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## Rethinking Shylock's Tragedy: Radford's Critique of Anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*

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### Abstract

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is not usually thought of as one of his more mythically resonant plays (aside from the Belmont casket scene), yet it is ultimately based on prevailing contemporary Christian myths about Jews and the way these myths defined Christians' beliefs about themselves. This paper examines film director Michael Radford's masterful use of myths and symbolism in his production of this play. Includes a reproduction of a painting which Radford duplicates in the final scene of the film, resolving the multiple themes of the play.

### Additional Keywords

Anti-Semitism; Carpaccio, Vittore. *Hunting on the Lagoon*; Jews; *The Merchant of Venice* (film). Dir. Michael Radford; Shakespeare, William—Characters—Shylock; Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*



ETHINKING SHYLOCK'S TRAGEDY:  
RADFORD'S CRITIQUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM  
IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

FRANK D. RIGA

Although *The Merchant of Venice* has been one of Shakespeare's most performed plays, until 2004, it had never been made into a major film feature during the sound era. In fact, as late as 2002, Charles Edelman could assert, "given the sensitivity of the play's subject matter, it is very unlikely that one will ever be made" (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 86). So the film directed by Michael Radford, in dealing with "the sensitivity of the play's subject matter," was faced with a number of difficulties for both director and actors. Radford resolves these difficulties by assimilating into his film a number of separate features that have appeared during the play's social and performance history. The strength of Radford's film, and thus of its director, is the joining of these separate features into a coherent, satisfying whole. In order to achieve this unity, however, he had both to amplify and to modify what came before.

The most contentious problem of the play, and the key issue of Radford's film, is the perception of its anti-Semitism. Harold Bloom has put the case forcibly and unambiguously: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (171). Radford has responded to this perception of the play by making a critical exploration of anti-Semitism central to his interpretation. Anti-Semitism, as Radford demonstrates, pervades the social fabric of Renaissance Venice, and thus of the lives of all of the characters. He establishes his critical approach at the opening of the film by creating a back story, developed in a montage of intercut film images and explanatory text. He is thus able to reveal how anti-Semitism damages both victims and victimizers, thereby undermining the likelihood of a comic resolution to the play's conflicts.

By undermining a comic resolution, Radford's film disposes of another of the play's difficulties, the ambiguity of its genre, i.e. is it a comedy, as its placement in the *First Folio* would insist, or is it tragic, as the situation of Shylock could indicate? The problem of genre is clearly illustrated in a quotation from a common Shakespearean source book, Russ McDonald's *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*:

*The Merchant of Venice* is probably the most illustrative example of the high cost of comic resolution. The lovers' gathering at Belmont in act 5, musical and joyous though it may be, is overshadowed by their intolerable treatment of Shylock in the trial scene (4.1). The movement toward assimilation that normally unites the cast in the last moments is not strong enough to include Shylock, who is stripped of his wealth, his daughter, and his religion and who leaves the stage for the last time in act 4. Although the merchant Antonio is present for the festivities in the last act, he has no partner and must go home alone. (97)

The "high cost of comic resolution" is made more problematic by the emergence of a sympathetic Shylock early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since his fate has been connected closely to the question of genre. The film, then, has had to reconcile the dire fate of the best-known character, Shylock, and the romantic conclusion of the other characters, and especially that of the other well-known character, Portia. The difficulty of achieving this unity, as Harold Bloom points out, is "that Portia would cease to be sympathetic if Shylock were allowed to be a figure of overwhelming pathos" (171).

Both of these questions, anti-Semitism and genre, have been addressed in the play's performance history, and several of these historic developments have parallels in Radford's film.<sup>1</sup> The first, and most obvious, is the shaping of Shylock as a sympathetic, and finally, as a tragic figure. The second is the apparently harmless development of spectacle, i.e. the increasing interest and insistence on an authentic Venetian setting, true to the 16<sup>th</sup> century historic period. From this development, Radford accepts and amplifies, not merely authentic props, the *mise-en-scène*, but a more detailed social and political situation of Jews living in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice. The third, a late development in the acting history, is the depiction of the friendship between Bassanio and Antonio as homoerotic. This theme places a continuous tension, and danger, on the romantic resolution. And last, the treatment of Jews and homosexuals turns Belmont into something less than an ideal, fairy-tale world.<sup>2</sup> This ideal haven has

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<sup>1</sup> The references throughout the essay to examples in the performance history are only meant to be illustrative, as a way to help place Radford's accomplishment. For careful and thorough examinations of the play's performance history, see Toby Lelyveld's *Shylock on the Stage*, James C. Bulman's *The Merchant of Venice: Shakespeare in Performance*, John Gross's *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, Jay L. Halio's introduction to the Oxford edition of the play, and especially Charles Edelman's introduction and notes to the Cambridge edition of the play.

<sup>2</sup> A representative example of this view of Belmont as an ideal is given by David Bevington in his head note to the play:

Belmont, to which the various happy lovers and their friends eventually retire, is a place of magic and love. As its name implies, it is on a mountain, and it is reached

often been recognized as an unsatisfactory place to end the action, since the usual pattern for the comedies is for the characters to return to the quotidian world after they work out their conflicts in the Athenian wood or the Forest of Arden or Prospero's island. Radford uses the ring episode, now expanded to include Jessica, as a way to restate all of the outstanding tensions, i.e. the homoerotic theme, Shylock's excessive punishment, Jessica's desertion of her father, and the disenchantment of Belmont. The use of camera images at the end of the film then allows Radford to summarize and comment on these tragic themes.

As an experienced film maker, Radford has replaced many of the play's linguistic functions with film imagery and techniques. As a modest estimate, at least half of Shakespeare's words in the standard text have been cut from the film. The cuts serve at least two purposes. First, for the film medium itself, working as it does from image, fewer words are necessary than in live theater. Second, for the director's interpretation and in keeping with a long tradition of Shakespeare production, certain cuts allow for a particular slant in the development of character and plot. Radford uses image to replace discursive and descriptive passages and to give a greater sense of reality to theatrical illusion. The rapidity of his scene shifts retains a fluidity analogous to that of Elizabethan dramaturgy, and his pictorial qualities mirror those of Renaissance painting. His skilled use of camera techniques such as cross-cutting and close-ups allows for wordless character development and for an emphasis on facial expressions that reveal the emotional reactions of the characters.

Following the theatrical tradition established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Radford has made a choice to interpret the play mainly for its tragic potential, using anti-Semitism as the context and situation out of which the tragedy will grow. And while Shylock is saved from being a stereotypical, Jewish stage villain, the darker complexities of the other characters, including Antonio, Bassanio, Jessica, and Portia, are explored before the film resolves itself in a less than comic reconciliation. Belmont is shown to be of a piece with Venice, since the ethos of both is too narrow to accommodate the value and dignity of all of their inhabitants.

### **Historical and Cultural Accuracy**

Research in the creation of authentic stage settings led to a growing awareness of the treatment of Jews in Renaissance Venice, a development reflected in Radford's film. As early as 1741, when Charles Macklin reintroduced Shakespeare's authentic text of the *Merchant*, he also incorporated authentic period items for the production. In his research, for example, he discovered that

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by a journey across water. It is pure, serene, ethereal. As often happens in fairy stories, on this mountain dwells a princess who must be won by means of a riddling contest. (Shakespeare, *Complete Works* 178)

Jews in Renaissance Venice had to identify themselves by wearing red hats. His research into historic authenticity was to have a continuous influence on future productions. In 1858, Charles Kean staged an elaborate version of the *Merchant* in which “the setting attempted to re-create a picture of Venetian life” (Campbell 526). His fashioning of the Rialto was highly praised by his contemporaries for its remarkable fidelity to the original. The costumes, as Kean notes in the preface to his 1858 edition of the play, were modeled on late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian fashions as illustrated in Caesar Vecellio’s 1590 book, *Degli habiti antichi e moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (Halio 67). When Marie and Squire Bancroft produced their version of the play in 1875, “the scenery was selected from views studied in Venice the previous year” (Campbell 526). The Bancrofts took special pains to reproduce specific locales, such as the Sala della Bussola.

In his thorough-going attempt to stage the play in a fully realized Venetian setting, Henry Irving produced, in 1879, a version that was the culmination of this enthusiasm for historic authenticity. His sets were constructed in minute period detail and his costumes reproduced the elaborate richness of Renaissance painting. As James Bulman observes, Irving’s *Merchant*, “in its quest for historical verisimilitude,” epitomizes “Victorian values in staging” (28). But by this time, the attempt to achieve historical accuracy included, not only the *mise-en-scène*, but also the cultural, social, and intellectual conditions of 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice and the place and treatment of Jews in Venetian society. Irving’s intention, observes Bulman, was “to bring a realistic awareness of cultural difference to the portrayal of ‘the other’” (30). Centering the drama on Shylock’s story by his cutting and rearrangement of scenes, Irving turned the *Merchant* into a tragedy caused by the historic intolerance of Venetian society for Jews. Shylock’s tragedy devolved from his society’s inability to treat him justly or to assimilate him. This view of the drama was to have a profound influence on subsequent productions.

All of this interest in historic authenticity laid the groundwork for Radford’s film. Production in a film medium, of course, has a number of advantages not available to the theater. The most obvious advantage, and one enjoyed by film-makers almost from the outset, was the capability of filming on location. Since Radford filmed his *Merchant* largely in Venice, a city that has kept its Renaissance buildings and ambiance, the verisimilitude attempted in setting moved from scene-painting and stage construction, which often required the reduction of the number of scenes, to the actual place itself, which allowed for a rapid and fluid movement to more locations and thus to more scenes. His use of the Venetian setting supports a more realistic reconstruction of the cultural and social conditions of Renaissance Venice and Shylock’s place in them. These historic conditions are crucial for Radford’s interpretation of the drama since, like Irving, he wanted to create a world of intolerance which corrupts both the

victim and the victimizers by its restrictive view of humanity. For him, moreover, to film the play in its own period suggests its similarity to our own since "people 400 years ago are like ourselves" (Radford, commentary to scene 15).

Radford's point is that "people of 400 years ago" also held anti-Semitic prejudices. That Radford should use quotations from St. Paul and Martin Luther in the opening preface of the film serves to remind us of the anti-Semitic context that was in part created by a number of Christian myths. These myths are perhaps best illustrated by the diatribes delivered by Luther once he was convinced the Jews would never be converted to Christianity. In his *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), he attempts to give credence to these myths.

I have read and heard many stories about the Jews [...] namely, how they have poisoned wells, made assassinations, kidnaped children [...]. I have heard that one Jew sent another Jew, and this by means of a Christian, a pot of blood, together with a barrel of wine, in which when drunk empty, a dead Jew was found. [...] For their kidnapping of children they have often been burned at the stake or banished [...]. I am well aware that they deny all of this. However, it all coincides with the judgment of Christ which declares that they are venomous, bitter, vindictive, tricky serpents, assassins, and children of the devil, who sting and work harm stealthily whenever they cannot do it openly. (277)

Luther uses the myths partially to justify his exhortation to princes and other rulers to execute "a sharp mercy" (268): that is, to burn their synagogues, raze their houses, burn their books, forbid them to teach, abolish safe-conduct for them on roadways, prohibit them from practicing usury, take their wealth, and put them to manual labor (268-72).<sup>3</sup> Although there may not have been many Jews in England in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century because of the Expulsion of 1290, the image of the Jew as a kind of Renaissance bogymen was current, as attested to by Barabas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589). There, in his self-definition at 2.3.171-98, Barabas applies many of these myths to himself.

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<sup>3</sup> Luther's reference to "the judgment of Christ" is found in John 8: 44: "You [Jews] are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Luther ignores the context of this statement, applying to all Jews what Christ was applying only to those who wanted to kill him.

For a detailed discussion of anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's plays, and especially *The Merchant of Venice*, see Charles Edelman's introduction to the Cambridge edition, Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews*, and Hermann Sinsheimer's *Shylock: The History of a Character*.

The anti-Semitic situation occasioned by such Christian myths and more recent history suffuse Radford's portrayal of Venice. The opening of the film establishes the theme of anti-Semitism through a montage of intercut images and text. The montage not only explains the structures that Jews lived under in the Venice of 1596, but also underscores the tension between Christians and Jews while revealing Antonio's abusive intolerance of Shylock. As Radford's opening preface informs us, "By law the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or 'Geto' area of the city," and "the gate was locked and guarded by Christians" (scene 1) to prevent their movement about the city after dark. In his 1980 production, Bill Alexander distinguished the two groups clearly: Jews wore the Star of David and Christians wore crucifixes. Similarly, Jews in Radford's film wear red hats and Christians wear crucifixes. Since Christians were forbidden by Canon Law to lend money at interest, Jews were tolerated because they were not restricted by this ban on money lending.

In the initial images of the montage, a priest is standing in a gondola, holding up a crucifix, and preaching to the crowd of onlookers on the bridge above. Radford has him quote the words of St. Paul and Martin Luther, as he preaches that usury is a sin that must be punished. The scene shifts to an image of the sacred Talmud being burnt, making the connection between the priest's words and the persecution of the Jews. Incited by his sermon, a mob of Christians cast a figure, recognizable as a Jew because of his red hat, into the canal from the Rialto Bridge. The camera cuts from the crowd to a close-up on Antonio who is wearing a large crucifix around his neck. A brief scene now images an event reported only indirectly by Shylock in the original text. Shylock sees Antonio and calls out his name, almost pleadingly, asking for recognition as of a friend. Antonio responds by spitting on Shylock's beard. Wiping away the spittle, Shylock does not return Antonio's offensive gesture in kind. Instead, a close-up of his face reveals shock and pain rather than anger. The scene shifts to a large Christian church, where Antonio receives a blessing from the same priest who incited the mob to violence, providing an ironic commentary on Christian love and charity. The scene shifts to positive images of the synagogue where Shylock and his daughter Jessica are praying, juxtaposed to a brief scene during which Lorenzo, Bassanio, and their drinking buddies secretly enter the ghetto to set up their plot to carry off Jessica. This continued contrast in behavior of the Christians and Jews during the montage, underlined by the text explaining the plight of the Jews at this time, establishes the kind of tension and conflict between the two that will result in a calamitous denouement.

To exacerbate this contrast, Radford reveals that the Venetians are as hypocritical and corrupt as they are intolerant. Many of the characters often go about their activities wearing masks which, as Radford tells us in his DVD commentary, were worn by Venetians so they could do indecent things



anonymously. The recurring images of bare-breasted prostitutes are one of Radford's ways of emphasizing the dissolute behavior of the Venetians who pretend to moral superiority through their Christianity. Prostitutes, with their bare breasts and rouged nipples, present a striking image epitomizing the play's mixing of love and money, with women being the purchased item. Every love relationship in the film is made to appear as much a financial transaction as a romantic one. While the whores are images of love for sale, Bassanio wants to court the rich Portia in order to recoup his wasted fortunes, Jessica joins Lorenzo bringing her father's jewelry and ducats, and Bassanio is homoerotically aggressive when he asks Antonio for the loan that, ironically, he needs for his courtship of a wealthy woman.

Throughout the film, moreover, Bassanio and his friends are continuously shown to be intemperate and corrupt. This behavior is particularly evident in the luxurious feast to which Bassanio has invited Shylock, a feast that is only mentioned, not depicted, in the original text of the play. Like George Granville in 1701, Radford creates this elaborate scene from whole cloth, but here, to show the dissolute behavior of the Venetians, Bassanio and his friends indulge in an orgiastic bachelor's party, complete with abundant wine, food, and willing whores. The camera focuses on Shylock as an isolated figure at the foot of the table, observing the dissolute Christians with distaste. During this scene, while Shylock is absent from his home, the final plan for Jessica's elopement and the elopement itself are completed. This scene, as well as the general behavior of these young people, confirms an observation made by W. H. Auden long before Radford filmed the play: Bassanio, Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Jessica, "for all their beauty and charm, appear as frivolous members of a leisure class, whose carefree life is parasitic upon the labors of others, including usurers" (234).

### **The Interpretive Tradition**

The film's Shylock, in part, follows an interpretive tradition with a long history. During an interview with Al Pacino, who played Shylock in the recently completed filming of *The Merchant of Venice*, Ivor Davis asked him how he viewed the character. Pacino answered, "I see him as more sinned against than sinning" (1). This response, of course, was not the first time Shylock was so described with this powerful line from *King Lear* (3.2.60). Its earliest recorded use was by William Hazlitt who, in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), published one of the first convincing defenses of Shylock as a sympathetic character. Such a view was novel in 1817, for in Hazlitt's description, the standard theatrical tradition, which probably grew out of anti-Semitic myths, was to present Shylock as "a decrepid [sic] old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy,

inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge" (323). Three years before, Hazlitt had seen Edmund Kean as Shylock, and because of that great actor's rendition of the role, Hazlitt made "a careful perusal of the play itself" to discover a Shylock "no less sinned against than sinning" (320, 324).

In his conception of Shakespeare's Jew, Kean raised Shylock above fierce avariciousness, to endow him with dignity and justification—in other words, to make him a tragic figure. For the first time, the stage Jew became humanized, and for the first time, an audience was able to accept and appreciate such a presentation. Kean conceived the character of Shylock as a persecuted victim who, driven by a resentment that was fully justified, became an avenger. And yet, although Shylock was presented more sympathetically, this did not mean his actions later in the play were absolved of their excesses. Radford, too, notes how a just cause can lead to overreaching excess: "[Shylock] goes beyond, he steps beyond, one step beyond where he should go" (Huttner 3). The roots of Al Pacino's Shylock date back at least to Edmund Kean, whose reinvention of the role has remained a living tradition.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, "the idea of an impressive, half sympathetic Shylock was well established" (Gross 133). The high point of this version came with Henry Irving, the last of the great nineteenth century portrayals. He conceived of Shylock as a victim, even in his unrelenting need for revenge. In 1884, five years after his first portrayal, Irving noted that he looked upon Shylock as "the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used" (quoted in Halio 68). As a study of what a man becomes in an oppressive and intolerant society, Shylock was, again in Irving's words, "a representative of a race which generation after generation has been cruelly used, insulted, execrated. It is an hereditary hate, but to this as the play progresses are added individual wrongs that make him inexorable and fiendish" (quoted in Lelyveld 83). Irving's interpretation of Shylock, with some modifications, has become one of the standards since, and it is subtly intruded into Radford's film.

The tradition of the justified Shylock, with variations, continued throughout the twentieth century. Lawrence Olivier played him in 1970 as an "assimilationist Jew," in a production that attempted "to show the roots of modern anti-Semitism in economics and the competition for power" (Halio 73). To make Shylock more sympathetic, the Olivier production cut Shylock's anti-Christian aside, "I hate him because he is a Christian," in act one. For David Suchet, in 1981, "Shylock's Jewishness is central; he is not an outsider who happens to be a Jew; he is an outsider *because* he is a Jew" (Halio 77). For Lawrence Olivier, David Suchet, and Patrick Stewart, act three rather than the trial scene was the climax of the drama: Jessica's elopement is crucial because she

betrays Shylock and all of his values by stealing his wealth and marrying a Christian. This climax was already anticipated by Henry Irving's addition of a non-Shakespearean scene to his production: there, Shylock returns to an empty house, ransacked of his wealth and his daughter. Radford, too, puts a heavy emphasis on act three. As he states in an interview, Shylock is "determined to teach these people a lesson because they have stolen his daughter"(Huttner 2).

While this interpretation of Shylock continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the modern understanding of the effects of intolerance and prejudice nonetheless allowed directors to retain the harsher and less attractive aspects of Shylock's character, with reference to history not myth. In a curious way, this understanding allowed for a more faithful representation of Shakespeare's Shylock. Social injustice and the resulting cruelty, we have learned, not only marginalize victims, but can also distort their personalities, with resentment, hatred, and violence seething below the surface. The tragic figure does not have to be sympathetic in the sense of pleasant or agreeable. This understanding of the effects of prejudice was reflected, whether intentionally or not, in a number of productions. In 1932, Theodore Komisarjevsky's Shylock, the victim of racial injustice, is vengeful and malicious. Bill Alexander placed the drama firmly in the Jacobean period to provide a clear understanding of "the position of Jews in Venice and Christian hypocrisy in dealing with them" (Halio 78). In this production, Antony Sher's Shylock was "highly offensive" (Halio 78). As so often happens in the history of presentation, these new productions responded to the social and cultural ethos of the times

With the dominance of the view of Shylock as a justified, if not a sympathetic, character whom Radford sees as "a man of great dignity" (Huttner 1), the problem had been how to incorporate this understanding of the character into a coherent dramatic structure. The solution to this problem, the one that had been developing for almost 200 years and the one adopted by Michael Radford, was to transform Shakespeare's comedy into a tragedy. In an interview with Lisa Huttner, Radford asserts, "For some reason or another in this light comedy which he is writing, Shakespeare creates his first great tragic figure. That's what Shylock is" (3). To make the rest of the film agree with this conception of Shylock, Radford, the screenwriter, cuts or reduces every other role and scene in the play, but almost nothing of Shylock's. In the standard editions of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock has fewer than 400 lines, making him only the third principal. By trimming throughout, Radford has brought him forward as the first principal, not to say the protagonist. Even, or especially, the comic scenes have been reduced, removing almost all the humor. Pacino's Shylock is not softened or his revenge condoned, which is true to the original, but he is given reasonable motivations which allow us to sympathize with his plight.

### **Making Shylock Sympathetic**

To keep a sympathetic Shylock and his Jewishness at the center of the film, Radford eliminates three passages at 1.3 and 2.2 which in the standard text can suggest Jewish stereotypes. By the time Al Pacino as Shylock enters the film in 1.3, the virulent anti-Semitism in Venice has been fully exposed. Shylock's Judaism has also been revealed and will be underscored during this opening entrance. Along with his wearing the required red hat that identifies him as a Jew, he meets with Bassanio in the ghetto at a kosher market. Shylock is buying meat. Before the characters speak, the camera pans the market and focuses on "the ritual killing of a goat" (Stone 5), and as Alan Stone notes, during this scene, Pacino's stage actions continually call attention to his newly purchased goat meat. Setting this scene in the market was Radford's idea, and as he observes, the purchased meat inspires Shylock's "whim"—a pound of Antonio's flesh to seal the contract. Along with the obvious purpose of concluding the loan, this scene suggests two others. The scene calls attention to Shylock's Jewishness which makes him an outsider and the object of abuse. Appropriately enough, it also calls attention to flesh, the recurrence of which is also apparent in Shylock's famous "I am a Jew" speech.

The cuttings and omissions in 1.3 render Shylock more sympathetic. When we first see Shylock in 1.3, Bassanio is attempting to arrange the loan of three thousand ducats, using Antonio's credit as surety, or as Shylock reiterates, "Antonio bound." At this point, Antonio enters. In an aside, Shylock bitterly observes, "How like a fawning publican he looks" (1.3.38), but the rest of the original speech is cut. While Lawrence Olivier cut the entire speech to present a sympathetic Shylock, here, most of this speech is cut to obscure Shylock's long-standing resentment of Antonio and, by extension, Christian Venice. Since the speech also emphasizes the obtaining of money by usury, its cutting mutes the money-grubbing stereotype associated with Jews, a part of the anti-Semitic myth.<sup>4</sup> As Shylock says in the standard text:

How like a fawning publican he looks.  
I hate him for he is a Christian,  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

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<sup>4</sup> In his repeated attempts to validate anti-Semitic myths, Luther rants,

They do not work, and they do not earn anything from us, nor do we give or present it to them, and yet they are in possession of our money and goods and are our masters in our own country and in their exile. A thief is condemned to hang for the theft of ten florins, and if he robs anyone on the highway, he forfeits his head. But when a Jew steals and robs ten tons of gold through his usury, he is more highly esteemed than God himself. (218)

If I can catch him once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.  
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,  
Even there where merchants most do congregate,  
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,  
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe  
If I forgive him. (1.3.38-49)

This speech, with its multiple reasons for hating Antonio, is hardly in keeping with a sympathetic and likeable character, however justified; instead, it shows Shylock as an avaricious malcontent waiting to do harm to this Christian enemy who hates his "sacred nation" and who lends money interest free.<sup>5</sup>

In order further to mute the money-grubbing stereotype, Radford has excised two other textual passages from the film. Later in this same scene (1.3), when Shylock is defending the practice of usury, he alludes to the Biblical Jacob's sly dealings with Laban in obtaining the spotted cattle. A case can be made for Jacob, but since both Shylock and Antonio connect the allusion to usury, it reveals one source of tension between the two and one that might help alienate the audience, as it connects Jews with their supposed cunning in financial dealings. At 2.2, the Jacob story again comes up later in the standard text when the clown, Lancelot Gobbo, asks his near-blind father for his blessing. This allusion, too, is cut from the film, not only because most of the play's comic material has been excised, but again because it would reflect unfavorably on Jews by recalling Jacob who, with his mother's connivance, steals his brother's blessing. These cuttings from 1.3 and 2.2 allow Shylock to keep his dignity and an appearance of resignation to his social condition.

What is not cut from this scene is Antonio's behavior towards Shylock. Even while asking Shylock for a substantial loan, Antonio mocks and insults him, making no excuses or apologies for his former behavior and threatening to spurn and spit on him again. Thus, while Radford's opening prologue indicts the Venetians as intolerant and persecutorial, Antonio's treatment of Shylock applies this general behavior specifically and personally. By being depicted as the victim of anti-Semitism, Shylock can receive the kind of justification and sympathy that has turned him into a tragic figure. What remains obscured, however, is Shylock's repressed resentment of this treatment of himself and his fellow Jews

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Christ in the New Testament approves the self-abasing publican and condemns the self-justifying Pharisee (see Luke 18: 9-14). But Shylock sees the publican as an obsequious sinner and, by implication, the Pharisee as justified by his strict adherence to the law. Although Radford has cut almost all of this speech, his retaining of the opening line subtly hints at Shylock's belief in his own justification and the deep-seated resentments that will be further revealed by Jessica's testimony at Belmont.

at the hands of Christians. Radford's cutting, moreover, by enhancing Shylock's dignity and muting his resentments, shifts the play from a dark comedic thrust to a tragic one.

### **The "Subtext"**

As in the text of the play, the film proper opens with Antonio's melancholy. When Graziano probes its causes, Antonio downplays the suggestion that he is concerned over his trade ventures, but he makes a surprisingly vigorous denial when Graziano suggests the cause may be love. His passionate response reintroduces a theme that Radford refers to as "the subtext" (Radford commentary to scene 2) and one that will become clear by the end of the scene: the homoerotic connection between Antonio and Bassanio. The homoerotic theme had already been subtly introduced during the montage, when Antonio bestows a love-sick look on Bassanio and calls out his name longingly as the latter passes in a gondola. This connection explains why Antonio conceals the root of his melancholy: he can hardly admit that he is sad because Bassanio is abandoning him to court the wealthy Portia. Not only is he losing the man he loves to a beautiful young woman, he is being asked to finance the frustration of his own romantic desire. To explain his plan and make his plea, Bassanio leads his older friend into the bedroom. In the DVD commentary, Lynn Collins, who plays Portia in the film, characterizes the scene as "sexy [and] luscious" and notes Bassanio's (Joseph Fiennes's) use of his cape which he "sensually" takes off and throws on the bed (commentary to scene 2). Bassanio closes the scene by kissing Antonio full on the lips.

After Tyrone Guthrie's 1955 production first disclosed "a homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio" (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 57), to imply, and even to emphasize, such a relationship between them has become something of a commonplace in modern theatrical productions of *The Merchant of Venice* (Bulman 116). Commenting on this friendship for his 1970 production, Jonathan Miller states that "the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio made me think of the relationship between Oscar Wilde and Bosie where a sad old queen regrets the opportunistic heterosexual love of a person whom he adored" (Miller 107). Bill Alexander in 1984 and 1987 and Peter Hall in 1989 both directed productions in which the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio was revealed as patently homoerotic. In Alexander's production, homosexuality serves as "a metaphor of social alienation" (Bulman 126), and in a scene that anticipates Radford, but in reverse, Antonio kisses Bassanio full on the lips. These examples suggest what will cause an undercurrent of sexual tension between Antonio and Portia for the love of Bassanio. When Portia/Balthazar wins his freedom from Shylock, Antonio then uses the ring episode as a trial of Bassanio's love— a trial he initially wins.

Radford's use of the homoerotic attraction between Antonio and Bassanio serves a number of functions. It accounts for Antonio's melancholy. It also darkens Bassanio's character, as he appears to be aggressively using his sexual power over his friend. Since Bassanio needs money to finance his courtship of the rich Portia in order to recoup his fortunes, the scene connects money to both heterosexual and homosexual love. Finally, it sets the groundwork for later marital tension. Portia suspects that she has a rival, perhaps an active one, to Bassanio's love, and thus Antonio poses a threat to the marriage. Radford's working out of this tension through the ring episode not only allows him to make the episode a more coherent part of the plot, but it also gives him an opportunity to underscore the related themes of Belmont's exclusivity and the dire consequences of anti-Semitism.

### **The Climactic Speeches**

As in the play itself, the film builds toward two climaxes, the one in Shylock's "I am a Jew" speech and the other in Portia's "quality of mercy" speech. In the organization of both of these speeches—how the words relate to the scenic context—Radford both echoes and modifies the conventional interpretations that have been given to them. Under Radford's direction, Al Pacino interprets the "I am a Jew" speech as a defense of Shylock's humanity and a justification of his revenge, and Lynn Collins does not deliver the "quality of mercy" speech as an attempt to influence Shylock. As in earlier productions in the performance history, Radford centers Shylock's turn to vengeance at 3.1 when he discovers the theft of his wealth and the abandonment of his daughter. He makes the "I am a Jew" speech, which follows his daughter's desertion, the eruption of long-suppressed resentment. While the trial episode with its "quality of mercy" speech frustrates Shylock's attempt at revenge, it also draws out Radford's "subtext," highlighting a number of themes that will be resolved in the ring plot.

If Antonio's spitting in Shylock's face reveals the malice and contempt with which Jews are regarded—and is also a personal insult to Shylock as a representative Jew—the elopement of his daughter with a Christian is the one blow too many. As he counts his new losses, both his daughter and his ducats, Shylock's rage grows and his resentments surface.<sup>6</sup> So when Antonio's fortunes are reversed and he cannot discharge the debt, Shylock's hunger for revenge is feverish and, as Radford explains, "He's on a one-man-mission to right the

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<sup>6</sup> Shylock's rage is further fed by Tubal's report on his daughter's behavior, wasting eighty ducats in one spree. Pacino as Shylock makes a brief, but moving, lament when Tubal tells how Jessica traded one of his rings for a monkey. Shylock says in pain, "Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.113-16). This ring, with other rings, will be important props at the end of the film.

wrongs of a thousand years of history by himself. He's determined to teach these people a lesson because they have stolen his daughter. He is flailing out" (Huttner 2). Like Bill Alexander and Jonathan Miller before him, and ultimately Henry Irving, Radford places heavy emphasis on 3.1 which he prefaces with Irving's non-Shakespearean scene of a vulnerable Shylock returning to his ransacked house. Here, Pacino utters the name "Jessica" and falls into a paroxysm of grief.

When Antonio's friends then try to intercede and urge Shylock to show mercy, he answers with the famous "I am a Jew" speech, in which his anger and resentment burst forth. Many readers and spectators have said the speech is a cry against anti-Semitism that resonates from Shakespeare's time to ours, a view Radford supports in his commentary. In the film, Shylock speaks these words in the street as Antonio's friends follow him. The camera pans a balcony, where other Venetians are consorting with bare-breasted prostitutes, a running motif in the film to show Venice's depravity and corruption. Just prior to the "I am a Jew" speech, in an added bit of non-Shakespearean dialogue, one of the prostitutes calls to Shylock, "Jew. The Jew! Hey! Take some pleasure with us! Taste my Christian flesh!"(scene 11). Throughout the speech, two prostitutes look on. These background images emphasize decadent carnality. The corruption that surrounds him stands in contrast to the earlier images of Shylock as an upright and temperate man who, although puritanically strict, loves his daughter. The unfolding and conclusion of the speech thus suggest a human being who is driven to revenge by a calculated spurning of his values and sensibility.

The speech begins when Salarino, one of Antonio's friends, asks what possible good can come of having a pound of human flesh. Shylock answers, "To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (3.1.50-1). In the next four lines, he spells out Antonio's insults and interference with his usury, but then follow eight lines which, as Alan Stone points out, proclaim "that Jew and Christian are alike in their carnal human nature, not their spirituality" (2). Shylock then returns to the lesson that is driven by his rage: Christian example justifies his revenge. Or as he puts it, "The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.67-9). Contrary to Portia's set speech on mercy, the Venetians have not taught Christian mercy, but as Radford's film imagery makes abundantly clear, they have practiced luxury and depravity and, to the Jews, they have taught contempt, cruelty, and vindictiveness. That Shylock acts in kind should come as no surprise.

But then what are we to make of Portia's speech during the trial? Moreover, why does she draw out the trial when she knows she will win by a legal trick? Obviously, Shylock is defeated before the trial begins. This is so in the original text. But the scene has always depended, finally, on the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. As W.H. Auden reminds us, for example, why



don't Shylock and the Duke know—and why must they be instructed by Portia/Balthazar—that a foreigner who conspires against the life of a Venetian forfeits his own life (229)? On the level of the plot, of course, Radford uses the trial scene to frustrate Shylock's thirst for revenge. As the camera pans the audience, including the Jews in attendance, its reactions show both anger and horror. According to Radford, Shylock, too, works through his "road rage" and comes to the realization that he has gone too far: "He's waking up and he's saying [to himself]: 'Oh my God, what have I done'" (Huttner 3; also Radford commentary to scene 23).

Radford, however, has used the trial for another reason: to forward his "subtext." Since the homoerotic attraction between Antonio and Bassanio has been in abeyance, but not resolved, it still poses a danger to Portia and her marriage. Radford has shaped the trial scene to let Portia know she must disengage her husband from a potential lover. The quality of mercy speech is delivered as "a matter of fact" (to use Radford's phrase, commentary to scene 20) and played largely to the on-lookers, not Shylock. She knows he will not relent, but the length of time spent on the speech creates further tension. The speech itself is built on a hypocrisy, as Portia will show no mercy but will drive home the letter of the law in its entire rigor. Thinking Shylock will have his pound of flesh and thus Antonio's life, Bassanio makes a touching and passionate good-bye: he must be pulled away from his friend by Graziano. Portia is looking on. To save Antonio, Bassanio, joined by Gratiano, offer all they have, including their wives. Portia sees the powerful attraction of Bassanio's friendship with Antonio and a close up of her facial expression during this scene reveals her dawning awareness of this threat to her love and marriage. Radford draws out the tension of the trial scene to let Shylock become self-aware of his monstrous intention, to obligate Antonio to Portia for saving his life, but also in large part to reveal the extent of the Bassanio/Antonio friendship to Portia.

### **The Three Rings**

The ring plot then becomes pivotal because it brings together all of the outstanding themes. In the original text, the Belmont reconciliation of act five resolves the ring business and, with the exception of Shylock, gives everyone something to be happy about. Bassanio and Gratiano are reassured that their wives have been faithful, Lorenzo and Jessica are given "From the rich Jew a special deed of gift,/ After his death, of all he dies possessed of" (5.1.292-93), and Antonio receives a letter telling that his merchant ships "Are safely come to road" (5.1.288). When the ring episode has been played out, Belmont has become a redemptive alternative to the corruption of Venice. For the film, however, Radford complicates the reconciliation by resolving in it the homoerotic theme and, through the film's imagery, returning to the theme of anti-Semitism.

Radford uses the ring plot, initially, to emphasize and then resolve the conflict between Bassanio's devotion to his friend and his love for his new wife. When Portia, as Balthazar, asks Bassanio for his wedding ring, he is unwilling to part with it, since to do so, would, in Portia's words, "presage the ruin of [his] love"(3.2.173). Antonio then urges him to give the ring: "Let his [Balthazar's] deservings and my love withal/ Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.446-47). Radford notes that in this plea, Antonio has drawn "the battle line" between himself and Portia (commentary to scene 25). This plea overcomes Bassanio's reluctance and he gives the ring to Portia/Balthazar. If there was any doubt before, Portia now understands clearly what is happening between the two men and must act to annul this possible danger to her marriage. When they return to Belmont and out of disguise, Portia challenges Bassanio's fidelity when he admits that he has given away her gift-ring which he swore never to part with. While the lovers quarrel over the rings, the camera focuses on Jessica's agonized face, as she responds seriously to the ring business that is probing the question of fidelity. The quarrelling is resolved when Antonio, as at the opening of the film, again offers himself as surety for his friend, but for Bassanio's fidelity, he now offers his soul, not his flesh. Satisfied, Portia has Antonio, like the best man at a wedding, return the ring to Bassanio.

Stephen Greenblatt reminds us in reference to the text that "the whole last act plays with the symbolic power of rings" (285). Radford reduces the original ring plot by half, but what remains is carefully crafted to underscore the film's tragic conclusion. In Miller's 1970 version and other theatrical productions, the whole episode is often played lightly and humorously, but here the humor is darkened and becomes a more serious test of fidelity. In the original, the threats to marital probity are a matter of disguise, trickery, and a mistaken, if understandable, gift-giving, with no suggestion of real infidelity. But here, even the light-hearted banter on gender ambiguity caused by the women's disguises has a bite to it, since Antonio and Jessica must look on as the lovers tease each other with sexual innuendo that turns on the slyly obtained rings. Although it is not as striking as the kiss Bassanio gives Antonio in the opening scene, when Portia kisses Nerissa full on the lips, the homoerotic theme is again implied, but here, ironically. Nerissa quips that she will never make Graziano a cuckold unless she lives to be a man, and Bassanio tells Portia, "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow. / When I am absent, then lie with my wife" (5.1.284-85), with the homoerotic wordplay intended. And Graziano ends the film dialogue with his sexual pun on "keeping safe Nerissa's ring"(5.1.307).

Despite these reconciliations, the ring episode culminates in a series of separations. When Bassanio receives Portia's ring the second time, his reconfirmed marriage separates him from Antonio. There can be no homoerotic joining when Antonio's soul is at stake to guarantee Bassanio's marital fidelity.

As the lovers pair off and depart to consummate their marriages, Antonio is left alone, separated from the heterosexual community. He has recovered his fortune, but the homoerotic cause of his melancholy remains. An added, silently imaged scene in Venice follows. Shylock, too, is left alone, excluded from the synagogue, the doors being shut against him. As a Christian convert, he has no place in the Jewish community and, very likely, no place in the Christian community itself. Then Radford creates another wordless scene set in Belmont, in which Jessica comes down to the lagoon in the morning, and, alone, she studies her mother's ring, which she has kept and not given away for a monkey. As in Jonathan Miller's 1970 production, Jessica is deeply troubled by her infidelity to her father, her religion, and her heritage, all imaged in a ring whose decorative emblem seems to be a model of the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>7</sup> Radford has prepared for this scene early in the film when, just prior to her elopement, the camera focuses on a remorseful Jessica who is wearing her father's ring. All these camera images clearly imply that Belmont, reflecting Venice, is a narrowly exclusive, intolerant society, unable to accommodate difference.

But Radford creates the subtlest, and most brilliant, effect of the film in its very last image. As the camera turns from Jessica and focuses on the beautiful, early morning lagoon, several shallow-bottomed boats come into view with men standing in them, and with bows, they look like they are trying to shoot fish. As Radford has noted, the scene, as so many images in the film, resembles a Renaissance painting. In this case, Radford reproduces Vittore Carpaccio's painting, "Hunting on the Lagoon" (see page 127). The speculative date of the painting is 1595/6; Radford set his film in the Venice of 1596; and Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* sometime around 1596. A look at the painting reveals that the archers are using clay pellets to shoot, not fish, but cormorants, glossy black water birds that prey on fish.<sup>8</sup>

The beauty of the scene, like the painterly beauty of the film, is misleading in order to make a point through a common Shakespearean theme, that of appearance and reality. Rather than end the film prettily, this final scene brings us back to Shylock, the drama's tragic figure. A citation from a common Shakespearean source book will make this clear.

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<sup>7</sup> That Shylock's ring should be an image of the Ark of the Covenant is thematically appropriate. The Ark, a sacred chest, was the earliest symbol of God's presence among the Jews. When told that the Philistines had seized the Ark in battle, Eli fell to his death, indicating the profound reverence with which it was regarded in the Hebrew tradition. See I Samuel 4:18.

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare employs the image of the cormorant in four of his plays: *Love's Labors Lost* 1.1.4; *Richard II* 2.1.38; *Troilus and Cressida* 2.2.6; *Coriolanus* 1.1.120. In each of these passages, Shakespeare uses the word *cormorant* in the sense of greedy, devouring, rapacious, voracious.

The name that the poet gave the character, "Shylock," was one to arouse the hostility of everyone who knew what it meant, for "Shylock" is an almost exact transliteration of the Hebrew "shalach," a word that in the King James version of the Bible is rendered as "cormorant," and any bird of prey was in Elizabethan times a conventional symbol of a usurer. (Campbell 524; see also Lewalski 41 n.17)

This subtle use of Carpaccio's painting epitomizes Radford's work throughout the film. In the painting, the archers use clay pellets rather than arrows in order to stun the fish-hunting birds and not damage their plumage, the thing of value. The complexity of the image becomes even more evident when it is recalled that, from the first century onwards, the drawn symbol for a fish, the ICHTHUS, was used as a means for Christians to identify one another.<sup>9</sup> Radford's last image, then, reintroduces the anti-Semitism theme that extends throughout the film: the Venetian Christians see themselves preyed upon by Jewish usury, and with their power, they damage, but not kill Jews, since they have something of value to be plucked from them. That the morning sun should suggest a new beginning is thus ironic, since it appears to be something it isn't. Perhaps this use of Carpaccio's painting was prompted by Shylock's answer to Salarino's question about the worth of a pound of human flesh: "To bait fish withal."

### Conclusion

Radford's film of *The Merchant of Venice* has accomplished two principal objectives. It has coherently combined a number of incidents and developments that have appeared in the play's social and theatrical history and has done so in a way as to place the whole in a unified relationship to a tragic Shylock. By shaping the action along tragic lines, Radford has been able to transform the charge of anti-Semitism leveled against the play into a convincing historic setting both for a realistic *mise-en-scène* and social-cultural context. Shylock, then, could be both justified and vindictive, given the environment of intolerance in which he carried on his business, practiced his religion, and cared for his daughter. Antonio's melancholy is given a motive deriving from his thwarted homoerotic longing, and which becomes the source of tension for the marriage of Portia and Bassanio. At the end of the film, images of isolation undermine the comedic, marital reconciliations by reminding us of their steep cost. Belmont itself, and the

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<sup>9</sup> ICHTHUS is the Greek word for *fish*. The Greek spelling for ICHTHUS is *Iota, Chi, Theta, Upsilon*, and *Sigma*, which stand for the words, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" or in Greek, *Iesus Christos, Theous Uios, Soter*. In order to avoid unnecessary danger during the early years of persecution, a Christian would draw an ICHTHUS on the ground or wall to let other Christians know he was a believer.

happiness of the lovers, can only exist by the narrow exclusiveness of a society unable to assimilate those who are different. Radford's adoption and transformation into film images of elements in the play's performance and social history, then, has succeeded at a number of levels. Not only has he united the play's apparently disparate elements into a coherent and patterned whole, but he has also demonstrated that the play's problematic themes of anti-Semitism and homoeroticism have historical and contemporary relevance.

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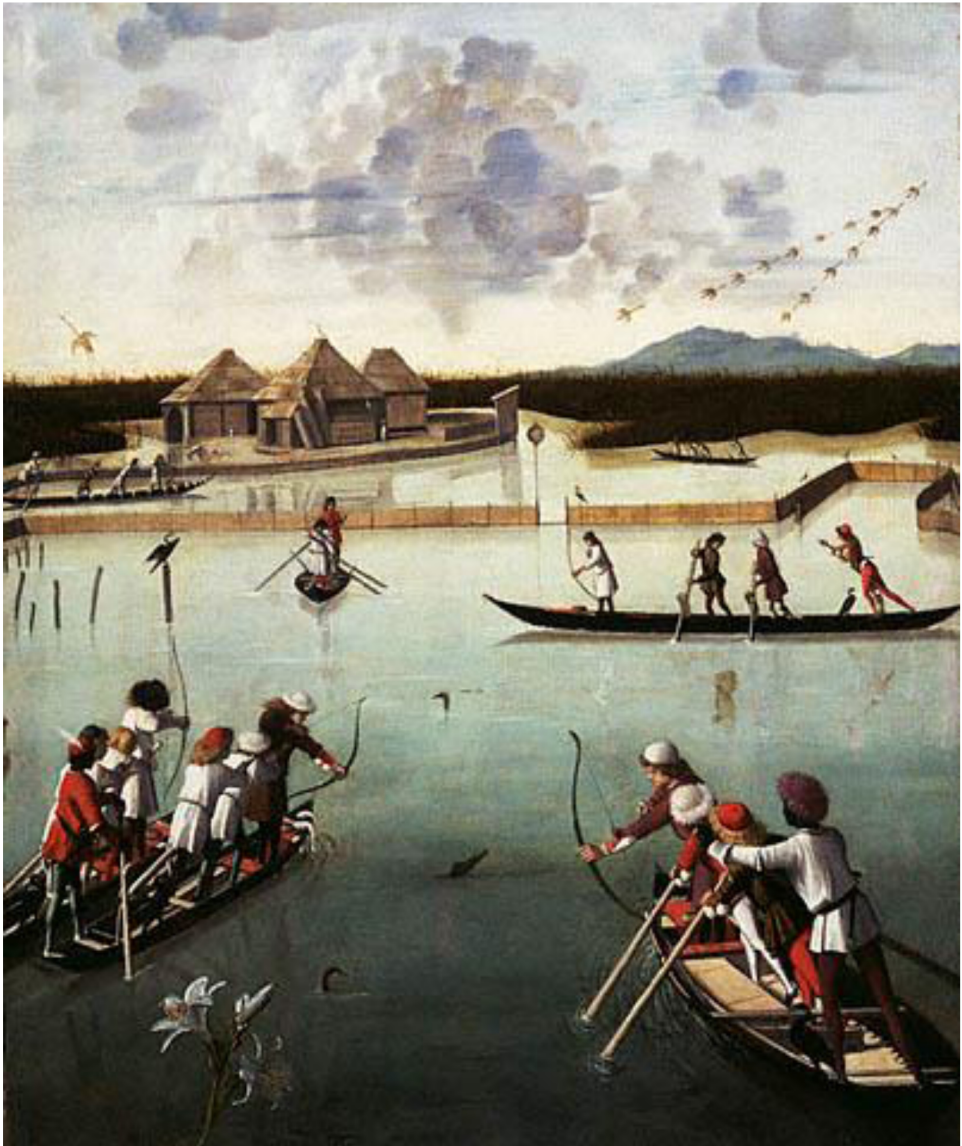
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