WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

The Merchant of Venice

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DESIGNERS
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Directors' Note

Our adaptation of The Merchant of Venice is set in the 1980s, a decade that played host to a variety of societal shifts concerning homosexuality. The AIDS epidemic that arose during this time period forced society to wrestle with the issue head-on. Controversy and friction resulted, causing a clash between conservatives and progressives and a rift between the older and the younger generations of the time.

Similarly, the original Shakespeare version is also driven by cultural warfare—Christianity versus Judaism. Christian society held the dominant role over the Jews in 16th-century Venice (as in England, where Jews had been banished since the 13th century). Yet Jews were making a rise through the practice of usury—a form of business that was outside Christian law. As the play develops, the power of a Jewish usurer threatens the life of a Christian via the details of a business contract. Conflict ensues between Jews and Christians as it did between the gay culture and the socially conservative mindset in the 1980s. Jessica is a foil for these conflicts by abandoning her cultural identity and the conservative views of her father.

By having a male actor play Shylock, the only performer of the same sex as his character, he is the only one who appears “normal.” Besides Shylock, all of the characters in one way or another wear masks and costumes, deceive and steal, and disown personal culture and family to attain what they want. Shylock wants to protect his daughter from this duplicity. The other characters in our version are played by actors whose sex is opposite that of their roles. These characters are in obvious drag for most of the production, heightening the sense of confusion within the play. Who is who? What is reality? What’s the truth? Jessica dresses up in masculine clothing, thus beginning the transformation process into her new Christian identity, which the text suggests is required of her to be Lorenzo’s lover. In our production, Jessica dons drag to fit in with the gay culture her friends have embraced, leaving her father’s more conservative views behind. Jessica appears to be oppressed by her father and his views. She seems unable to make her own decisions and still remain within her current society. Therefore she makes a break with her past, her only method of escape.

Just turn on the television, and you’ll see cultural conflicts taking place on a local, national, and international level. These struggles appear to be never-ending. They impact many, and both sides usually have legitimate points. Therefore, dialogue is necessary. An analytical and open-mind is necessary. Attention is necessary. We hope this play reminds our viewers of the two-sidedness of conflicts and encourages well-informed opinions and decisions.

Plot Summary

The Merchant of Venice opens with Antonio, a Christian merchant in Venice, giving his friend Bassanio a loan through the Jewish lender Shylock. As part of the deal, Antonio promises Shylock a “pound of flesh” in case he cannot repay the loan. Bassanio desires the money in order to appear richer than he actually is and thus be eligible to woo a beautiful and rich woman named Portia who lives in Belmont. While Bassanio is away, Antonio runs into trouble: his shipments do not come in, making him unable to pay back the loan to Shylock.

Bassanio wins the hand of Portia by guessing which one of three caskets holds her portrait (the gold, the silver, or the lead casket), which none of her previous suitors has been able to do. He then marries Portia while Gratiano, accompanying Bassanio on his journey, marries Portia’s lady-in-waiting, Nerissa. Bassanio soon learns that Antonio is in financial trouble and rushes back to save him. In the meantime, Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, runs away to marry a Christian, Lorenzo, who is one of Antonio’s friends. By stealing her mother’s ring, an artifact that Shylock holds dear, and becoming Christian, Jessica causes her father to disown her.

Portia and Nerissa dress up as men, a lawyer and a lawyer’s clerk respectively, and go to Venice to attend Antonio’s trial in attempts of saving him from his fate of giving a pound of flesh to Shylock. Portia (as Balthasar) makes the verdict that Shylock can only take a pound of flesh if he does not shed any of Antonio’s blood, which, of course, is impossible. She decides that, as a punishment, Shylock must convert to Christianity. She and Nerissa, both still in male disguise, then ask for their husbands’ rings as compensation for their services without their husbands knowing their identity. When everyone arrives in Belmont, Portia and Nerissa use the rings to reveal their disguises to Gratiano and Bassanio.
Theme

THE THEMES OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE INCLUDE ANTAGONISM between Christians and Jews, and conflict between two generations. The first, most central to the main plot, plays out with Antonio borrowing money from Shylock, and, when Antonio cannot pay him back, Shylock demands retribution through violent means. This conflict is clearly not just about the money, however. Even when Shylock is offered twice what he is owed, he still insists on Antonio’s “payment” of his pound of flesh, saying, “If every ducat in six thousand ducats / Were in six parts, and every part a ducat, / I would not draw them. I would have my bond” (1.1.85–87). Shylock and Antonio hate each other from the start, and their hatred is due largely to religion. Shylock states outright of Antonio, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.32).

Another conflict is the one between Shylock and his daughter, Jessica. Shylock tries to keep Jessica safe by controlling her and locking her up at home while he is away, warning her not to get any ideas from the masked Christians outside his house: “Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter / My sober house” (2.5.34–35); unbeknownst to him, however, Jessica is running away with Lorenzo, a Christian. This shows the contrast between the older, more conservative generation and a younger generation. The daughter wishes to free herself from what she perceives as oppressive control by her father, but the father’s aim is to protect his daughter from what he perceives as a dangerous world.

Costumes are used in this play as a way for the characters to embrace and let out their most genuine selves. Portia dresses as a lawyer to be taken seriously in a world controlled by men. As a woman of the late sixteenth century, she is not able to let her voice be heard with any seriousness in regards to politics or law. As a man, Portia can show her husband and the people of Venice that she, too, is intelligent. Bassanio uses disguise initially to try to win Portia’s hand. Pretending to be richer than he truly is breaks down boundaries of class and opens up the door for both Bassanio and Portia to fall in love. The Prince of Aragon says, “Let none presume / To wear an undeserved dignity. / O, that estates, degrees, and offices / Were not derived corruptly, and that clear honor / Were purchased by the merit of the wearer!” (2.9.39–43). Pretending to be someone else helps the characters be who they are without social constraints that would normally be imposed on them. In our interpretation, we used drag as a way to show that there is an actual person beneath the disguise. Just like Jessica, Portia and Bassanio dress up as someone they are not but that does not mean that they are someone different. Portia is still the intelligent woman behind masculine garb and the real Bassanio is the one that Portia falls in love with, not the richly dressed person he pretends to be.

Symbolism

🎀 VENETIAN MASKS: Some masks in the play are actual painted masks that are worn to parties; these are what Shylock is referring to in his phrase, “Christian fools with varnished faces” (2.5.32). The masks represent the happiness and prosperity of the Christian community of Venice; for Shylock, they represent all the reasons that he hates Christians: their cruel domination, their sinful tendencies, and their seductive appeal. He warns his daughter to not “thrust your head into the public street” and “let not the sound of shallow foppery enter my sober house” (2.5.31, 34). Other masks in The Merchant of Venice are also metaphorical, such as the “mask” worn by Portia to confuse the people of Venice. This mask likely consists of a fake beard and a wig, giving her the appearance of a man. With her masculine disguise, Portia has power to control other people’s lives; her mask gives her the power of a man, revealing that in Venice true power is held by men.

🎀 SHYLOCK’S TURQUOISE RING: This once belonged to his wife and is taken by Jessica when she escapes with Lorenzo. Shylock loved his wife and treasures the ring for the way it reminds him of her: “It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a pound of flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (2.5.31, 34). Shylock is controlling Jessica by telling her to lock the windows so that no sounds of Christian celebration can be heard: “But stop my house’s ears—I mean my casements” (2.5.33). When Jessica steals the ring, she has taken the control of her life from her father, and she is now making her own choices independently; one of these choices being to convert from Judaism to Christianity.

🎀 A POUND OF FLESH: The symbol of a pound of flesh arises from the business contract between Shylock and Antonio. The men agree that Antonio will pay a “pound of flesh” as payment for the money he is borrowing from Shylock if the debt cannot be repaid. The flesh has no monetary value: “A pound of man’s flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (1.3.157–59). The request for flesh, rather, is representative of Shylock’s desire for revenge and his thirst for Christian blood. Antonio has personally humiliates Shylock in the past and because of this, in Shylock’s view, he must pay a price. The pound of flesh, in essence a threat of violence against Antonio, casts a cruel light on Shylock and encourages a perception of villainy towards his character.
Designers’ Note

working with our collaborators’ re-interpretation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* was a great way to explore the play’s use of symbolism. Shakespearian plays are complex in both plot and symbolism, so sifting through both was a challenge in its own. With the interpretation by our collaborators from the Shakespeare class, we had a ton of ideas to incorporate into the poster.

Understanding what our collaborators were trying to convey through their interpretation of the play was our main challenge. Early in the brainstorming process, we concentrated on imagery from the original play. Once we had a better understanding of the group’s interpretation, we were able to run with their theme and come up with something unexpected for a Shakespearian play. Our goal in creating the poster was to use subtle imagery that inspired the viewer to take a closer look.

Our collaborators concentrated on the 1980’s and the issue of homosexuality of the time. The characters are played by members of the opposite sex, harkening back to how plays were produced in Shakespeare’s era and furthering the sexual tension. In the specific scene, a young woman attempts to attend a drag show, but her disapproving father tries to keep her from going. We decided we wanted to run with the idea of 80’s over-the-top culture and fashion and pair it with the drag queen persona. When looking at iconic typography and cultural icons of the time, the MTV logo caught our attention. We thought that using the MTV type would be interesting and explored that option. The MTV worked well with the abbreviation of *Merchant of Venice*—MOV. Combining the play on the MTV logo and a hand-drawn drag queen image, we assembled a mashup of pop culture and Shakespeare’s classic play. We further expounded on the imagery of the play by using gold foil for the drag queen’s earrings, a reference to the scene where Portia has her potential suitor choose between caskets of gold, lead, and silver to win her hand. When the suitor chooses wrong—the gold casket—he finds a paper bearing the infamous line “all that glitters is not gold.” We decided that quote went perfectly with the symbolism of a drag queen. Using it with the MOV logo brought more of the original play into our spinoff.
**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).