

Shakespeare the merchant of venice vs the film adaptation



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Understanding the characters in The Merchant of Venice 4 The character of Antonio; The Merchant 4 The charge of homosexuality within The Merchant of Venice 6 Characteristics of Shylock the Jew 6 Shakespeare's Women: Portia 8 Gender and gender relationships portrayed in the film 10 The role of 'woman' in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice; Portia 10 Female stereotyping in Merchant of Venice 11 Hierarchy in Shakespeare's world mirror of Elizabethan Society 12 Conclusion 12 Work Cited 14 To what extent does a viewing of The Merchant of Venice the movie enhance your understanding of the portrayal of character and the issues of racism and gender/gender relationships in Elizabethan society? Michael Radford's adaptation of The Merchant of Venice can be described as a dramatic device; in regards to its portrayal of characters, the issue of racism and gender/gender relationships, It can be said to be a portal into Elizabethan Society at the time of Shakespeare. This adaptation gives a very accurate visual to the written play, and through it we the reader, now the audience should be able to better understanding the points previously listed. This essay will show through the critical analysis of certain important scenes from the movie; Shylock's famous monologue, and the most important the court scene, how Shakespeare tackles and challenges these issues, and if the movie does help to better understand the characters and the issues of racism, gender and gender relationships in 16th century Elizabethan Society. The issue of Racism addressed within The Merchant of Venice. From the first scene the issue of racism is tackled head on; as it shows the Jew; Shylock being spat upon by his counterpart Antonio the Merchant. This cursory and common place way in which the issue of racism is portrayed pervades the <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice-vs-the-film-adaptation/>

film and justifies Shylocks strong reasons for demanding his pound of flesh. The anti-Jewish bigotry propels the film, as the introduction titles give a background to the marginal status and civic oppression of the Jewish population. In the film adaptation we see the Prince of Morocco come to make a bid for Portia's hand in marriage, by choosing a casket. On his arrival he greets her with these words; " Mislike me not for my complexion, the shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun..." " From this scene the theme of racism is again revisited. Due to his dark countenance he is considered as ' other', and is persecuted like the Jews, for it. ' Othering' is classified as those not accepted by society, those who don't fall in to societies expected norms. It can be said that Shakespeare was of this same mind-set as he only allots seven lines to the prince within the text, these lines shows that the prince is aware of his place within society likewise the Prince's body language and nervous discourse also conveys this sense of place; ' othering'. The court scene can be said to be the most dramatic as this is where the conflict between Antonio and Shylock is resolved. The issue of racism is once again questioned. Antonio has failed to put forward the money he owes and Shylock demands his pound of flesh. Shylock's adamant demand for Antonio's flesh is seen by the Christians as cruel, but by the Jew's just; as they support his argument by vocal outcries, within the movie. There is even a visual division within the physical outline of the court, were this one side populated by the Jews, noticeable by their red caps, and the other side populated by the Christians. There is hardly any mingling of the two races in this physical space. At the forefront of the movie there is a short description of the Jews presence in Venice during the 16th century were there presence is barely tolerated and how they were treated. They are secluded in one part

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of Venice 1956; 'old wall foundry or 'Getto'. They were to make themselves known by publicly displaying their religion, belief and race by the wearing of the red hat marking them as a Jew. At sundown they were to be behind the gates guarded by Christian. Jews were not allowed to own anything; property, and they reverted to usury; that is lending money with the addition of interest and this was against Christian law. The Christian's hatred towards the Jew is evident, when Antonio spits on Shylock, in Shylock's monologue about his treatment at the hands of the Christian's especially Antonio, hence his contempt and joy at Antonio's request for money. Through the film the audience gets a view of both 'worlds', we get a better understanding of what it meant to be a Jew living in Venice in the 16th century. Also what it meant to be a Christian and the privileges granted to being one. By staging the scenes in Venice it draws attention away from England, his main source of information while staging these plays. One would argue that Shakespeare is actually writing about the situation in England during the 16th century, therefore Michael Radford's film adaptation is a portal into the conditions in 16th century Elizabethan Society. Understanding the characters in The Merchant of Venice. The character of Antonio; The Merchant Jeremy Irons plays Antonio with a much-needed touch of dignity and compassion. As Irons playing Antonio paces his home, talking with Salerio and Solanio, as they try to understand why he feels down, they say his ships out at sea, or his heart is broken by love, Antonio denies these are the reasons why he feels thus. This scene best shows Antonio as a melancholy figure, his long sad face, his pacing back and forth, allows us to see that there is turmoil within him. Like the waves that ripple on the sea bearing Bassanio to him; this Antonio views out of his window. The answer is given; as we see Antonio's face as he

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recognizes Bassanio's approach; there is a spark of happiness, content, or excitement upon his face for a while. When Salerio suggest that he is sad because of love Bassanio's arrival comes at the exact moment, prompting a thought that Antonio may be in love with his knismen Bassanio. Through this scene we can best understand Antonio's character as melancholy and one full of emotional turmoil. When the conflict has been resolved, Antonio's life is saved, Bassanio and Gratiano's marriages are joyfully settled, we see Antonio left alone, this is mirrored in the beginning scene when Antonio hears of Bassanio's news to marry, his face allows us to see what he is feeling inside, it acts as a foreshadowing of what is to come, and also revealing something else about Antonio, his loneliness. Antonio isn't happy or belongs unless Bassanio is there. Bassanio can then be perceived as a crutch for Antonio's contentment in life despite all of his riches and wealth; he is still a lonely man by the end of the film as he was in the beginning. The court scene also reveals something about Antonio's character. He is defeated not only because he can't repay the debt he owes, but he believes that Bassanio has also forsook him now that he is happily married, Antonio is once again alone in the world, an exact mirror image of the opening scene in his home. Through these lines; " I pray you think I question you a Jew?... you may as well stand upon the beach, bid the main flood low.... You might as well question the wolf..." and Irons facial and body language; the scene conveys one of defeat and again melancholy. Throughout the movie Antonio walks around with an air of melancholy, except when he is with Bassanio, and that also changes when Bassanio states his intentions to marry. This film adaptation of the play illustrates Antonio's character well, so that the audience can best understand the very sad nature of this character. The <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice-vs-the-film-adaptation/>

charge of homosexuality within *The Merchant of Venice*. Some may say that there is an underlying theme of homosexual love between Antonio and Bassanio, however only on Antonio's side. In the film adaptation we see Antonio take Bassanio into his bedroom to discuss Bassanio's predicament. One would wonder why he chose this room. Some would say for privacy, while others would argue that Antonio wants to be alone in a private setting with Bassanio. In this scene Irons' facial expressions, as he listens and watches Bassanio as he lies on the bed, convey a sense of yearning, Antonio's character goes through a kaleidoscope of emotions, from yearning to happiness to sadness. From this scene one could argue for or against this form of love, and if the movie does in fact convey a homosexual love from Antonio to Bassanio.

Characteristics of Shylock the Jew

Readers tend to agree that Shylock is the most noteworthy character within the play, however it has been difficult on how to read him; 'bloodthirsty bogeyman', 'clownish Jewish stereotype', or 'a tragic figure; whose sense of decency has been fractured by the persecution he endures, making Shylock a very complex character, never the less he is certainly the text's antagonist.

Shakespeare has constructed Shylock's character as one of his

circumstance, this is evident in his pursuit of his pound of flesh, he still mentions the cruelty he endures at the hand of Christians, and this skews the readers' vision of him as a complete monster. One of Shakespeare's famous monologues gives an in-depth insight to his reasoning for his actions; the product of lessons taught to him by the cruelty of the Christian and Venetian citizens; this is seen in the movie as Shylock speaks to Solanio and Solanio: "... he hath disgraced me, and hindered me... half a million laugh at my losses, mock at my gain, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains,

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cooled my friends, heated my enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew! "

Shylocks cold and calculating steps to exact his pound of flesh from Antonio, allows the reader to view him in a negative light, however there are times that Shakespeare paints him in human moment; this is scene in the movie when Shylock has returned home from dinner with Bassanio and Antonio, and his daughter is not there. He searches the home and realizes she is gone, the film has shylock weeping for the loss of his daughter, but for the most part he is painted as a cruel, miserable and prosaic figure. Al Pacino brings a very driven, remorseful rage to the role of Shylock, emphasizing Shylock's grief as much as his viciousness. More than that, his estrangement from the other actors, a liability in more conventional movie dramas, makes sense, given Shylock's status as an outsider, who speaks a rougher verse than his Christian antagonists. Director Michael Radford stays faithful to the play, in particular the most fascinating angle: the moral ambiguity of Shylock. Is he a manipulating, money-hungry snake, or a man who has every right to seek vengeance against the men who have condemned him? Was Shylock's contract with Antonio a misguided sign of his goodwill, or was it an ill wish that was granted? With his life falling apart, should he be blamed for his desire to cut Antonio's flesh? The usurer's shifty moral character drives the movie, he is meek and humble in one scene, impassioned the next, Shylock's character is so multi-layered, that the audience can't seem to get a read on him making him the very complex character. Shakespeare's

Women: Portia Portia is portrayed with the virtues of Shakespeare's women; wealth, beauty and wit. However in the beginning of the play her autonomy is limited by the degree her father left in his will, stipulating the outline on how she should be wed. " This opening appearance, however, proves to be a

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revealing introduction to Portia, who emerges as that rarest of combinations—a free spirit who abides rigidly by rules. " The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies by Penny Gay. Limited by her loyalty to abide by her father's wishes, she watches as a stream of suitors pass by her, happy to see them go, but yet sad that she has no choice in the matter. We see this in the film as the first the Prince of Morocco and then the Prince of Aragon come to make a bid for her hand. As the Prince of Aragon come forward to make his choice he reads of the plague and attempts to make a joke that only his side laughs at, there is apparent shock and disgust on Portia's face, there is even a sense of dread and dismay, as she hopes he fails the test. Portia is also portrayed as resourceful; this is evident when Portia in the play begs the man she loves to stay a while before picking a chest, and finding loopholes in the will's provision that we never thought possible. In the film the manifestation of these loopholes comes in the form of Portia telling Narissa to place a cup of wine on the correct casket; as Bassanio is a known 'sponge', i. e drunkard, and it would more likely prompt him to choose that casket. As well the loopholes can be perceived from her body language. As Bassanio approaches the caskets to make his choice, we see Portia in the background by the window, going through an emotional turmoil displayed by her facial expressions, her audible pleasures and displeasures. One can argue that she does this in hopes to steer Bassanio to the correct casket, as she relaxes when he is in front of the lead casket, and then gets agitated and nervous when it seems he is going to choose the gold or silver casket. Portia rejects the stuffiness that rigid adherence to the law might otherwise suggest. In her courtroom appearance, she vigorously applies the law, but still flouts convention by appearing disguised as a man. Then after depriving

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Bassanio of his ring, she stops the prank before it goes too far, but still takes it far enough to berate Bassanio and Gratiano for their callousness, and she even insinuates that she has been unfaithful. In these scenes we can better understand Portia's character as being not only beautiful, and witty but also resourceful as she works within the confines of her father's rules and even the law, and still gets what she desires. Gender and gender relationships portrayed in the film "Literary critics acknowledge unease with the presence of stereotypical elements in Shakespeare's female characters and more especially when, after a more individual treatment, there is a return to stereotyping at the end of the play..." Shakespeare's Women by David Mann.

The role of 'woman' in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice: Portia In the Merchant of Venice Portia is an embodiment of the virtues that are typical in Shakespeare women; quick witted, wealthy and beautiful. Therefore it isn't really a surprise that she becomes the antidote to Shylock's malice. However for Portia to do this we see her done a disguise. In Elizabethan Society women weren't allowed to practice law. She uses a disguise of autonomy of a man to gain entrance into their world to bring justice to Antonio. Why does Portia appear in the courtroom disguised as a man? This question tackles the issue of gender and gender relationships within the play. "We need to be able to recognize Portia while she gives the Mercy Speech because the Mercy Speech is the defining moment in the play for Portia. It is the moment when we realize that she is noble and courageous (and much more intelligent than anyone else in the courtroom)." Shakespeare's Women in Drag: Portia by Lee Lady. Arguably this scene and Portia in disguise in the movie helps us to better understand where women stood in society, as Shakespeare places Portia in a 'space' she should not be occupying, it can <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice-vs-the-film-adaptation/>

be said that Shakespeare was challenging society at that time. Some critics go so far to say that he is a feminist. How true is this? Within the court scene as Shylock argues his case and demands his pound of flesh Portia in the disguise of a young male lawyer, supports his argument and his stand; "... it must not be, there is no power in Venice can alter a degree establish.... Cannot be" Shylock then says; " a Daniel come to judge me, yea a Daniel. Oh wise young judge how I do honour you. " Shylock believes that Portia is in agreement with him and is arguing in his behalf. However the twist comes when Portia says: " Tarry a little, there is something else. This bound does give you here no drop of blood" Anybody can break the rules, but Portia's effectiveness comes from her ability to make the law work for her. Female stereotyping in Merchant of Venice " If you are playing one of Shakespeare's women, you are by definition in a supporting role" says Juliet Stevenson in Shakespeare's Women by David Mann. This is could be said of Nerissa played by Heather Goldenhersh, who not only plays as a support for Portia but for Gratiano as well. Nerissa character fulfils two roles within the play, friend and confident to Portia and lover to wife for Gratiano. David Mann describes Nerissa, a stereotypical character, as a narrative subordinate; " Above all, the main function of stereotyping is to provide easily recognisable subordinate characters to support the narrative around the more three dimensional main characters. " Shakespeare's Women by David Mann. Nerissa is Portia's servant, she fulfils the role of confidant, and friend, even adviser at times but she is also in Portia's employ. She would be classified in Elizabethan times as a lady-in-waiting, in the movie in every scene that a suitor calls upon Portia to make their choice so too is Nerissa. She stands proxy as a friend in these scenes; we can tell as Portia usually leans upon <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice-vs-the-film-adaptation/>

her and whispers in her ear. We are however still aware that Nerissa belongs to Portia, in the movie as they celebrate Bassanio and Portia wedding nuptials, Nerissa through Gratiano has to ask permission to be wed, "Femininity is thus seen as a (delightful) deficiency." Shakespeare's Women by David Mann. Hierarchy in Shakespeare's world mirror of Elizabethan Society? Through the film adaptation we can see the structure of a hierarchy. The Christian's above the Jews, men over women, the Duke as royal over the merchant and the Jew. These binaries allow for the characters to fill their roles: as Portia plays out the role of a woman, and a man through disguise, Bassanio plays the role of the man by taking a wife and securing his future fortune through her. Even so Shylock fulfils his role as the 'Jew' bitter and vengeful, demanding his pound of flesh. The movie brings to light this hierarchal society that was present within Elizabethan society as well, and allows the audience to understand the stereotypes accorded to these characters. Conclusion Michael Radford's film adaptation of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice is successful in representing Elizabethan society and issues within. Racism, gender and gender relationships are all conveyed through the actors displaying of the characters virtues and vices. We the audience understands that Antonio is a lonely melancholy character, Shylock is complex, Nerissa and Portia are the stereotypical Shakespeare woman, and other characters like Solario, Gratiano and Solanio are identified as narrative subordinates; supporting the main characters. " Whether plots are driven by the desire for true love to triumph or the achievement of revenge for some terrible wrong, or whether they relate back to the older struggle of the psychomachia, what they all have in common is a central conflict, what the Greeks called agon, usually between opposing sets of values and <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-the-merchant-of-venice-vs-the-film-adaptation/>

loyalties but expressed through the individual characters. " Shakespeare's Women by David Mann. Works Cited 1. Mangan, Michael. A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies 1594-1603. Longman 1st Edition 26th January 1996. 2. Mann, David. Shakespeare's Women. Cambridge University Press 2008. 3. Beth Rose, Mary. Renaissance Drama as Cultural History; Essays from Renaissance Drama 1977-1987. North-western University Press 1990. 4. Gay, Penny. The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies. Cambridge University Press. 7th April 2008. 5. Wildes, John. The Merchant of Venice: A Casebook " Shakespeare's Women in Drag: Portia by Lee Lady. February 2002.