The dramatic climax of *The Merchant of Venice* is a battle: a battle not with sword and shield but with legal document and loophole. Shylock's perhaps unreasonable claim for the payment of a legal bond is thwarted by a technicality: "blood!" is not "lesh!". It is symptomatic of the current state of our society that we convict or acquit our modern defendants on similar grounds.

There were two conflicting ethical traditions at work in Shakespeare's England: the Roman one of literal and narrow application of statute and the Judaic one of justice through interpretation and analysis. Shylock has been wronged: by Christians as a Jew, by Venetians as a moneylender, by his daughter as a father. He seeks justice. Antonio has entered a bond; he has risked life and fortune for friendship's sake. He asks mercy. Both take refuge in law. And when Shylock insists on a strict application of laws, not "flesh", it is symptomatic of the current state of our society that we convict or acquit our modern defendants on similar grounds.

In performing *The Merchant of Venice*, the MIT Shakespeare Ensemble has recreated the most important physical feature of Elizabethan theater: the intimacy of actors and audience. Shakespeare's Globe patrons surrounded his stage on three sides (some actually sat on the platform), and no one was more than 65 feet away. In the current production in the Sala de Puerto Rico, this distance has been reduced to 40 feet.

A thrust stage, no curtain, minimal lighting changes: these make it not only necessary but also possible to use words as props and scenery. But words are not the only necessary but also possible to use words as props and scenery. But words do not act alone. Use of space, flow, rhythm, and depth of characterization, too, are important.

I am happy to be able to report that the Ensemble production is visually convincing in all these respects. There is no intrusion of "stage business". People—not actors—enter the space we watch. They speak, they argue, they plead, lie, beg, behave, not as though things were happening, but better: they are happening. Shylock (Mark Hazard) particularly deserves mention here. He steps on stage and pulls your attention. This is a proud and careful member of a race that lives only by suffering. He speaks, and we know the bitterness, the loneliness and the courage of the man. Incredibly, he makes his lines fresh again: "Heh not a Jew eye!...If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

There are caricatures in the play. The Prince of Morocco (Jesse Abramhain) is a one-dimensional creature, who is nonetheless believable because the characters on stage believe him. This part works. And so it is with the rest of the cast. Shakespeare's conception can be seen in the blend of all is not perfection, however. Antonio (Alicevy Orlowsky) seems a bit uncomfortable and perhaps also a bit self-important. Portia (Susan Mangold) showed a tendency to overact before intermission, but was admirable after. But on the whole, these are real people, caught in a real dilemma: justice or mercy?

*The Merchant of Venice* is set in the early 1500s. *A Man For All Seasons*, quoted at the head of this column, is set about thirty years later, and people are discussing the same problem: why don't we bend the law if it permits apparently evil acts to harm apparently good ones? Bananio says to Portia (disguised as the Doctor of Laws):

I beseech you, 
Wrest once the law to your authority: 
To do a great right, do a little wrong, 
And curb this cruel devil of his will.

I think Thomas More answered best:

Yes, What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?...And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? The country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—men's laws, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—why, you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake.

The Shakespeare Ensemble's production of *The Merchant of Venice* is not only thought-provoking, it is good entertainment. Go see it.

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The essay was written by Mark Fishman of the Tech Arts Section. The focus is on the MIT Shakespeare Ensemble's performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. The piece highlights the dramatic climax and the ethical dilemmas presented in the play, emphasizing the blend of realism and caricature in the characters. It also includes a positive review of the ensemble's performance, noting the natural and convincing acting, and provides a thoughtful commentary on the ethical questions raised by the play.