
REPRESENTATION OF THE RACIALLY OTHER AND PROBLEMS OF ADAPTATION IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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Abstract: Shakespeare's canon is so rich and diverse that a majority of his plays are located in geographical locations outside Elizabethan England. This entails the fact that his characters, too, belonged to different races, religions and climates. In fact the lists of his dramatic characters are mainly dominated by the non-English. Neil Taylor suggests that "Of his plays, only fifteen have English settings...while twenty seven have non-English setting." (Taylor 262) While providing this useful information he adds another crucial point that "His representations of Englishness and non-Englishness inevitably engage with Elizabethan stereotypes." This paper primarily attempts to deal with the problems of representing the racially other in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and its cinematic adaptation that retains the original title by Michael Radford - set in the cosmopolitan Venice. Shakespeare's *Merchant* dramatises the antagonistic nature of relationship that existed between the Jews and the Christians in the sixteenth century Venice and it arguably represents the triumph of the Christians over the Hebrews. The willingness of Antonio to shed his blood in order to save his friendship, faith and the nobility of the Venetian law seems to coincide with the sacrifice of Christ. But Shakespeare deprives him of this glorious sacrifice and in turn punishes the erring Jew - Shylock. However it's interesting to note Antonio's arguments regarding the charges that have been brought against him by the Jew and the course that justice must follow in the court of the Venetian Duke.

Keywords: Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*, problems of adaptation, race, religion and representation of Jews in Shakespeare

He painfully suggests to Solanio that The Duke cannot deny the course of law:

"For the commodity that the strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations. Therefore, go,
these griefs and losses have so bated me,
That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh
Tomorrow to my bloody creditor".(3.3. 26-34)

This can be read as a remark upon the market economy of Venice where traders from all around could practice their craft and also avail legal rights. But this illusion of equality in terms of seeking justice in Venice is nonetheless shattered towards the end of the play when Shylock is deprived of his suit on account of the law that prohibits the shedding of Christian blood by an alien. Religion and race are, therefore, of primary significance while addressing the main politics of the *Merchant*. It has perennially been subjected to charges of anti-Semitism and there are enough evidence within the play to classify it as one. The representation of Jews within the play as usurers and as people who maintained a cultural distance from their Christian counterparts has been subject to widespread criticism on account of its factual inaccuracy. Brian Pullan's study, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* attempts to subvert this assumption by showing that the Jews were subjected to "elaborate and often punitive controls by the authorities. Those Jews were obliged by law to maintain charitable and non-profitable banks to

provide loans to needy Christians at strictly controlled low rates e.g. five per cent to cover expenses." (Watts 12) Also the caricature of Jews within the *Merchant* as usurers and on the contrary their Christian counterparts as adventurous and dutiful citizens is proved wrong by Pullan by suggesting that the Jews were denied the right to manufacture anything and were also officially subjected to practice only a limited set of professions and thereby they often ended up as either money lenders, dealers or middle-men but never producers. This systematic discrimination aimed to curb the social and political opportunities of the Jews and thereby to keep them subservient to their Christian masters. Shakespeare's the *Merchant* dramatises many of the stereotypes associated with Jews that formed a part of the popular cultural discourse in the sixteenth century Europe. However his Jew, Shylock is a far more complex character than it appears on the surface and unlike the Jew of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* displays both occasional flashes of brilliance as well as of banality. However the most remarkable aspect of the play has been its potential to be used both as device to convey anti-Semitic ideas as well as to represent the historical injustices suffered by the Jews. One major instance of its abuse as a vehicle of anti-Semitic rhetoric was during its various productions (around thirty between 1934 and 1939) in Nazi Germany. But it has also been successfully appropriated to facilitate the subaltern voices of the play. Michael Radford's adaptation of the *Merchant* for cinema also attempts to offer a reinterpretation of

the play where the Jewish subject i.e. Shylock is invested with heroic potential and also the misery that his tribe has to experience is brought in as a subtext to the play. He attempts to picture the Shakespearean tragedy as a text that is driven by his liberal humanist approach towards life and therefore he finds it problematic to associate the playwright or the play with anti-Semitism. On the contrary he regards Shylock as a great tragic character who has been invested with the agency by the playwright to reflect to the world the inadequacy that characterise a thought that seeks to associate evil or wretchedness with a particular faith or identity. Radford's Shylock is therefore not a vicious Jew who is out in the world to thwart the interests of the Christians. In fact he is represented as a victim of the prejudiced Venetian social order. It begins with a didactic account of the condition of the Jews at the turn of the sixteenth century in the cosmopolitan Venice, where they were deprived of social and economic liberties and were forced to live in ghettos. It says that

"Intolerance of the Jews was a fact of 16th century life, even in Venice the most powerful and liberal city state in Europe. By law the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or 'Geto' area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians. In the day time any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law. The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter..."

Till this point in the film Radford does not make any use of the Shakespearean play. Therefore it can be wisely discerned from the onset that the primary objective of this adaptation is to sympathetically address the question pertaining to the representation of the Jews. L. Monique Pittman commenting on the primary contribution that Radford's adaptation succeeds in making writes that

"First he opts for a hyper-realism that replicates the spectacle of renaissance Venice in a way not even the most extravagant of Victorian stage productions could have achieved; and second, he crafts a person of William Shakespeare as liberal humanist, a non-racist, a non-anti-Semite who for example, anticipated abolitionist rhetoric hundreds of years before the end of slavery in West." (Pittman 15)

It is interesting to note that Radford's adaptation of the *Merchant* draws its primary criticism for his attempt to negate the complexity of the play by investing the characters of his film with more or less uniform motives. For instance in order to project Shylock as a victim of social inequity, Radford's

adaptation deliberately omits those parts of the play that invest his character with possible villainy. One such example is when Antonio arrives to sign the bond and Shylock quips "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 inevitably provide the audience an insight into the threatening potential of this man who will rise at the opportune moment (read as climax) to have his revenge. In this opening part of the film there is an encounter between Antonio and Shylock where the former spits upon the latter on the grounds that he practices the wretched profession of usury. This encounter establishes the antagonism between the two characters. But as the scene shifts to nighttime the audience beholds both Antonio and Shylock at their own designated abodes offering prayers to their individual gods. This again seems to be an instrument employed by Radford to indicate that despite their differences their religious customs are not very different and therefore it establishes a lot more similarity between them as compared to the scapegoat fanatics driven at the command of the crusading priest in the beginning of the film. The portrayal of this universalising episode as according to Pittman indicates a desire on part of the playwright to convey that Shakespearean play urges "a religious tolerance ahead of its time." (Pittman 18) She also suggests that in order to make Shylock a great tragic figure the film resorts to textual cuts and interpolative additions. She argues that Radford "labels the "Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats" (1.3.121-22) as a plea for humanity in people's treatment." (Pittman 19) But according to her the director fails to take into account the fact that the above pronouncement functions at two levels, at the first, it describes the terrible fate of Shylock in the Venetian society where the treatment he encounters is worse than what would even befit a dog. However at the second it only gives an indication of the sadistic pleasure that the Jew is experiencing which is further substantiated by an expectation of seeking the final revenge in case Antonio fails to fulfill the bond. Such selective inference drawn by the filmmaker gives the impression that he is being led by a particular agenda that may be an act of righteousness when addressing the historical exploitation that the Jews were subjected to. However an attempt to invest Shakespearean work with such meaning will nonetheless be seen as an essentially altering the meaning of Shakespeare's play. The major setback that the film suffers in terms of its ability to attain its desired effect is because of its unskillful treatment of Portia's character. Shakespeare's *Merchant* is accused of being an anti-Semitic play on account of its projection of Portia as a racist but one who is morally

fit to take control of the play's dramatic movement in the later part of the work. Pittman accuses Radford of ignoring Portia's racist behavior by giving it comic overtones. She refers to the barely concealed racism of Portia, particularly when she deals with her suitors who have come from all over the world to win her as a bride. Pittman writes that "Readers first observe Portia's limitations when she catalogues for Nerissa and the audience her multitude of suitors; these scenes in the film utilize humor to diffuse any possibility that Portia articulates a troubling doctrine of racial superiority. Any hints that her perspective may not conform to modern standards of tolerance are suppressed by capitalizing on the humor of racial stereotyping already embedded in the play itself." She further suggests that Portia's and Nerissa's act of looking down from the second floor window of the palace at the prospective suitors a position which is mimicked and justified by the placement of the camera gives them an imaginary position of superiority. Their act of judging the suitors is also a means of constructing national stereotypes as each of the suitors that get entertained at Belmont represents a unique geographical territory. This interpretation enables us to understand that Portia has been invested with the ability to control the dramatic narrative of her universe. In a way she becomes the representative of the playwright and therefore when she articulates racially objectionable sentiments or stereotypes identities then it becomes imperative to link those sentiments with the playwright. However as Radford suggests that this racial profiling is in fact a part of the comic structure of the play, therefore neither Portia nor Shakespeare should be accused of racism based on it. In this context it is interesting to note that Shakespeare is making fun of the English baron despite being English himself. This suggests the ironic nature of humor that his works contain and how they may fail deliver if handled inappropriately, a charge that Drew Daniel labels against Radford's adaptation of *Merchant* by suggesting that his adaptation "enforces a strong distinction between the comic and dramatic scenes" (Daniel 53), which is absent in Shakespeare tragic comedies like *The Merchant of Venice*. But there is another incident in the play as well the film where Portia encounters the Prince of Morocco and their first encounter gets defined when the camera focuses on Morocco's black hand holding the white hand of Portia. Pittman writes that when Morocco comments on his complexion a shot of Portia and Nerissa reflects them as barely trying to keep straight faces and to look engaged and welcoming. This indicates that they have already formed their dismissive opinion. However the most revealing moment of Portia's racist attitude gets manifested at the departure of Morocco

when she utters

"A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go / Let all of his complexion choose me so." (2.7.78-79)

Radford's screenplay carefully eliminates this couplet in order to conceal the racist attitude of the heroine. This deliberate omission is all the more important because in its absence the female protagonist will be no longer able to exercise the moral authority that she gets invested with for the courtroom scene, the moment in the play and the film, that promises the delivery of uncontaminated justice. Also Portia's brave move to disguise herself as Doctor Balthazar in order to liberate Antonio from the evil bond of Shylock is also not above scrutiny. But before moving to that aspect it's important to note that Portia is invested with a visible position of dominance in the courtroom. In so far as she is the only individual who can acquit Antonio on the ground that nobody else seems to be aware of the Venetian law that prohibited shedding of Christian blood in the city state. As the court scene proceeds the marginalization of Shylock becomes more pronounced and this eventually consummates into a denial of his existence when Portia defeats his legal suit and also obtains the judgment that instructs Shylock to convert his faith and renounce one half of his property to the royal coffer and the other half to his adversary Antonio. This final development yet again complicates both the position of Portia as well as Shakespeare vis-à-vis the oppressed subject – Shylock. The ruthlessness with which Portia destroys his identity yet again forces Pittman to contend that "Radford must deal with the judgment that Portia administers and that contradicts the principles of mercy central to Radford's claims about the playwright's intentions. Portia's vexed relationship to that foundational authority of Shakespearean humanism experiences greatest logical pressure when the same voice who celebrates the

"Quality of mercy" sentences Shylock to loss of property and self." (Pittman 26)

Radford attempts to defend the action of his heroine by positing that

"It is in fact Shylock who denies himself dignity in the scene "because he knows he has gone too far" in pursuing revenge; thus Portia is absolved of any active complicity with her culture's prejudices." (Pittman 28)

This attempt to structure an adaptation based on a false premise that refuses to consider the politics of religion and race around which Shakespeare constructs the narrative of the Merchant of Venice is inevitably prone to inadequacies. The major problem that Radford's adaptation thus faces is the charge of over simplifying a subject that could have been dealt in a more nuanced manner. It fails to capture

prejudices that are a part of a collective consciousness and that are both historically rooted as well as subject to constant revisions. And most importantly by undermining the all pervasive racism of Portia, he inevitably tampers with the meaning of the text. Shakespeare by virtue of casting Portia as the messenger of justice problematises the judicial system of Venice where only the select few which in this case would be the privileged Christians have access to the information about those Venetian laws that blatantly discriminate between Christian and Jewish blood. Therefore the idea of legal equality that the state of Venice boasts to guarantee to its subjects irrespective of their racial or religious identities, inadvertently turns out to be a pretense on its part and thus Shylock's defeat was decided even before he petitioned the Venetian court and unlike Radford's estimate that Shylock's vengeance determines his eventual fall, it was in fact his socio-historical

location as the member of an ostracized community of Jews that in fact ascertained his decline. Most importantly Shylock's defeat also serves the purpose of ratifying the position of the Other (in terms of race or religion) in the Venetian society as necessarily that of a subordinate, therefore the play leaves the reader with a sense of disenchantment similar to the one experienced by the renegade daughter of the Jew, Jessica, who by presuming that marrying a Christian will liberate her from being a Jew in the Venetian society eventually realizes that the Christian world continues to perceive her as the daughter of an infidel and not as the wife of a Christian. So Shakespeare leaves both the daughter as well as the father by the end of the play with sufficient disappointment to make them wonder about their social and religious identity as aliens in a society that otherwise endorses social equality.

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