

Redistributing Complicities in an Age of Digital Production: Michael Radford's Film Version of *The Merchant of Venice*

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In his chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom claims that “the ontological weight of Shylock, from his first appearance through his last, places him as a representation of reality far distaining every other character in the play” and that, “equivocal as he must be,” Shylock “is our best clue for tracing the process by which Shakespeare . . . invented or reinvented the human.”¹ As *human* as Shylock no doubt seems to Bloom, *humanity*, as Bloom defines it in relation to Shylock, probably counted for as little in the Elizabethan period as it does in today’s commercial film industry. Indeed, if being human is held to be commensurate with “the massively, frighteningly sincere and single-minded” figure that Bloom holds Shylock to be,² then Shylock’s outsized humanity may be not only ill suited to a play too small to contain what Bloom terms Shylock’s “field of force”³ but incompatible with a globalized film culture in which youth, good looks, and an easy sociability command the gaze of young and old alike.⁴ To put it as McLuhan might, Shylock may simply be too *hot* to command the attention so cool a medium affords, too *human* to register as more than a blip on a screen in which formulaic simulations of what is uniformly desirable and attractive command the ontological field.

Some seventy-odd years ago, Walter Benjamin anticipated such changes in the filmic constitution of the human in his influential essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Contending that what “withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura [halo of authenticity or uniqueness] of the work of art,” Benjamin claims that film, as the “most powerful agent” of “contemporary mass movements,” is the primary medium responsible for this “liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” in art.⁵ Given that my subject is *The Merchant of Venice*, a play many consider too objectionable to require further reproduction, one might well choose to celebrate the withering away of its “aura” and the “liquidation” of the “traditional value” of the race-hatred that even Bloom would admit the play has long played a role in culturally sustaining. But as I hope to demonstrate, to the extent that the digital reproduction and global marketing of film have rendered “the social significance” of the art form ever more remote from contemplation than Benjamin could have imagined,⁶ even an effort to revive the aura of Shylock through “the artificial build-up”⁷ of a celebrated movie star is fated to fail if it does not coincide with “the critical and receptive attitudes” of a public whose “individual reactions [have already been] predetermined by the mass audience response” they are designed to produce.⁸

I intend to apply this thesis to Michael Radford’s 2004 film, *William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice*, which features the charismatic movie star Al Pacino in the role of Shylock and whose full title revealingly echoes that of Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), which is far and away the most financially successful Shakespeare film ever made. I also aim to extend its application to a consideration of how the globalized filmic discourse in which Shakespeare’s play has been newly embedded redirects the flow and distribution of complicities that make the principal actors in *The Merchant of Venice* seem not just variably but simultaneously sinned against and sinner, villain and victim, giver and taker.

No one watching Radford’s extended prologue or preface—which foregrounds a fanatical priest holding a cross aloft from his position on a gondola while intercutting images of a burning Torah as its captions tell a sad, seemingly fact-based tale of persecutions and inquisitions (Figure 5.1)—would guess that he is aiming his film at much the same audience Luhrmann was targeting in 1996 with a cast headed by Leonardo DiCaprio. Indeed, Radford’s ominous prologue signals, if anything, the reconfiguring of Shakespeare’s play in the genre format of a Holocaust film. Yet



FIGURE 5.1

once the clamorous din of radical Catholic proselytizing and anti-Semitic violence has cleared, and an unshaven Bassanio casually loiters on Antonio's bed in the first scene drawn directly from Shakespeare's play, it becomes clear that Radford's eye is drawn as much to what will make his film compelling to his audience as to what will render his ethically "corrective" vision of Venice accurate and authoritative (Figure 5.2).

The director of an array of films ranging from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) and *Il Postino* (1994) to *Dancing at the Blue Iguana* (2000)—which explores the lives and loves of habitués of a pole-dancing club—Radford evokes in his film a privileged vision of youth and beauty, courtship and wooing, feasts and masquing, in which Christian Venetians not only thrive at the expense of Jews but enjoy a purchase on their cultural centrality that arguably exceeds that which Shakespeare afforded them in 1596 (Figure 5.3). Radford editorially strives, at the beginning and end of his film to



FIGURE 5.2



FIGURE 5.3

provide an explanatory preface and sentimental postscript for Shylock's proverbially inhuman demand for a pound of Antonio's flesh that would render him as much a man sinned *against* as sinning. But the body of the film, particularly those scenes set in Belmont, privilege norms of desired social behavior that effectively exclude those consigned by passion, profession, or complexion to live their lives behind the bars of the "ghetto" or in the wilds of Barbary, thus muting the redistribution of complicities that might otherwise shadow Belmont's revels and qualify the virtue of Portia's mercifixion of Shylock in Venice.⁹ Apart from the pathos in which he increasingly envelops Shylock, Radford arguably does little more here than restage Shakespeare's pogrom-within-the-play, which has an ultimately overmatched Jew finance Bassanio's successful argosy to Belmont, restore most of what Antonio's argosies have lost, and enforcedly bequeath his estate to the man who has stolen his daughter before being dispossessed of his profession and identity alike. But by displaying a conspicuously presentist take in his casting and direction of Bassanio and Portia, Nerissa and Gratiano, Lorenzo and Jessica, and by delegating the passions and pathos of Pacino's Shylock to a tribal, superannuated past, Radford assembles a *Merchant* cosmetically attuned to our difference-dissolving age of global production. In the face of the infinite cultural variety made available by the latter-day movement and mixing of peoples and races, Radford's film largely privileges one way of looking, looking at, and living off the world.

Whether by commercial design or merely in order to satisfy the multi-generic challenges of Shakespeare's play, Radford assembles his film in the form of serially discontinuous segments that work, respectively, within a variety of market-favored genre formats and thus supply its audience with an alternating array of prompts to satisfy its assumed interests and sources

of identification. Offering changing takes on character and meaning from scene to scene so that, for example, what is “true” about Bassanio in one scene cedes to another truth in the next, Radford manages, in the end, to accept (or have us accept) all that the individual character presents in the course of the film in the interest of what film scholar Rick Altman terms “filmic multivalency.”¹⁰ While in some respects Radford’s multivalent approach faithfully resonates with Shakespeare’s own densely ambivalent characterizations, it also tends to privilege the proclaimed motives of characters whose occasional indulgence in sexual manipulation, financial opportunism, and legal connivance is uncritically recorded and conveniently elided. Radford’s cultivation of multiple generic framings, such that a single story may satisfy as broad as possible an array of audience expectations, works to the particular advantage of characters who move freely, as Bassanio and Portia do, between the urban and exurban confines of Belmont and Venice and works against that of a character like Shylock, whose single-mindedness consigns him to the monomaniacal role (and polarities) of the alternating villain-victim. I proceed by offering two sustained examples in support of this argument, the first focused on the film’s treatment of Bassanio, the second on its construction and contextualization of Shylock.

Along with Jeremy Irons’s Antonio, we first glimpse Bassanio as he languidly glides by in a gondola quaffing a goblet of wine, on his way either to or from a bout of masquing toward the end of the interpolated establishing scene with which the film begins (Figure 5.4). We next spy him landing outside Antonio’s house after the first lines of Shakespeare’s dialogue kick in, and watch Antonio gaze at him through his window, the gaze and what it fastens on serving to gloss the mystery of Antonio’s melancholy in the preferred modern manner. Bassanio’s ensuing request for



FIGURE 5.4

yet another loan from Antonio plays upon this homoerotic undertow, presented as it is from the staging ground of Antonio's bed and sealed as it is with a decidedly unchaste kiss. On his next appearance in the company of Shylock, we witness a rather different, if still ardently ambitious, version of Bassanio. This Bassanio is all business, but also convincingly loath to have Antonio accept on his behalf so sinister a bond. Once invested with the sum he has bargained for, Bassanio reverts to earlier form in Radford's next staging, lazily enjoying the first fruits of his fortune and regally sharing them out with his friends in a scene Radford seems to have fashioned either to celebrate the sumptuous stylings of youthful excess or, at most, generously to indulge their regardless high spirits (Figures 5.5a, 5.5b).

In this scene, in particular, as in the interpolated banquet scene, which consigns Shylock to an enforcedly scripted silence as Bassanio lavishly showers the table with his borrowed ducats, the sheer high spirits and



FIGURE 5.5A



FIGURE 5.5B

camaraderie of Bassanio and Gratiano trump any temptation to determine whether it is “the triumph of life” or “feast of fools” we are witnessing. With respect to the dinner that Shylock departs for but never seems to arrive at in Shakespeare’s play, the sullen Shylock may well seem the only truly *human* being at the feast, though I’d venture that it is his *way* of being human (sullen, inward, silent, withdrawn) that makes him seem so conspicuously alien in the first place, especially if we read the scene from the privileged subject position of youthful enthusiasm, which forgives, and is forgiven, everything (Figures 5.6a, 5.6b). Whatever residual sleaze adheres to Bassanio in Venice melts into air upon his triumphal arrival at Belmont, his entrance celebrated not only by his regal bearing and accoutrements but by the beauteous Portia herself, who preemptively recites a flurry of love-struck lines textually repositioned to convey her maiden’s reluctance to speak her heart directly to Bassanio. From this moment on



FIGURE 5.6A



FIGURE 5.6B



FIGURE 5.7

through the third casket scene itself, Bassanio is nothing if not noble, gracious, plain-dealing, wise, and well coiffed, in short, nothing like he is in almost all his appearances in Venice (Figure 5.7).¹¹

Although Shylock's affect also shifts from scene to scene, it does so in a narrower compass and more expressly motivated manner. As the gloomy-minded outsider to youth's feast, Shylock is, of course, unadventurous in the repertoire of arch gestures, posturings, and casual badinage that Bassanio and company engage in, nor does he seem to appreciate the plump, roseate breasts of the prostitutes on which Salerio and Solanio nuzzle every chance they get. He is, in this respect, only multivalent when he needs to be in negotiating his bond, or when Radford needs him to be, as he suffers and addresses the loss of his daughter and ducats in the mixed dramatic idiom of sorrow and rage. It may, however, be said that multivalency is *imposed on* Shylock in Radford's interpolated scenes, each of which supplies Shylock's single-mindedness with a context that both seeks to explain and forgive it.

I count four interpolations that perform this function. The first, the extended prelude or preface referred to earlier, establishes Venice, in a way Shakespeare does not, as a socially volatile space shot through with anti-Semitism and Christian religious fanaticism. The second plants the silent Shylock in an unfriended seat at Bassanio's festive dinner party and leads into the third interpolation, wherein Shylock "discovers" the flight of Jessica in a series of choked, unscripted sighs and projects his sorrow to the empty streets while exposing himself, Lear-like, to a torrential rain-storm. The fourth and final interpolation works in tandem with the earlier ones to evoke the kind of sympathy for Shylock that annexes Shakespeare's romantic comedy to the genre of the Holocaust film citationally alluded to earlier in the film's preface. Presenting Shylock in the enforced garb of

a Christian convert—a transformation Bloom considers unimaginable in Shakespeare’s construction of the character—Radford has the door of the synagogue closed in Shylock’s face as part of a montage in which we also witness a seemingly repentant Jessica sighing toward a figurative Jerusalem (Figure 5.8).

While clearly different from the multivalency that allows Joseph Fiennes’s Bassanio to become the serial, though never fixed, embodiment of prodigality, opportunism, carelessness, vanity, graciousness, wisdom, and loyalty, Radford’s design here seems to be similarly motivated, if less effectual in achieving its aims. On the one hand, he wants to find a way of compensating for the anti-Semitic thrust of Shakespeare’s “unimproved” play. To do this, he goes much further than Shakespeare does in attempting to evoke the physical and historical reality of Venice itself. His accuracy in doing so is presumably warranted by touches such as having all his Venetian prostitutes go bare-breasted (Figure 5.9) and all his Jews wear red caps, though when he animates his speaking picture to have a fanatical priest prompt a crowd of Venetians to throw an anonymous Jew into a canal, one is prompted to ask: Was this a daily event, and if not, what specific occasion is Radford documenting? In order to localize such doings in terms supplied by the play, he has Shylock himself witness this event, encounter Antonio in the crowd, and seem about to ask for an explanation, only to have Antonio “void [his] rheum upon [Shylock’s] beard,” thereby proving the greater atrocity by reference to the smaller. In this transaction (Figure 5.10), Antonio is to Shylock what the inquisitor-priest is to the anonymous fallen Jew, that is, sinner to sinned-against—but only for as long



FIGURE 5.8



FIGURE 5.9



FIGURE 5.10

as this interpolation lasts, since when we next see Antonio, he is sympathetically rendered as the gaunt, doting, melancholy lover of the opportunistic Bassanio whose wholesale infatuation with the younger man will lead him to make an almost fatal bond with the stereotypically scheming Jew.

If in interpolations like these Radford seeks to compensate for, or at least contextualize, *The Merchant*'s apparent anti-Semitism and even position the film in the post-Holocaust network of the *anti-anti-Semitism* genre, such gestures are discontinuous with his film's overarching effort to appeal to and please an audience that may be generously construed as other-directed. In some quarters the Shakespeare film has been construed as constituting both its own genre and its correspondingly small market-niche audience. But a commercial enterprise such as Radford's would founder were it not designed to appeal to the widest possible (and youngest) audience for whom a multivalent mix of the romantic-comedy genre,

the quest- or dress-for-success film, and even the buddy-film genre might well supply a competitive edge. And as the “Official Teacher’s Guide” distributed by Sony Pictures indicates, the single largest potential audience for Radford’s film consists of the thousands upon thousands of high school and college students worldwide for whom this film will be screened until the next, presumably more topical version of *The Merchant*, set in Las Vegas is produced and distributed.

That Radford is targeting just such an audience by working both simultaneously and serially within overlapping genre formats is signaled by the presentist approach he brings to the presentations, characterizations, and interactions of Bassanio and Gratiano, on the one hand, and Portia and Nerissa, on the other. Though the grace and hairstyle of Lynn Collins’s Portia have been aptly likened to the look of Botticelli’s earth goddesses (Figure 5.11), the coolness, coyness, and confidence of her bearing and behavior make her just as comparable to any number of pretty misses populating the covers of *Seventeen* and *Vogue*, a host of fanzines, and just about any film starring Gwyneth Paltrow or Keira Knightley. Like the latter, she is the quintessential sweet, sexy, sensitive, breathy “all-girl” who can also play the androgynous girl-boy as needs require. By extension, the contrastingly grungy look of the shape-shifting Bassanio in the first half of the film presents him in the favored contemporary cinematic and advertising format of the slacker male object of desire. As he languorously winds his way around Antonio’s bedpost (and into his heart) and casually banters with his mates (particularly Kris Marshall’s eye-popping Gratiano), Joseph Fiennes’s Bassanio evokes latter-day male heartthrobs ranging from Brad



FIGURE 5.11

Pitt to Ethan Hawke. (If the long straight hair casually brushed behind the ear fails to spark the connection, take note [Figure 5.12] that in every pre-Belmont scene, Bassanio and Lorenzo either have a “beard coming” or have conscientiously neglected to shave.)

The film’s mining of different genre conventions is even more apparent on the level of tone than it is on that of fashion or cosmetics, most notably in scenes that neither Jeremy Irons’s Antonio nor Al Pacino’s Shylock weigh down with their old-world gravitas. That tone is at once genial and archly ironic and clearly intended neither to do nor to mean any harm. But it’s also grounded in the conviction that foreigners of any kind are as inherently absurd as Jews wearing gabardine and red caps—a conviction embedded in Shakespeare’s play itself, particularly act 1, scene 2, in which Portia and Nerissa engage in a scathing critical commentary on the “parts” of the assembled suitors, ironically reserving some of their best shots for the Englishman who “hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian” but dresses himself in the mismatched fashions of many nations. The first two casket scenes supply exemplary cases in point.

Rather than deploy these scenes merely to exemplify the overweening pride and narcissism of the princes of Morocco and Aragon, respectively, Radford stages them as comedic set pieces that turn upon extreme ethnic stereotypes. In the first, Radford appears to draw inspiration both from Eddie Murphy’s *faux* African turn in *Coming to America* (1988) (Figure 5.13) and from Portia’s arguably racist dismissal of the Prince of Morocco (“Let all of his complexion choose so”), which he suppresses in part to disavow Portia’s unseemly bias but also to allow the prince and his retinue



FIGURE 5.12



FIGURE 5.13

to dismiss themselves by engaging in bumptious behavior. While Shakespeare traffics in well-worn stereotyping of his own here, particularly with respect to the reputed penchant for boasting of Moors, Radford transforms the Moroccan delegation into a credulous latter-day “posse” (Figures 5.14a, 5.14b) whose English is changed from the elegant thing it was in Shakespeare to an exoticized variant on black African English. As funny as the scene plays, there’s no mistaking the fact that in Radford’s film only born and bred Venetians are capable of speaking an unaccented version of Shakespeare’s verse. (In Shakespeare’s play, of course, the only characters whose English is lacking are Lancelot and Old Gobbo, whose only sin is ignorance.)

Extreme ethnic stereotyping proceeds apace in the second casket scene, which focuses on the Prince of Aragon and his retinue, all of whom are



FIGURE 5.14A

elaborately tricked out in costumes designed to suggest that they have walked out of the frame of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (Figures 5.15a, 5.15b). In this sequence, the humor fastens less on the vulgarity of the contestant than on his mincing hyperrefinement, though sight gags again predominate as we witness Aragon being fashionably attended by a dwarf and elegantly sneezing on his snuff. As in *Eurotrip* (2004), the recent teen flick of young Americans abroad—which metonymically reduces France to the affect of a single preening street mime and Britain to a busload of soccer louts—the aim here is less outright condemnation of the predictably caricatured foreigners than confirmation of the naturalness and normality of the featured protagonists, who set the standard for civility, humor, and balanced dispositions alike. Portia's good-natured tolerance of the suitors, whose self-understanding is made to seem as flawed as their English, is, for example, signaled by her casually bemused gaze, which should cue any uninformed or unsuspecting viewer that the Belmont half of the film's double plot will eventuate in Bassanio's successful completion of his quest and Portia's liberation from "the will of a dead father" (1.2.22).

To his credit, Radford's subsequent staging of the trial scene balances the cruelty Shylock would show Antonio with the malevolence the rabidly partisan Venetians show Shylock. And upon the film's return to Belmont, Radford even has a seemingly repentant Lancelot discard his once "rare new livery"—either out of sympathy for Shylock or disgust at the shallow newlyweds—as well as a seemingly regretful Jessica display Shylock's apparently unsold ring to the eye of the camera as she sighs longingly toward Venice (Figures 5.16a, 5.16b). But both these interpolations operate in much the way Radford's other efforts do, failing to locate dissent against the play's "happy ending" and the redistribution of complicities *within*



FIGURE 5.14B



FIGURE 5.15A



FIGURE 5.15B

the orbit of the characters who most enjoy the play's "comic" resolution, namely, Portia and Bassanio, Gratiano and Nerissa. Indeed, Jessica's close-up display of what we take to be the ring Shylock "had of Leah" possibly operates as Radford's most glaring (and manipulative) attempt at generating serial multivalency, insofar as he has already shown her selling the ring in exchange for a monkey in an earlier flashback. The only way to avoid thinking that Radford has cynically decided to include ocular proof that the ring was both sold *and* kept is to interpret the flashback retrospectively as proceeding either from Tubal's or Shylock's overactive imagination. In the end, neither these obtrusive editorial moves nor the more conclusive one of having the door of the synagogue shut against Shylock dissipate the normalizing momentum of a film as symptomatic as this one is of the complicities that get muted or redirected at the point where Hollywood genre conventions, global marketing strategies, and a play as deeply problematic as *The Merchant of Venice* meet.



FIGURE 5.16A



FIGURE 5.16B