

# The Merchant of Venice (2004)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-1; L-1; S-1/N-3

*The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.*

*Psalms 9:16*

*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*

*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.*

*James 2:12-13*

Director Michael Radford, who *The Merchant of Venice* also adapted the script, has brought to the screen the first sound version ever of Shakespeare's beautiful *Merchant of Venice*. Yes, that's right—there were adaptations of the play back in the days of silent films, and in England, a TV version, but never one since the advent of sound in the late 1920s. No doubt this has been due to the problem of the play's anti-Semitism, and, given all the furor that arose over *The Passion of Christ* prior to its release, it is a wonder we haven't heard more in regard to the issue in this production. Had this been "A Film by Mel Gibson," or some other high profile director/producer, no doubt we would have. As it is,

Mr. Radford handles the question of the play's anti-Semitism very well.

Before the film begins there is a prologue in which we are told how in 1596, the year in which the story is set (which, according to many scholars might have been when Shakespeare wrote it), Jews were everywhere persecuted, being forced to live in the run-down section of Venice called the "getto." Forbidden to own land, they could not engage in arts and crafts or trade, so they were forced into the odious business of usury. Lending money at interest was forbidden by the Scriptures and the Church, but the practice was necessary for trade, especially in the leading commercial center that Venice was then. The travel of Jews was restricted (they were not supposed to leave the getto after dark, the gates being locked), and they had to wear a red hat when they ventured out so that they would be identified as Jews—the Renaissance equivalent of the yellow Star of David.

The play then begins, with Radford adding a scene in which Shylock (Al Pacino), making his way along a crowded street, is spat upon by Antonio (Jeremy Irons), who is the merchant of Venice of the title—indeed, Antonio is later referred to by an admirer as a "prince of merchants." In the original play we learn of this insult only from Shylock's conversation with Antonio, to which the latter replies that he will do it again, even if "the Jew" does loan him the money he is requesting on behalf of best friend Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes). By actually showing this, Radford instills in our minds and hearts the dreadful humiliations that Jews in general, and Shylock in particular, underwent. Whereas this does not excuse the moneylender of his cruel intent to extract his pound of flesh, it does add to our understanding of his mindset.

Bassanio had come to Antonio to see if he can borrow a large sum of money so that he can suitably approach the love of his life, Portia (Lynn Collins), a very wealthy young lady living

on the island of Belmont not very far from Venice. Antonio is very willing, but at the moment his wealth is tied up in the four merchant ships that he had sent out. However, his affection for his friend is such that he is willing to approach Shylock, even though the payback will be costly due to usury. This is when Shylock reminds Antonio of the many ways in which the merchant had insulted and humiliated him in the past, but to "extend friendship" Shylock offers the requested three thousand ducats with no interest, the only stipulation being that failure to repay will require Antonio to forfeit a pound of his flesh. Taken in by the offer of friendship, and confident that his laden ships will return a month before payment is due, Antonio accepts the deal. Only Bassanio protests, he rightly discerning some darker motive in Shylock's seemingly generous offer.

I will not go very much into detail into the rest of the generally known plot. The plotline involving Portia is like the old fairy tales in which various suitors seeking the hand of a princess are required to answer a series of riddles or endure a series of tests. Portia's recently deceased father had required in his will that suitors must choose from three chests—made of gold, silver, and lead—the one which contains her miniature portrait. We see two foreign suitors, misled by the riddle attached to each casket, choosing wrong, until at last, armed with the expensive raiment and gifts necessary for him to approach such a wealthy lady, Bassanio arrives on the island in pursuit of her hand. This part of the story was concocted largely, I presume, to show how worthy a person is Bassanio, compared to the two overbearing suitors.

Lovers of courtroom scenes will not be disappointed by the climactic confrontation between the principals. For once the women (Portia and her attendant), donning male disguises, actually look like young men, and Portia's great "quality of mercy" speech is indeed moving. But it does not move Shylock, his obsession to avenge himself being too great to listen to

any plea for mercy, no matter how eloquent. Portia skillfully leads him toward that final moment—he rejects an offer of repayment several times the original amount of the loan if he will but give up his claim for a pound of flesh—when the trap that his deception and obstinacy have helped to create is sprung, and he must himself fall to his knees and beg for the mercy, which he had denied his enemy.

The film is beautifully photographed in Venice itself, but it is set mainly in the side canals, off the tourist-beaten path—though we do see the Rialto Bridge and catch a brief view of the Ducal Palace, with just a tiny glimpse of part of the Basilica of St. Marks jutting skyward behind it. The costumes and make up are gorgeous, inspired by Renaissance art—Lynn Collins as Portia is radiant, looking like she has stepped out of a Titian or Tintoretto painting. The acting is equal to the visuals, Pacino exuding the mixed villainy and crushed nobility of the ultimate outsider. Jeremy Irons, as always, is convincing, especially at the climax when he bears his chest, expecting without recrimination to give up his life for his friend. Joseph Fiennes' Bassanio is the picture of the love-stricken suitor who proves himself worthy of the love of both his friend and beloved.

The play is a good example of how admirable, appealing people can nonetheless be so infected with a form of racism that their view of social relationships is terribly distorted, akin to that which have infected most Americans north and south. Some would absolve the author himself of anti-Semitism because of Shylock's great speech, "I am a Jew," thus making Shylock as a tragic rather than a comic figure. This great speech certainly makes Shylock one of the most interesting and complicated villains in all of literature, but I suspect those scholars are right who insist that Shakespeare largely embodied the prejudice of his day, but wanted to deepen the character of Shylock, rather than settle for a cardboard cutout villain. These scholars insist that even if he had not

been Jewish, Shylock would have been a villain because of his obsession with getting even with his chief enemy. Using deception to bait his trap, he, as the psalmist declares, becomes ensnared in his own trap.

Though the play is a little over 400 years old, its theme and issues are as relevant as ever today, well worth a group's viewing and discussing. As with the film version of *Vanity Fair*, the film might send you back to the source—it's been a long time since I've enjoyed so much the beauty of the English language as the other evening when I picked up a copy of the play. (Also, the footnotes helped me grasp the archaic words that passed over my head during the film.)

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

Note: As always this section contains a few partial-spoilers, so you might want to wait until you have seen the film before reading on.

1) How do the opening visuals support the text in calling our attention to the ways in which Jews were viewed and treated at the time of the Renaissance? The legal barriers against Jews have gone down, but do you still detect signs of anti-Semitism among family or friends?

2) How do you think it possible to be a "good Christian" like Antonio and still be such a bigot? Have you known such people—if so, what were their "blind spots"?

3) Do you think Shylock really meant it when he said, "I would be friends with you, and have your love"? Why or why not?

4) How do the words that Shakespeare puts into Shylock's mouth (Act III, Scene I), showing that Jews suffer like everyone else, subvert the accepted views of his day? How have similar statements been used to combat racial or ethnic stereotypes?

5) What do you think of Bassanio's comments (Act III, Scene

II), when he stands before the three caskets and reflects upon their words?

“The world is still deceived with ornament.

In law, what plea is so tainted and corrupt, But being seasoned with a gracious voice, Obscures the show of evil? In religion, What damned error but some sober brow Will bless it, and approve it, with a text, Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?

There is no vice so simple but assumes Some mark of virtue on his outward parts.” Does this still apply in the realms of politics, business and religion? An example?

6) What do you think of Portia’s quality of mercy speech? Check out “mercy” in the Scriptures and compare them. How do the “Christian” characters exemplify it?

7) How is the image of Shylock, with his insistence on law and justice as retribution, like what most Protestant leaders believe all the Pharisees of Jesus day were like? But were they? How has this image often resulted in an unconscious anti-Semitism?

8) What do you think of what Jessica does in regard to her father and faith? How would Elizabethan audiences regard this very differently from how we might regard it today?

9) How is friendship an important theme of the play? What kind of a friend is Antonio? Some film critics would construe his relationship with Bassanio as homosexual, but could this be a valid interpretation, considering Shakespeare’s time? How might the florid language and sentiment of the times lead modern critics into misunderstanding the nature of friendship between males? (Music lovers might bring up and compare to Antonio friendship songs that have been popular, such as “You’ve Got a Friend” or “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”)

10) How does Shakespeare, abetted by actor Pacino, show that there is a trace of nobility even in such a villainous character? Earlier the director showed a synagogue scene not in the play: how does this prepare us for the last time we see Shylock? How has the outsider become an outsider even among outsiders?

11) Do you think that Shylock is a tragic or a comic figure? Do you think that he deserves what happens to him? What do you believe Jesus might say to the characters gathered together in the last scene?