shylock emerge. When Shylock sees Antonio arrive to sign the bond, in Radford's film we hear Pacino say "How like a fawning publican he looks," but we do not hear the line that follows it: "I hate him because he is a Christian" (1.3.37). Such a line would confirm Shylock as a threatening figure of intractable "Jewish" hard-heartedness who is being set up for his comeuppance in the play's climax. From the dramas of Plautus and Jonson to the silent films of Chaplin, Lloyd, and Keaton, comedy deals in such broadly sketched types: the tramp, the wealthy man, the poor girl, the cop, the precocious child. In early modern stage comedy, the figure of the miser is just such a type—and Radford and Pacino emphasize it here. I assume that this line was cut because it was thought to undermine our sympathy for Shylock; if the aim is to engineer the play into an exposé of Christian anti-Semitism, this line and others like it throughout the play have to go, while others must be re-emphasized or downplayed in order to shore up a less offensive interpretation. After his daughter Jessica (Zuleikha Robinson) robs him of jewels and money in order to elope with her Christian suitor Lorenzo (Charlie Cox), Shylock rages "I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear" (3.1.80–81). Pacino neutralizes the venom in this line, playing it as the impotent whimper of a hurt father rather than the icy curse of a heartless miser. What is left out is the seam of comic ridicule at Shylock's expense. Smothering such alternate possibilities, Radford rounds this out with shots of Shylock softly crying out his daughter's name, soliciting a sympathetic reaction to a man robbed and betrayed by his oppressors.

Yet, confusingly (but tellingly), those very oppressors are themselves granted the benefit of some rather flattering editorial decisions. After the Prince of Morroco (David Harewood) takes a chance on the wrong casket and is sent home in despair, in the play Portia heaves a starkly racist sigh of relief: "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.78–79). This line was cut by Radford and for obvious reasons; he wants to play the casket scenes for laughs, but not *that* kind of laugh. If Portia is seen as racist in the film, which she certainly is in the play, Radford perhaps feared that a contemporary audience would not emotionally invest in her—and the film's construction of her as the voice of Christian mercy in the courtroom scene would be compromised. It is a safe choice with an eye on the box office, but it is also an index of the gulf that separates us from Shakespeare's time; it prompts reflection upon the circular, self-confirming nature of such screenplay decisions. We can safely conclude that an audience will not be able to dislike a mixture of good and evil that they have not been shown in the first place.

Radford's screenplay also omits darker undercurrents from comic scenes—and correspondingly removes comic possibilities from the moments of high drama. At the peak of the climactic trial scene, when Portia, in transvestite disguise as the young Doctor Balthazar, declares that the law cannot deny Shylock's suit for the pound of flesh, Bassanio desperately utters a rash and characteristically empty vow, offering to sacrifice his wife in place of his friend:

> Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself,
> But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
> Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
> I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you.
> (4.1.278–83)

In Shakespeare's play, the hidden wife in question responds immediately with a tart understatement: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (4.1.284–85). In this lightning flash of a comic aside to the audience (the wife is all too close, though the husband does not know it), Shakespeare underlines with a light comic touch the moral ugliness of Bassanio's betrayal of his love for Portia. Downshifting from humor to an altogether earnest sincerity, the adaptation omits these lines and replaces the broadly comic banter with a shot of Lynn Collins's Portia silently registering a deep emotional wound at Bassanio's callous remark. Comedy with dark undercurrents is replaced by a ponderous sincerity.

The emotional core of this moment is one which has a particular resonance within Michael Radford's work, for the betrayal of the beloved in the face of the threat of torture lies at the heart of a previous literary adaption (this time from George Orwell's novel) which Radford directed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984). In that film's climactic torture sequence in Room 101 of the Ministry of Love, the phobic civil servant Winston Smith (John Hurt), when faced with the threat that a cage full of starved rats will attack his face, finally breaks down and betrays his lover, crying out to his torturers:

"Do it to her! Do it to Julia." State violence registers its domination precisely in its ability to lead us to volunteer others to suffer in our place; clearly there is something in this dark vision that appeals to Radford because his adaptation revises Shakespeare's play to fit the contours of a purely tragic pattern inflected by the nightmares of the twentieth century. One can see this anachronistic morphology at work in the knife-edge sadism and brutality of the trial scene. Jeremy Irons's Antonio vomits and passes out before being stripped to the waist and lashed to a chair in preparation for Shylock's carving of his body. The chair strongly resembles an electric chair and the proceedings take on the bureaucratic chill of a modern execution. In a powerfully evocative moment of sound design, we hear the knife being sharpened in a horror-struck courtroom.

If we take all of these examples of Radford's cuts, directorial decisions, and his cast's performances together, we can see the broader issue plainly: because of a commitment to a polarized artistic vision in which dramatic scenes are kept earnestly "serious," if not tragic, and comic scenes are purged of their dark undercurrents, the virtuoso balancing act that Shakespeare achieves in his plays—in which comic scenes turn nasty, courtroom dramas are interrupted with clowning outbursts, and heroes and villains are often reversible—is avoided in favour of a simplified morality tale. Radford's film is on sure footing when it is engaged in an ethically admirable and historically accurate project of depicting Jewish oppression, but precisely at those moments it struggles desperately with the comic machinery and fairy-tale logic of Shakespeare's play. If Shylock is to truly be the moral hero of the play, then we must correspondingly view Portia and Antonio as cruel and cynical bigots. Unwilling to pursue this logic to its end, Radford's film attempts instead to sympathize equally with each character, padding the sharp corners until the dramatic shape disappears. Radford's compromise ultimately betrays Shakespeare's Christian and Jewish characters by levelling down his play's vision of their differences for the sake of a smoothly digestible universality. The film ends with a telling moment of utter fabrication that encapsulates the spirit of this adaptation: the converted Jessica looks at her hand and fondles the turquoise ring that her father gave her mother Leah, a ring which the play clearly tells us Jessica has already given away "for a monkey" (3.1.99) while out on the town with her Christian accomplices after her elopement. The return of this ring is pure wish fulfillment, an expression of the same refusal of Shakespeare's hard lessons that led eighteenth-century directors to have Cordelia revive at the end of *King Lear*. The cinema audience has a robust sense of logical continuity and will not fail to ask how a ring that has already been given away can be returned to Jessica. The problem is that Radford wants us to like each and every character in the play. Jessica could not really have given away a family heirloom so easily, he assures us. As a directorial fiat, this final *coup de grâce* is pushy, willful, and gratuitous. But as a symbol of this film's pained ambivalence about our obligations to the troubling inheritance of the past, it is a perfect Hollywood ending.

NOTES

1. The play's film history begins with *Il Mercante di Venezia*, an Italian silent version made in 1910 by Gerolamo Lo Savio. Orson Welles completed filming of his own adaptation in 1969 but, bizarrely, the majority of the soundtrack for the film went missing during production, and so his *Merchant of Venice* remains incomplete; the full story is given in the documentary *Orson Welles: The One Man Band* (Vassili Silovic, 1996). There have also been numerous productions for television.
2. Gerwin Strobl, "The Bard of Eugenics: Shakespeare and Racial Activism in the Third Reich," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34 (1999): 323–36.
3. Though the tale of the bond of flesh ultimately traces back to Persian and Indian antiquity, Shakespeare's play has been traced most directly to an Italian source, Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone*; the tale of the three caskets comes from the *Gesta Romanorum*. I have consulted the 1955 Methuen edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown.
4. Robert Greene, *Groats-Worth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592), ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1923), 46.
5. Ben Jonson, "Timber: Or, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter" (1641), in *Collected Works* 8, ed. H. Herford Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 584.
6. Avraham Oz, "Transformations of Authenticity: *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel," *Jahrbuch Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft West* (1983), 156–68.
7. See also James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
8. Heinrich Heine, "Shakespeare Justifies an Unfortunate Race," in *The Merchant of Venice: The Critical Tradition*, ed. William Baker (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 54.
9. René Girard, "To Entrap The Wisest," *Literature and Society: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 100–19.

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ABSTRACT Lingering controversy about anti-Semitism has kept *The Merchant of Venice* off the screen. Michael Radford's 2004 film adaptation creates a critique of anti-Semitic violence revealingly at odds with the play's comic form. This review considers the challenge Shakespeare's art poses to the ethical imperatives of contemporary filmmaking.

KEYWORDS Film adaptation, Shakespeare, Pacino, anti-Semitism, Girard