WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S

The Merchant of Venice

DIRECTORS
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DESIGNERS
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Directors' Note

WHEN DECIDING WHAT PLAY TO DO, THE MERCHANT OF VENICE SEEMED LIKE THE PERFECT PLAY TO PERFORM FOR AN AUDIENCE IN THIS DAY AND AGE. In contemporary theatre productions, shows have characters with extreme personalities, often separating them from the “average Joes” of the 21st century. Shakespearean plays, however, tend to have characters that can stand the test of time, staying relevant to the modern audience. The Merchant of Venice is just that play, with some of the most relatable characters in all of theatre.

The cast of characters includes everyone from a villain seeking revenge to the protagonist who finds himself knee-deep in trouble. The play has a character for everyone to relate to. Audience members can find themselves connecting with Antonio as he tries to do what’s best for his friend, while others will find themselves in Shylock as he struggles to get his wanted revenge. The characters within the play also include a daughter trying to get away from her father’s rules, a young man trying to get a leg up in society, and a brave young woman who is willing to take risks. This cast of relatable characters keeps the audience engaged throughout the play, keeping it relevant even in today’s society.

Though the cast of characters can carry on from decade to decade, we didn’t want to keep it in the same era. Instead, we chose to modernize the play to make it more relatable to the audience. Keeping the same central plot as the original, such as names and occupations, we worked to change the setting and the overall feel of the play. To do this we found ourselves looking over the play again and focusing on the dramatized play of crime and punishment; this focuses mainly the plot with Shylock getting his pound of flesh from Antonio. The drama reminded us of a popular television show Law and Order where the initial crime is taken to an extreme and the court scenes are intense. The Law and Order theme also worked as the show exposes the personal lives of those involved, and the play does the same thing. This theme seemed perfect for audiences, as it would make the piece more interesting and familiar to the modern generation.

Plot Summary

A MERCHANT IN VENICE NAMED ANTONIO HAS A FRIEND WHO IS IN DIRE NEED OF A LOAN. He has the money, but at the moment it is all invested elsewhere. The friend in need of the money is Bassanio, who needs it to make a trip to Belmont and court the beautiful Portia. Since Antonio doesn’t have the money now he advises Bassanio to go to a local money lender and have Antonio basically cosign on the loan. They decide to go to Shylock, a Jewish money lender who has a grudge against Antonio for the way Antonio treats the Jews. Putting the grudges aside Shylock agrees to let them have the money but says that if not paid on time, a pound of Antonio’s flesh will be the collateral.

Portia meanwhile has seen potential suitor after suitor with all of them coming up as not worthy. She does recall however a trip from Bassanio in the past, and is quite fond of him. Upon Bassanio entering Belmont he immediately does all the correct things to win Portia’s hand in marriage. Bassanio’s traveling partner, Gratiano, falls in love with Portia’s servant Nerissa, and there is a double wedding for the four of them. The celebration ends abruptly when Antonio finds out that his fortune is lost at sea and he cannot pay Shylock back for the loan. A trial is set immediately, Nerissa and Portia decide to dress up as men and attend.

Ignoring any begging for Antonio’s life, Shylock demands his pound of flesh. The Duke of Venice calls for the legal expert who is actually Portia dressed up as a man. In a confusing mess of Portia using legal jargon to tell Shylock that he does indeed deserve his pound of flesh, but says also that if he cuts over or under a pound he shall be punished severely, she eventually gets Shylock to accept a deal that ends up with him converting to Christianity and giving up half of his fortune.

After the trial the two women speak to their unknowing husbands and trick them into giving up a wedding gift to them that the men were not supposed to part with. Eventually, back in Belmont, they tell the men their disguises and are very relieved. The other great news that comes in is that Antonio’s fortune has not actually been lost and all is well again.
Theme

THOUGH THE PLAY HAS SEVERAL MINOR THEMES, THERE IS A LARGER
THEME THAT CONCERNS RELATIONSHIPS AND THE TRUST WE PUT INTO THEM.
The play represents several relationships, including those between friends,
lovers, family, and enemies.

The most common relationship is that between friends. Close friends will
easily become family and it is natural to place your trust in them, the play
shows this through several relationships. One relationship is between Portia
and Nerissa. The two come from different class upbringings, yet they are still
close. They confined in each other all of their secrets. Portia is also able to
trust Nerissa to follow her to Belmont for Antonio’s trial without exposing
them. This is Shakespeare’s way of showing the close bond between friends.

Shakespeare also expresses this through the friendships of male
characters. There are several strong friendships with males in the play.
Gratiano represents the overprotective friend. He is a symbol of the ultimate
kind of trust among friends, the man that can always be counted on as the
protector in the group. In the play, the relationship between Bassanio and
Antonio is somewhat skewed from the average male friendship.

Shakespeare uses the two as expressions of an unusual kind of trust.
Instead of just being best friends, like the Nerissa and Portia, a new element
is added to the men’s friendship, that of love. Though it is debatable whether
the love between the two characters is platonic or not, there is a distinct
form of trust that is not seen in other relationships. There is an unspoken
trust that has developed after years of loyalty and contact between the
two men. It could be said that this is a relationship that Shakespeare added to
the play to show how heightened the trust can get after friendship has been
established for a number of years. Antonio, who arguably loves Bassanio, will
always be there for his friend or lover, there is no questioning that. Their bond
makes it so that they can have a neverending trust with each other that isn’t
threatened by other character’s actions.

While Shakespeare touches on good trust in his character’s relationships
he also exposes the result of a distrustful relationship. The villain, Shylock
holds no trust in relationships making cold. He has a lack of trust with his
daughter leading her to run away form home, only reinforcing his lack of
trust. It could be argued that the only thing Shylock trusts in is that Antonio’s
money will fall through, making his only trust in that of impending hardships.
Another wary relationship exists between Portia and Bassanio. The ring was
example of that. Given to Bassanio by Portia, the ring was meant to symbolize
their love for one another. Portia however used it to find out how much
Bassanio could be trusted in the relationship.

The Merchant of Venice uses the theme to show strong relationships, as well
as distrustful relationships, and how they affect the people involved.

Symbolism

A SCALE
Why this bond is forfeit;
And lawfully by this time the Jew may claim
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
Nearest the merchants heart. (4.1.226-228)

A balance scale is a prime symbol for this play. It can represent the
pound of flesh that Shylock wants from Antonio. This is very important in
the play because Shylock only wants the amount that is due to him, and
Portia explains that he is to take no more or no less than his weight in flesh
that he asks for. This balance can represent the difference between life and
death, pleasure and pain for Antonio because if it is ever tipped to one side
by Shylock it is due to Antonio being cut to pieces. This scale can also be
displayed to portray the unbalance within the different religions represented
in the play. There is a strong tip of favor for the Christians than the Jews.

A RING
Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,
And when she put it on she made me vow
That I should neither sell nor give nor lose it. (4.1.436-438)

An engagement ring would be a good symbol as well, because it meant so
much to Portia as a wife giving it to her husband, and when it was given back
to her dressed as a man, it hurt her. This action resembled Bassanio having a
greater love for his best friend than his wife. The ring also represents Portia
giving over power of her household and allowing Bassanio to rule over her as
a man and her husband.

A CROSS
Two things provided more, --that for that favor
He presently become a Christian. (4.1.381-382)

A cross would be a good symbol for this play because of the weight of the power
given to the Christians throughout the play. They treat the Jews with
disrespect and even in this play where Shylock the Jew just wants justice he
ends up being tricked in the end and having less than he began with, he is
even ordered to change his religion by the court as punishment for seeking
what was due unto him. A cross can represent the how much the Christians
rule in this play.
Designers' Note

Neither of us were familiar with William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* when we started this project. We both had to do some of our own research in order to get more comfortable with the material. We utilized what our collaborators had said about the play and took their advice on what direction we should go in. They listed a few symbolic items and recommended we utilize them in the poster. We tried to illustrate the feel of how they adapted the play into an episode of *Law & Order* to the best of our ability.

Originally, we wanted to work with the symbols that had the strongest meaning. We thought the ring, the balance scale and a knife or dagger interacting together would hold the most symbolic meaning. We wanted to make the title a focal point in order to draw in potential viewers, but mostly wanted to illustrate the original concept in more than just four words. We initially struggled when it came to our illustrations. This was simply because the symbols we chose to use weren’t the easiest to represent through simple vector illustrations. It was a challenge for us to come up with a concept that looked professional yet held a sense of originality and creativity to it.

Overall we found this to be quite the challenge artistically. We were weary on what colors would work best with the gold of the ring and had to make some sacrifices. Eventually we got rid of the balance scale as working with it proved to be too awkward. We chose the background color because it represents the turquoise ring which is a big part of the play. The rest was kept simple with the bold black of the title and the gold of the ring. We had to play with the positioning of the hand, ring and dagger quite a bit until we found we found it to meet to our creative standards. We played with the layout until we came to a design we liked and thought our collaborators would find to be a visually appealing representation of their adaptation of the play. We think that it reflects their concepts and ideas well and that both our creative voices show through.
This program and the corresponding theater poster were produced as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration between students in two Shakespeare in Context classes and two Graphic Design Two classes at Drake University in Spring 2011. The program is typeset in Chaparral Pro.

This project was conceived and organized by Sarah Hogan (Department of English) and Hilary Williams (Department of Art & Design).
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

ORDER ADAPTATION

A PRESENT DAY LAW