

Anti-Semitic and gay themes reflect modern attitudes in 'Merchant'

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Article Launched: 02/11/2005 3:00:00 AM PST

Shakespeare's plays are almost never presented in their entirety these days, neither on stage nor in film. They're too long for the attention span of modern audiences, and they especially clash with the unwritten rule that proscribes a maxim two-hour running time for films.

The solution has been for directors to cut what they consider unimportant matter and even "reshape" the play. In film, this practice is usually identified in the credits by the film being identified as a screenplay written by one person or another. Such is the case with Michael Radford's new version of "The Merchant of Venice."

The problem with these "reshapings" is that they usually involve re-interpretations which at times are so extreme they destroy the meaning of the play. Radford's "Merchant" is one of these. Not that you should avoid seeing the film — it's a fine, enjoyable visual experience, to say the least — but you should bring with you to the theater some notions of what Mr. Shakespeare was after, and the liberties Mr. Radford has taken with the master's material.

Don't get me wrong. Re-interpreting the classics is fine, even necessary, but sometimes it plays havoc with the original author's intentions. In Radford's case, witness the blatant implications of Antonio's homosexual interest in Bassanio, which may be "hip" for our times but damages the core of the play's meaning.

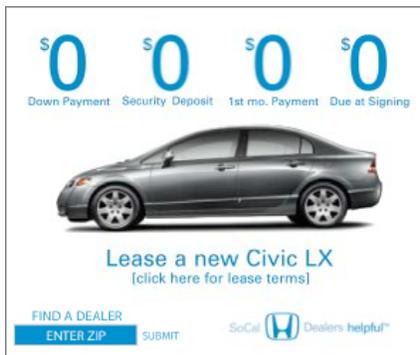
In the film, we see Antonio gaze longingly at Bassanio standing in a Gondola under his window, and Bassanio gaze suggestively back at him. Several scenes later, Antonio takes Bassanio into his bedroom where Bassanio, after flopping down on Antonio's bed, asks him for a loan so he can court the wealthy Portia. The bed flop suggests carnal intimacy between the two men —and is meant to.

But in the play, there is no eye-contact scene. In fact, the first time we see Antonio and Bassanio together is on a busy street among acquaintances, and it is there and then that Bassanio asks his older, wealthy friend for the loan. This explains the confusion of the film version creates of Bassanio asking his lover for money so he can court a woman in order to marry her, as well as Antonio's immediately granting his request without a hint of jealousy. More important, it keeps clear the terrible situation that befalls Antonio because he secures the loan from the moneylender Shylock.

In the play, Antonio is a good man whose benevolence almost costs him his life. He is a heroic figure with whom we sympathize, not an old queen in thrall to the handsome young Bassanio, and his seemingly hopeless plight at the hands of the vengeful Shylock provides the play with its dramatic tension and elicits our concern for him.

In fact, all Shakespeare's plays, whether they be dramatic or comedic, deal with situations of disorder and end with the re-establishment of order. Although Radford maintains this essential Shakespearean formula, he does so by making Antonio a less sympathetic character and in the end by marginalizing him.

Although in the film Portia's clearly pro-feminist role may seem more timely than the viewer might think is present in the original, in the play she also emerges as the force whose willness and strength win the day, so to speak.



This is not to imply that Shakespeare was 400 years ahead of his time concerning gender issues, but that he continually reversed the role and status of women in his plays in order to gain his audience's attention.

Radford, however, enhances the praiseworthy picture of Portia's character by cutting out her nasty interchanges with Shylock during the trial scene of the play, where she continually addresses him as "Jew" in what must be read in a derogatory tone of voice and would give her character a decidedly unpleasant side in the minds of modern theatergoers.

One of the most unsettling elements of the original play is that it is a tragedy until after the trial scene, when it suddenly turns into a romantic comedy. Somewhere in this transformation, Antonio not only becomes less important, but Bassanio and Portia (as well as Gratiano and Nerissa) are elevated above him, and we leave him unaccountably alone at the end of the play as the two couples happily rush off to bed.

Radford, unfortunately, doesn't take advantage of this possibly poignant turnaround, missing an opportunity to make something out of a weak point in the original.

Another, and in modern times a more problematic aspect of the play, is the character and actions of Shylock. Although he is vengeful and avaricious, he is clearly a victim of rabid anti-Semitism, and in the 20th century, he has usually been treated sympathetically. He tells us that he desires to revenge himself on Antonio because Antonio hates the Jewish people and spat on him in public because he is a Jew. These are reasons many in the audience may think justify his rancor. To Shakespeare, however, Shylock was a

villain, the character who created the disorder that must be resolved by the end of the play, and the fact that he is Jewish is part of his villainy.

Does this mean that Shakespeare was an anti-Semite? For the past hundred years or so, critics have tried to prove that he wasn't by taking into account the times in which he wrote and the world in which he lived, but their attempts to exonerate him are not convincing. Shylock is a villain, and he's a villain partly because he's a Jew. Yes, Shakespeare was a man of his times and a writer for all times, but he seems to have been an anti-Semite as well.

That fact leaves the modern viewer in a bit of a quandary as to how he is supposed to react to Shylock, since we understand the moneylender's anger and sympathize with him in the light of the vicious instances of prejudice with which almost every character in the play assaults him at one time or another.

He is so much a victim that he comes to serve as a model for all groups and individuals — whether they be African-Americans, Mexicans, Muslims, Croats, Serbs or any ethnic, racial or religious individuals or peoples who suffer from similar intolerance. Certainly Al Pacino's complex rendering of Shylock demonstrates the bitter anguish of such people.

And that may be the single most telling memory the viewer takes away from the film. True, Shylock is rapacious and lacks even a modicum of mercy, but if the viewer puts himself in Shylock's place, he will inescapably identify with the moneylender's unforgiving attitude — and the attitude of all those we discriminate against.

Such issues, as well as Pacino's acting and Radford's sumptuous rendering of Renaissance Venice, are good reasons for seeing the film. The issues alone, as all great art does, make us ponder our own failings and successes as moral beings and will hopefully cause us once again to wonder at the never-ending complexities of the human condition.

Morton Marcus, former English instructor at Cabrillo College, is the co-host of the TV film review show "Cinema Scene," which airs at 8:30 p.m. Thursdays and Sundays on Community Television Channel 27.

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