

The (In)Sides Beyond Male Friendship-Desire: Alterity and Minorities in Michael Radford's *Merchant of Venice* (2004)

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Abstract

One of Shakespeare's most controversial plays is undoubtedly *The Merchant of Venice*, brought to the screen by Michael Radford (1984, *White Mischief*, *Addicted to the Stars*) in 2004, becoming the first attempt to revise the Shakespearean text for a contemporary mass audience. Radford clearly opens a path for the interpretation of a possible homoerotic relationship between the main characters, Antonio and Basanio, visually sustained on a set of subtle hints and glimpses that constitute the main core for our analysis in this paper. Radford explores the discourse of otherness and presents a reflection on minorities in his adaptation through the figure of Antonio and his implied homoerotic desires, together with the ambivalent depiction of Shylock (the revengeful usurer- the sympathetic villain). The film hence may promote a reflection on our treatment of those minorities, those individuals that due to different circumstances happen to fall outside the scope of the standardized boundaries of the social structures and remain outside the mainstream.

It is well known that *The Merchant of Venice* constitutes one of the most controversial Shakespearean texts, mainly due to its core content, dealing with the Christian oppression of the Jewish ghetto during sixteenth-century Venice. Moreover, that divisive nature also stands on how the play moves in an unclear territory within the boundaries of comedy and tragedy, which has traditionally made its filmic adaptation a clearly troublesome task.

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After some, not very popular, filmic attempts, mainly devised for TV broadcasting,¹ Michael Radford brings Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* to screen in 2004, as one of the few attempts to revise the Bard's text for a mass audience. In his challenge to provide a faithful approach to the play, Radford aims to resume its central subplots and themes, paying special attention to the portrait of Shylock, the situation of religious dissenters under the Catholic yoke in European Renaissance, and the ambiguous relationship between the two male Christian protagonists, Antonio and Bassanio. Bearing in mind that any filmic production should be understood as a product of its time, we can argue that Radford creates a post-Holocaust multifaceted microcosm in which he echoes all the different possibilities for the interpretation of the Shakespearean text and the characterization of its protagonists in a hyperrealistic portrait of the play. Radford intends to explore on the never-ending universality of the Bard's production, defending that "*The Merchant of Venice*, I saw as a piece that basically spoke not just of Jews and Venetians. But, using the epoch of the 1500s, it spoke of a very modern situation – that is, two cultures that don't understand each other in terms of customs and beliefs".²

One of the key points within the analysis of the film covers the treatment of the relationship between Antonio (the successful merchant residing in Venice) and Bassanio, who epitomises the model of the Elizabethan lover and aristocrat, young, impulsive and romantic.

Male friendship in Early Modern England was commonly seen in numerous ways superior to any other bond, as according to Montaigne "it offers not the mad desire of heterosexual love, but rather a constant and settled heat, all pleasure and smoothness" (1993: 256). It was even seen in opposition to marriage many times based on the feeling that "the ordinary sufficiency of women cannot answer this conference and communication, nor seem their minds strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast and durable" (Montaigne, 1993: 256).

¹ The attested filmic adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* are: *Il Mercante de Venezia*. 1910. Dir. Gerolamo Lo Savio; *Shylock, ou le More de Venise*. 1913. Dir. Henry Desfontaines; *The Merchant of Venice*. 1969. Dir. Jonathan Miller and John Sichel; *The Merchant of Venice*. 1980. Dir. Trevor Nunn and Chris Hunt; *The Maori Merchant of Venice*. 2002. Dir. Don Selwyn.

² Quote from <www.sonyclassics.com/merchantofvenice/interviewradford>.

However, the unqualified affection that Antonio feels for Bassanio has also enabled a homoerotic reading of their relationship by the Shakespearean critical corpus³, so that his feelings of unrequited love for Bassanio are widened as the play evolves, turning dramatic with Bassanio's intention to marry Portia (the wealthy heroine living in Belmont that is bound to marry one of her suitors after her father's death). Radford remains aware of the innuendoes within the complex relationship between both characters as he mentions in the online interview for Sony Pictures:

We talked a lot about the homo-erotic story between Antonio and Bassanio. I do not know if they've ever had sex, but I do know that when Bassanio comes in and says 'I am going to get married' it's as though a knife has gone into Antonio's heart. It's as though all the joy has gone from his life.⁴

Thus, the director clearly opens the path for this homoerotic relationship within the film, exploring its visual possibilities to the utmost through a set of subtle hints and glimpses that constitute one of the underlying subplots operating within the filmic narrative background.

The film opens with a written prologue that places the historical setting of the production in Venice, 1596, complemented with a visual prologue that introduces the main themes and relationships highlighted in the production, as the first shot introduces the image of the Christian cross (symbol of the oppressive power of religion) along with the humiliation of the Jewish community (among them Shylock), physically and verbally aggressed by the Catholics (among them Antonio, who spits at Shylock at Rialto). Antonio meets Bassanio in the channel and utters "Bassanio" in a soft languid tone after exchanging glances in a melancholic mood. This constitutes the first possible hint for Antonio and Bassanio's relationship beyond the limits of friendship, something that goes a step beyond while Antonio is asked about the sources for his sadness: "In sooth, I know not why I

³ Some of the most outstanding studies accounting for the homoerotic reading of Antonio's friendship are Adelman, 1985; Graham, 1960; Khan, 1981 and 1985.

⁴ Quote from <www.sonyclassics.com/merchantofvenice/interviewradford>.

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am so sad” (1.1.1-7), the camera and Antonio himself visualize the arrival of Bassanio through the window pane, establishing a referential link between the subject matter of the conversation (the reasons for Antonio’s sadness) and his unrequited love for Bassanio.

This is the first glimpse in which Antonio appears isolated as an outsider, so that Radford follows the reading that “Antonio is an outsider because he is an unconscious homosexual in a predominantly, and indeed blatantly, heterosexual society” (Midgely, 1960: 122). The setting chosen for the conversation in which Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money to woo Portia is highly significant, as both characters shift to the bedroom. Bassanio reclines on the bed as Antonio sits on it, in a scene that may parallel any couple bed-talk. Bassanio thanks Antonio for the loan with a kiss in the mouth that highly suggests their homoerotic attitudes. Radford does not go far beyond the Shakespearean text in terms of their relationship, but visually suggests that, as he himself mentions “we do not know if they had ever had sex”.⁵

We may initially conclude that from the very onset of the film, male friendship seems to be set against marriage, so that Antonio’s affection to Bassanio constitutes an obstacle for Bassanio’s marriage with Portia. The climatic point for this relationship emerges within the courtroom scene (4.1), in which the revengeful Shylock asks for Antonio’s pound of flesh as the payment for his loan. Presented in a three-fold shot-counter shot technique, the triangular bond between Portia (disguised as lawyer), Antonio (on the verge of being slain) and Bassanio (impotent to help his “friend”), the camera reflects not only the dialogue between the two male friends but more interestingly, Portia’s reaction to their open exaggerated affection “Say how I lov’d you, speak me fair in death” (4.1. 272). Through that device, the viewer is presented with the scope of vision of the visual love triangle, adding a new dimension to the friends’ twofold conversation, which may initially seem the original focus of the text.

The courtroom scene leads to the climatic denouement of the film and the central step within the ring plot, which has been articulated in three scenes. First, Portia gives a ring to Bassanio (and Nerissa to Gratiano) at the moment of their betrothal, asking them not to lose it. Then, in the trial scene, the men are forced to give the lawyer (Portia in

⁵ Quote from: www.sonyclassics.com/merchantofvenice/interviewradford.

disguise) the ring as payment for his services, despite their protests. The final turn for the joke arises once Antonio is released, and as both Bassanio and Gratiano seem not to have succeeded in their loyalty, they are asked for the rings and the women threaten them with cuckoldry: “I will become as liberal as you / I’ll not deny him [the lawyer] anything I have / No not my body, nor my husband’s bed” (5.1.226-28). Following the line of thought shown in the courtroom scene, we may infer that Radford maintains the whole ring plot to parallel Antonio and Portia as rivals competing for Bassanio’s love, bringing an open conflict between male friendship and marriage. Following the text faithfully, both characters are even introduced into the film with a sigh expressing inexplicable sadness, “In sooth I know not why I’m so sad” (Antonio 1.1) and “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aware of this great world” (Portia 1.2), a device that may also highlight their parallel attitudes and roles in the love triangle.

This perspective visually complements how, as Janet Adelman mentions, “the complications posed by male identity and male friendship provide the most dramatically and emotionally significant obstacles to marriage in Shakespeare’s early comedies (*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*)” (1985: 76). Thus, we witness how bonds among men precede marriage and interfere with it; in contrast, cuckoldry follows marriage and threatens it. This device follows the idea that “two anxieties run through this intrigue: that men, if they are to marry, must renounce their friendships with each other—must even, perhaps, betray them, and that once they are married their wives will betray them” (Khan, 1985: 105).

The joke also evolves so that Portia and Nerissa’s masculine disguise constructs their image as both male and female superimposed, an androgyny which comically arises Gratiano’s sexual desire, both fulfilling his homoerotic wish and his heterosexual desire: “But were the day come, I should wish it dark, / ‘Till I were couching with the doctor’s clerk. / Well, while I live, I’ll fear no other thing, / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring.” (5.1.304-07).

We may conclude that Radford hints at the multiple forms that male friendship can take in the Shakespearean text, leaving open to the audience’s interpretation different possibilities and boundaries from friendship to homoerotic desire. Nevertheless, we openly recognise a

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constant thematical thread in the production, which depicts Antonio as a melancholic isolated character, recurrently presented as “the other” in the triangular relationship between Portia-Bassanio-and himself. Under the light of a gender-based criticism, the film depicts Antonio as the sexual deviant (due to his more than obvious attraction to Bassanio) who is cornered and obliterated by the heterosexual predominant social structure. Thus, in the final scene of the film, Radford shows Antonio alone (something not so clearly highlighted in the play, but which is brought to the foreground in the filmic adaptation) without taking part in the final climatic denouement of the film: he is an ex-centric figure, defeated and detached from the integration into the main current of the social-sexual standard hierarchy.

This veiled treatment of Antonio as “the other” (understood as Simone De Beauvoir’s ‘minority’) has its thematic parallel in Shylock, an outsider for both the Catholics and the Jews after his forced conversion, and Jessica, who fled away from her Jewish culture and religion to marry a Christian. Radford concludes the film in a way that openly departs from the traditional joyful celebrations of Renaissance comedies, in which marriages and the reunion of lovers is highlighted at a great banquet. We may also take into consideration that due to the ambiguous reading of the play (comedy-tragedy), the staging tradition has also provided different devices for the play’s ending. The late nineteenth century drew its attention to Shylock, and –as Henry Irving did– cut all of Act V to end with the Jew. In contrast, most of the twentieth-century performances focused on Antonio and his quasi-existentialist isolation, while more recent productions have highlighted the figure of Jessica, even though she has no lines at the end of the play. We witness how Radford resumes the different approaches to the play’s ending and combines them through the blending of the tradition, something that can be seen as an original device and simultaneously as a homage to *The Merchant of Venice’s* immediate staging past.

Radford presents the “original” play’s ending (the heterosexual couples on their way to bed to consummate their love) followed by a visual addition (eminently cinematographic, as no linguistic interaction is involved), with three strongly powerful and suggestive images which link the production with a more melancholic and symbolic aesthetics: Antonio isolated while the couples go to physically celebrate their love (the repressed homosexual, who finds no space in a dominant

heterocentric society), Shylock visually banished from the Ghetto and the synagogue (the religious convert, outsider of both religious groups –Jews and Christians), and Jessica staring out at a fisherman wielding a bow and arrow, (reminiscent of the Fisher King mythology), while she caresses her father's ring –who initially belonged to her mother (in an attitude of seemingly melancholy or even sadness). We witness how Radford provides unity to the film closing with a cinematic add-on which is centred on three characters that share the common status of otherness and isolation, although caused by different social, cultural or religious roots.

Through these three points of reference, their bonds of interdependency and the complex web of religious forgiveness, Radford explores on the discourse of otherness within minorities in the Renaissance world, perceiving and analysing it through the post-modern post-holocaust gaze, so that in parallel terms minor groups are nowadays neglected, humiliated and simply erased from the socio-political panorama due to their falling outside the scope of the standardized boundaries of social mainstream structures.

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