

Queerying Antonio: Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) and the Problem of Heterosexism

Sara Martín, UAB
Sara.Martin@uab.cat
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Abstract

The logical preoccupation with how to represent Shylock after the Holocaust too often prevents stage and film directors from addressing in depth other problematic aspects of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, such as the nature of the intense relationship between Antonio and Bassanio and the meaning of the subplot involving Portia's ring. Shylock's progression from secondary character to protagonist, to the extent that many believe that he and not Antonio is the merchant of the title, makes it unlikely for these other aspects to be the focus of any production, whether for the stage or the screen. Yet, Michael Radford's accomplished film adaptation of this play proves that solving the problem of Shylock's representation for our times actually highlights other problems that *Merchant* poses for a contemporary audience. This is, precisely, the reason why despite its apparent classicism, Radford's version turns out to be an intriguing adaptation that shakes spectators out of any complacent reading of the original text.

In close collaboration with a superb Al Pacino as Shylock, Radford strikes all the right notes to please audience and critics concerned with post-Holocaust political correctness. His Shylock is more painfully vulnerable than ever to the ruthless, anti-semitic laws of the Venetian state and this vulnerability is what motivates the downright brutality of his outrageous, yet legal, claim on Antonio's Christian flesh. Portia's tight binding to the equally ruthless laws of patriarchal fatherhood and her brief sojourn in the world of men as a lawyer in drag bent on imposing an exemplary punishment on Shylock have always seemed strange companions for the Jew's case. However, Radford's decision to queer up Shakespeare by queerying Antonio makes perfect sense of this apparent mismatch. By suggesting that he is in love with Bassanio, a deliberate misreading introduced to validate for unimaginative audiences Antonio's decision to risk his life for a friend, Radford gives new coherence to the play, integrating into a single unity Shylock's vicious attack against the merchant, Portia's role in Antonio's defence and even the often overlooked ring plot.

Michael Radford's productive (mis)reading of *The Merchant of Venice* for his film adaptation tells a new story: how two outsiders –Shylock the loathed Jew, Antonio the closeted homosexual– are brought under the heterosexual norm of their Christian Venetian community by a woman. Portia is so certain about the validity of the patriarchal rules she obeys that her only excursion outside them (the courtroom scene) aims just at securing her husband Bassanio exclusively to herself, a process which, precisely, the ring plot culminates. By attempting to clarify Shylock's obsession for

Antonio, Radford wittingly or unwittingly reveals that the main silenced issue of the play is Antonio's own obsession for Bassanio, which triggers the fierce war waged by Portia against the merchant for the exclusive rights on Bassanio's body and love. This is a heterosexist turn that actually conceals a misogynistic twist, with Portia representing an asphyxiating normativity that leaves no place for outsiders, whether on grounds of religious faith or sexual preference. Not bad for a first major film adaptation of *Merchant*.¹

Radford's queering of Antonio not only elicits Portia's heterosexist jealousy and patriarchal zeal; it also forces the audience, supposedly free from anti-semitic prejudice, to confront contemporary homophobic prejudice, particularly regarding friendship between men. Producing *Merchant* today demands that we try to understand the context of anti-semitism in Shakespeare's times, which is why Radford includes a prologue in which we are shown in painful detail how Jews were mistreated in 1596 Venice, the year when Shakespeare possibly wrote the play. Yet, neither the film nor the academic specialists in the play succeed in fully contextualising the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, which is why reading it as gay simplifies matters too much and blurs the essence of the conflict articulating the triangle that the two men form with Portia.

The Elizabethan dilemma that Bassanio faces in having to choose between marrying Portia and loving Antonio as his bosom friend worked adequately for Shakespeare's audience but it is quite confusing in our day. Their deep male bonding is typical of patriarchal societies in which women play a negligible public role; whether it includes sex or not is irrelevant, for it is *not* the same as homosexual love. In contemporary Western societies, however, homophobic fears make intimate friendships like Antonio and Bassanio's far less frequent so that, in a sense, they are more stigmatised than homosexual love, which seems clearer in its definition. If Antonio and Bassanio's friendship is chaste, their declaration of mutual love in the courtroom scene seems quite extravagant and Portia's jealousy quite absurd. After all, we tend to agree today that even though love may be the main focus of our sentimental life, no person –whether man or woman, queer or heterosexual– can be truly happy without friendship, the deeper the better.

In our context there is absolutely no reason why Bassanio should have to choose between wife and friend, unless his relationship with Antonio were gay on both sides, as it is even possible to contemplate a (certainly difficult) situation in which a heterosexual man could sustain a friendship with a gay man in love with him. Our inability to understand Bassanio's plea except by characterising Antonio as gay in a necessarily anachronistic reading leads thus to a blatantly heterosexist interpretation of Shakespeare's play, which reduces to contemporary parameters a situation far more complex in the original text. This operation is, however, inevitable as, despite its

¹ *The International Movie Data Base* lists 18 screen versions of *The Merchant of Venice* made between 1908 (Vitagraph's) and 2004 (Radford's). Of these, 7 were made for television, all of them in Britain except for Orson Welles's incomplete 1969 version. Film versions include 6 silent films (3 British, 2 American, 1 German), an Indian film which was the first version of *Merchant* after the introduction of sound (1947), a French film (1953) and a Maori adaptation (2002). Radford's *Merchant* is a co-production financed by companies from the USA, Britain, Italy and Luxembourg and, as can be seen, it is the first cinema adaptation of *Merchant* spoken in English. (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0379889/movieconnections>, Accessed July 2008)



avowed sexual freedom, in current Western society homophobia, unlike anti-semitism, is rampant.

1. (Mis)reading Renaissance male bonding: How Antonio loves Bassanio

The academic criticism of *Merchant* has been dealing for decades with the ‘problem’ of Antonio’s sexuality. In an essay published in 1962, the poet W.H. Auden characterised Antonio as “a melancholic who is incapable of loving a woman” (229), a man quite unlike his counterpart in Shakespeare’s main source, *Il Pecorone*.² In the Italian version the equivalents of Antonio and Bassanio are godfather and godson; the former ends married to the equivalent of Portia’s companion, Nerissa, whereas in *Merchant* Bassanio’s buddy Gratiano marries her. According to Auden, Shakespeare “deliberately avoids the classical formula of the Perfect Friends by making the relationship unequal” (229). This inequality and the introduction of usury as one of the main plot issues lead Auden to classify *The Merchant of Venice* as a problem play rather than a comedy. Making the point boldly, Auden observes that, surely, Shakespeare must have been aware of the link between usury and sodomy as described by Dante in the “Eleventh Canto” of his *Inferno*, which is why “It can, therefore, hardly be an accident that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex” (231). Auden does not clarify, however, why he assumes that Antonio is chaste and carefully avoids using the word ‘homosexual.’

Antonio’s sexual preferences also worried Lawrence W. Hyman, probably the first to read *Merchant* as a love triangle among Antonio, Bassanio and Portia. Like Auden, he shies away from openly discussing Antonio’s homosexuality, referring instead to his “unconscious sexual feeling for Bassanio” (1970: 110). Hyman, writing from a somewhat homophobic position, explains that

What we are concerned with is not a matter of right or wrong conduct, but with the insistent and altogether natural desire of a woman to possess her lover completely coming into conflict with the desire of Antonio to hold on to the love of his friend. We need not concern ourselves with the question as to whether Antonio’s desire is equally ‘natural.’ For our purposes all we need recognise is that his desire is equally strong. (113)

In Hyman’s view, at the end of the play Antonio is acknowledged by Portia to be “no longer a rival but a willing accomplice in his friend’s marriage” (113) which is why, in a sense, his lost ships must return, as the success of his business ventures removes “the last sacrifice that Antonio has suffered for Bassanio” (115). Radford’s film questions this reading by having Portia make no reference at all to the returned ships.

² *The Merchant of Venice* may or may not have been written in reaction to Christopher Marlowe’s anti-semitic *The Jew of Malta* (1590), from which it apparently borrows the subplot concerning Jessica’s conversion. Shakespeare added the subplot of the three caskets, popular in folk tales, to his main source: the tale “Giannetto of Venice and the Lady of Belmonte” included in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino’s collection of novellas *Il Pecorone* (a 14th century text published in 1558, with no English translation). Rodrigo Lopez, physician to Queen Elizabeth, executed in 1594 for allegedly trying to poison her, may have been the inspiration for Shylock. He was a marrano, or sephardic Jew forced to convert.



Since the 1980s, thanks to the revolution started by Gay and Queer Studies, critics interested in Antonio are finally free to interpret his love for Bassanio as homosexual passion, though this clashes quite badly with the feminist readings of Portia as a heroine. Joan Orzack Holmer claims that the alterations made on *Il Pecorone* turn Portia into a “judge and educator” of men, morally much sounder than the “whimsical Lady of Belmont” (1985: 329). Holmer insists that Portia shows her generosity in forgiving Bassanio and Antonio for the way they misuse her ring, and also by “emphatically and harmoniously” including Antonio “in her relationship with Bassanio by handing Antonio the ring to give Bassanio” (331). She also claims that by leaving Antonio unmarried, Shakespeare grants him “the role of the ‘dear friend,’ the ‘true friend’ (III.ii 290, 307) –Bassanio’s and now Portia’s as well” (333). This opinion, however, only shows Horner’s blindness regarding how Antonio’s exclusion from the general happy end signifies that he is forced to remain chaste, since living publicly as a gay man (if that *is* what he is) is not an option available for him.

In an article published shortly after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal *Between Men: English Literature and Men Homosocial Desire* (1985), Karen Newman reads *Merchant* in the light of Luce Irigaray’s criticism of Marcel Mauss’s and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological studies describing how the exchange of women regulates male bonding in patriarchal societies. Irigaray criticised this system of exchange for using women as an instrument to prevent generalised homosexuality among men. Seeing Portia’s father as the originator of the “ur-exchange” that triggers the plot (he sets up the casket riddle which leads Bassanio to borrow money from Antonio), Newman argues that whether they are just bosom friends or lovers, “Irigaray’s reading of Lévi-Strauss allows us to recognise in Antonio’s relationship with Bassanio a homosocial bond, a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails” (1987: 22). For Newman, Portia is the real heroine because “In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio” (26). Newman, however, does not see that Portia’s is a victory for patriarchy, the system which forces her to cease being an independent lady to become a dependent wife.

In a book devoted to contrasting Renaissance views of homosexuality with our own, Jonathan Goldberg reacts strongly against Newman’s argument that cross-dressed females figures like Portia carry the weight of Shakespeare’s (alleged) alternative sexual discourse. Interpreting Antonio and Bassanio’s love as yet another version of the bisexual plot of the sonnets, Goldberg protests that one might read the relation

Between Antonio and Bassanio, to see that Portia’s success, described by Karen Newman as woman-on-top, however much it denaturalizes gender, also is fueled by the misogyny that shapes her as the dark lady, that her power as boy is directed against and serves to police Antonio and Bassanio and to separate them; that the boy-girl figures a triumph for the patriarchy, that however much it has been deformed by installing a woman in the father’s place it ensures that when s/he saves Antonio and defeats Shylock the two acts form a single gesture –unleashing energies that are racist and homophobic, that secure in his/her transgressive body the acceptable limits of marriage and homosociality under regimes of alliance close to those of heterosexual privilege; at the end of the play Portia is in the father’s place and the wife’s, but not the friend’s. (1992: 142)

This might be why the actress that plays Portia in Radford's film, the American Lynn Collins, shows an evident discomfort when commenting on her role in an interview.³ In Collins's view, Portia passes from girl to woman and understands who she really is through her impersonation of masculinity, which clearly suggests that Portia acknowledges herself to be part of patriarchy, not its alternative.

This disagreement as to what Portia actually does to Antonio and Bassanio stems from the fact that reading the play from a feminist position is actually easier than reading it from a queer or pro-queer position. Alan Sinfield, writing openly as a gay man, ironizes about his own task as a critic when he notes that "If Antonio is excluded from the good life at the end of the *Merchant*, so the gay man is excluded from the play's address" (1996: 128). He sees the bonding system criticised by Newman as a reflection of the social pecking order of Venice (or, rather, of Shakespeare's time) and claims quite rightly that "whether the friendships of men such as Antonio and Bassanio should be regarded as involving a homoerotic element or not is not just a matter of what people did in private hundreds of years ago; it is a matter of definition within a sex-gender system that we only partly comprehend" (131). The quandary we face is that the alienness of the Elizabethan bonding system and the fact that no one "would have labelled himself a 'homosexual'" in Shakespeare's time (Smith 1995: 9) problematise any queer reading of Antonio. Vindicating Antonio is incompatible with celebrating Portia: whether as a patriarchal dupe or a feminist heroine, heterosexual woman carries the day and whether gay or not, excluded or included, Antonio loses.

Homosexuality as we know it today is ultimately a product of the Victorian obsession for ruling out so-called deviation from normative heterosexual practice on spurious clinical and scientific grounds. We must not forget that up to 1973 the American Psychiatric Association still classed homosexuality in the category of mental illnesses, which possible explains the unease of commentators like Auden (writing when gay sex was still a criminal offence in Britain) and Hyman (in 1970) about Antonio's inclinations. The current queer project to rewrite the history of homosexuality is, in any case, complicated by the fact that same sex partnerships have meant different things at different historical times. As Bruce R. Smith reminds us, in the Renaissance period engaging in homosexual practices would not make a man "fundamentally different from his peers. Just the opposite was true. Prevailing ideas asked him to castigate himself for falling into the general depravity to which all mankind *is* subject," (1995: 9) since sodomy was seen as part of generalised 'vice.' In order to avoid this sinful fall into temptation, Elizabethan society endorsed a system of homosocial bonding remotely based on, as Smith contends, the myth of combatants and comrades.⁴ This essentially allowed men to form strong bonds which might include gay sex but needn't be homosexual. As Smith writes,

Young men of a certain age in Renaissance England, had, then, to reconcile two conflicting demands: the emotional intensity of male bonds as they were fostered by Renaissance patriarchy and the necessity of marrying to acquire full status

³ In the bonus features of the DVD Special Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, 2005.

⁴ This is based on Plutarch's narration of the intense friendship between former enemies Theseus and Pirithous. Smith explains that the myth reconciles "two conflicting traits" found among men of all cultures: "the tendency of human males to be aggressive towards other males and, at the same time, to form strong bonds with them" (31). He argues that *Coriolanus* reflects best this myth within Shakespeare's production.

within that patriarchy. The question confronting a young man at sexual maturity in Shakespeare's day was not, am I heterosexual or am I homosexual, but where do my greater emotional loyalties lie, with other men or with women. (65)

For Smith, Antonio is "the most pathetic of these severed friends" (67), though Portia gains just a pyrrhic victory in this patriarchal contest for Bassanio. After all, she is a mere link in the chain binding her father and her husband; her function is simply to pass the property she inherits from the former onto the latter, and to beget eventually Bassanio's son and heir.

Steven Patterson remarks quite frankly that "Antonio's love is a frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio and, further, that his passionate love falls into an early modern tradition of homoerotic friendship, or amity" (1999: 10). The inequality that Auden detected and the reason why this amity fails is due only partly to the fact that Bassanio does not requite Antonio's homosexual passion. As Patterson contends, their relationship is also doomed because their relationship has no place in "a radically shifting mercantile economy –an economy that seems better regulated by a social structure based on marital alliance and heterosexual reproduction," (10) as I have already suggested. Patterson explains in detail how amity, which in his view may have included homosexual intercourse, blended the ideals of "heroic masculinity and good citizenship" (11) to offer the men of the Elizabethan court a model to cling onto at a time when many lacked the necessary aristocratic credentials. In his view, "*Merchant* takes to task the ideals of homoerotic male friendship, even as it raises doubts about the ability of romance and marriage to offer any radical improvement to society or to be any more inclusive." (1999: 14) This need to relinquish male bonding for marriage is justified by characterising Antonio and Bassanio as men of different social classes: essentially, Antonio's mistake is to foolishly suppose that a (rich) merchant can aspire to being in a relation of amity with an (impoverished) aristocrat. "Whether in or out of the circle," Patterson concludes, "Antonio stands dumbfounded –awed by the wife's magnanimity but perhaps also by the way he has been betrayed by his own faith in amity, a system that has contained mechanisms to exclude him." (31)

This suggests that people who work to make money –whether they're called Antonio or Shylock, merchant or usurer– do not belong to the happy circle of the people who inherit money, which would add snobbery to the sins of anti-semitism and homophobia which Shakespeare arguably commits in his play. Antonio's rejection is thus even more pitiful because it exposes Bassanio's mercenary nature: penniless and endowed only with his good looks, this young man exploits Antonio's belief in amity in order to marry rich heiress Portia. Antonio, of course, pretends not to see how crude and unfeeling his friend is because, as his unwise deal with Shylock hints, he is desperate to coerce Bassanio into being emotionally indebted to him, perhaps in the hopes that his rash deed will finally make Bassanio requite his love. Portia, on her side, must relinquish her power to her husband, as neither her father nor Venice are ready to accept that she remains single; like Antonio, though, we choose to believe that she gains in Bassanio a loving husband and not a selfish exploiter. The snobbishness of the play is also clear as regards the fact that Portia is only wooed by noblemen: respectable, rich Antonio could never be her suitor, supposing he felt attracted towards her, for he belongs to the wrong social class; Bassanio, in contrast, has the right social background but lacks the money. Why he should be a desirable match for Portia and the love object of two people is never clarified, and seeing how selfishly he behaves one wishes Portia

and Antonio would marry each other and leave him as stranded as Shylock and in the same complete poverty. Since this is impossible within the narrow social and gender economies of the play, we must conclude with Cynthia Lewis that Antonio “lingers on the stage to remind us that alienation and suppression are, for some men, the inevitable consequences of social cohesion.” (1983: 30)

2. Intertextual casting and method acting: Pacino, Irons and Fiennes

These issues are articulated in Radford’s film not only through the scenes added to depict the anti-semitism of Renaissance Venice but also through the casting of the three main male roles. Although he is possibly too harsh on Joseph Fiennes, reviewer James Berardinelli makes the point clearly when he states that although Shylock is just a secondary character and Bassanio the apparent hero, “if there’s any doubt about whom Radford considers to be the draw, consider the cast. Second-rate actor Joseph Fiennes plays Bassanio, while the legendary Al Pacino is Shylock” (2004). Peter Bradshaw, an English reviewer, “fearing the worst” about Pacino comments with relief that

his is a cool, considered Shylock, retaining an icy good humour while the Christians hold their noses and solicit loans from him, who finally forces the issue of how they pay for credit: a flourish of socio-professional suicide that Pacino endows with ferocious calm. And in case we were thinking of patronising the American interloper, Pacino gives an object lesson on speaking the verse, matching and often outclassing our native Brits who sometimes breathily over-emphasise and over-interpret the lines. (2004)⁵

Bradshaw finds the “sonorous languor” of Jeremy Irons as Antonio to be “beautifully suited to the character’s melancholy: the Venetian entrepreneur who has all his capital hazarded in various adventures, and in middle age is beginning to feel how precarious and how short life really is” (2004). Happy that Fiennes is avoiding “his smirking mannerisms,” this reviewer commends Radford for “keeping the tics and mannerisms [of Fiennes and Pacino] under control, scraping away the spangly encrustations of star quality and allowing something warmer and more intelligent to come through.” (2004)

These three actors contribute to Radford’s adaptation not only excellent performances but also a wealth of associations connected to previous roles, some of them with direct bearings on Shakespearean films. Al Pacino produced and directed one of the most singular films ever made on Shakespeare –the ironic documentary *Looking for Richard* (1996) about his alleged difficulties to film *Richard III*– while Fiennes was the Bard himself in the witty, highly acclaimed fantasy biopic *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1999). Jeremy Irons, a former Royal Shakespeare Company actor though without previous experience in playing Shakespeare on the screen, lends to Antonio his landmark sensual ambiguity, which so deeply colours his controversial roles in films such as David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M. Butterfly* (1993).

⁵ Not all reviewers are as kind towards Pacino. Whether American or British, they criticise him mostly for his New York accent, showing a linguistic snobbery hardly pertinent to our globalised times.



Looking for Richard arose over Pacino's frustration that nobody had offered him a major Shakespearean role in a film because he is a popular American actor. Despite this, Pacino was initially reluctant to playing Shylock, since the role has "the stink of antisemitism."⁶ Pacino had already rejected playing the role on the stage several times but finally accepted Radford's offer as he convinced himself that, unlike stage productions, Radford's film would make sense of the play's anti-semitic context thanks to its additional visual material. Pacino plays Shylock as a character "mainly depressed" but deeply human, for which he based aspects of his performance on his most famous role, that of Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* saga (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1990). Above all, Pacino borrowed the adamant attitude that Corleone assumes in the second film at the time when he decides that the need to kill his brother may be insane and irrational "but makes perfect sense to him."⁷ This perfectly agrees with Peirui Su's analysis of the way Pacino used his former roles, above all Corleone, as the basis for his Richard III. Pacino usually plays characters that

live at the edge of society physically and psychologically: the drug dealer, the Mafia don, the blind soldier, the veteran CIA agent, and finally, the Devil himself [in *Devil's Advocate*]. Each character exhibits various and complex aspects of human nature: they are evil and violent but at the same time, charismatic, earthy, and vulnerable. They are mysterious and antiheroic, but also emotionally intense and explosive. (2004)

This description also fits Shylock, to whom Pacino gives in addition a mournful dignity that transpires even at his very worst, when his hysterical demand of the flesh nearest Antonio's heart alienates him even from his peers in Venice's Jewish community. Pacino's suffering Shylock is appalled by Jessica's religious and filial betrayal and by Antonio's callousness. He uses the famous speech on what Jews are like not at all to stress that Jews are as human as Christians but to stress very forcefully that Antonio's religion-based racism justifies Shylock's own racism, for

If we are like you in the rest,
we will resemble you in that.
If a Jew wrong a Christian,
what is his humility? Revenge.
If a Christian wrong a Jew,
what should his sufferance be
by Christian example?
Why, revenge.
The villainy you teach me I will execute.

Shylock is not born a villain but provoked into becoming one; that he ends up ruined by Portia's harsh sentence and cast out of his community due to Antonio's demand that he converts, shows the depth of *Christian* villainy.

⁶ See the interview in the bonus features of the DVD Special Edition of Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*.

⁷ The popularity of his Mafia-related role might have alienated Italians from Pacino but as Michael Radford explains the task of making the film on location in Venice was greatly simplified because Pacino's popularity made the crew welcome to film where they chose. Without Pacino, the crucial scene on the Rialto Bridge could not have been filmed. (See the bonus features in the DVD Special Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, 2005)

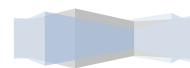
Pacino made a second contribution to Radford's film as crucial as his excellent performance. He used his status as Hollywood film star to impose on Radford and the other actors –awed into full complicity by Pacino's magnetism– a typically American way of performing, based on his training in method acting. This entails, as shown precisely in *Looking for Richard*, constant rehearsing before shooting inspired by the communal discussion of the peculiarities of the text. Thomas Cartelli, who admires *Looking for Richard* as a genuine post-colonial rendering of Shakespeare, praises Pacino for succeeding in giving to his American, populist vision of the Bard the authority so far enjoyed only by British icons like Kenneth Branagh. This vision is based, Cartelli observes, on the “commitment to a conspicuously cinematic (and Method-oriented) dissolving of the distance between word and feeling as a way of getting at the truth of the experience.” (2003: 190)

In accordance with Pacino's acting method, which supposes that all characters have a back story, Irons and Fiennes were asked to play Antonio and Bassanio assuming that they had been lovers at some point. Asked in an interview whether his “idea about the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio [was] a hard sell at all to your actors,” Radford answers: “Not at all. Jeremy, who was very proud about his heterosexuality, would admit that Antonio and Bassanio had actually done it. But we all agree that he was in love with Bassanio” (Epstein 2005). The odd phrasing suggests some disagreement between director and actor, which surfaces in Irons's own words when he explains that Antonio is “a man who's really subjugated his emotional life, a man who's put all his time and energy into his work” and who is very successful but not happy except in the company of young men like Bassanio, who is “everything he'd like to be”: noble, good-looking, wild, fun. In contrast to Radford's words and most reviewers' impressions Irons claims that “I didn't play Antonio gay,” not because Irons himself is homophobic but because he wants to criticise our reductionist view of sexuality: “I think we're terribly two-dimensional about our understanding of sexuality nowadays. [...] If we have a male friendship today, we're gay. The Elizabethan didn't have that problem because your relationships with women were something else.”⁸

The reviewers of Radford's film –mostly men– tend to either ignore the gay subtext or comment on it only superficially. The opinions on Antonio's homosexuality, nonetheless, are generally positive, with Roger Ebert arguing that “Irons finds the perfect note for the treacherous role of Antonio; making his love for Bassanio obvious is the way to make his behavior explicable, and so Antonio for once is poignant, instead of merely a mope”(2005). The complaints, quite scarce, call attention to the fact that the suggested homosexual relationship is represented too prudishly. James Christopher, for instance, finds Bassanio and Antonio's kiss unconvincing: “I have never seen two male leads milk a homosexual frisson quite so feebly. Instead, there is manly bluster, and frothy lessons about constancy” (2004). Gamberro writes with engaging cheekiness that

There is such flagrant evidence for the fact that Antonio is a rich bitch that needs or at least is in the habit of keeping his lovers that one wonders how the play could be read at all obviating this matter. [...] The advantage of being able to openly discuss matters like this is not just moral but also intellectual: being able to deal openly

⁸ From the bonus features of the DVD Special Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, 2005.



with the gay plot of *Merchant* allows us to explain quite simply what forced critics of past periods to perform feats of contorsionism. (2005)⁹

What truly worries Jeremy Irons, at any rate, is that Antonio is both a melancholic gentleman and an intransigent bigot. For the actor the hardest passage to play was the one in which after Portia publicly destroys Shylock, Antonio demands that the Jew converts to Christianity. Irons sees this as an appalling imposition, though he adds wistfully that in a sense Antonio is typical of his time in his concern for Shylock's spiritual salvation. As film reviewer Phillip French comments, the film gives us "a realistic chill" in "the way Antonio, strapped down in readiness to die by losing his pound of flesh, resembles a condemned man about to be executed in an electric chair," (2004), something which possibly diverts our attention from the very cruel way Shylock is subsequently treated. Yet, there is no doubt that Antonio, as Irons claims, is a bigot, both in the play and the film. When he asks Shylock for money, the Jew complains that "Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;/ You spurn'd me such a day; another time/ You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies/ I'll lend you thus much moneys?" (I.iii 118-121) Unfazed, Antonio responds that "I am as like to call thee so again;/ To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (122-3) and argues that it's much better to lend money "to thine enemy,/ Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face/ Exact the penalty", (127-9) surely the very argument that inspires Shylock to demand the pound of flesh. Radford offers to us not only this exchange but also the startling image of Irons spitting at Pacino just for no reason at all in a chance encounter in which the Jewish moneylender is actually trying to ingratiate himself with the Christian merchant.

As a Christian Antonio behaves as expected for a member of a religious faith that regarded usury as a mortal sin. Jews were hated all over Europe for sticking devotedly to their faith and resisting conversion but also, or perhaps mostly, because they were a necessary instrument for the survival of the Christian economic system. The authorities of Venice were quick to see that the Jews, always in need of protection, could be used to stabilise the city's tottering economy but never granted them full citizenship. Although Shakespeare's England had practically no Jews, for they had been expelled in 1290, Venice allowed the entrance of many Jews mostly of German origin in 1509 after the League of Cambrai's invasion of the Venetian mainland. Since they were willing to run pawnshops and second-hand goods stores in exchange for "substantial payment," (Ravid 1975: 274) the Jewish refugees solved two problems: how to keep the poorest sections of the population supplied with cheap goods and how to generate income for the city. "However," Ravid adds, "the Jews were subjected to many restrictions, including the wearing of a yellow hat, and from 1516 on, confinement to living in compulsory quarters in the *ghetto nuovo*, thereby giving a new meaning to the word ghetto, previously used to refer to an iron foundry" (274). Radford's film reflects this ghettoisation by having Jews wear a red cap –red being perhaps less conspicuous than the historically accurate yellow, the colour of the stars which the Nazis used to the same purpose.

Antonio's characterisation as a religious bigot, however, is not wholly successful in Radford's film due precisely to the casting of Jeremy Irons. His Antonio, played as an elegant Venetian gentleman, is not exactly believable in the scene of the ugly

⁹ The translation from the original Spanish of this and subsequent quotations from the same source are the author's own.



confrontation with Pacino's Shylock –somehow it is easier to picture Pacino spitting on Irons. Argentinean reviewer Carlos Gamarro argues that this scene is in a sense “politically accurate” (2005) since elegant gentlemen can indeed be tainted with a “Hitlerian reek,” as history has shown us. Gamarro himself, however, sees that although Irons is perfect as the unrequited lover –roles he also played, Gamarro points out, in *Swann in Love* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1984) or *Lolita* (Adrian Lynne, 1997)– he is less effective as a villain. Gamarro forgets, of course, that Irons won an Oscar for *Reversal of Fortune* (Barbet Schroeder, 1990), a film in which he played a singular, suave villain: real-life millionaire Claus von Bulow, accused of putting his wife Sunny in a coma following a failed murder attempt. In any case, there is certainly a reluctance in Irons's spitting, which nonetheless perfectly fits Seymour Kleinberg's suggestion that Antonio “hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has come to identify symbolically as the Jew” (in Sinfield 1996: 139). By spitting at the Jew Antonio diverts the attention of those who would spit on him were he publicly denounced as a sodomite.

Joseph Fiennes, on his side, contributed to Radford's film not only the idea of having Bassanio surprise Antonio by kissing him full on the lips before he asks for the loan, but also his previous performance as young Will Shakespeare, the role that made him popular world-wide. In the mind of the spectator the association is inevitable, specially because Fiennes has played no other major role after John Madden's film (1998) which would distance him from his Will Shakespeare. His Bassanio is thus a composite figure, whether Radford intended this or not: we see in him not only a particular Shakespearean character but also Shakespeare himself lending authority to Bassanio's words and behaviour and, of course, to the confrontation between Irons's Antonio and Collins's Portia for his love.

As we can see, this confrontation is coloured in Radford's film not only by the adapter's productive (mis)reading of the original text, but also by what the three leading male actors contribute, both in terms of acting method and of intertextual references to other films. Inevitably, the casting of Al Pacino as Shylock stresses the Jew's protagonism, yet Jeremy Irons's prestige and persona lend Antonio a visibility at practically the same level. Fiennes, good-looking but not extremely so, and acting under the heavy weight of Shakespeare's shadow, invites us to reconsider Bassanio's worth and the very nature of the strong passions he unleashes.

3. Heterosexism triumphant: Portia's role

This question of whether Bassanio is worth the frantic efforts that Antonio and Portia make to secure his love is essential in Radford's version of the electric courtroom scene. Portia, in drag as the young lawyer Bellario, begs Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio, who awaits execution in despair, his breast already bared for the Jew's knife. She fails to move the embittered Jew but moves instead Antonio to declare his love for Bassanio in the public domain of the Venetian Court:

Commend me to thy honourable wife.
Tell her the process of Antonio's end.
Say how I loved you,
speak me fair in death.
And when the tale is told,



bid her be judge
whether Bassanio had not once a love.
Repent but you
that you shall lose your friend
and you repent not that he pays your debt.
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart. (IV.I 269-77)

These are melodramatic words which Bassanio answers in a storm of passion:

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 esteemed above your life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all,
here to this devil
to deliver you. (278-83)

Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience may have understood 'love' in quite a different way but contemporary spectators of Radford's film can hardly miss the meaning that the body language of Antonio and Bassanio lends this word, nor Portia's effort to conceal her distress in order to avoid discovery. The brief close ups showing Portia's concern as Antonio speaks and her pain as Bassanio answers underline her predicament for, in her disguise as Bellario, she must be a silent witness to her own public humiliation. Shakespeare allows her to remark sneeringly that "Your wife would give you little thanks for that/ if she were by to hear you make the offer" (284-5) but this is out of character for Radford's Portia, too deeply hurt to be flippant.

Feminist readings of Portia's heroism emphasise her decision to pursue to the end her plan to save Antonio from Shylock despite Bassanio's declaration, though, as Gamarro points out, "a dead Antonio would become a ghost, spoiling each sexual encounter of the couple" (2005). As it is well known, Portia announces that the Jew may take the merchant's flesh but not a single drop of his blood, yet this apparent generosity in saving Antonio actually leads her to secure Bassanio's exclusive love. Whether this love is worth Antonio's public torture and Portia's humiliation is by no means clear, for Bassanio is certainly confused about the loyalty he owes wife and friend. It is implicitly understood, of course, that Portia commits a serious offence by impersonating a man, and a lawyer to boot, which is why she can only explain to her husband how she saved Antonio after the events. Surely, disclosing her secret right after the trial would be enough to secure Bassanio's love yet, somehow, Portia can't accept that Bassanio's feelings for her be conditioned by his gratitude for Antonio's release. She comes up instead with the ring plot, devised specifically to reverse the order of Bassanio's loyalties: his wife, not his friend, must come first and foremost.

When Bassanio wins Portia's hand by solving the casket riddle, she gives her property and her self to him willingly and thoroughly, assuring him that: "Happiest of all,/ is that her gentle spirit/ commits itself to yours to be directed/ as by her governor,/ her lord,/ her king" (III.ii 162-5). Portia accompanies the transfer of all she owns, body, soul and household with the token of the ring, warning that "I give them with this ring,/ which when you part from,/ lose or give away,/ let it presage the ruin of your love" (171-3). This is Portia's way of saying that the price Bassanio must pay for her

unconditional surrender to his patriarchal rule is his total fidelity, a concept that ranges far beyond sex; it is also her way of suggesting that he will fail her, for as anyone in the audience guesses Bassanio soon loses the ring. That Portia herself contrives the means for the ring to be given away just adds weight to the idea that Bassanio must ultimately earn the right to rule her, thus sealing the patriarchal compact they strike when marrying.

When Antonio convinces Bassanio to give his wife's ring away in lieu of payment to Bellario (Portia herself still in drag), as the lawyer demands, she realises that Antonio must be kept away from her husband. When she shames Bassanio into confessing that he did give the ring away, Portia teases him mercilessly by declaring she had to share her bed with Bellario to get it back. She then discloses the secrets of her performance as Bellario, and hands the ring over to Antonio, asking him to return it to her astonished husband. With her action, Portia tacitly accuses Antonio of being the cause of Bassanio's disloyalty and forces him before witnesses to guarantee her husband's total fidelity, above all regarding Antonio himself. The merchant, of course, learns then that as a husband Bassanio must place his wife above his friend and that realisation puts an end to his emotional (and possibly sexual) hold over Bassanio. Jeremy Irons's discomfited expression when, once Bassanio returns her the ring, Portia openly invites her husband to have sex with her, signals her victory. For all its apparent transparency about homosexual desire *The Merchant of Venice* as written by Shakespeare and adapted by Radford is patronising towards Antonio at best and heterosexist at worst.

This heterosexism is inevitable in the play's gender system since Portia *must* marry, an obligation the film never questions either. She bemoans the casket riddle that so monstrously binds her to the will –in both senses– of her dead father. Yet, although she protests against the duty to marry whatever suitor solves the riddle she never questions marriage itself. In spite of her show of bravery in the courtroom scene, Portia is no heroine because she would never give up Bassanio for Antonio's sake –nor for Bassanio's own. This is simply impossible, whether in the original Elizabethan context or in our own, as only a queer or pro-queer audience would welcome an alternative ending in which heterosexual Portia would sacrifice herself for the happiness of a homosexual relationship.

The wives of Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, the tragic gay lovers of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) a film released just one year after *Merchant*, are women who face the relationship between their husbands with apprehension, insecurity, fear and ultimately hatred; they remind us that these are the limits within which heterosexist Western society operates so far, at least as regards mainstream commercial film. Portia's extreme rationalisation of her situation and relative sympathy for Antonio hardly mask her anxiety that Bassanio will prefer him to her, a feeling any heterosexual woman in the audience shares with her.¹⁰ Thus, in spite of how refreshing it is to be able

¹⁰ The class of 45 young women with whom I worked on Radford's adaptation within a course devoted to 'Shakespeare on the Screen' (Autumn 2006) were all in agreement regarding this point. They all reacted spontaneously with great sympathy for Portia's distress at Antonio and Bassanio's declaration of love. None suggested the film should rewrite Shakespeare for our times and have Portia hand Bassanio, not the ring, over to Antonio. When I did, they rejected my arguments in favour of queer love. If any of them was queer, which I ignore, she must have been felt silenced anyway by the manifest yet unacknowledged homophobia of her classmates.



to finally see Antonio as gay, if that is what he is, Portia reminds us that still today women's fear of male homosexuality makes them react in a heterosexist way even when they're own freedom is at stake.

In her favour, it must be noted that Portia does not reject Antonio for showing his feelings –actually she saves him because she can see how deep they are and how brave he is. Quite simply, she'd rather the merchant loved someone else and not 'her' Bassanio. In a sense, she fights Antonio as she might fight any other female rival (hence Hyman's remarks that what matters is not the nature of Antonio's feelings but that their intensity equals Portia's). And, just as happens when two women fight over a man's love, both rivals lose the ability to resist patriarchal heterosexism: Antonio becomes either the chaste friend some suppose him to be or the closeted "rich bitch" of Gamero's reading; Portia, paradoxically, exults in her bondage to Bassanio. He, heterosexual man, is by all accounts the winner: the money that Antonio borrows from Shylock allows him to fool Portia into believing he is a rich enough suitor; once he's married, her money is his. Both Antonio and Portia perform very rash deeds for his sake, yet Bassanio sacrifices nothing and loves, above all, himself.

Conclusions: The long struggle to up-date Shakespeare

Michael Radford's film of *The Merchant of Venice* is a valuable adaptation as it succeeds in solving the problem of how to deal with the play's anti-semitism, which is made manifest by the film itself. Thanks to the contextualisation of the racial hatred against the Jews in the Renaissance and to Al Pacino's superb performance, Shylock gains dignity; although his actions are still irrational, this irrationality is seen to stem from the Christians' equally irrational abhorrence of the Jews. The American star contributed to Radford's film, besides, his training in method acting which, when applied to Antonio and Bassanio, forces Radford to make important decisions regarding how Christian bigotry and fear of homophobia converge in Antonio's characterisation. By solving the problem of the Jew, Radford raises wittingly or unwittingly the problem of the closeted gay. This may be a misreading of Antonio and Bassanio's friendship but it is relevant to our times, as *Merchant* also reflects through Lynn Collins's strong-minded yet fretful Portia contemporary women's anxieties regarding male homosexuality. By queering up Shakespeare and queering Antonio, Radford, in short, shows that we are not queer enough, perhaps even why.

Logically, this shortcoming can be read both ways either in the play or in the film adaptation, for *The Merchant of Venice* is as much an endorsement of patriarchal heterosexism as its subtle critique, if one wishes to see it so. The title itself (after all, it is not called *The Jew of Venice* or *Portia and Bassanio*) suggests that this is indeed a problem play, as Auden saw it, the problem being Antonio's understanding of male bonding. Despite Al Pacino and the importance Shylock has gained within the cast of Shakespearean characters due to the Holocaust and the later rise of political correctness, the play is about Antonio's failure to understand how he's trapped by patriarchy's exploitation of marriage. Ironically, he himself is the instrument by which his best friend marries; Antonio can't see, though, that in his society his view of male bonding is incompatible with marriage. Given the current paranoiac, homophobic way of

understanding male friendship, we can only read Antonio as gay, whether this makes sense or not in the original context of the play.

Radford's adaptation is very much a version for our times and, as such, it cannot ignore our own confusion regarding how far the exclusivity of marriage should reach. Some will sympathise with Portia, others might dislike her for her possessiveness; some will sympathise with Antonio for the pain he suffers under Shylock's and Portia's grip, others might consider it a fit punishment for his being gay. Whatever reading we choose, this will certainly reveal our prejudices: if you are horrified by how Shylock is treated but not by how Antonio is treated, or viceversa, this will give you a clear measure of your own prejudices. Perhaps this is what Shakespeare intended but we will never know.

As for Michael Radford, his adaptation, whether implicit or explicitly, shows the way in which our readings of Shakespeare in general and of *Merchant* in particular struggle with the need to make sense of plays that, though classics, might well be no longer apt for our sensibilities. Unless, that is, we assume that we needn't admire them, which certainly complicates the issue of why it was important to finally have an (English) film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Radford's version, insightful as regards Shylock, muddled as regards Antonio's queerying and Portia's heterosexist role will hopefully inspire other adapters to continue questioning Shakespeare. That, after all, and not easy homage, should be the purpose of all Shakespearean films and possibly, of all adaptations. And in this Radford succeeds, within the limits set by his own prejudices.

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