

### THREE OPENINGS:

#### Antonio and Bassanio

Through *The Merchant of Venice*, playgoers and readers are led through many definitions of love and its many forms. Whether it was male and female, female and female, or male and male, love was the ultimate factor for happiness in a relationship. In present day, these relationships would be categorized into heterosexual and homosexual labels. During Shakespeare's time, there were no such labels; love was more transcendent. Shakespeare has fused these different connections into this one play asking the audience what is true love. Through the many couples within this story, the pairing of Antonio and Bassanio was one that caught my attention. I hadn't expected such a relationship in a Shakespeare play, and I believe that's why it was so interesting for me to look into deeper. From the text, I felt these two men loved each other. There is a clarification when talking about this however; I saw their love based on a strong friendship quality rather than a romantic sense. Using the text and Radford's 2004 movie rendition, one is able to see many different ways in which their love can be interpreted. In the movie, one is also able to ask more questions about the directions and ideas the actors were given and how that ultimately shaped the illustration of their relationship.

Today, artists are asked to take risks with their art. This is apparent in the modern 2004 film of *The Merchant of Venice*. It has become almost a new fad these days to take original Shakespeare shows and modernize them in a way to make them more "interesting" for audiences now. For example, SITI Theatre Company took *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and set it during the Depression of America, giving a new view and new connections for audiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A new twist on something old always seems to draw in audiences. Shakespeare was a great playwright, and present directors like working with it and keeping it alive, but they also want to do well financially, thus create these new ideas and illustrations for the modern era. Even though Radford decided to keep the time period the same as the play, he was able to add so much more concerning sets, colors, and people into the scenes to enhance the picture for the viewers. Through this enrichment of the text, the director did what any artist is supposed to do: create questions. While watching this version, those words I had read were now actions. Every turn of the head or expression of the voice gave me new ideas on what Shakespeare's words could mean.

The biggest question that I came up with while watching the movie was what was Antonio and Bassanio's relationship; was it that loving friendship found in the text or was it Eros. Eros, as defined by the Old English Dictionary, says it is, "the urge towards self-preservation and sexual pleasure." As I explained earlier, a relationship between two men was not seen as homosexual and was not based merely on a sexual impulse. However, Radford was able to use the label of homosexuality to make the movie more interesting for this modern era, adding that sexual energy to make the audiences think more.

Antonio and Bassanio had many scenes in both text and movie where their infatuations for each other were brought out. The one scene that demonstrated this love the most for me was Act One, Scene One, when it was just between the two. Here Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to get to Portia, and thus acquire wealth and marriage. From just reading the text, it is sometimes harder to interpret what is actually being felt by the characters. But after studying this one part of the scene extensively, I was able to decipher their love by looking into the lines of both characters. Even though there are no stage

directions invoking this love tension between the two, one can see their love through many of their lines.

### **Two-Worlds of Merchant of Venice**

“By law all Jews were forced to live in a wall foundry or ‘Geto,’” This is one of the first lines we are shown in the beginning of the movie, William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, directed by Michael Radford. This is the beginning of Michael Radford’s interpretation of Shakespeare. Merchant of Venice like many of Shakespeare’s plays is one of interpretation. Setting, theme, context, positioning, everything, every word, every character can have a number of interpretations. One will never be sure of what is right, or even if there is a right way, but we can compare interpretations to what is said in the text. An interpretation of many of Shakespeare’s plays can be changed by the deletion of a line or the style of acting. In this movie of Merchant of Venice we are able to understand how greatly a play can be transformed, and how different it can be interpreted. In this movie, Michael Radford placed great attention at the vision of “two worlds”.

The “two worlds” are created both physically and through interpretation of text. The beginning scene, before any dialogue occurs, is an introduction to the physical vision of the two worlds. Radford makes it clear through a scene of writing, the fact that the Jews were separated from the Christians by forcing the Jews to live in a ‘geto.’ Through further text of a gate which is closed at sundown and guarded by Christians, followed by a scene of an iron door being locked we are shown further physical interpretation of the separation of these worlds, the world of the Jews, and that of the Christians. After these beginning scenes of textual information of the separation; the director elaborates the idea through further exploration of these two worlds; Antonio and Shylock. We see a close up of Shylock surrounded by garments of red, watching a riot occur between the Jews and the Christians. Following we see a close up of Antonio watching the same riot, with a background of browns and fur-like colors. These two characters are the spirits of the two worlds. This is further explored when we first see Bassanio. While on a gondola with friends, Bassanio rides through the Christian procession in which Antonio is taking part. Through this scene we see a number of significant Christian customs and symbols including the cross, blessing by holy water, and praying. The scene is one contrasted with where Bassanio goes next. As we see Bassanio go through the big iron gates which separates the Jew and Christian worlds we see Bassanio stop in front of the synagogue where we are given similar scenes to a Jewish procession. In this scene we see the Torah, many praying and Shylock’s deep involvement in this ceremony. Bassanio’s trip also becomes a trip for the audience in showing them how vastly different these two world’s are, but how similar they could also be. The beginning gives us a view of these two different characters. The fact that all this occurs before any of the textual dialogue allows the director to form an image in the mind of the audience of these worlds within one city. But what is achieved by this interpretation of the “two worlds” and how does it differ from the actual text?

The actual text varies greatly from the movie. It would be impossible to reproduce the beginning of the movie in a theater. So what other effects does this beginning serve? The text presents the idea of one world. When Shylock gives his famous speech which includes: “If we are like you in the rest, we will/ resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian,/ what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian/ wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by/ Christian/ example? Why, revenge. The villany you/ teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.(III.1.63-67) he talks about one world in which he

learns by Christian tradition. This speech, in the text, is more about how much Shylock is like the Christians, how they are alike, how they are one world. However in the movie *Shylock*, focuses this speech more on Shylock's revenge on Antonio. The one world text interpretations versus the two world interpretation are very different and achieve different goals.

The text with its idea of one world is able to show all the characters intermingling and shows a greater sense of the Jew being part of the people. At the end Shylock is classified as the scapegoat not only for his sins but also for those of the other characters. The line: "The villany you/ teach me, I will execute" (III.1.66) gives the main reason for why he is a scapegoat of not only the Jews, but of all humanity in the sixteenth century and why he at the end is humiliated, converted, and punished for his malice actions. The triumph of the Christians would have been something frequently seen in the Elizabethan stage. In the text Shylock can be seen as the vice character as in having an immoral or wicked habit; for this the theater audience would have probably not shown any sympathy for this evil character. However, the movie achieves much through its idea of the two worlds.<sup>1</sup>

The two worlds make it possible for both of these characters to suffer while subconsciously separating them from the fact that they have caused the suffering to one another. By creating the idea of two worlds in the beginning we are able to sympathize with both, and not attribute one with pure evil at the end. Radford's "two worlds," are made possible by the editing of the text. The aside made by Shylock: "I hate him for he is a Christian,/But more for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis and brings down/The rate of usance here with us in Venice."(I.3.39-42) makes Antonio similar to Shylock in that they are both lenders of money. However the film makes no reference to this but instead presents Antonio as merchant and Shylock as lender. This further separates one another while bringing them closer as representatives of their world. The elimination of this similarity creates a greater separation between Antonio and Shylock. It allows the audience to sympathize with both characters for different reasons. People sympathize with Antonio when his ships do not return, and sympathize with Shylock when he loses his money in the trial. This sympathy and the idea that both characters are separate present the idea of both characters as martyrs for their world.

### **Burnout**

In his ethnography called *Engineering Culture*, Gideon Kunda examines an engineering startup company that he calls High Technologies Corporation in order to protect its identity. High Technologies seems like a great place to work. Presumably, the workers at High Technologies are highly skilled, and their salaries are good. There is relatively even distribution of power: most workers receive the same salary (Source . . . maybe in chapter 2). An interviewee describes the ideal worker as "Someone who is innovative, enthusiastic, willing to work hard, who isn't hung up on structure, and who has absolutely no concern with educational background (Kunda 2006:73). The philosophy of the company hinges around the phrase "do what is 'right' to do in each situation," apparently giving the employees freedom to act as they please (Kunda 2006:55). The

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<sup>1</sup> C.L Barber, "The Merchants and the Jew of Venice: Wealth's Communion and an Intruder," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 11-32.

employees at High Technologies love the company. An engineer exclaimed, "I love this company. I would die for it!" (Kunda 2006:174). An engineering supervisor commented, "I'm trying to get y son into Tech—that should tell you something [about how good the company is]" (Kunda 2006: 171). "Tech caters to engineers," yet another engineer remarked, "Its reputation in the industry is a country club for engineers" (Kunda 2006:176).

We would expect the workers at High Technologies to experience a great deal of satisfaction. The workers seem to be content with their jobs, but the mean age of the workers is low, and burnout is common. At High Technologies, the average age of employees falls between the late twenties and the mid thirties (Kunda 2006:2). One could argue that this preponderance of young workers is because of the nature of a startup: startups attract young people whose careers have not begun. However, High Technologies is a large company, so it is probably well established. Such a company should attract a wide range of workers. Burnout is such an issue that its definition in a company publication's glossary takes up as much space as the definition of "networking," a skill integral to the growth and development of the company (Kunda 2006:75-6). These observations imply that stress accumulates as employees spend time at the company, because the amount of time workers spend at a company is directly related to the workers' age. This indicates that there must be an insidious factor at play in the company causing the employees a great deal of angst, giving rise to burnout, and ultimately forcing them to leave their jobs.

To identify the source of this problem in the jobs at High Technologies, we will compare the work to another salaried job that attracts employees of the same age, but in which burnout is unheard of—production workers at a chemical factory.

David Halle follows the production workers in a New Jersey factory plant in his ethnography titled *America's Working Man*. Work at the factory is lonely (Halle 1987:109). Shifts are long, and they impose on the workers' social lives the biologic rhythms (Halle 1987: 115-119). Halle writes, "Most men find the work dull because it is largely routine and repetitive" (Halle 1987: 105). Additionally, the work is dangerous (Halle 1987:109-115). Workers mention the dangers placidly, and they acknowledge the risks. One worker remembers his colleague's death: "He cut off the fuel—but it killed him . . . blew him against the wall and the wall came down on him. He did the right thing, shutting it down, but it killed him" (Halle 1987: 112). Work at the chemical factory is, at best, dismal. Despite these negative aspects of the job, however, workers at the factory tend to stay for years. The ages of the employees interviewed in the ethnography ranges from 19 to mid fifties (Halle 1987: 107, 116). Halle notes that "often men with enough seniority to transfer into [a better job] wil remain in production because they can earn more money there" (Halle 1987: 118). Presumably, the oldest men have worked in the plant since they, too, were about 18 years old.

Though we cannot examine either company's motivations, we can observe how the employees of each company handle their work. Comparing the lives of the workers at High Technologies to the lives of the workers at the chemical factory reveals the concerning effect of High Technologies' regulatory system. This suggests that the recent trend of managing workers through communicating values rather than rules has detrimental effects on workers.