

# The Merchant Of Venice: What Role Does Its Modern Adaptations Play?

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## Abstract

This paper studies on the relationship between Shylock and Jessica in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and how this father/daughter relationship has been slightly modified on screen and in text in two important adaptations of Shakespeare's play. These two modern adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* are John Sichel's film which was produced in 1973 and Arnold Wesker's play *The Merchant* (1977). The paper argues that both adaptations tried to soften the severity of Jessica's and Shylock's relationship in Shakespeare's original play. This was done by either showing direct or indirect signs of closeness between the father and his daughter. To highlight this idea, the paper will first contextualize *The Merchant of Venice* in order to understand why the Jewish characters were depicted in what seemed as a negative way in Shakespeare's text, and second it will study the reasons and the methods used by both Wesker and Sichel to create more appropriate versions where the family's ties between Shylock and Jessica are stronger. By highlighting these two aspects, the paper concludes that these interventions were not aiming to create better versions of Shakespeare's original text, but to simply appropriate Shakespeare's original play to the modern audience.

Keywords, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare, adaptation, Shylock, Elizabethan literature.

## 1. Introduction

By focusing on the relationship between Shylock and Jessica in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and how this

father/daughter relationship has been slightly modified on screen and in text, one can notice how it was important for the modern adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* to present different versions of this turbulent relationship. To be more precise, the British film adaptation of 1973 directed by John Sichel, and *The Merchant* in 1977 by the British playwright Arnold Wesker both tried to soften the severity of Jessica's and Shylock's relationship in Shakespeare's original play. This was done by either showing direct or indirect signs of closeness between the father and his daughter.

Although the dates of releasing or publishing these two adaptations are very close, what is more important to notice is the fact that both adaptations are considered post-Holocaust. This is due to the idea that after the Holocaust, depicting Jews in a negative way has become a very sensitive topic in our modern times. However, during Shakespeare's time, it was a different world where criticizing Jews was carried out due to either a sense of nationalism, or to reveal the hypocrisy of the Jews who converted to Christianity.

Therefore, this paper aims to achieve two goals. First, it will contextualize *The Merchant of Venice* in order to understand why Jews were depicted in what seemed as a negative way in Shakespeare's text. Second, it will also study the reasons and the methods used by both Wesker and Sichel to create more appropriate versions where the family's ties between Shylock and Jessica are stronger. To achieve this goal, the paper will analyze Jessica's and Shylock's relationship in relation to the original text. In doing so, I hope to highlight the idea that these interventions were not aiming to create better versions of Shakespeare's original text, but to simply appropriate Shakespeare's original play to the modern audience.

## **2. Discussion**

During the Elizabethan England where Christianity was the most important prevailing ideology, attacking Jews was not a very sensitive topic. In fact, it was part of an old national view that simply did not include Jews, or any other faiths besides Christianity, as citizens of England. Thus, it was embodied in the minds of the English to consider the Jews in England as the unknown outsiders who were associated with evil. In *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James S. Shapiro provided a detailed context of how Jews were viewed during Shakespeare's times. He

writes, “the desire on the part of the English to define themselves as different from, indeed free of, that which was Jewish, operated not only on an individual level but on a national level as well: that is between 1290 and 1656 the English came to see their country defined in part by the fact that Jews had been banished from it” (42). Here, it becomes clear that any individual prejudice against the Jews during Shakespeare’s times was supported by the overall atmosphere of the kingdom.

Furthermore, the long absence of Judaism which was forced by the legal powers was perhaps an important factor that inspired Shakespeare to create *The Merchant of Venice*. Hence, from a new historicist point of view, when one considers the prejudice against the Jewish Characters in the play, we need to consider the political aspects of England during that period. To that end, it could argue that Shakespeare was perhaps trying to create a work that would support the long-standing law of the banishment of the Jews. This is because the play suggested the idea that the Venetian society was not only rejecting the presence of the Jews, but it also suffered from their presence.

Along with the political factors that played major role in presenting Jews negatively in the play, questions surrounding the sincerity of the Jews who converted to Christianity were also an important issue that Shakespeare might have been trying to address. Shapiro argues, “[b]y the mid-seventeenth century there was an increasing sense among English writers that Jewish conversion to Christianity had never been sincere and that baptized Jews would ultimately prove counterfeit Christians” (19). It seems that since Christianity was a major theme in the works of the English writers during the sixteenth century, then it is possibly to argue that Shakespeare’s play was aiming to address the issue of faith through confirming the tolerant teachings of Christianity over Judaism for those who were reluctant to embrace it.

This is due to the suggestion that through Antonio’s tolerance in the courtroom scene, Shylock was given another chance to live; something that the Jew himself was not ready to do. And by showing these differences between the two religions, the play was perhaps communicating that there were moral differences between the character of the Jew and Christian.

Still, although written during these less tolerated times, *The Merchant of Venice* was not totally biased against Jews. In fact, even though Shylock’s horrible fate and, unfortunately, the

happiness that surrounded it raised concerned questions, the great Elizabethan playwright maintained a humanistic concern for Jews. This can be easily seen in Shylock's most famous speech, Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?

These strong words will always make the readers and the audience puzzle over Shakespeare's goal for creating the play. In other words, one could not confirm if the play was in fact an anti-semitic work, or was it in fact Shakespeare's way of raising concerns for the Jews in England. Yet, what is crucial here is the fact that this ambiguity opened the work for contradictory interpretations.

However, it appears the relationship between Shylock and his daughter was not a realistic one, at least in terms of our modern understanding of the instinctive bond between a father and his daughter. This is due to the suggestion that it might be possible for the readers or the audience to accept the play's idea of a daughter running away with her lover. Yet, for this daughter to be happy over the loss of her father is something that is difficult to accept, especially in the final scene where everyone, including Jessica, seemed to be thrilled over Shylock's misfortunes.

That opened the door for the adaptations to add their touches on this troubled relationship by suggesting stronger ties between Shylock and his daughter. These interventions were either shown directly as in the example of the Merchant, or indirectly as in the British film adaptation of 1973. Either way, the important goal of these modifications is to add a stronger humanistic nature for Shylock's and Jessica's relationship which the modern audience could find it more convincing.

In 1973, Sichel directed one of the few film adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. His television adaptation is well known for two main reasons. First, the cast featured Laurence Olivier, a very famous Shakespearean actor who prior to playing Shylock's character in this adaptation, played the characters of Hamlet, Richard III, Macbeth, and Henry V. Besides, the production did not just benefit from Olivier's great performance, but more importantly, his presence helped the adaptation to gain

attention of both fans and critics. The second reason that distinguished Sichel's adaptation was changing the setting of the original play to the Edwardian era. This creative modification helped the creators of this film to minimize the effects of religion in the play, and highlight the aspects of trading and business.

Besides changing the setting, Sichel's film followed Shakespeare's play exactly; the plot, the characters, the scenes, and even the lines were almost identical to the original play. Yet, that did not prevent Sichel from using the advantages of films where lightening, music, gestures from the actors, and so forth can help the director to indirectly change some elements of the original work. To that end, the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice* was depicted differently in this adaptation. This change led Joseph Pearce to argue that "the film's ending is flawed, as the reconciliation of the married couples is eschewed for a mournful scene with Jessica singing the Kaddish, the Jewish song for the dead. As with most modern productions of this play, the happy ending Shakespeare envisioned is missing." (134).

However, it appears that the disappearance of Shakespeare's happy ending is what makes this adaptation significant for the modern audience. Especially, since this intervention happened in an indirect way whereas all the events of the original play were left intact. Therefore, it seems that a detailed analysis of how the final scene was adapted is needed in order to understand how the creators of this adaptation delivered an important message regarding the relationship between Shylock and Jessica.

First, the decision to end the film by playing the Kaddish as the background music of the final scene hinted to the idea that Shylock had died as a result a severe grief over his loss. Thereby, any prejudice against the villain was downplayed by the fact that he faced the worst punishment. And because of the presence of the Jewish music of the dead, and Jessica's gestures of sadness, the final scene was obviously belonging to the Jews of the play, Shylock and Jessica. In other words, with the new atmosphere of the final scene, Jessica and presumably her deceased father were positioned at the center of the audiences' attention. That helped to emphasize the suggestion that although Jessica was officially a Christian, her emotional bonds to her father and to her Jewish identity were still strong.

Second, the physical movements of Bassanio, Gratiano, Antonio, and all the other characters who were present at the

final scene suggested that after her father's death, Jessica was left vulnerable. This is because as the scene was ending, everyone was going inside the castle except Jessica who was left alone with her facial gestures and her slow body movements that revealed great psychological shock. Here the creators of this adaptation wanted to emphasize the idea that the saddened orphan was unfortunately left alone outside as she was reading her father's decree. Thus, if we interpret the castle on a symbolic level as representations of security, safety, and belonging, then the adaptation was perhaps hinting to the idea that after her father's death, Jessica had become helpless. In addition to this, while her conversion to Christianity was supposed to provide her with means of belonging, the final scene simply suggested that she was going to be always an outsider.

Third, the decision to end the film with a medium shot of Jessica holding a piece of paper that held her father's unfortunate fate is an attempt to push the audience to generate feelings of sympathy. Here the camera took an active role through leaving the audience with an image of the saddened Jessica, a technique that is trying to push the audience to be compassionate with Jessica and Shylock. Moreover, giving Jessica the final shot of the whole film also indicated that along with Shylock, they were the focus of this adaptation. This is simply because although they were silenced and overshadowed by the play's Christian characters, especially Jessica who did not say anything in the final scene, the movement of the camera helped the daughter and her father to have the final word of this production.

With these three techniques which only films could provide, Sichel was able to indirectly rewrite Shylock's and Jessica's relationship, especially, the final scene where the creators' efforts to suggest a different interpretation of this relationship could easily be felt. As such, by creating these stronger ties between Shylock and Jessica, this production was also following the norm of being sensitive in criticizing the Jews in the post-Holocaust world. This is because erasing the Jewish identity which was hinted by Shylock's death and Jessica's misery after converting to Christianity was an important aspect that helped to make the Jewish characters the real victims of this production. Still, what is even important about Sichel's touches to *The Merchant of Venice* is the fact that he was able to

successfully adapt the work to the modern audience, and still be sincere to the original plot of the play.

Other adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* took a different approach by changing some major aspects of the original play. The Merchant by the British dramatist Arnold Wesker is a good example of such a work. Although, this short play relied heavily on Shakespeare's original story, Wesker managed to change some important features of the play. Perhaps the most obvious shift was the surprising mutual love between Shylock and Antonio who both decided to make the same original bond as only a gesture of mocking the Venetian law. With this type of specific and purposeful changes, one could possibly argue that Wesker simply retold Shakespeare's original play from the perspective of the Jewish character.

In fact the play itself addressed directly its reader by stating clearly what to expect to be different in this play, "the basic change in the play as a whole, focused by the shift in Shylock's character is the way that anti-Jewish feeling is presented. In Shakespeare's play it is taken for granted; it is the foundation to Shylock's character as a villain: all Jews are supposed to be misery, so Shylock is misery, not as his individual characteristic ... but simply because he is a Jew" (xxi). Thus, apparently Wesker did not just want his readers to keep Shakespeare's play in mind, but he also wanted them to reinterpret Shylock's character. To me, this perfectly fits the definition of the concept of adaptation. This is because obviously here one has to look at the newer version of the work in relation to the original. To that extent, it appears that this adaptation came with a specific goal that was mainly focused on improving the image of Jews. And when one takes into account Wesker's religious background, then it becomes no surprise to see such a work by a Jewish writer in a post-Holocaust world.

This is simply due to the idea that after the Holocaust, there were efforts by Jewish writers to become more concerned in publishing literary works that aimed to change the public image of the Jewish character. In this regard, Efraim Sicher comments on Wesker's recreation of Shylock's character in *The Merchant*, by writing, "Shylock has long been an ominous epithet. Yet the Nazi genocide of the twentieth century ... has brought Jewish artists to attempt a corrective of that public image, a corrective which must of necessity be also a claim for

cultural identity by the Jewish artist stamped with the image of Shylock" (1).

Of course one aspect of the original Shylock's evilness was his treatment of Jessica. In the original play we saw the young Jewish lady had to escape from her father's house in order to simply escape from the misery of the Jewish old man. However, in Wesker's play, "Jessica still runs away with a gentile, but her flight now becomes a bid for freedom from an over-possessive but loving father, not escape from a misery old tyrant" (Wesker xxi). This suggestion was very crucial for Wesker's adaptation because it redefined the whole relationship between Shylock and his daughter. So, in this modern version of *The Merchant of Venice*, we were introduced to a disappointment between a father and his daughter, not a deep hostility. In other words, the tension in their relationship was simply caused by a misunderstanding.

For example, in act 2, scene 5 of Wesker's play, we saw Jessica providing the reasons that drove her to escape from her father:

Jessica. I loved his questioning the wisdom of age, his clamouring to give youth its voice, his contempt for what men wrote in books. His strength, his seriousness, his devotion. I loved, I suppose, escape from oppressive expectations. (68)

To me, these few lines were very crucial because they summarized clearly the differences between the relationship of the original characters of Shylock and Jessica, and how Wesker wanted us to view the relationship between his new adapted characters. In his text, the daughter had no trouble in listing the positive things about her father, she understood the reasons of their dispute, and more importantly she was obviously still tight with her Jewish identity.

With these new additions to Jessica's characters, Wesker made his adapted character sound more mature. That was an important intervention by the Jewish dramatist because it not only helped him to present an improved version of the Jewish household relationships, but more importantly it helped him emphasize the importance for Jessica to maintain and preserve her Jewishness.

This idea of clinging to Jewishness could be interpreted from Jessica's reaction to Lorenzo's and Bassanio's attacks on Shylock,

JESSICA. Please! Gentlemen! Remember me! I'm raw. My



rhythms still belong to the Ghetto. I can't slip quickly from God to God like a whore. (2.5)

Here, it becomes clear the unlike the original play where Jessica was excited to run away from her father and convert to Christianity, Wesker's Jessica struggled heavily with accepting the decision. Thereby, it appears that while the original play presented the two religions as one being better than the other, here, we get the sense that the two religions are in fact equal.

This is an important intervention that helped to move religion aside in terms of interpreting it as the reason for Jessica's and Shylock's troubled relationship. And in doing so, Wesker was able to make Jewishness the last mutual ground where any tension between the daughter and her father could easily disappear. This not only minimized the problems of this relationship, but it also helped to present stronger ties between the Jewish families.

### **3. Conclusion**

The modern versions of *The Merchant of Venice* whether they were films as Sichel's production, or texts as Wesker's play, all focused on presenting a different sense of the relationship between the father and his daughter. The reason for this intervention, as this paper was trying to argue, is to present versions that are not only more sensitive in criticizing the Jews, but are also more appropriate to the modern audience, especially given the fact that these works are all post-Holocaust.

This whole idea of intervention can be understood in relation to Julie Sanders' argument regarding the concepts of adaptation and appropriation. Sanders writes,

On the surface, all screen versions of novels are transpositions in the sense that they take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audience by means of the aesthetic of an entirely different generic process. But many adaptations, of novels and other generic forms, contain further layers of transposition, relocating their source texts not just generically, but in cultural, geographical and temporal forms. (20)

Hence, it is possible to argue that the modifications in Sichel's version of the play were part of that extra level where the temporal factor becomes crucial. At the same time, although it is not a screen version of the original, Wesker's play could be in fact better read as an adaptation and not an appropriation of the original. The reason lies in the idea that the text did not only rely

heavily on the original, but more importantly because it also tried to focus more on the cultural aspect of the play. More precisely, it aimed at rewriting the play with the specific aim of recreating the Jewish image.

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