

## The Merchant of Venice

(Michael Radford, 2004)

This dense and moving film succeeds for a number of reasons. First, everyone speaks the lines as though this were the language in which they were brought up. It's all conversational, never rhetorical: it has the realism of TV script dialogue, but with no sacrifice of clarity or beauty. Radford has developed (they rehearsed for five weeks) a consistent, understated style in actors as diverse as Al Pacino and Anton Rodgers. Secondly, huge amounts of the original survive – compare Branagh's *Loves Labours Lost*, where very little survives, and what there is left is balanced by insulting junk. Even Old Gobbo is there, one of Shakespeare's most cuttable roles. Shakespeare (so far from writing happily for *The Sun*, a claim I have heard made), would have been the most brilliant and profound screenwriter ever. Several speeches which a director less confident would remove or curtail, such as Bassanio's monologue over the caskets, are not only there intact, but spoken (by Joseph Fiennes, in Bassanio's case) with inwardness and deliberation. We are in no doubt that, materialist as his behaviour may seem in outline, Bassanio has his moral bearings. Thirdly, Radford keeps his camera close to the actors' heads much of the time, giving a great sense of intimacy and urgency. He often *seems*, Kurosawa-like, to be using more than one camera – this is especially true of the trial scene: so that we get the feeling not only that we're there in the court-crowd, but that it's unfolding before us unedited. No shot seems deliberately framed (apart from one or two CGI establishing shots); nearly all the filming appears spontaneous, the camera there without calculation.

Very little is not based directly on Shakespeare. A brief opening sequence tells us via titles what disadvantages Jews lived under in sixteenth-century Venice; we see a priest preaching against usury, and a Jew being thrown into the canal from the Rialto. We see Antonio spitting on Shylock. This sequence lasts about ninety seconds. At the end, we see Jessica leaving the house at Belmont, and wandering down to the waterfront to watch what appear to be fishermen catching fish with bows and arrows. What her mood is, beyond reflective, we can't tell. It seems not to be linked to Shylock's fate: we've just seen him (in a shot inverting the final shot of *The Godfather*) having a Jewish door shut in his face: but he's still alive.

The usual problem – having our sympathy for Shylock, no matter how self-destructive he may be, overbalance our sympathy for Portia – is solved by Pacino's outstanding performance, which has dignity, eloquence, and humanity, but which throughout defies us to love him.



“Hath not a Jew eyes?” is uttered to Salerio and Solanio at camera-right, with passion and persuasiveness, but without pathos. Those snake-eyes which made Michael Corleone so

memorable help a lot. He's one of us, and yet not one of us – in fact, like his cousins Malvolio and Jacques, he doesn't want to be one of us. You concede every point he makes, but you still dislike him. Some productions have Tubal shaking his head in sadness and reproach as Shylock fulminates – others have Tubal goading Shylock on to his defeat. Here you're aware, from some of the crowd reactions in the trial, that, whatever happens, Shylock has gone too far for most of his co-religionists. His monomania and inability to see round the issue has cut him off not just from Venice, but from Jewry. It's an outstanding exercise in Stanislavskian identification combined with Brechtian dispassion – just what the script needs.



Lynn Collins as Portia seems at first too young – but then Portia's supposed to be inexperienced, yet witty and resourceful – one of Shakespeare's miracle-heroines who's had everything from birth, even though you can't see where she got it from. Actually in Portia's case you can see where she got it from – she got it from her father, who, it's clear, loved her, was jealous for her happiness, and, knowing what a snakepit of suitors she'd be beset with, devised an excellent trick to make sure she got only the man most worthy. Collins rises to the challenge of the trial scene with ease – assisted, as few stage Portias are, by an excellent wig, beard, and dark downy cheek.



Antonio is often cast as an afterthought. Trevor Nunn cast David Bamber, known to the world as Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* – thus leaving no doubt as to how we were to react: that Antonio is a pain, and you wouldn't mind at all if Shylock did cut a few bits off him (which fits Nunn's unsuccessful attempt to make Shylock the hero). Radford has Jeremy Irons, from the top drawer, and Antonio thus has the weight and dignity to convince us that

unless Portia is cunning, he'll be a threat to her marriage dead or alive. Bassanio gives him one chaste-ish kiss at one point (not vice versa), leaving us to suspect, not that Antonio has a crush on him, but that they're actually lovers – still more of a threat to Portia than usual. Irons' gravity matches that of Pacino – except you do love him: again a threat to Portia's marriage.

The presence given in this way to the two heavyweights, and the skill with which we leave the one – Shylock – defeated at the end of the fourth act, while aware that the other – Antonio – is still alive to create trouble in the fifth act – thus succeeds where Nunn's version fails, and puts the centre of the play in the last scene, of which Nunn can make nothing except a series of anticlimaxes, in strange taste. I never expected to have a lump in my throat at Gratiano's "My lord Bassanio gave his ring away!" but here I did, on both viewings. Gratiano's comic desire to share the blame with Bassanio is a sign that Portia's plot is working, and that Antonio will soon have peripheralised himself from his own sense of obligation.



One of the best Shakespeare films there are. Kenneth Branagh, eat yer heart out.