

# Merchant of venice film analysis



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

English 101-210 Final Draft Battle of the Directors The Merchant of Venice, also known as “The Jew of Venice” is a drama play originally written by William Shakespeare in 1598. The major conflict occurs when a man named Antonio (Venetian merchant) fails to pay off a loan to a greedy Jewish money lender known as Shylock who demands a pound of flesh from Antonio in return. Antonio and his friends take a journey through friendship, love, and hatred in an attempt to free him of his pound of flesh fate induced by Shylock.

Imagine yourself sitting in the master minds of directors Michael Radford and John Sichel while they are directing their adaptations of the play. Imagine experiencing their unique ideas first hand looking through their eyes and listening to their silent thoughts. You ask yourself how so many ideas run through their minds and what their intents are; is one director more creative than the other? In this essay I will take you on an adventure of my interpretation of two scenes that will show you how Sichel’s directing is more effective than Radford’s.

There are a couple of different versions of this movie but two of the directors approach the same two scenes from the film “The Merchant of Venice” in an extremely different perspective. John Sichel’s version of “The Merchant of Venice” was created in 1973; major characters are Shylock (Laurence Olivier), Portia (Joan Plowright), Bassanio (Jeremy Brett), and Antonio (Anthony Nicholls) (“The Merchant of Venice” (TV 1973)). In 2004 director Michael Radford produced his adaptation of this film starring Al Pacino (Shylock), Jeremy Irons (Antonio), Lynn Collins (Portia), and Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio (“The Merchant of Venice” (2004)).

Sichel and Radford present their scenes in different way which makes the character's personality appear different. The choices Sichel makes when directing his film seem to make his characters more empowered. Radford's decisions support his characters but have less of an effect on the viewer. This effect is how the audience's point of view on the scene being displayed. Sichel makes his characters seem more empowered when the Prince of Morocco comes to Belmont in solitude in purpose to obtain Portia's hand in marriage by choosing the correct casket of the three under her father's will when comparing his choices to Radford's.

Sichel also draws attention to his characters more when Portia and Nerissa are accusing Gratiano and Bassanio of giving away their rings to other women. This is shown through the characters actions and how the use of light has an effect on the viewer. This essay will compare and contrast the differences in both theatrical versions of this play and how the different choices from the directors affect the viewer's standpoint. Sichel's unique ways of setting his characters apart from Radford's is brought about through their actions which reveal the symbol of bravery.

In Radford's 1973 film, the prince of Morocco comes to Portia's home in Belmont alone in an attempt to choose to right casket out of the three (gold, silver, and lead). These caskets are in the shape of a triangle in the center of the room, with Portia and Nerissa standing off to the side. If he is to choose the right casket he will have the reward of marrying Portia under her father's will (23: 60 – 29: 38)(“ YouTube – The Merchant of Venice (1973). Part 4 of 14”). The first thing that stood out was the fact that he came alone.

The director choose to have him come to Belmont alone, his choice may give the audience the opinion that the prince of Morocco is exceedingly confident when choosing the correct casket. When comparing the same scene from Sichel's movie to Radford's 2004 film, the prince of Morocco is accompanied by some of his friends when making an effort to pick the right casket. These caskets are in a line off to the left of the room with Portia and Nerissa standing beside one another (34: 54 – 38: 07)(“ YouTube – The Merchant of Venice – 2004 R; (lektor) – Part 3/10”).

This choice of scene may affect the viewer's belief that the prince of Morocco may be insecure and needs his friends to accompany him when making the decision. By having the prince travel alone it appears that he has more to offer in the sense of bravery and boldness to Portia compared to when he comes with his friends. The viewers could see that Sichel uses the prince seeking for love in solitude as a symbol of nobility and heroicism to support the character's personality. The audience watching Radford's interpretation may give them the opinion that his choice lowers the prince's independence by bringing in unnecessary characters.

This choice does not present the characters very well when compared to Sichel's. Analyzing the same scene above but in a different perspective it is apparent to the viewer that in Sichel's film the setup of the caskets can be seen as symbolic to the prince's actions. The prince is standing behind the triangle shaped display of caskets and asks Portia how he will know if he chooses the right one, after her response he says, “ some God direct my judgment...” while looking up at the ceiling (26: 42 – 26: 45)( “ YouTube – The Merchant of Venice (1973). Part 4 of 14. ”).

The shape of a triangle stands for many beliefs according to many ancient beliefs. This shape is associated with the number 3 for there are three caskets to choose from. Each corner is said to symbolize “ The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”; while this shape is said to represent God the prince of Moscow looks up towards the ceiling as if he was looking up at a God. Some cultures believe that when the triangle is pointed upwards it represents the power of man, when pointed downwards it resembles female sexuality. If these ancient beliefs are true then the director’s choice of setup plays a major role in symbolism.

This choice affects how the viewer comprehends the scene. Based on this director’s decision his viewers could believe that the triangle setup plays a major role because if the prince were to choose the right casket he would obtain Portia as a wife (female sexuality) with her hand in marriage (male power). In Radford’s movie his caskets are set up in a linear formation so when the prince wants to view each of the caskets he can see all of them at once since they are lined up right next to each other. By having this formation Radford’s audience may interpret this scene as making it harder for the character to focus on a single one.

If Radford’s formation were compared to Sichel’s set up, the spinning triangular shape allows the character to focus on a specific one without having the distraction of the others sitting right next to it. Sichel also puts the caskets in this rotating figure in a unique way for the camera’s view. When the prince is looking at a specific casket the angle of the camera gives the appearance of the other ones are smaller since they are behind the one

that is being focused on thus bringing more attention to the casket he is contemplating on.

In Sichel's film the character's actions and the set up of the caskets are parallel to one another. Sichel's audience may believe that he is making his characters more aggressive than Radford's. This makes the scene much more intense to watch. By adding aggressive body language to the characters this can symbolize control over one another. In Sichel's film, Portia and Nerissa (Portia's friend) accuse both Gratiano and Bassanio (Antonio's friend) for giving the rings to other woman when the men had promised that they would never part from these cherished possessions.

While Portia is scolding Bassanio for giving up the special ring she gets directly in front of him and starts walking into him causing him to back up. This scene is taken place outside of a building (01: 49: 58 – 01: 53: 25)( “ YouTube – The Merchant of Venice (1973). Part 13 of 14. “). While his viewers are watching this scene they may get the opinion that Portia has complete dominance over Bassanio because he is backing away from her while she is holding him responsible for the loss of the ring. Sichel's choice may give the effect that Bassanio feels inferior to Portia at this point because he draws back and doesn't try to stand up her.

When comparing this exact scene to Radford's film, Bassanio is confronted by Portia in the same manner but when she approaches him in an aggressive way he does not back down (01: 50: 45 – 01: 54: 47)( YouTube – The Merchant of Venice – 2004 R; (lektor) – Part 10/10). Radford's choice in action may affect the outlook of his audience believing that Bassanio is not

afraid of Portia nor does he feel inferior to her. In fact, by not backing away from her he is showing her that he is superior over her. Stereotypically Men are often seen more dominant over women in this world.

On the contrary, it appears that Sichel switches the roles of man and woman. Instead of the man being the superior one it is the woman. His style of directing brings out more questioning of the audience as to why he may have done or is there a specific effect he wants on the audience. That's what you have to ask yourself when analyzing these scenes. The same scene above is being speculated in this paragraph. The spectator's perspective may vary due to the different uses of light each director displays.

In Sichel's production he chooses to have his characters outside during the day time while arguing and Radford's characters are inside a room with absence of light. One's perception of this scene can be taken out of context and seen as symbolic to the characters' identity and truth. In Sichel's film he may give the idea to the viewer that his use of background lighting in the scene may reveal the characters' identity. When compared to Radford's adaptation his audience may see the lighting as a tool that conceals the character's identity. Sichel's setting of the scene takes place outside where he uses the sunlight as his lighting.

The brighter lighting symbolizes truth because light reveals. One example of light representing truth comes from Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" where in order to obtain the truth the people must seek light. The saying, "Seeing is believing" is another example where it is an idiom which figuratively means that only physical evidence is convincing. This saying supports that light

represents truth because out of the five senses that humans acquire sight is what people depend on most, without this it can be hard for some people to grasp what is real to them or not.

This is the reason why people often say, “ Show me, I need to see it for my own eyes” when an unbelievable event or object is present. In the same scene, Radford’s setting on the other hand takes place during the night time inside of a building that is not well lit making it harder for the audience to see the expressions of the characters. By having the scene in a darker setting this could be seen as essentially concealing each of the characters’ identity setting a negative mood. If light represents truth then lack of light must represent the opposite, lies.

The lies could most definitely be seen as the flaws hidden in the darkness of the room. Directors Michael Radford and John Sichel each have a unique adaptation of “ The Merchant of Venice” which gives the viewers a different perspective of each film. Sichel’s supports his characters more effectively through the choices he makes when directing his film. All of their choices when directing their interpretations affect the audience’s perspective in different ways. Sichel’s ideas and representations differ from Radford’s through the character’s actions, symbolism, and the setting of the scene.

Just by analyze these scenes there are many examples where symbolism is portrayed and where hidden aspects are revealed. The symbols of bravery, God, aggressiveness, and truth are exposed through the actions of the characters, inanimate objects, body language, and light exposure. Will you look at these two scenes differently after reading this essay? When the



directors made their film they wanted their audience (you and I) to be effected in each scene in a sense of what thoughts were going through our minds.

By sharing this paper with you I am starting a generation of how these scenes affected me. I challenge you now to continue this generation and analyze these scenes to let others know what your interpretations are and how each of the director's actions may affect the viewpoint of the audience. If one was to just sit down and take the time to look past the obviousness of a scene from any movie, without any distractions, anyone could spark their world of imagination and discover the undiscoverable. Like people often say, " It is how you look at it that makes a difference. "