WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

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**Directors’ Note**

*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IS A COMEDY* that was written during a time of incredible social, economic, and religious turmoil. Contemporary interpretations do a fine job of capturing the rich comedy that is at the heart of the play but the esoteric mores and class divisions that flesh out the world in which the comedy takes place are often lost amidst their emphasis on gender confusion, misunderstandings, and generally foolish behavior. Many interpretations also avoid the play’s religious complications—anti-Semitism—by making Shylock a sympathetic character rather than the bumbling idiot or heartless villain, as he was likely to have been perceived by audiences of Shakespeare’s time.

To give this interpretation a sense of social structure, the rather common backdrop of late 1980s criminal culture will be utilized. Setting the scene at this time is representative of the genesis of the antihero which became a staple in popular culture at the turn of the decade. In the late 16th century commoners were seen as low and base, but since contemporary American culture tends to fancy itself as classless, making a character poor is not enough to evoke the vitriol of the audience. Being disgusted by poverty isn’t acceptable, but being disgusted by drug addicts bearing the scars of their addiction, both physical and psychological, is not only a socially acceptable impulse but one that is hard to contain for even the most sympathetic of the privileged citizens that tend to make up the audiences of Shakespeare performances today.

Representing Christians and Jews as warring drug cartels as well as oppositional religions may, we hope, bring the religious conflict that complicates this play for modern audiences to the forefront rather than taming it. The social, economic and religious contests of The Merchant of Venice compromised and reflected the cultural conflicts of the early modern England, and the intent of this interpretation is to highlight these aspects of the play in a way that will do the same for a modern audience. We have chosen this setting not for novelty’s sake, but in order to highlight the play’s ethical issues and re-imbue it with the visceral drama that can only be achieved by tugging at the audience’s sense of morality. With this re-imaging of The Merchant of Venice, we hope to expose the binaries upon which prejudices are built upon by subverting and absorbing them—the combination of these two strategies has a similar effect to a stream of tears smearing a circus clown’s makeup. This sight would frighten and bewilder a circus-going child, and we hope our audience experiences a similar shock at our interpretation.

**Plot Summary**

*IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD VENICE, THE DRUG LORD ANTONIO* complains to his friends about his discontent. His friends dismiss his depression, saying it’s because his goods at sea haven’t yet reached port. Bassanio, one of Antonio’s friends and in this production, thugs, asks to borrow some cash so he can win the famously beautiful, rich Portia of Belmont. Antonio suggests he borrow money from someone else in the city in Antonio’s name because all of his money is invested in another deal.

In Belmont, the heiress Portia is also depressed, but for a more specific reason—the challenge her deceased father has set for her suitors. Her friend, Nerissa, also dismisses her sorrow and asks about several of the suitors, none of which please Portia in the least. She fondly remembers Bassanio instead.

Back in Venice, Shylock is lending Bassanio money in Antonio’s name. Shylock holds a grudge against Antonio for mistreating the Jews in various ways. They make the deal that Shylock gets a pound of Antonio’s flesh if he doesn’t pay in time. One of Shylock’s thugs decides to leave him to work for Bassanio instead, hoping for better treatment. The Christians invite Shylock to a masked ball so they can steal away his daughter, Jessica, who is in love with their friend Lorenzo. She escapes from Shylock’s house by dressing as a boy, and after the party Bassanio and his friend Gratiano leave for Belmont.

In Belmont, the Prince of Morocco tries and fails to win Portia’s challenge. In Venice, Shylock is driven practically insane by the loss of his daughter and some of his wealth, but rejoices in the news that Antonio’s money has been lost in the latest deal. In Belmont, Prince Aragon also tries and fails to win the challenge. Then Bassanio arrives, and he and Portia express their love for one another before he tries and wins the challenge, after which Gratiano confesses he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The four of them decide to have a double wedding, and Portia gives Bassanio a ring and makes him promise never to lose it. Lorenzo and Jessica arrive unexpectedly, bearing the news that Antonio is in danger because he has been unable to pay his debt. Gratiano and Bassanio leave immediately to try and save him, and Nerissa and Portia soon follow after in disguise.

At the trial, in our production a justice system of the drug underworld, Portia in disguise as a young male clerk saves Antonio from Shylock’s revenge and turns the charges against him instead. Shylock is forced to become a Christian as the utmost punishment and all the Christian couples, after the women reveal their disguises, enjoy a happy ending at his expense.
Theme

Setting the merchant of venice in a modern-day drug underworld holds fewer complications than one would initially expect. The stark competition between Jews and Christians translates quite well from the early modern period into the materialistic modern society and Shylock’s violent revenge is completely justifiable in the drug underworld. The strong female characters’ motivations are now much easier to understand, as they are dealing with situations for the most part out of their control—Portia’s druglord father has put her in a position of power, and she must follow his wishes in order to protect herself and those for whom she is responsible.

Perhaps the most unconventional approach taken in this interpretation is the depiction of Shylock as a druglord antihero, sort of a Scarface a la Dolemite. One thing that makes Shakespeare such an intelligent writer is that almost all of his characters are multi-dimensional. Since so many of his characters have intelligent motivations, the difference between hero and villain is formed primarily by the performers. Thus, Shylock can be transformed into a protagonist via a swagger in his step and the lax moral expectations of a druglord. As a result, a play that antagonizes Judaism appropriately becomes about antagonists, albeit in plot alone. The drug scene shows the stark, locked-in class system better than regular modern life or modern portrayals of early modern life because the life on a drug addict can reach a whole new dimension of grim desires. In conjunction with Shylock’s role as an anti-hero, this leaves space for those oppressed by the class structure to be the true victims of the play.

It’s all nicely summed up in Antonio’s speech in Act IV:

So please my lord the Duke and all the courts
To quit the fine for one half of his goods
I am content, so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it,
Upon his death, unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more: that for this favor
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift
Here in the court of all he dies possessed
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.”

(4.1.375-385)

This excerpt conveniently covers almost all of the themes we wish to address. The conflict between the Christians and the Jew comes to a climax as violence is done upon Shylocks faith. The emphasis on the importance of land can easily be translated into territory for drug dealing. And furthermore, while this is intended as an act of mercy of Antonio’s part, it can also easily be read as not only a strategic maneuver but also a death threat.

If nothing else, we hope that this interpretation challenges the notion that the world is black and white. None of our characters can be seen as good or bad—the women are victims, yes, but they also have their own agendas. The Christians are tricky and deceitful but they want a much less violent end than does Shylock. We hope the audience leaves with questions about American culture and identity, as well as having enjoyed more than a few good laughs.
Symbolism

The cross and the Star of David symbolize religion, one of the most significant subjects in The Merchant of Venice. From the opening scenes of our production, these symbols are shown as a brand, literally a tattoo, that divides people into sectors of society. We are especially focused on highlighting the separation created between the Christians—who always seem to have the upper hand not because of their own abilities and ambitions, but because of the group they were born into—and the Jews, who in contrast are limited by society’s expectations for them. Shylock’s famous monologue in Act 3 Scene 1 suggests that people are equal despite which group they identify with, but in the end, the Christians force their own identity on him. The brands of the cross and the Star of David could be said to show the power that societal institutions hold over the characters of The Merchant of Venice.

While the mask is not an immediately obvious symbol within The Merchant of Venice, it plays an especially important role in our production. If The Merchant of Venice could be a microcosm of our world, the mask represents the confusion, misunderstandings, and trickery that all people create. In his warning to Jessica in Act 2, Scene 5 Shylock unknowingly foreshadows the Christians’ trickery. He tells her not “to gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces,” but he is surrounded by superficiality for the rest of the play—the invitation to the masque itself was a trick, his own daughter uses a disguise to escape, and in the end, another disguise takes away his victory. The Christian trickery wins over Shylock’s honest actions throughout the play, suggesting that those who wear masks will succeed. Taking the pound of flesh is a physical metaphor for Shylock’s fight against superficiality—he literally desires more than the skin-deep.

A scale is used most prominently in The Merchant of Venice in preparation to measure the pound of flesh that is never cut from Antonio’s chest. As the removal of this flesh would have meant Antonio’s death, the measurement is made more significant since it is his mortal soul that is being weighed as well. Since at least ancient Egypt, scales such as those of Anubis have been used as a symbol for the measure of a mortal’s worth. Also a symbol of justice, balance, commerce, and a common tool of the drug trade, the scale is a prominent sign within The Merchant of Venice. Within the mortal mind, hence Gods notwithstanding, the tendency and the ability to judge another are at significant odds. Identification with an antihero is derived from a celebration of agency, and with Shylock in this role, the judgment of the Christians, or perhaps any judgment, for better or worse, is resented for the same reason Shylock is—for being what it is.

Designers’ Note

William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice presents the timeless, fundamental clash between religious groups. While it seems that these feuds are something of the past, there are similar (if not the same) conflicts existing in today’s world. Our illustration aims at presenting these conflicting ideologies in a subtle, yet evocative, manner. The traditional symbols, the star of David and the cross, are avoided and other symbols are used as cues. The implied exchange approaches depicting the beginning to Shylock’s troubles.

The type used was chosen to reference drug lines while also creating an eerie or mysterious aura to the work. While The Merchant of Venice is already known as a tragic comedy, appropriating this play into the context of the ’80s drug culture is something new and interesting which we hoped to highlight in the poster and playbook.
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).