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The Portia Project: The Heiress of Belmont on Stage and Screen

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The Portia Project: The Heiress of Belmont on Stage and Screen

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
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Dedication

To Giulio and Valentina, the two brightest stars in my universe.

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Abstract

Until now, there has not been a performance history of *The Merchant of Venice* that focuses on Portia, the main character of the play. Although she has the most lines, the most stage time, and represents the nexus of the action, Portia has often been hidden in Shylock's shadow, and this dissertation seeks to bring her into the spotlight. *The Portia Project* is a contribution to literary and theatrical history; its primary goal is to provide a tool for scholars and teachers. Moreover, because of *Merchant's* notoriously problematic nature, the play invites different perspectives. By presenting the diverse ways that actors and directors have approached the play and resolved the cruxes associated with Portia, I aim to demonstrate that there are multiple valid ways in which to interpret the text.

Chapter one explores the literary criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*, centering on the treatment of the play's female protagonist. The early twentieth century produced wide-ranging interpretations of Portia, and the last fifty years have seen her analyzed through the lenses of feminism, cultural materialism, psychoanalytic criticism, and queer theory. Having analyzed the literary criticism, I next concentrate on the performance history of *The Merchant of Venice*, with particular attention to Portia.

I then turn to those who have performed the role in a wide-range of theatrical venues. Chapter three features the input of Seana McKenna—star of the Canadian stage and a mainstay of the Stratford Festival in Ontario—who played Portia in a 1989 production. Michael Langham directed in an atmosphere of trepidation over the play's reception and its portrayal of Shylock's forced conversion. For chapter four I interviewed

Marni Penning, a veteran of the smaller repertory companies that are sprinkled about the United States. For chapter five I talked to Edward Hall, artistic director of the all-male Propeller Theatre Company, and Kelsey Brookfield, a young black actor who played Portia for the group's 2009 production. By dressing all of the "male" characters alike, Hall de-emphasized the differences between the Christians and the Jews, while Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica were presented not as women, but as men, who have feminized themselves to survive in their harsh environment. Lily Rabe played Portia for the 2010 production of *Merchant* in Central Park, opposite Al Pacino's Shylock. The production was so successful that it moved to Broadway in October of that year, and Rabe's intelligent portrayal won universal accolades.

The Portia Project explores the perceptions of literary critics, theatrical reviewers, actors, and directors, in order to ascertain how representations and expectations of Shakespeare's most learned heroine have changed over the years and to rescue her from Shylock's shadow. By combining the disciplines of literary criticism, theatre, and film, an evolving picture of Portia emerges, revealing Portia's complexity and her centrality to *The Merchant of Venice*.

Prologue

One half of me is yours, the other half is yours (MV 3.2.16)

Poor Portia. She does not get nearly as much attention as she deserves, either from directors or from the literary critics. According to the *MLA International Bibliography*, roughly four times as many works have been written about Shylock (217) as about Portia (55), and not a single book-length study. Of course, Shylock's undeniable magnetism gives compelling fodder to literary analysts and provocative challenges to actors and directors. Moreover, post-Holocaust critics have, quite understandably, been fascinated by the question: is the play anti-Semitic or a critique of anti-Semitism? As a result, this fascination sometimes overshadows the romance that lies at the heart of the drama. Nevertheless, interest in Portia has burgeoned during the last several decades, and over the years, scholars have afforded much perceptive insight into one of Shakespeare's most intriguing heroines.

Literary discussions of *The Merchant of Venice* inevitably center on the Jewish usurer, and theatrical reviewers have tended to follow suit. David Bevington points out in *Shakespeare: Script, Stage, and Screen* that “[v]irtually all stage histories of the play focus on Shylock and the actors who play him” (212). Portia, however, has the larger role, 574 lines to Shylock's 352, and her part represents the fourth largest female role in the Shakespeare canon; only Rosalind, Imogen, and Cleopatra speak more lines. In addition, Portia appears in nine scenes, whereas Shylock is present in only four.

Moreover, the heiress of Belmont represents the nexus of the play; the quest for her hand drives the action, creating a motive for Bassanio to borrow money and initiating the bond plot, which further instigates the ring plot. Depending on one's interpretation, she also controls the result of the casket scenes by hinting to the highly preferred Bassanio concerning the correct casket. Furthermore, she serves as *deus ex machina* to resolve both the bond episode and the ring episode, manipulating the trial as well as the comic resolution of the play.

Although Shylock gets more press, his role remains significantly smaller than Portia's. Bassanio, although he has slightly more stage time than Portia, speaks even fewer lines. Antonio technically has the smallest role of the four main characters, but he spends more time on stage than Shylock. The following chart delineates the particulars of the four main roles.

Table 1
Roles and Stage Time in *The Merchant of Venice*¹

	Portia	Bassanio	Antonio	Shylock
Number of scenes	9	6	6	4
Percentage of scenes	45	30	30	20
Lines spoken	582	332	182	353
Percentage of the play spoken	22	13	7	14
Lines for which the character is onstage	1286	1361	1008	735
Percentage of the play spent onstage	50	52	39	28

The lovers Portia and Bassanio remain on stage for half of the play, and even when they are not speaking, the audience observes their presence; clearly, the romantic story dominates *The Merchant of Venice*. Moreover, Shakespeare sometimes emphasizes important moments by placing them at the center of the play, and the exact halfway point

¹ I used Bevington's updated fourth edition for this analysis. There is a total of 2598 lines in the play and 20 scenes.

of *Merchant* occurs at act 3, scene 2, line 16 when Portia says to Bassanio, “One half of me is yours, the other half is yours.” Perhaps without intending to, Shakespeare highlights an important detail about the play. The first part of the play and its emphasis on the romantic plot clearly belongs to Portia, and the Belmont plot and the casket contest drive the bond plot. Portia commands the second half as well, both in the courtroom and in her return to Belmont.

In order to rectify what has been overlooked about her fundamental importance to the play, this project seeks to shed light on representations of Portia. I begin with a survey of the literary criticism of *The Merchant of Venice*, centering my discussion on the treatment of the play’s female protagonist, and continue with a performance history that focuses not on Shylock, but on his courtroom adversary.

The final four chapters include interviews with four very different Portias who have performed the role in a wide-range of theatrical venues: a well established Canadian actor and marquee name who played the role at the leading Shakespeare Festival in Canada; another established actor who appeared in both a much acclaimed London stage production and a film; a theatre veteran who starred in a repertory production in Florida; and a black male Portia who performed the role in a highly experimental New York production. Chapter three highlights Seana McKenna, star of the Canadian stage and a mainstay of the Stratford Festival in Ontario. McKenna played Portia in a 1989 production that also featured Brian Bedford as Shylock and Geraint Wyn Davies as Bassanio. Michael Langham directed in an atmosphere of trepidation over the play’s reception and its portrayal of Shylock’s forced conversion. Marni Penning, the subject of chapter four, lit up the Orlando stage in 2009 with a fairy-tale Portia in

Disney's neighborhood. This veteran of U.S. regional festivals brought her broad experience to the magic kingdom of Belmont. Kelsey Brookfield, a young black man, did not resemble the typical Portia when he played the role for Edward Hall's Propeller Theatre. The production—featured in chapter five—visited the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the spring of 2009, and its cutting-edge setting in a harsh prison, its all-male cast, and its highly physical approach allowed Brookfield to enact a thought-provoking and sympathetic Portia that blatantly broke with convention. Lily Rabe, the focus of chapter six, had appeared in a few Broadway plays when she landed the plum role of Portia opposite Al Pacino for a 2010 production at Central Park's Delacorte Theatre. She quickly won the hearts of New York audiences and critics, and the hugely successful production moved to the Shubert Theatre in November of that year, packing the house night after night, earning an average of one million dollars a week at the box office.

These interviews from diverse productions reveal Portia's complexity and her centrality to *The Merchant of Venice*, a provocative mixture of genres, simultaneously one of Shakespeare's earliest festive comedies and his most well-known problem play. Amongst his earlier work, the lady of Belmont represents Shakespeare's most fully-developed female character, and even in the full canon, only Cleopatra's infinite variety supersedes Portia's multifaceted appeal. *The Portia Project* seeks to amalgamate the perceptions of literary critics, theatrical reviewers, actors, and directors, lending these voices to a discussion of Shakespeare's most learned heroine and thereby rescuing her from Shylock's shadow.

Chapter One

Critical History

THE EARLY CRITICS

Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century critics frequently ignore Portia or, when they deign to notice her, grant her scant respect. Moreover, as is perhaps inevitable in an epoch that placed such a high value on gender decorum, Portia is generally evaluated against conventional ideals of proper womanhood. In 1710, Charles Gildon expresses disdain for Portia's lack of femininity in his *Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare*: "The Character of *Portia* is not every where very well kept, that is, the Manners are not always *agreeable* or *convenient* to her Sex and Quality; particularly [in III.iv. 60-78]² where she scarce preserves her Modesty in the Expression" (Bloom 47-48). One hundred years later, Friedrich Schlegel gives her a bit more credit, although he contends that Bellario, not Portia, masterminds Antonio's acquittal: "Bassanio's preparations for his courtship are the cause of Antonio's subscribing the dangerous bond; and Portia again, by the counsel and advice of her uncle, a famous lawyer, effects the safety of her lover's friend" (389). Moreover, Schlegel takes a very conventional view of the love story, ignoring the complexities of the Portia/Bassanio relationship when he declares that "We share in the rapture of Portia and Bassanio at the fortunate choice; we easily conceive why they are so fond of each other, for they are both most deserving of love" (390).

² Gildon probably refers primarily to Portia's lines, "They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit / That they shall think we are accomplished / With that we lack" (3.4.60-62).

Whereas Giddon and Schlegel marginalize Portia, William Hazlitt, writing in 1817 in his *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, seemingly annoyed with her intellectual display, positively attacks her. Hazlitt brings Portia into the world of scholarly controversy, boldly denying her any readerly respect:

Portia is not a very great favourite with us; neither are we in love with her maid, Nerissa. Portia has a certain degree of affectation and pedantry about her, which is very unusual in Shakespeare's women, but which perhaps was a proper qualification for the office of a 'civil doctor,' which she undertakes and executes so successfully. The speech about Mercy is very well; but there are a thousand finer ones in Shakespeare. We do not admire the scene of the caskets; and object entirely to the Black Prince, Morocchius. We should like Jessica better if she had not deceived and robbed her father, and Lorenzo, if he had not married a Jewess, though he thinks he has a right to wrong a Jew. (322)

Hazlitt's condescension supersedes even that of his contemporaries; he includes not only Portia but also Nerissa, Morocco, Jessica, and Lorenzo in his disdain. However, one of the first female critics of Shakespeare will shortly give Hazlitt the comeuppance that he deserves.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY "CHARACTER CRITICISM"

Nineteenth-century criticism sought to rehabilitate Portia. Seemingly outraged by Hazlitt's remarks, Anna Brownell Jameson thoroughly rejects his comments while singing Portia's praises in her 1833 book, *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical*,

and Historical. Jameson's critique of Portia reflects both the character criticism so popular at this time and the interest in Shakespeare's female characters—including Ophelia and Desdemona, as well as Portia—that emerged in the nineteenth century. Mary Cowden Clarke's 1851 book, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, in which she imagines a girlhood for Shakespeare's female protagonists, also epitomizes the character criticism that dominated nineteenth-century critical discourse, whereby Shakespeare's *dramatis personae* were treated as real individuals with a past and present beyond their brief appearances on the stage; these female characters were also judged in the moralistic terms that dominated the Victorian era. Moreover, Jameson is the first critic to comment positively on Portia's obvious intelligence. Approaching the mistress of Belmont not simply as a character in a given play but as an individual who can be compared to other individuals in other plays, Jameson remarks that "Portia, Isabella [in *Measure for Measure*], Beatrice [in *Much Ado about Nothing*], and Rosalind [in *As You Like It*], may be classed together as characters of intellect, because, when compared with others, they are at once distinguished by their mental superiority. In Portia, it is intellect kindled into romance by a poetical imagination" (12). Thus, Jameson vehemently refutes Hazlitt's evaluation, noting that Portia has received no "critical justice" and castigating Hazlitt for his scathing remarks. Jameson observes that Portia's "dignity" and "sweetness" are blanced by "qualities peculiar to herself; by her high mental powers, her enthusiasm of temperament, her decision of purpose, and her buoyancy of spirit" (13-14). Jameson pays particular attention to Portia's performance in act four, implying that initially Portia hopes her mercy speech will be sufficient to convince Shylock to forego the pound of flesh: "It is evident that she would rather owe the safety of Antonio to

anything rather than the legal quibble with which her cousin Bellario has armed her, and which she reserves as a last resource” (16).

Perhaps following Jameson’s lead, a number of commentators writing in the mid-nineteenth century sought to recuperate Shakespeare’s neglected heroine and establish her as the sympathetic protagonist of the comedy. In 1838 Heinrich Heine, another “character” critic, presents Portia as a counterpoint to Shylock and acknowledges the heroine’s centrality to the play, while still expressing admiration for her adversary: “In fact, with the exception of Portia, Shylock is the most respectable person in the whole piece” (382). Heine further extols Portia’s acumen and sunny disposition with poetic enthusiasm: “Portia appears . . . to us as setting forth that after-blossoming of Greek spirit which spread forth its delicious perfume in the sixteenth century from Italy all over the world, and which we love and esteem to-day as the Renaissance.” Heine maintains that Portia stands in opposition to Shylock’s “gloomy adversity” and enthuses that “Her blooming, rose-like, pure ringing is her every thought and saying, how glowing with joy her every word, how beautiful all the figures of her phrases, which are mostly from mythology” (396).

Like Heine, Hermann Ulrici (1839) in *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Art: and His Relation to Calderon and Goethe* expresses sympathy for Portia, particularly commenting on the *senex*-like restrictions with which her father has limited her free choice: “The whim of Portia’s father, which fetters her free will and robs her of all participation in the choice of her husband, rests, no doubt, ultimately on parental rights and authority.” Ulrici acknowledges that Portia has just cause to complain and pardons her for any intimations she may have made to Bassanio: “Even if she had broken her oath, and by signs and hints

had guided her well-beloved, amiable, and worthy lover to a right choice, would any of us have been ready to cast the first stone at her?" (304).

Further supporting Heine, G. G. Gervinus (1849-50) unequivocally asserts the significance of *Merchant's* heroine in his *Shakespeare Commentaries*: "Nevertheless, Portia is the most important figure in our drama, and she forms even its true central point; as for her sake, without her fault or knowledge, the knot is entangled, and through her and by means of her conscious effort it is also loosened" (239). Moreover, Gervinus vituperatively spurns Shylock while admiring the characters of Antonio and Bassanio: "But Portia proves even here her superior nature. She sees more keenly what an inevitable snare this inhuman Jew has dug for Antonio; she adopts the surest course of saving him by right and law itself; she devises at the same time a plan for testing the man of her love" (242-43). In 1881, A. Pietscher further lauds Portia's composure and praises her shrewdness, which, according to Pietscher, outdoes Shylock's cunning: "For my part, commend me to our Portia, who, in true woman's fashion, does not allow herself to be in the least disconcerted by the pathetic appeal: 'If you deny me, fie upon your law!' . . . The discomfiture of the Jew is not the lamentable downfall of a hero; it is the victory of cunning by greater cunning; the rogue is caught in his own snare" (412-13).

Finally, as the end of the nineteenth century approached, Portia found several articulate champions who stress her optimism, her ethical balance, and her predominance in the play. Denton J. Snider, writing around 1890, recognizes Portia's significance, although, unlike Gervinus, he is unwilling to designate her as the sole protagonist of the play: "Portia is the third great character of the play, and in importance stands quite on a par with Antonio and Shylock. Her function is mediatorial; in fact, she may be called the

grand mediatrix of the entire drama. In her we see the instrumentality by which the main results are brought about” (316). Snider lauds her ability to see past the trappings of wealth: “Portia has quite disregarded the outward glitter of wealth and rank, and has seemingly sought out a follower in the retinue of a lord, instead of the lord himself—’a Venetian, a scholar, and a soldier, that came hither in the company of the Marquis of Montferrat’” (317-18). Snider further praises Portia in ways that twentieth-century feminists would find highly offensive, noting (approvingly) Portia’s ultimate willingness to acquiesce to her husband’s will: “. . . she has that complete harmony and unity with her husband, that his joys are her joys, his sorrows her sorrows; and she has the same interest in her husband’s friend that the husband himself has. Thus she is a truly ethical character—ethical in the sense that she instinctively subordinates herself to the highest end of woman” (333). E. K. Chambers, writing in his 1908 *Red Letter Shakespeare*, again observes Portia’s impact and seems especially enthralled by her relationship to Phoebus:

Heart-strings shall be wrung in the process of the story; but it is not, as a whole, written in the key of tragedy. It stands under the domination of Portia, the first and most triumphant of Shakespeare’s questing heroines; and its atmosphere is throughout in harmony with Portia’s sunny hair, and Portia’s sunny wit, and Portia’s sunny temper, rather than with the grey twilight of Antonio’s mood. (107)

Thus, although most nineteenth-century critics appear to admire Portia, the majority laud her as the conventional “feminine” heroine who conforms to the gender expectations of the period while remaining totally unaware of her complexity and empowerment.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

In reaction to nineteenth-century character criticism, many of the commentators of the early and middle twentieth century sought to provide a cultural dimension for Shakespeare's plays, either embedding the plays within the philosophical discourses of the period or relating them to their cultural milieu or their dramatic heritage from both the classical and medieval drama. Chief among the cultural/historical critics of *Merchant*, Nevill Coghill promulgates a perceptive and highly influential allegorical reading of *Merchant* that equates Portia with mercy; he comments on the similarities between the trial scene in *Merchant* and the debate of the daughters of God in the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*, observing of Portia's famous "mercy" speech that "Almost exactly the same argument is conducted by the same four daughters of God at the end of *The Castle of Perseverance*, a morality play written in the early fifteenth century" (277-78). Coghill expands on his theory, clarifying his thoughts by stating, "As I am here considering what Dante would have called the allegorical meaning of the play, let me stress that I am not saying it is the 'only' meaning. . . . The principle here mainly adumbrated in Shylock is justice, in Portia, mercy" (278). Coghill further exonerates Portia for her perceived cruelty to Shylock—an issue often stressed in contemporary criticism—by attributing her actions to the allegorical mode: "The verbal trick played by Portia is not a part of her 'character,' but a device to turn the tables and show justice in the posture of a suppliant before mercy" (279).

Two other critics who seek to situate Shakespeare's plays within the dramatic and folkloric conventions of his time, Northrop Frye in "The Argument for Comedy" (1949) and C. L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959), locate the provenance of

many of Shakespeare's comedies in the festivities and pageants of early modern England. Frye posits two different worlds operating within Shakespeare's comedies: the "normal" world of the court and the "magical" world of the country, a place of festivity and self-discovery, what Frye terms Shakespeare's "green world." Typically, Shakespeare's festive comedies dramatize a retreat from the "normal world" into the "green world," where the characters experience a metamorphosis and achieve comic resolution before returning to the "normal world" (68). Although, as Frye remarks, in "*The Merchant of Venice*, the two worlds are a little harder to see, Venice is clearly not the same world as that of Portia's mysterious house in Belmont, where there are caskets teaching that gold and silver are corruptible goods, and from whence proceed the wonderful cosmological harmonies of the fifth act" (68). Although Barber is usually classified as a psychoanalytical critic, his book *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* in which he situates Shakespeare's comedies within the cultural context of Medieval and Renaissance festivals, is one of the definitive studies of cultural influences on Shakespeare's drama. Barber develops his cultural reading of Shakespeare's festive comedies along somewhat different lines from Frye, locating in Saturnalian festivity a source of release and clarification and pitting the forces of celebration and holiday against those of denial and parsimony. In his reading of *Merchant*, although like so many critics he focuses more on Shylock than on Portia, Barber identifies Portia and Bassanio with the forces of celebration while stigmatizing Shylock as the "killjoy" or "scapegoat" who must be banished before felicity can be restored. The cultural critics cited above tend to view Portia symbolically rather than realistically, and their critical approach leads to an idealization of the mistress of the magical realm of Belmont.

Early historical critics focus not on the “history of ideas,” the cultural heritage, or the dramatic conventions that shaped Shakespeare’s plays, but on the historical context that influenced his creation of character. Although this approach will become a hallmark of new historical criticism (to be discussed later), long before new historicists begin finding analogues between Hamlet and the Earl of Essex and King Lear and King James, scholars were positing parallels between Portia and Elizabeth I. John E. Hannigan in his 1939 article “Shylock and Portia” identifies a parallel between Portia and Queen Elizabeth I. As would be expected when likening Portia to such an iconic figure, Hannigan lauds Portia with most extravagant praise, extolling her as a captivating example of femininity, an exalted maternal figure (Queen Elizabeth often presented herself as both the spouse and mother of her people), and the most intelligent character in the play (perhaps mirroring the acumen of England’s shrewdest monarch). Moreover, Hannigan commends Portia’s wifely devotion—“As we all know, but most of us overlook the point, she is as deeply concerned about the case as her husband is”—while labeling Shylock a criminal—“And when he refuses to fall for her high-sounding eloquence, note the change of tone and the sophistry with which she lays it down that although he has a good case, his refusal of the money and demand for a lawful judgment of his lawful case make him a criminal” (173-74). Although Hannigan effusively praises Portia throughout his article, his use of the word “sophistry,” suggesting deception, subtly criticizes Portia’s tactics.

Several decades later, Samuel Small, in his 1973 book *The Return to Shakespeare: The Historical Realists*, will also seek to place Portia in a historical context and critique Hannigan’s rather fulsome praise, observing that the idealization of Portia is

simply a literary convention: “The explanation of Shakespeare’s over-statement of Portia’s nobility of nature is easily found in the literature of Shakespeare’s day and also in the lives of many noble women, exemplified best in Queen Elizabeth. . . . who was wholly representative of her age” (37). Small allows that “[Portia’s] actions indicate that her intelligence is remarkable” (37), but asserts that “it was conventional in the sixteenth century literature to impart the most extravagant wit to the heroine.”

Although early cultural/historical critics tend to view Portia favorably, their idealization of the Mistress of Belmont remains rather reductive. Coghill views her allegorically, Frye and Barber place her within the green world of festive comedy, and Small reduces her to a literary convention. These critics, with the possible exception of Hannigan, overlook the complexity that makes Portia such a fascinating character.

FORMALIST CRITICISM

Another dominant critical approach of the early and middle twentieth century was formalism, which foregrounds the work of art as the central object of exploration, sometimes ignoring historical context and privileging structure, imagery, and theme. Applying the theories of Frye and Barber to a structural analysis of the play, Sigurd Burckhardt, in his seminal 1962 article “*The Merchant of Venice: The Gentle Bond*,” observes that *Merchant*, like so many of Shakespeare’s comedies, can be divided into two very different spheres. According to Burckhardt: “The world of *The Merchant* consists of two separate and mostly discontinuous realms: Venice and Belmont, the realm of law and the realm of love, the public sphere and the private” (243). While following Coghill by presenting Portia as the representative of “love” and “mercy,” Burckhardt affirms the

absolute centrality of the bond: “Portia, won through the bond, wins Antonio’s release from it; what is more, she wins it, not by breaking the bond, but by submitting to its rigor more rigorously than even the Jew had thought to do” (242). Burckhardt acknowledges that Portia’s eloquent mercy speech has absolutely no effect on Shylock and observes how Portia’s strict adherence to the bond saves the day: “Very much as Shylock learned, from Antonio’s hardness, how to transform metal into flesh, so Portia now learns from Shylock himself the art of winning life from the deadly letter” (259). Like the critics cited above, Burckhardt tends to idealize Portia as the mistress of Belmont, Shakespeare’s “green” world: “Portia—the indefinable being who speaks most truly when she sounds most faithless, who frees us through an absolute literalness, who learns the grim prose of law in order to restore it to its true function” (262).

Thirty years later, Tony Tanner, in his 1999 essay “Which is the Merchant here? And which the Jew?” also employs a structural analysis, this time to dispute Burckhardt’s famous division of the play into two spheres. Tanner uses Portia’s question to frame his argument that the worlds of Venice and Belmont are actually quite similar: “Belmont (in the form of Portia) is as much under the rule of (male) law as Venice” (52). Tanner joins the critics who interpret the Bassanio/Antonio relationship as homoerotic, which will be discussed below, relating it to Shylock’s usury, and although Tanner believes this same-sex relationship is not important, he draws a parallel between Antonio and Shylock with the following statement: “Buggery and usury were very closely associated or connected in the contemporary mind as unnatural acts” (61).

While foregrounding structure, image, and theme, formalist critics also privilege ambiguity, and their close reading of literary texts often discovers ironies overlooked by

previous commentators. Thus, whereas Burckhardt concentrates on the two worlds of the play, J. P. Brockbank (1963), also applying a formalist analysis to *Merchant*, identifies a dual reading, one that valorizes Portia and one that sentimentalizes Shylock. He perceptively remarks that elevating Shylock inevitably denigrates Portia, insisting that we watch the play with “one auspicious and one dropping eye, or . . . an innocent eye and a skeptical. . . . To the more skeptical eye it appears a magnificent exercise in lawcourt virtuosity. . . . But if we take it only skeptically we find ourselves sentimentalizing Shylock and brutalizing Portia” (38).

In characteristic formalist fashion, Norman Rabkin develops the ironies and double meanings identified by Brockbank. Although Rabkin’s chapter “Meaning and *The Merchant of Venice*” (from his 1982 monograph *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*) does not spend much time on Portia specifically, its overall contribution to the understanding of this play merits inclusion here. Expanding Brockbank’s dual interpretation of *Merchant*, Rabkin disdains reductive readings that insist on viewing the work narrowly and argues that ambiguity permeates the play, orchestrating ambivalent responses in the reader or spectator. He boldly asserts that

. . . audience responses to Shylock or Bassanio or Portia which are alternatively or exclusively hostile or sympathetic are the result of ambivalent signals built into the play. . . . If for a moment, or an entire production, we are led to respond sympathetically to Shylock, we necessarily respond with less sympathy to Jessica or Portia, and vice versa. (28)

Rabkin's observations are important to this study; interpretations that elevate Shylock inevitably degrade Portia, and the critic takes note of the extremes and "deep polarities" of the play: "The life-and-death struggle between them makes us feel the need to take a stand on one side or the other. And yet the same play that makes that demand refuses to permit an unequivocal resolution in favor of one character or group of characters or one term in a thematic debate" (28-29).

Rabkin's interpretation of *Merchant* has been very influential, and although his approach is decidedly formalist, historical critics have offered strong support for his reading by relating Shakespeare's plays to other interrogative works of the period. Sara Munson Deats offers a number of provocative explanations for the popularity at this particular historical moment of these highly ambiguous dramas:

In *Censorship and Interpretation* (1984), Anabel Patterson posits "functional ambiguity" as the response of Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries to the censorship laws of the 1590s. She suggests that these laws constrained the playwrights of the period to obscure the subversive material in their texts beneath the cloak of indirection and to craft plays that they intended to be experienced differently by diverse audiences (17-18). Conversely, in *Tudor Play of Mind* (1987), [Joel] Altman situates the problematic dramas of the period within the rhetorical traditions of arguing on both sides of the question. . . [71]. Finally, Ernest B. Gilman in *The Curious Perspective* (1978) links the early modern admiration for multiple perspectives in literature to the period's fascination with dual aspect paintings that shift configurations with a shift in position (35-38).
(108)

Whatever the provenance of Shakespeare's famed interrogative dramas, *Merchant* does seem to belong among this group and offers multiple perspectives not only of the play's much discussed antagonist, Shylock, but also of its female protagonist, Portia.

The introductions in the various editions of the play often provide entry points to the work; for many readers they create an initial impression of Portia, and editors frequently note the dual nature of Portia's character. John Russell Brown in the Arden edition (1955) and Anne Barton in the Riverside edition (1974) capture both the admiration and ambivalence that Portia has traditionally evoked in critics. Brown acknowledges Portia's complexity without elaborating on it when he writes, "The speech with which she sends Bassanio to his hazard—'Away then! I am lock'd in one of them, . . .' (III.ii.40-62)—is as complex as Portia herself, and as simple; it is poised and beautiful poetry, and yet expresses perfectly her hopes and fears" (xlviii). Much more specific in her analysis, Barton comments on both Portia's generosity and her alleged callousness, issues that will be debated consistently in later criticism and will be treated more fully in chapter two. First she observes, "The hand, however, is Portia's and it is characteristically generous and full of gifts. At the same time that she gently but firmly excludes Antonio from priority of place in Bassanio's affections, she compensates him with the news that three of the ships he had given up for lost are miraculously, and richly, arrived in port" (253). However, Barton also claims—reductively, I think—that Portia is unmerciful to Shylock despite her eloquent mercy speech: "[d]uring the trial itself, she seemed to forget her own eloquent celebration of mercy as soon as it came to sentencing her victim, and she does not spare him a thought now" (253).

Whether praising her or denigrating her, formalist critics began to acknowledge Portia's complexity, promulgating a Janus-faced reading that allows Portia to be more than a one-dimensional stock character.

PORTIA AND MEDEA

The duality of Portia's character and the ambivalence that this duality evokes are epitomized by her association with Medea. Herbert S. Donow (1969) will be the first of a group of critics to align Portia with Medea, a figure from Greek mythology who suggests both positive and negative connotations:

This allusion to the Roman Portia, a woman renowned for prudence and integrity and for her superiority to her sex, creates our initial image of the Belmont Portia . . . only a few lines after he compares her to Brutus' Portia, Bassanio makes a qualification of this impression of great virtue by alluding to Medea. . . . If Cato's daughter is the epitome of restraint, rationality, and virtue, Aietes' daughter [Medea] is another matter. . . . Medea may well epitomize all that is irrational and dangerous in women. And yet here in one woman, Shakespeare brings together these two extremes. (87-88)

Donow's comparing Portia to Medea in terms of the quest for the golden fleece is reasonable, but his equating her to Medea's dark deeds is hardly justified by the reference in the play. Furthermore, Donow seems to be implying that all women, including Portia,

are irrational and dangerous, an especially hyperbolic statement when read in the context of Medea's brutally murderous acts.³

In "The New Medea: On Portia's Comic Triumph in *The Merchant of Venice*," (1996), Michael Zuckert rejects an interpretation that focuses too heavily on Shylock: "As is frequently the case in Shakespeare's dramas, he uses the opening scenes to set the problem the main action of the play attempts to resolve. The problem is this: both Antonio and Portia love Bassanio; Antonio and Portia are rivals for the love of Bassanio" (4). Following Donow, he compares Portia to Medea: "Portia's first move is not against Antonio—she has no idea he is part of the story—but is, or seems to her to be, against her father. To the new Jason, Portia is the golden fleece, but in her feelings and actions she is Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes, the possessor of the fleece" (8). Despite comparing Portia to a very problematic mythological figure, Zuckert extols her for her cool-headed insight: "The only character in the play who seems clear-eyed about Antonio is Portia. From the moment that she observes Bassanio's reaction to Antonio's letter, she knows she does not have the full devotion of her husband" (16).

In 2002, John W. Velz re-visits the Medea legend with "Portia and the Ovidian Grotesque." Like Donow and Zuckert, Velz stresses Portia's "two apparently incompatible identities" (179). The critic suggests that the roots of this duality lie in the mythic Medea story: "Shakespeare got the strange disjunction between the two discrete identities in one Portia . . . in an important mythological substructure that underpins the role and the action: the Medea legend, which is referred to more than once in the play"

³ Medea lured her brother into being killed by Jason; she convinced Pelias's daughters to cut their father up into little pieces and boil him. When Jason betrayed her love by becoming betrothed to another, Medea murdered Glauce, the bride, with a poisoned wedding dress that melted her flesh. Most egregious of all, to avenge her husband's disloyalty, she murdered their two children.

(180). Velz argues that the somewhat exaggerated account in Ovid offers an analogue for Portia: “Medea is an innocent virgin in love for the first time, yet she is a witch with supernal powers. She is, in this almost absurd amalgam of innocence and extraordinary competence, an Ovidian grotesque of the first order” (181). Velz’s unfair comparison seems to imply that Portia’s legal brilliance is born of witchcraft, not intellect.

PERFORMANCE CRITICISM

Performance criticism has never dominated Shakespearean scholarship. However, by stressing that Shakespeare’s creations are characters in a play who have no life separate from their “two hour traffic” on the stage, performance critics offer a valuable leaven to the excesses of character criticism. One of the leading performance critics, himself a highly successful director of Shakespeare’s plays, is Harley Granville-Barker. In his 1930 *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Granville-Barker designates *The Merchant of Venice* a fairy tale (335) and approaching the comedy like the director that he is, observes that “Shakespeare can do little enough with Portia while she is still the slave of the caskets; incidentally, the actress must resist the temptation to try and do more. She has this picture of an enchanted princess to present, verse and prose to speak perfectly, and she had better be content with that” (347). Granville-Barker acknowledges, however, that Portia’s depth of character manifests itself in act four—“[The quality of mercy speech] gives us the true Portia. To the very end she expands in her fine freedom, growing in authority and dignity, fresh touches of humour enlightening her, new traits of graciousness showing” (348)—and remarks on some of the challenges that the actor faces: “Throughout the [trial] scene a Portia must, of course, by no smallest sign betray to

us—as well betray it to Bassanio—that she is other than she now seems” (351). Although his treatise is almost eighty years old, Granville-Barker’s ideas still influence directors as well as literary critics.

David Bevington, in his anthology *Shakespeare: Script, Stage, Screen*, (2006) remarks on the difficulties of staging the casket scenes, noting how directors still endorse Granville-Barker’s ideas but can effectively balance them with shades of commerce:

Portia arrives with Nerissa and a suitor for each of the three [casket] scenes. Staging can adopt a stylized manner that suggests the realm of fairy tale, parable, or romance. Yet at the end of the first two scenes, Portia is undeniably cruel in her dismissal of the foreign princes; she calls them “fools.” Nerissa quotes the old saying “Hanging and wiving go by destiny” to mock the losers. Directors can underscore either the romance in a kind of balletic repetition of the choosing motif, or the commercial bargaining involved, or (most effectively) blend the two into a full expression of the contradictory position into which Portia has been placed once she accedes to the terms of her father’s will. (178)

Kenneth Gross’s 2006 study, *Shylock is Shakespeare*, echoes Granville-Barker while it correctly identifies the shift in energy that Portia’s arrival in Venice brings: “Dramatically speaking, Portia enters as a kind of angelic visitant. Her entrance is a gift to the court, also to the audience, a relief from the battlement that has attached itself to Shylock” (97).

PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

The psychoanalytical approach to literature derives from Freud, who from his earliest writings displayed an intense interest in the relationship between creative writing and the unconscious, and from 1909 to the present a number of critics have applied psychoanalytical theories to the understanding of literature. The psychoanalytical approach, like character criticism, treats the *dramatis personae* in a play like real individuals in society, motivated by drives and complexes of which they are unaware. The psychoanalytical critic typically puts the characters in a literary work—and sometimes even the author—on the couch and employs the techniques of Freud, or less often Jung or object relations theorists, to probe the unconscious desires and motivations of either the play’s characters or their creator. At other times, the critic searches for archetypes that evoke responses in the author’s or audience’s collective unconscious. Freud himself wrote about *The Merchant of Venice* in his 1913 essay, “The Theme of the Three Caskets”; he maintains that Shakespeare has inverted the source story from the *Gesta Romanorum*, in which a woman chooses from three suitors. Freud makes the dubious claim that the caskets (a traditional female emblem) symbolize the “essential thing in woman,” and Bassanio’s choice is thus a choice among three women (Bloom 124). However, Freud does not elaborate on who the other women are; rather, he uses his point as a lead-in to his discussion of Lear’s choice amongst his three daughters. Moreover, Freud notes something suspect about Portia’s Venetian suitor: “what [Bassanio] finds to say in glorification of lead as against gold and silver is but little and has a forced ring about it. If in psycho-analytic practice we were confronted with such a

speech, we should suspect concealed motives behind the unsatisfying argument” (Bloom 123).

Applying the archetypal criticism of Jung, A. Fodor, in her 1959 essay, “Shakespeare’s Portia,” posits Portia as an embodiment of the maternal ideal, asserting that her good looks, noble blood, wealth, and intellect remain peripheral to the “spell of her lofty maternal being, profound feminine wisdom and helpfulness, the very qualities with which man has endowed the ‘good’ Mother” (61). Fodor’s rather reductive view seems to equate Portia with the 1950s housewife, assuming that a woman who is both helpful and merciful must, therefore, be maternal.

Conversely, Vera M. Jiji, in her 1976 article, “Portia Revisited: The Influence of Unconscious Factors upon Theme and Characterization in *The Merchant of Venice*,” endorses a psychoanalytic approach to uncover Portia’s darker side, insisting that a desire for power drives her: “Not only does she control events throughout the play, she controls her sex at will. She moves from female to male and back to female not under the pressure of events from outside (as Julia, Viola, Rosalind and Imogen do), but by her own choice of time and circumstance” (8). Moreover, this critic dubiously asserts that Bassanio’s line “Why it were best to cut my left hand off / And swear I lost the ring defending it” (5.1.190-91) displays his castration anxiety, and further maintains that “Portia has been so clever and manipulative that Bassanio would be a great fool indeed not to be afraid of her” (8). Jiji’s skeptical assessment of Portia may be the harshest interpretation by any critic; only Hazlitt comes close to being as critical of her.

Psychoanalytical critics have not offered much insight into Portia. In trying to fit Portia's personality onto the procrustean bed of Jungian or Freudian theory, these studies have tended to reduce her to a "patient" that fits their theories.

FEMINIST CRITICISM

Feminist criticism emerged as one of the dominant critical trends in the 1970s and, understandably, feminist critics became fascinated with Portia. Elaine Showalter posits two different strains of feminist criticism: "gynocriticism," whose goal is the rediscovery of the works of women writers neglected in male-dominated cultures, and "feminist critique," which views works by male authors from a woman's perspective, noting in particular the treatment of gender ("masculine" as well as "feminine") as an organizing and often limiting force in the literary work (128-29). Thus, both the centrality of Portia to the action of *Merchant* and the degree to which she transcends the gender stereotypes of the early modern period have intrigued feminist critics.

However, long before feminist critics discovered Portia as one of the most empowered women in Shakespeare, commentators had identified her as the protagonist of the play. Thus, although all of the commentators discussed below are certainly not feminist critics, indeed many of them predate the emergence of feminist criticism as a distinctive methodology, I am including them here because they anticipate many of the concerns central to a feminist approach.

Chief among these concerns is the recognition of Portia as the protagonist of the play. Although Antonio, as the merchant of Venice, is the titular hero, and Shylock has traditionally garnered the most critical attention, as early as 1838, Heinrich Heine asserts

that Portia is the main character in the play. Herbert Donow's 1969 article "Shakespeare's Caskets: Unity in *The Merchant of Venice*" follows Heine by identifying Portia as the nexus of the action: ". . . if we make a specific examination of the action, we find that the main events center on the courtship of Portia, and, secondarily, on Jessica's elopement" (86); this article also points out parallels between the romance of Portia and that of Jessica, an aspect of the play overlooked in earlier criticism. Furthermore, Donow also carefully validates Portia's theatrical dominance: "If we may measure a character's importance in terms of his frequency of appearance and of the number of lines he speaks, Portia and Bassanio are unquestionably the principal characters." Donow further notes that "the play begins and ends as a story about the wooing of a romantic heroine" (87).

If we expand the definition of protagonist to mean not only the actor who has the most stage time, but also the one who represents the center of the action, then clearly Portia fits the bill. Supporting this interpretation, in 1955 Peter J. Seng suggests that in Portia Shakespeare has created a character more complex than the docile, adoring wife of earlier criticism. His essay "The Riddle Song in *The Merchant of Venice*" is one of the first to establish Portia as the controller of events, particularly as the architect of Bassanio's successful selection of the lead casket, which leads to his winning the hand of Portia. One of the first to explicate the "riddle song" in the casket scene, Seng concludes that through this song, with its focus on the danger of false appearances and its repetition of words rhyming with "lead," Portia directs Bassanio to choose the correct casket. He asserts that an Elizabethan audience would have been well-attuned to "phonetic word-play" and that "Shakespeare certainly knew enough about music to write this sort of a song if he chose to" (192). Seng contends that the giving of hints "does no service, of

course, to the cause of Portia's honour," a statement that seems uncritically to endorse the patriarchal dominance of the father over the daughter; perhaps plucky Portia simply seeks control over her own life. Moreover, he patronizes Portia even while he exonerates her, attributing her "trickery" to romantic intentions: "It would be no more than a charming—and pardonable—fault in this woman in love were she to equivocate her oath to her father enough to hedge Bassanio's choice against disaster for them both" (193).

Not all commentators agree that Portia uses the song to hint, however. Alfred Harbage, writing in 1963, maintains, "In some productions, Portia is made to give Bassanio a hint of which casket to choose—a cute notion which effectively cancels the playwright's design. His ability to choose right is the proof of Bassanio's fine character, and cheating is unnecessary as well as offkey" (189). Harbage correctly notes that our perception of Bassanio suffers if he needs hints from his future wife, but the prodigal hanger-on's character is certainly less than fine, at least at the beginning of the play, although arguably he ameliorates under the influence of love. Furthermore, one wonders how Harbage can be so sure of "the playwright's design."

Alice N. Benston's 1979 essay, "Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of *The Merchant of Venice*," affirms the views of Donow, Seng, and others concerning Portia's central importance to the play even while she endorses a triple structure over the dual structure that Burckhardt delineates: "The key to understanding the thematic and structural organization of *The Merchant of Venice*, I think, is to see the play as a series of *three* trials." The critic points out that a "pattern of triads" exists in the play: "three trials, three caskets, three couples, and, of great importance, three rings. . . And the play's crucial figure is neither Antonio nor Shylock but Portia, since it is her attitude toward the

law that is central for these trials” (369-70). Moreover, Benston warns against interpreting Shylock as a tragic hero; she notes that such a reading “throws the play out of balance. Elevate Shylock and the Belmont crowd becomes a callous lot” (368). The critic points out that “Antonio acknowledges the bond, and [Portia] concludes ‘then must the Jew be merciful.’” Benston claims that “here, as elsewhere, Shylock misconstrues and takes Portia’s use of the word ‘must’ to mean compulsion rather than, as she intends, a posing of alternatives” (376). Perhaps Benston’s most salient argument concerns Shylock and revenge, an argument that elevates Portia considerably and is worth quoting at length:

Shylock is guilty of more than attempting to enforce a fraudulent contract. His greater guilt is that he would use the state’s judicial system for purposes of private revenge. The reversal here, then, is not in Portia’s out-‘Shylocking’ Shylock, thereby exposing the harshness of Old Testament justice, but in her demonstration that, just as law and the state would be in jeopardy were Shylock not allowed his day in court, so both would be equally threatened were Shylock not punished for the implicit intent of his bond. Shakespeare will explore this basic conflict later in *Hamlet*, where the Prince wrestles with the conflict between the claims of “minister and scourge” and those of the private revenger. (378)

Mary Mathis (1988) applauds Portia’s ability to “shape the dramatic outcome of the play,” although, unlike many contemporary feminist critics, she observes that, ultimately, the heiress of Belmont will uphold the patriarchal order. In her 1988 article, “Portia’s Role-Playing in *The Merchant of Venice*: Yes, Nerissa, We Shall Turn to Men,”

Mathis declares that “Portia, the most adept role-player in *The Merchant of Venice*, moves from the confining social roles of ‘lady’ and daughter to the dramatic role of ‘queen of the green world’ to the nonce-role of a professional man, and finally, to the social role of wife, which is as restrictive as her initial role” (42). Mathis enumerates and analyzes the traits that Portia possesses that allow her to shift roles flexibly— subservience, intelligence, and morality.

Certainly, Portia controls the action of the play. She takes matters into her own hands, ensuring that Bassanio finds the correct casket, arranging to gain her husband’s love and devotion and effectively removing Antonio as a rival, all the while remaining true to the letter of the law. S. F. Johnson’s article “How Many Ways Portia Informs Bassanio’s Choice” (1996) examines these issues and enumerates five variations on the theme of a conflict of wills:

- (1) Lancelot Gobbo’s trying confusions with his sand-blind father, . . . (2) Jessica’s o’erleaping of her father’s will, . . . (3) Portia’s multiple hints to Bassanio in the first 70 lines of the third casket scene, . . . (4) Portia’s o’erleaping the legal knowledge of the Venetian authorities themselves to deliver Antonio from Shylock’s taking his forfeiture; (5) Portia’s o’erleaping the marital authority of Bassanio and rebonding Antonio as surety for Bassanio’s future faith in the resolution of the ring plot. (144)

Although earlier critics had commented on the ways by which Portia subverts her father’s will, remaining true to the letter but not the spirit, Johnson offers the most detailed treatment of this important issue relating to Portia’s empowerment.

Another important issue for feminists concerns the degree to which Portia, as a character, transcends the gender limitations of the early modern period. As discussed above, Snider, in typical nineteenth-century fashion, praises Portia for her wifely acquiescence to her husband's will. However, anticipating the perspective of many feminist critics, W. H. Auden in his 1970 essay "Belmont and Venice" disagrees, commending Portia not, like Snider, for her feminine acquiescence, but for her female assertiveness. Auden dances around the problematic nature of Antonio's friendship with Bassanio while praising Portia:

I cannot picture Portia, who is certainly no Victorian doormat of a wife, allowing her bridegroom to let her enter the house by herself. If Antonio is not to fade away into a nonentity, then the married couples must enter the lighted house and leave Antonio standing alone on the darkened stage, outside the Eden from which, not by the choice of others, but *by his own nature*, he is excluded. (114, emphasis added)

Auden elevates Portia over the others at Belmont, assigning her moral superiority: "Portia we can admire because . . . we know that she is aware of her wealth as a moral responsibility, but the other inhabitants of Belmont, Bassanio, Gratiano, Lorenzo and Jessica . . . appear as frivolous members of a leisure class, whose carefree life is parasitic upon the labors of others, including usurers" (115).

Bevington addresses these feminist concerns in the introduction to *Merchant* in his Longman edition (1997). Occupying the golden mean between Snider and Auden, he presents Portia as a balance between independence and obedience:

Portia is at once spirited and submissive, able to straighten out Venice's legal tangles when all the men have failed and yet ready to call Bassanio her lord. Her teasing him about the ring is a sign that she will make demands of him in marriage, but it is a testing that cannot produce lasting disharmony so long as Bassanio is truly loyal. Portia is, from Bassanio's male point of view, the perfect woman: humanly attainable and yet never seriously threatening. Guided by her, Bassanio makes the potentially hazardous transition from the male-oriented friendships of Venice (especially with Antonio) to heterosexual union. (179)

However, tempering his favorable view of Portia, Bevington admits that her actions in act five are less than praiseworthy: "The testing of the husbands' constancy does border at times on gratuitous harshness and exercise of power, for it deals with the oldest of masculine nightmares: cuckoldry. Wives are not without weapons in the struggle for control in marriage, and Portia and Nerissa enjoy trapping their new husbands in a no-win situation" (181).

Although many earlier critics anticipated feminist concerns, stressing Portia's predominance and empowerment, feminist criticism came into its own in the 1970s, exerting its influence on the treatment of Portia. In her 1979 article, "Giving, Taking, and the Role of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*" Marianne Novy argues that "*The Merchant of Venice* implies a criticism of the ideal of self-denial in favor of the more comprehensive attitude of Portia, who is not only more assertive than Antonio but also more accepting of sexuality" (137). Novy expounds on Portia's sexuality: ". . . femaleness and Jewishness as qualities in themselves had negative meanings in this

tradition—both were associated with the flesh, not the spirit, and therefore with impulses toward sexuality, aggression, and acquisitiveness, all qualities becoming more evident in Renaissance society” (139). Moreover, Novy rejects the idea of a homoerotic relationship between Bassanio and his benefactor: “Many contemporary critics have seen homosexual feelings in Antonio’s love for Bassanio. But it is important to note that Shakespeare’s language can go much further in suggesting sexual undertones in love between men than Antonio does. The sonnets play with far more witty double entendre than do Antonio’s serious and asexual words” (141). Novy, aligning herself with those who emphasize Portia’s dominance and independence, concludes by enumerating Portia’s strengths and noting that she manages to overcome the restrictions imposed on her.

Developing Novy’s stress on Portia’s sexuality and strength in her major 1987 feminist study, “Portia’s Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*,” Karen Newman asserts that “the *Merchant* interrogates the Elizabethan sex/gender system and resists the ‘traffic in women,’ because in early modern England a woman occupying the position of a Big Man, or a lawyer in a Renaissance Venetian courtroom, or the lord of Belmont, is not the same thing as a man doing so” (33). Employing anthropological theories, Newman finds Portia’s dominant role in the play similar to that of the Big Man of New Guinea, who gains power by giving gifts too great to be equaled. She also insists that the play typifies Lévi-Strauss’s exchange system and the “French feminist critique of that system.” Newman notes that the quest for Portia is the precipitating action that drives the plot: “The exchange of Portia from her father via the caskets to Bassanio is the *ur*-exchange upon which the “main” bond plot is based: it produces Bassanio’s request for money from Antonio and in

turn the bond between Antonio and Shylock” (21-22). Newman interprets the ring as a “visual sign of her vow of love and submission to Bassanio; it is a representation of Portia’s acceptance of Elizabethan marriage which was characterized by women’s subjugation, their loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel,” a vow that Portia nullifies through the intrigue of the ring (25). Moreover, Newman relates Portia’s giving the ring to Bassanio in act two to the Big Man of New Guinea:

Here Portia is the gift-giver, and it is worth remembering Mauss’s description of gift-giving in the New Guinea highlands in which an aspiring ‘Big Man’ gives more than can be reciprocated and in so doing wins prestige and power. Portia gives more than Bassanio can ever reciprocate, first to him, then to Antonio, and finally to Venice itself in her actions in the trial which allow the city to preserve both its law and its precious Christian citizen. In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bond it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio. (26)

According to Newman, at the denouement of the play, Portia, like the Big Man of New Guinea, is totally in charge, giving gifts to Antonio, Lorenzo, and Jessica, and establishing her control as she enters “my house.”

While Newman focuses on Portia’s authority, Lisa Jardine examines her intellect; moreover, while Newman sees the play as affirming Portia’s dominance, Jardine discovers an ambivalence toward Portia embedded in the play, which dramatizes both Portia’s power and the gender limitations on that power. Jardine’s 1987 “Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare’s Learned Heroines: ‘these are Old Paradoxes’” analyzes

both Portia and Helena from *All's Well That Ends Well* through a feminist/New Historicist lens, suggesting that “Renaissance views on learned women, expressed with all their contradictory feelings about the ‘value’ of education and the ‘forwardness’ of female articulateness in the treatises and manuals of the period, are reproduced in the plot strategies of Shakespeare’s learned women” (16). She asserts that “. . . the legal knowledge she deploys to save Antonio modulates Portia’s initial obedient conformity with the patriarchal demands on her, in her position as female heir, into something close to unruliness” (12). Furthermore, Jardine claims that Portia’s, like Helena’s knowledge “is strictly *borrowed* from the male sphere” and that Bellario has masterminded the courtroom *tour de force* (15-16, emphasis in original).

This reading, while intriguing, does not allow for the portrayal of Portia discovering or contriving the “jot of blood” escape clause on the spot. According to Jardine, Portia, as a woman, has no intrinsic value in the male world; only by consulting with her male cousin and by pretending to be a man can she have any worth in the courtroom. However, she does have value within the patriarchal order, and Marc Shell’s 1998 article “Portia’s Portrait: Representation as Exchange” explores the idea of Portia’s commercial value: “While this essay is about *The Merchant of Venice*, its real mission is to explore the problems that gave rise to the play in the first place” (94). Combining the theological with the monetary, Shell assesses the financial relationship between fathers and daughters, asserting that “What happens *literally* to Midas’s daughter happens *figuratively* to Shakespeare’s Jessica and Portia. *The Merchant of Venice* suggests the literal commodification, or astonishment in gold, of daughters by fathers; the lives of Portia and Jessica are commercially bound up with fathers who conflate inanimate metal

with animate mettle” (114-15). Shell speculates on the nature of “Portia’s counterfeit” found in the lead casket: “We may hypothesize that Portia’s portrait—the counterfeit that Bassanio finds—is a painted picture of Portia. If so, then . . . part of that painting ought to be made of the material, gold, that both *represents* and partly *is* Portia’s apportionment The golden part of Portia’s portrait would be the picture’s gold-paint or gilt representations of the fleece that is Portia’s locks: her hair” (126). Shell further hypothesizes that the “counterfeit” could have been a picture-ring, a medal, or a coin.

The traffic in women is central to feminist concerns, and Robert F. Darcy expands the theme of commodification in his 2003 article, “Freeing Daughters on Open Markets: The Incest Clause in *The Merchant of Venice*,” which focuses on Portia and the way that her father’s hidden hand manipulates events: “Whether she realizes it or not, Portia’s skillful performance at the Venetian court is a direct and particularly revealing application of her training at Belmont. There, under her father’s indirect tutelage, she has already learned the process by which foreigners may be made to lose when they entrust the outcome of their suits to the mechanism of a local trial” (190). Moreover, Darcy acknowledges her father’s sexual control over Portia: “Portia may allude, even without full knowledge of her speech, to the sexual nature of the service into which she has been conscripted by her father. And the notion that she is at her father’s sexual command signals her participation in a psychological form of incestuous compliance” (196).

Portia has the power of wealth, as Newman points out, and she can be seen as the embodiment of wealth, as Shell asserts. However, perhaps she is drawn to Bassanio *because* of her wealth. Presenting Portia as the empowered female, Corinne Abate observes that most of the suitors do not need Portia’s money: “What they are lacking is a

need for Portia's estate because they all appear to come with their own money. Her assets, while desirable, would only enhance what they already own, so Portia may not be as important to them as she would like" (284). "Nerissa Teaches Me what to Believe": Portia's Wifely Empowerment in *The Merchant of Venice*," Abate's 2002 feminist article, maintains that Portia "ultimately learns—through marrying beneath her station, cross-dressing with a difference, accomplishing in a Venetian court what no man can, and securing her husband's loyalty through subordinating his male friendships—the invaluable lesson of turning to herself"—although I would argue that Portia has been quite able to handle herself from the outset (284). Moreover, following a dominant trend in feminist criticism, Abate centers on female bonding as a source of empowerment, doubtfully placing Nerissa center stage and crediting her with more ingenuity than she deserves. Abate—somewhat implausibly—claims that Nerissa's "partial and biased interest in what happens to her mistress may account for her careful arrangement of Portia's marital future to a man who is most decidedly not Portia's financial equal." More is at stake, however, for Portia's friend: "Nerissa has been at every step of these important nuptial proceedings, and has a vested interest in whom Portia marries. If Portia leaves Belmont, then so too must Nerissa" (285).

In 1964, Norman Nathan anticipates many of the theories of Abate by focusing on the neglected theme of friendship, particularly the importance of Nerissa as a friend. However, Nathan over-emphasizes Nerissa's importance: "the ties of this Renaissance ideal [female friendship] exist between Portia and Nerissa as well as between Bassanio and Antonio"; he further comments that "Nerissa's social standing is sufficiently high to admit the possibility of friendship between her and Portia" (56-57). Nathan— accurately,

I think—pictures Nerissa as a sort of lady-in-waiting, much like Maria in *Twelfth Night*: “It is interesting to note that in the Quarto of 1637, under *The Actors Names*, Nerissa is Portia’s “wayting-Gentlewoman” (57n). He also dubiously attributes the hint-filled song that helps Bassanio choose the right casket to Nerissa: “Who is responsible for the selection of the particular lyric? . . . The weight of evidence . . . falls upon Nerissa. . . . [who], in order to preserve Portia’s honor, must not only not break the letter of the law, she must adhere to the spirit” (59-60).

Portia’s strong friendship with Nerissa does lie at the heart of Belmont; it emphasizes the feminine sphere and parallels Bassanio’s friendship with Antonio. Moreover, Portia seeks a husband who will also be a friend. She would like to re-write the rules on marriage and wants a companionate marriage that centers on mutual affection. Laurie Shannon’s 2002 feminist rhetorical analysis, “Likening: Rhetorical Husbandries and Portia’s ‘True Conceit’ of Friendship,” suggests that “*Merchant’s* Portia deploys the discourse of friendship, affectively and effectively, to rewrite her marriage contract in the play” (4). Shannon declares that Portia negotiates a new kind of marriage for herself: “*Merchant’s* Portia starts with a ‘marriage’ in the matrimonial sense and then uses her considerable verbal and economic assets to leverage a second marriage in a Neoplatonic affective sense that entails friendship” (9). Referring back to Karen Newman’s 1987 article, Shannon delineates her interpretation: “While Newman emphasizes the ways Portia is unruly as a woman, I want to press the ways her unruliness both invokes and instantiates other gendered norms and also reproduces her as not exactly a woman anymore, nor just as a man, but more particularly as a husband. (16)

Not all feminist critics see Portia as transcending early modern stereotypes, nor do they unequivocally endorse her actions. Linda Boose cynically points out that “Portia is regarded by everyone in the play and usually by audiences outside it as the veritable exemplum of generosity. Yet Portia actually never spends or hazards an uninsured ducat of her own; she spends Shylock’s money” (250). In her 1988 article, “The Comic Contract and Portia’s Golden Ring,” Boose focuses on the “mediation between play and audience,” on what she calls the “comic contract,” and “in particular on the role of Portia, the agent who insures its success” (241). Boose confirms *Merchant’s* classification as a comedy, but an uneasy one: “Regardless of how we read the treatment of Shylock, the romantic plot ending should by itself suggest that Shakespeare intended to mark *The Merchant of Venice* with a latent unease and even a hostility toward the audience whose desires the comic genre must fulfill” (251).

Despite the feminist emphasis on Portia’s strength and independence, the view of Portia as a liberated woman has not been universally accepted, even by contemporary critics. Linda Rozmovits’s 1995 article, “New Woman Meets Shakespeare Woman: The Struggle Over the Figure of Portia in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” discusses an 1887 essay contest in which women were invited to write about their favorite heroine from Shakespeare. Portia became a popular favorite: “. . . with regard to the choice of subjects, the editors note that Shakespearean heroines ‘who successfully overcome their troubles have been six times more popular than those whose end is tragic,’ and that amongst these ‘Portia of Belmont has been long and away the most popular’ with ‘more than a third of the papers . . . [being] devoted to her.’” (442). Rozmovits explicates the Victorian response to Portia as a character: “. . . the most

striking feature of late Victorian and early twentieth-century discourse about Portia in relation to *The Merchant of Venice* is that her appearance in the trial scene was of marginal importance to the play.” Audiences during this period admired Portia not for her courtroom display of intellect but her submissiveness in 3.2; they admired “the woman who held her breath while her true love chose the appropriate casket, and the women who then declared: ‘You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, / Such as I am . . .’” (453-54.) Departing from a feminist perspective even while asserting Portia’s prominence, Rozmovits presents Portia as a contrast to the New Woman, although modern feminists might question Portia’s eagerness to cede control to her husband: “Portia had it all—ambition, independence, education, wealth, property, yet somehow she retained the traditional feminine attributes of selflessness, obedience and virtue that the New Woman had cast aside. . . . In short, here was a woman who had it all and was, nevertheless, willing to give it up once she had found the right man” (456). Rozmovits’s interpretation contrasts markedly with those of Novy, Newman, and Shannon, another example of the multiple diverse readings evoked by this problematic play and affirming Portia’s complexity.

COMIC RESOLUTION AND THE COMIC HEROINE

Although many critics see the courtroom episode as the most significant of the play, some place more importance on act five; Anne Parten chooses to explore Portia in terms of the act five ring incident in her 1982 article “Re-Establishing Sexual Order: The Ring Episode in *The Merchant of Venice*”: “The business of the rings . . . has a dramatic function beyond mirroring the main action or providing comic counterpoint. It also serves

as an important element of the play in its own right, in that it acts as focus for the unresolved—and potentially explosive—issue of the heroine’s power.” Parten maintains that Portia embodies a “threat to the comic world,” to which the ring episode effectively puts an end (146). Moreover, Parten considers how Portia differs from Shakespeare’s other comic heroines and opines that the Bard might have made her more threatening than originally intended: “it is arguable that—at least from the Elizabethan point of view—[Shakespeare] overplayed his hand, producing a figure too powerful to be credible as a future wife” (147). Parten examines how Portia uses the threat of cuckoldry against her husband, maintaining that this lighthearted scene gives resolution to the play: “Portia’s game is shown to be only a game; the episode gives her, in effect, an opportunity to tell the audience explicitly that she would never really cuckold her husband. The rest of the triad follows: she will not beat him, and—more importantly—she will not dominate him. (149-50)

Certainly, Portia is worlds away from the light-hearted jocularly of Rosalind or the sexual discomfort of Viola. Keith Geary, in his 1984 article “The Nature of Portia’s Victory: Turning to Men in *The Merchant of Venice*,” further develops Parten’s comparison, noting that Portia’s alter-ego Balthazar greatly differs from Viola’s Cesario or Rosalind’s Ganymede: “We need to examine anew the place of Portia’s performance as Balthazar in the play’s treatment of the love-versus friendship *débat*-theme, attending closely to the *ambivalence* built into the part of Portia-Balthazar and the way that it is resolved in the much-abused fifth act” (55, emphasis in original). Geary perceptively enumerates the ways in which Portia differs not only from Shakespeare’s comic heroines in general but from his other cross dressed heroines in particular: she has “more pre-

disguise scenes than any of the other disguised heroines, firmly and extensively establishing her character before she disguises. Furthermore, Shakespeare returns her to female dress for the entire fifth act, unlike the other heroines.” Moreover, “the ‘special intimacy’ that the other heroines share with the audience is never established. Portia speaks only as Balthazar, not in a ‘double voice’ as Julia does to Silvia or as Viola does so poignantly in the ‘Patience on a monument’ scene with Orsino” (57-58). Geary further points out that “in no other Shakespearian comedy do the chief lovers meet for the first time so late in the play. This reflects the play’s stress on the initial situations of the lovers: Portia bound by her father’s will, and Bassanio in debt and virtually penniless” (61).

In 1999, adapting a distinctively feminist approach, Joseph Chaney stresses yet another distinctive quality of *Merchant’s* female protagonist, attributing to Portia a very postmodern awareness of the performative nature of gender. In his article “Turning to Men: Genres of Cross-Dressing in Charke’s Narrative and Shakespeare *The Merchant of Venice*,” Chaney compares Portia’s cross-dressing in the play to the performances of Charlotte Charke, an eighteenth-century actress, playwright, and transvestite. Chaney asserts that “Portia unravels gender unity . . . defusing its power for the sake of reconfiguring her own specific relationship to masculine authority in the person of her husband, Bassanio” (215). Chaney channels Judith Butler in his discussion of gender as performance, asserting that Portia’s plotting with Nerissa to travel to Venice dressed as men “demonstrates her awareness of the constructed, performative nature of both traditional genders She suggests that gender itself is a performance, for the man who performs ‘his own’ gender, as well as for the woman who imitates masculinity” (213-14).

Feminist critics have actively debated the significance of Shakespeare's transvestite heroines and the effect that these figures would have had on an early modern audience. Juliet Dusinberre approvingly affirms these doubly cross-dressed characters (boy actors playing girls playing boys) as examples of androgynous wholeness (253). Jardine disagrees, rebutting that the "androgyny" of these cross-dressed actors serves to stress their maleness rather than their femaleness and thus to titillate homoerotic fantasies in the audience (20). Conversely, Linda Woodbridge, in her study *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood*, insists that the transvestite disguise of Shakespeare's heroines accentuates their femaleness rather than either their androgyny or their maleness (154-55). Engaging in this critical discourse, Janet Adelman argues that Portia is clearly a different species of cross-dressed heroine from Shakespeare's other transvestite characters. In her 2008 full-length study of the play, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice*, Adelman discovers another divergence between Portia and her contemporaries:

The disguise she adopts for her rescue mission serves both her own interests and the mandatory heterosexual closure of the play in Belmont well, even while permitting the muted and displaced expression of homoerotic desire in Bassanio's 'Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow' (5.1.283). (Muted because Portia's transvesticized body is so severely removed from the domain of desire: *she is nearly unique among Shakespeare's transvesticized heroines in not stirring up desire as she crosses genders.*) (129, emphasis added)

These four critics make ample contributions to the critical discourse: while Parten believes that Shakespeare overplayed his hand, Chaney emphasizes the performative nature of gender; Geary notes how Portia differs from the other cross-dressed heroines—Viola, Rosalind, Imogen, and Julia—and Adelman adds that Portia is not a cross-dressed object of desire.

FRIENDSHIP OR HOMOEROTICISM

What exactly is the nature of the friendship between Bassanio and Antonio? Is it a homoerotic relationship, or simply a close homosocial friendship? If Antonio has homoerotic feelings for Bassanio, are they reciprocated? These represent some of the provocative questions about *The Merchant of Venice*, and critics have disagreed about them over the years.

Norman Nathan's 1964 article stresses the importance of same-sex friendship in the early modern period. Developing the theme of friendship, Auden (1970) refers obliquely to the problematic nature of the Bassanio/Antonio friendship, hazily stating that Antonio remains excluded from conjugal bliss "by his own nature" (114). In the same year, in his article, "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*," Lawrence W. Hyman asserts explicitly that rivalry for the love of Bassanio lies at the core of the play: "We shall ignore [Shylock], for the most part, in order to focus our attention on Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio. And once we make this simple step, we will see that the main action of the play is centered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's love" (109). Hyman points out that both Antonio and Portia are rich, while Bassanio is poor: "But when we realize that Antonio's wealth which he puts at his friend's disposal is

a means of holding on to Bassanio's love, we can see that Portia's wealth makes more emphatic her role in displacing Antonio" (110). He further reveals that if Antonio had died for Bassanio, Portia would never have been able to match such a sacrifice: "The climax of the play, Portia's turning of the tables on Shylock, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio. She not only saves his life but also prevents him from proving to Bassanio that his love could not be surpassed" (112). Hyman stops short of characterizing the love between Antonio and Bassanio as anything more than a deep and abiding friendship, but he acknowledges that Portia must have some reason to be upset with her husband:

What woman who could display the tenderness that Portia does in Act III, Scene ii, would be so cruel to her husband a few hours after he had witnessed the near death of his best friend? Only, it seems to me, a woman who is still fighting to break the last remaining bond that holds her husband to a former love. That this former love is another man, and is thus not a real rival, allows Portia to fight her battle in the form of a joke. (113)

Although Hyman rejects interpreting the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio as homoerotic, he is the first to discuss thoroughly the problem that their close affiliation creates for Portia. Conversely, in an earlier 1960 article, Graham Midgley labels Antonio a latent homosexual, confidently stating that "Antonio is an outsider because he is an unconscious homosexual in a predominantly, and indeed blatantly, heterosexual society" (125), and the nature of the friendship between the two men has been the subject of much critical inquiry over the years. Although, like Hyman, hesitating to characterize the friendship as homoerotic, Anne Barton admits that the relationship

between Bassanio and Antonio could be problematic, noting that “. . . both Bassanio and his friend say things in the course of the trial which Portia has every right to find alarming” (253). As noted earlier, Tony Tanner explicitly relates buggery to usury, but Marianne Novy asserts that Shakespeare would have been clearer about a homoerotic relationship if he had been trying to depict one.

In the 1980's queer theory emerged as a significant critical methodology and soon discovered Shakespeare. Thus, from the 1980s onward, it became possible to discuss same-sex desire openly and candidly in academic circles, thanks largely to the work of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (1984) and historian Alan Bray (1982). Following this trend, Alan Sinfield completely accepts the homoerotic reading and thoroughly analyzes the play from this viewpoint in his 2001 article, “How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* without being Heterosexual.” As will be discussed more fully in the chapter on performance history, the emergence of queer theory and the contemporary fascination with same-sex desire have strongly influenced cinematic versions of the play, from Trevor Nunn's 2001 production for television to Radford's 2004 film version starring Lynn Collins, Joseph Fiennes, Al Pacino, and Jeremy Irons, both of which emphasize the homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Epitomizing this interpretation, Sinfield's queer theory reading foregrounds the affiliation between Antonio and Bassanio and seeks to de-marginalize their liaison, examining the homoerotic undertones in *Merchant*, while at the same time asserting that the play ultimately denies the significance of the Bassanio/Antonio relationship: “The last act of the play is Portia's assertion of her right to Bassanio. Her strategy is purposefully heterosexual: in disallowing Antonio's sacrifice as a plausible reason for parting with the ring, she

disallows the entire seriousness of male love” (119). However, Sinfield asserts that Bassanio may have been attracted to Portia’s male-disguised self: “What is notable . . . is that Portia has no hesitation in envisaging a sexual relationship between Bassanio and the young doctor: ‘I’ll have that doctor for my bedfellow,’ she declares, recognizing an equivalence” (126). Adelman will later disagree with this assessment, as she maintains that the cross-dressed Portia is not an object of desire.

The nature of the Bassanio/Antonio affiliation is crucial to any interpretation of Portia. If the relationship between the two men is one of mutual desire, then Antonio presents a rival for Bassanio’s affections, one that Portia must outwit and eliminate. If, however, Antonio is simply a good friend and mentor to the younger man, Portia’s motivation for saving the merchant becomes simpler; she has no need to be calculating. I believe Portia does not suspect that she has cause to be jealous of Antonio until she sees them together in court.

NEW HISTORICISM AND CULTURAL MATERIALISM

Two other very significant critical trends exerted their influence on the interpretation of Portia: new historicism and cultural materialism. Both new historicism and cultural materialism, like the cultural/historical criticism of the early twentieth century, seek to situate a literary work within an historical milieu. However, unlike the earlier historicists, who tend to focus on the “history of ideas,” the cultural milieu, and the dramatic legacy informing literary works, these two more recent methodologies privilege topical events—such as trials, wars, imperialistic excursions—often finding parallels between historical figures and the characters in Shakespeare’s plays. Both

critical approaches are also informed by post-structuralist theory (feminist, psychoanalytical, Marxist, and deconstruction) and, as such, also foreground issues of class and race, although cultural materialism, more strongly influenced by Marxist theory, tends to concentrate more centrally on economic concerns.

Lars Engle's essay "Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*" epitomizes this perspective. Viewing *Merchant* through the prism of cultural materialism, Engle paints a less idealized portrait of Portia than that depicted by many of his feminist counterparts. Engle's rather cynical idea is that Portia goes to Venice to protect her money;⁴ in his essay, he declares that "financial transactions in the play reward a more detailed analysis than they have to my knowledge received, and I shall survey the play with something of an accountant's eye for cash flows, unpaid balances, and the like" (21). Engle posits that "Portia, discovering Bassanio's 'engagement' to Antonio, turns immediately to money, to male disguise, and to the law to protect her status as a principal and to avoid becoming an object of homosocial exchange. Seen in this light, the trial scene betrays an unexpected (and I believe hitherto unnoticed) but cogent financial logic" (34-35). Like many critics before him, Engle affirms Portia's shrewd intelligence, pointing out that her courtroom maneuvers ensure that she loses not one of her gold ducats—until now, Bassanio has been spending the money borrowed from Shylock—and that both Antonio and the freeloaders Jessica and Lorenzo now have enough funds to be self-sufficient. Engle remarks on the additions to Portia's household since her marriage: "The instant Portia's house becomes Bassanio's, it begins to fill with guests; Gratiano will marry Nerissa and stay, Lorenzo and Jessica arrive hungry, having

⁴ Engle's article is intriguing but was disdained by every actor and director that I interviewed. See chapter three for Seana McKenna's comment on Engle's theory.

thrown away the money Jessica stole from her father's house . . . and Salerio brings a letter from Antonio" (33). Engle enumerates the ways in which the resolution of the court case protects Portia's money:

Each of these interventions protects Portia's endowment from threats; half Shylock's goods wipes out the debts Bassanio has to Antonio and re-equips him as merchant so that he will not turn into a dependent. He then, very neatly from this viewpoint, answers Portia's question, "What mercy can you render him Antonio?" by endowing Lorenzo and Jessica, so that they will not be dependents of Portia and Bassanio (whose house they are looking after, not very thriftily, in Portia's absence). (36)

In the wake of Engle's noteworthy but highly skeptical article, the commercial nature of the Christian community in *Merchant* began to evoke considerable critical discussion. Another much debated issue concerns Portia's derogatory comments about her suitors. One can take Portia's remarks about the Neapolitan Prince, the County Palatine, and the others as either evidence of a quick wit or of a catty disposition. However, following the new historicist tendency to uncover topical references in Shakespeare's plays, Richard Kuhns and Barbara Tovey parse Portia's description of the suitors in their 1989 article "Portia's Suitors." Rather than attributing Portia's laments to a fault in her character as some commentators have argued, Kuhns and Tovey suggest that her remarks have a more topical relevance, discovering fascinating, if perhaps far-fetched, contemporary analogues for the six wooers, whom they identify as representing Shakespeare's rival authors—Boccaccio, Spenser, Montaigne, Chaucer, Henryson, and

Hans Sachs—with Bassanio, the “successful suitor,” representing Shakespeare himself (331).

Race is, of course, central to *Merchant*. The question of whether *Merchant* is anti-Semitic or an indictment of anti-Semitism has been argued *ad nauseam*. However, not only the anti-Semitism of the play but also Portia’s disturbing remarks about her African suitor, the Prince of Morocco, have invited considerable conversation among both new historicists and cultural materialists. These commentators not only frequently concentrate on issues of race and class but also seek to view these issues through an early modern historical lens. Writing from the perspective of one who has directed the play (for the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express), Ralph Alan Cohen in “Unpalatability in the Web of the Merchant of Venice” (1999) proposes to examine an “unpalatable moment—Portia’s reaction to Morocco—and suggest ways in which it links to the treatment of Shylock the Jew, ways in which it is a part of the play’s web of unpalatability” (2). First, however, Cohen foregrounds Portia’s predominance in the play, especially in its initial performance: “[this paper] begins with a certainty about the first production and its audiences: Certainly the play’s champion is Portia. . . . She is the play’s primary voice and ultimate insider, its most compelling locus of identification, and the person in the play with whom an audience most wants to agree” (2). However, Cohen acknowledges the difficulties of staging Portia’s scene with Morocco, pointing out that “. . . in her ingenious way Portia is lying to Morocco about her disdain for appearances. Before she even meets Morocco, she says explicitly how she feels about dark complexions: ‘If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me’ (I.ii.109-10)” (4).

Gustav Ungerer also analyzes this problematic issue in his 2003 article, “Portia and the Prince of Morocco,” declaring that “. . . the sequence of Morocco’s ill-fated courtship can also lead us into significant vistas of the cultural world which created this complex play, one such vista compromising the intense diplomatic, commercial, and cultural interactions of the time, interactions that were taking their shape from the traffic between the court of the Moroccan sultan Ahmad al-Mansur and that of Queen Elizabeth of England” (89). Ungerer addresses the sixteenth-century aversion to mixing races: “Resistance to miscegenation, as Nabil Matar has demonstrated, was strongest in the English upper classes and weakest in the lower ones” (106-07). Moreover, the critic discusses Morocco’s boasting of sexual prowess: “The ‘renowned prince’ (2.1.20) has no second thoughts about advertising to his bride-to-be the sexual reputation he enjoys in Morocco In Elizabethan eyes, this violent sexuality doubtlessly appeared quite in tune with the rapes reportedly perpetrated by the Moroccan sultans Ahmad al-Mansur and Muhammad ash-Shaykl” (112). Although Portia’s comments about Morocco may seem racist to modern ears, by embedding her observations within the discourses of Shakespeare’s own time, Ungerer offers an explanation, if not exactly a defense, for her remarks, especially “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.79): “Portia’s education as a Christian gentlewoman would have left her unprepared for an unexpected cross-cultural transfer of her person, body, and the property of Belmont to a Muslim husband” (113).

Conversely, the founder of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, in the latest Norton edition (2008), denounces Portia’s remarks: “Unfortunately, it soon becomes obvious that the Christians’ generosity, grace, and self-assurance have a disconcerting

racist tinge. . . . The charming Portia rejoices in the failure of her black suitor to choose the correct casket: ‘Let all of his complexion choose me so’ (2.7.79)” (1083).

Many critics and directors do not realize that Portia’s remark about complexion is not necessarily racist. As Bevington points out in his gloss to 1.2.128, “*complexion* can also mean ‘temperament’ or disposition’.” The OED supports this position, and a 2007 production at Stratford, Ontario, seems to have taken this view into account when director Richard Rose changed Portia’s line to “Let all of his persuasion choose me so.” Viewed from this perspective, Portia may well be commenting on Morocco’s macho arrogance rather than on his dark skin.

LEGAL ANALYSIS - THE COURTROOM SCENE AND THE LAW

Although the structural center of the play resides in act three, scene two, critics of diverse critical persuasions have throughout the years placed primary importance on the trial scene, understandably so, since it can be rendered quite riveting in performance. E. M. W. Tillyard weighed in on the subject in his 1961 article, “The Trial Scene in the Merchant of Venice,” suggesting a performative strategy that recalls Granville-Barker: “. . . it is an enrichment of the dramatic situation if Portia knows she has Shylock quite within her power while the other characters know no such thing: if she is cool about the thing all the others agonize over; if she is able to prolong her moment of power before enjoying the supreme satisfaction of giving to the sorely tried sufferers their unexpected and spectacular relief” (51-52). However, some critics argue that if Portia knows all along about the legal loophole, her character becomes less sympathetic, and her actions toward Shylock seem more cruel, since she can be seen as setting a trap for him. On the

other hand, if she knows from the beginning that she will be able to save Antonio, then her “mercy speech” can be interpreted as an attempt to convince Shylock to be merciful in order to save himself. The diverse possibilities surrounding Portia’s famous appeal to mercy epitomize the complexity that underlies so many of her motivations.

Tillyard also engages with Coghill’s allegorical reading, stating that “. . . any educated audience would be quite familiar with Spenser’s habit of sliding characters along a scale that was naturalistic at one end and allegorical at the other. . . . Having seen Portia begin as a witty Elizabethan lady, change into the fairy-princess of the Beautiful Mountain, and change again into the tom-boy of contemporary romantic comedy, the original audience would have been well prepared for further changes” (52). Finally, Tillyard was one of the first critics to detect a long series of double meanings in Portia’s speeches that stress Portia’s merciful concern for Shylock as well as Antonio: “[w]hen Portia lectures Shylock on mercy, while the other persons on the stage can only think of Antonio’s fate, she is thinking of Shylock’s, she is imploring Shylock to recognize his own peril and to mind the salvation of his own soul. Read in this double sense, the scene gains greatly in richness of content” (53). Tillyard closely examines Portia’s famous line, “Then must the Jew be merciful” (4.1.180)⁵, insisting that Shylock uses *must* in two different senses: “It is of the utmost consequence, to you, she means, that you should be merciful; but when it comes to mercy no one can force you, the impulse must come from your own heart, or from the yielding of your heart to the operation of heavenly grace” (57). Alice Benston will later make a similar argument, asserting that *must* represents a posing of alternatives, not a compulsion (376).

⁵ My quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* come from Bevington (1997).

While Tillyard focuses primarily on performance issues, Robert Hapgood's 1967 article, "Portia and *The Merchant of Venice*: The Gentle Bond," is primarily concerned with Portia's attitude toward the law. Hapgood pays tribute to Burckhardt with his title but refutes much of the earlier critic's argument, noting Portia's willingness to compromise. He focuses on the play's three main events: the casket contest, the trial, and the ring scene, asserting that Portia's "ultimate loyalties are to the law, including its most legalistic forms. Yet in each she also reveals her most appealing trait, a gift for making enlightened exception. These exceptions are in the service of a large-minded sense of law, one that includes its spirit as well as its letter; and it is through them, not through out-Shylocking Shylock, that she makes the bond gentle" (20).

Hapgood sees Portia as more of an educator than a jurist: "Undoubtedly, Portia's methods in the trial scene (as elsewhere) are highhanded. Yet they seem to me defensible, not as those of a judge administering the law but as those of a teacher presenting a series of lessons in it. For Portia is a born and incorrigible teacher" (21). Hapgood acknowledges the contest between Portia and Antonio without accepting the homoerotic overtones that later critics will discuss: "Her rivalry with Antonio never becomes an open, direct issue at all. . . . The reaction of Portia-the-judge to Bassanio's grandiose exaltation of his friend over 'life, wife, and all the world' is jocular: 'Your wife would give you little thanks for that'" (28).

While Hapgood views Portia as a teacher in the courtroom scene, Leon Howard (1972) elucidates the three different roles that she plays during the trial: that of the "humane, Christian rationalist," who relates the law to religious doctrine, the "legal

philosopher” who tells Bassanio ““Twill be recorded for a precedent” (4.1.218) and the judge, a “strict constructionist of the statutes” (108).

In her 1978 article, Monica Hamill concentrates on still another of Portia’s roles, that of poet-lawmaker: “In the lottery episodes, the trial-scene, and the ring-play, Portia’s use of poetic language and fictions are inextricable from her upholding and interpreting law” (229). Hamill maintains that “Portia is a better poet than Bassanio. Having mocked his legend of ‘many Jasons,’ she shows her own more discriminating use of heroic metaphor in the climactic episode of the casket-plot, where Bassanio makes his choice” (234). Moreover, Hamill rejects the allegorical reading of Coghill and others, asserting that “It is as an imperfect human being, rather than as divine Mercy, that Portia speaks of salvation. She includes herself among the flawed men and women whose own need for God’s mercy inspires their charity towards one another: ‘we do pray for mercy,’ she points out, ‘And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy’” (239).

Perhaps critics and audiences are so fascinated with the courtroom scene because it simply makes such good drama, its crucial element being high-stakes tension. Elizabethan audiences may have loved a good trial scene just as much as modern audiences enjoy *Perry Mason*, *Law and Order*, and *Presumed Innocent*. In 1993 Jay L. Halio combined a legal approach with pop culture in his article “Portia: Shakespeare’s Matlock?” Halio asserts that courtroom drama was as popular in Shakespeare’s day as it is today, even if the legal technicalities were not and are not always accurately portrayed: “Shakespeare learned how dramatically effective trial scenes could be on stage. . . . But his emphasis remained, I repeat, on the dramatic effect, not the legality” (58). Halio

remarks on the Elizabethan stage convention by which the heroine's male disguise is "impenetrable" and offers an explanation for Portia's line, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.172): "She assumes and is credited with an air of proper impartiality; she fails even to distinguish between merchant and Jew, despite their different attire and accoutrements" (59). Halio concludes by interpreting Portia's actions in relation to mercy:

If *The Merchant of Venice* is about anything—and it is about many things—it is surely very much about mercy, *but mercy in the context of justice*. That is why Portia acts as she does. It is not that she wants to give Shylock enough rope to hang himself—literally, where Gratiano is concerned—but that she wants to establish the right relation between justice and mercy: mercy in the context of justice. (60, emphasis in original)

Perhaps following Halio's lead, Filomena Mesquita examines the relationship among law, literature, and popular culture as manifested by Portia in her 2003 article, "Travesties of Justice: Portia in the Courtroom": "The role played by Portia in the courtroom has granted her a unique cultural weight that few other female characters can boast of. She is a cultural reference in the world of law and in the world of literature, both popular or erudite, reverberating with echoes of aristocratic excellence, wit and power" (117). Mesquita relates her essay to John Mortimer's *Rumpole of the Bailey*, as well as contemporary courtroom drama and, intriguingly, to the O. J. Simpson case.

PRÉCIS

Portia has clearly been the subject of much insightful critical inquiry, although oftentimes she has not received the kind of examination she deserves; few critics acknowledge her predominance or her status as protagonist. Moreover, early critics seemed primarily concerned with her conforming—or failure to conform—to contemporary standards of femininity. However, in 1833 Anna Brownwell Jameson brought Portia to the forefront by acknowledging the intelligence and wit of Belmont's heiress, creating a change in critical opinion that recognized Portia's central role in the play.

The early twentieth century produced wide-ranging interpretations of Portia. Harley Granville-Barker envisioned her as a sort of fairy princess, while Neville Coghill promulgated his allegorical reading, casting her in the role of mercy. E. M. W. Tillyard was the first critic to detect double meanings in Portia's speeches, suggesting that in the courtroom scene she may have been trying to help Shylock as well as protect Antonio. Following Granville-Barker's interpretation, Sigurd Burckhardt, writing in 1962, separated the play into the two spheres of Venice and Belmont, endorsing an otherworldly view of the Beautiful Mountain over which Portia presides.

Subsequent critics began to create their own perspectives from which to view the play. Robert Hapgood foregrounded legal analysis, and he was later joined by Alice Benston, Jay Halio, and Filomena Mesquita, while Herbert Donow represented the first critic to align Portia with the problematic mythological figure of Medea, an analogue later expounded by Michael Zuckert and John W. Velz. Anne Parten discerned the problematic nature of act four's ring plot, a conversation that also included Lynda Boose

and David Bevington, and in 1986 Lars Engle paved a new path, exploring the financial transactions of the drama, an angle from which Robert Darcy later viewed the work.

In the late 1970s, feminism discovered Shakespeare with Marianne Novy in the vanguard, asserting Portia's predominance and independence even while exploring her sexuality. Several years later, Karen Newman combined feminist and anthropological theories to create a case for Portia as controller of the action, a view reinforced by S.F. Johnson. In 2002, Corinne Abate focused on Nerissa as well as Portia, and Kenneth Myrick and Lawrence Danson added their voices to the feminist discourse. Keith Geary investigated Portia's cross-dressing, noting how she differs from characters like Rosalind and Viola, and Joseph Chaney revisited the same issue, historicizing his argument by comparing Portia to the real-life cross-dresser Charlotte Charke.

Not all modern critics admire Portia. Mary Mathis commented on Portia's extraordinary ability to embody different roles, and Ralph Cohen discussed the "unpalatability" of the incident with Morocco, a censorious view shared by Stephen Greenblatt. Gustav Ungerer analyzed the Morocco scene as well, thoroughly historicizing it for his reader. Richard Kuhns and Barbara Tovey sought to excuse Portia's catty remarks about the suitors, claiming that Shakespeare is having a little joke, making fun of his poetic rivals. Also endorsing an historicist approach are Samuel Small—who aligned Portia with Queen Elizabeth I—Linda Rozmovits—who explored Portia's reception by young Victorian women—and Marc Shell, who looked at possible historical alternatives to "Portia's counterfeit."

Does Portia manipulate the casket scene by giving Bassanio hints? Peter Seng introduced the question in 1955, asserting that the rhyming pattern of the song in act

three, scene two spurs Bassanio to success. However, just one year later, John Russell Brown refuted Seng's claim in the same journal, *Notes and Queries*. Herbert Donow's article on the caskets supported the "con" side, asserting that Bassanio perceives the correct casket without any help from Portia. Alice Benston, who focused on the casket plot as part of the "tripartite structure" of the play, acknowledged the critical disagreement: "Whether or not we feel that Portia manipulates the outcome of the casket choice by providing Bassanio with musical clues, we usually credit Bassanio with having passed his test by the conditions set" (371).

Another hotly debated topic has been the nature of the Bassanio/Antonio friendship. Are they friends—in the highly valued early modern sense of the word—or are they sexual lovers? Lawrence Hyman was the first to analyze thoroughly this issue, although he rejected the homoerotic reading, as did Marianne Novy. Anne Barton allowed that the friendship may be cause for Portia to worry, but did not identify it as specifically homoerotic. However, Alan Sinfield brought the issue out of the closet, foregrounding the Antonio/Bassanio relationship as homoerotic in order to avoid a heterosexist reading.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, J. P. Brockbank, writing in 1963, was the first to champion a dual reading of the play, which he classified as either "innocent" or "skeptical," or what we might today call "romantic" or "ironic." Twenty years later, Norman Rabkin revisited the issue, asserting that Shakespeare has deliberately loaded the play with ambiguities, refusing "to permit an unequivocal resolution in favor of one character or group of characters or one term in a thematic debate" (29). Rabkin is

certainly correct, and those built-in ambiguities have given fodder to the critics for the last three hundred years.

Chapter Two

Performance History

The actor who takes on the role of Portia must make several important decisions when shaping her or his interpretation of the role. Of course, the director's vision greatly influences how she will be perceived; if he or she emphasizes Shylock's role, Portia's importance and the romantic plot become minimized. However, some directors—especially in recent years—have noticed that Portia has more lines, more stage time, and more relevance to the plot than Shylock, allowing her to shine in her rightful spotlight at the center of the play.

First, how does she react to the restrictions of her father's will and the casket contest? Is she bored, petulant, or angry, and how will her descriptions of the suitors reflect that outlook? More significantly, how does she respond to Morocco and Aragon? The latter, usually presented as ludicrous in some way, becomes an easy target for ridicule. Portia's lines about Morocco, however, give cause for concern, and directors often cut "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.81), an excision which ameliorates her character and avoids charges of racism.

Second, does she hint to Bassanio about the correct casket? By the time he arrives in Belmont, Portia knows which chest is the correct one. Does she use the song "Tell me where is fancy bred" or some other means to direct her Venetian suitor to the lead casket? If she does, some critics find her less sympathetic, since she circumvents her father's will; others see her as empowered, using her ingenuity to control her own destiny.

Moreover, how does this scene affect our perception of Bassanio? If he needs Portia's help, he may seem less worthy; he has not successfully inferred the meaning of the casket inscriptions. However, his speech on ornament, if left uncut and delivered convincingly, demonstrates that he has learned from his ordeal and passed her father's test.

Third, does she go to Venice to win Bassanio back from the clutches of Antonio or to help rid the merchant of the pesky Shylock problem? Perhaps she adores Bassanio so much that she just wants to be near him. Alternatively, as some critics suggest, she may be going to Venice to protect her investment and prevent the payment of the bond; this latter choice, however, would make her very unsympathetic indeed. The relationship between Bassanio and Antonio, another crux of the play, influences Portia's motivation for going to Venice. If the production situates their relationship within the early modern tradition of Neo-Platonic friendship, we might conclude that Portia assumes her disguise to help her husband's beloved friend. However, if the production portrays a homoerotic relationship, then perhaps Portia wants to prevent Antonio's dying for Bassanio, a sacrifice she could never match, as Lawrence Hyman has pointed out.

Fourth, and most importantly, when does Portia discover the obscure law concerning a "jot of blood?" If she enters the court with forethought, setting a trap for Shylock (which she can indicate to the audience in various ways), her actions may become reprehensible, especially when the usurer is presented sympathetically, as in the vast majority of post-Holocaust productions. However, if Portia struggles and contrives the "escape clause" on the spot, her sudden epiphany can be quite charming, endearing her to audiences. Conversely, if Portia arrives in the courtroom fully aware of the escape clause that can protect Antonio, her mercy speech—if sincerely addressed to the vengeful

usurer—may be seen as an attempt to save Shylock as well as Antonio, thus rendering Portia an embodiment of Christian mercy to both Christian and Jew.

Fifth, how does Portia react to Bassanio's gift of the ring to Balthazar in act four? If the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio follows the early modern ideal of male-male friendship, Bassanio's giving the gift to Balthazar is appropriate and only a minor transgression in Portia's eyes, an excuse for mischievous teasing. However, if the production endorses the homoerotic reading, Bassanio has chosen Antonio over Portia, a more serious betrayal

This decision informs the act five ring scene; does Portia merely tease her husband, or is she mean-spirited, ruthlessly allowing Bassanio to believe he has been cuckolded? She could be attempting to teach Bassanio to put his love for Portia above his friendship with Antonio. Is the scene completely disconnected from the events in the courtroom? Some actors play act five as a way of avenging Bassanio's giving away the ring, especially when overtones of homoeroticism have been emphasized, while others emit a sense of playful triumph at successfully fooling and perhaps teaching Bassanio. These choices—and, of course, many others—become the building blocks of an actor's portrayal of Portia.

Perhaps the most difficult task for an interpreter of Portia is to strike a balance between the romantic comedy elements in the Belmont scenes with the serious, high-stakes proceedings of the courtroom, all without seeming too frivolous or too threatening. The multiple controversies surrounding the interpretation of Portia and the many perspectives from which she has been viewed validate my view that Portia—far from the conventional heroine of eighteenth and nineteenth-century criticism or the spoiled heiress

endorsed by some of her detractors—represents one of the most complex and multidimensional female characters in the Shakespearean canon.

What follows is a history of *The Merchant of Venice* on stage with particular attention to Portia. I have assembled this account by using reviews, promptbooks, interviews, personal correspondence, newspaper articles, and recordings.⁶ A word about theatrical reviews: not all of them are created equal, and the scholarly reviews that appear in publications like *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, and *Cahier's Elisabethains* have been most helpful, perhaps because these articles are more analytical in nature and seek to provide a record of a given production. Mainstream reviews in newspapers and magazines generally exist to advise the public whether or not a production is worth seeing and usually offer less detail, although the New York and London *Times* often present an exception to this rule. Many reviewers focus almost entirely on the actor playing Shylock and neglect the rest of the cast, including Portia; thus if the details about her depiction seem scant, the reviewers have probably neglected to provide particulars of Portia's portrayal. I have sorted the productions chronologically, geographically, and more specifically into categories like "Star Portias," "Pushing the Envelope," and "Shakespeare's Merchant and Marlowe's Jew." Inevitably, some overlap occurs, but I have grouped productions, when possible, in order to identify trends and engage the reader.

⁶ See the appendix for a list and details of all included productions.

EARLY PRODUCTIONS

Little is known about the first performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. The 1600 Quarto states that when it was published, the play had already been presented “divers times,” although no actual performance was recorded until the King’s Men staged the play at court in 1605. We do know that the role of Portia must have been played by one of the boys apprenticed to the Chamberlain’s Men. These boys “entered their bonds between the ages of ten and thirteen, usually playing the women’s parts which their small stature and unbroken voices equipped them for” (Gurr 113). The boys’ ability to play female roles remained ephemeral, as David Bevington has pointed out: “. . . the company roster at any given time was likely to include . . . perhaps four or five boys at varying stages of professional development. Because their voices would change at adolescence, the boys reached the peak of their skill in portraying women only for a relatively short span of time” (*Theatre* 20). In his study *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*, Michael Shapiro notes the difficulties a boy actor playing Portia or one of the other cross-dressed heroines would have encountered: “To distinguish the female character from either her assumed male disguise or his own male identity, the play-boy had to establish the heroine’s femininity with absolute clarity” (49). Shapiro further points out the challenges of Portia’s particular role, noting that Shakespeare seems to “submerge Portia in the fused male identities of Balthazar and the young male performer. In this regard, Portia differs from Julia and Rosalind, who have numerous asides both as themselves and as their male alter egos, as well as from Viola and Imogen, who address the audience as themselves in soliloquies while in male garb” (104).

In 1605 the play enjoyed a revival; much to the pleasure of King James. The King's Men performed at court "around ten in the evening, after much feasting"; James would often fall asleep during the performance, but the only play he ever asked to see twice was *Merchant*. It remains unclear whether he asked for the repeat because he liked Portia's or Shylock's performance, or because he had missed the ending, but the fact remains that James asked for an encore only of *Merchant*. (Crystal 181).

Merchant was not seen on stage again until 1701, when George Granville produced his adaptation, *The Jew of Venice*. Granville made significant changes, completely omitting Morocco and Aragon, as well as Launcelot, Old Gobbo, the two Salads,⁷ and Tubal. The trial remained largely unchanged, but, according to one reviewer, "Portia, finally, when she finds Shylock to be merciless, throws aside her judicial decorum to display a violent partisanship, even descending to offensive utterances" (Kilbourne 70, 71). Shylock, moreover, was depicted as a thoroughly repulsive character, drinking a "toast to his mistress, money, and [grinning] like an ape in the trial scene" (Kilbourne 73). Mercifully, Granville's version has disappeared from the modern stage.

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

The actor-manager system proliferated in England and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this model, a theatrical group's leading actor also performed the roles of director and financial manager. Of course, these male directors would tend to choose plays for the company that featured parts that they themselves would like to play, and they had the freedom to adapt and make cuts that enhanced their own histrionics.

⁷ Directors and actors tend to refer to the largely interchangeable roles of Salerio and Solanio simply as "The Salads."

Thus, a woman enacting Portia had the unenviable task of playing a role that had been de-emphasized.

According to reviewers, Kitty Clive, one of the earliest Portias, failed to meet this challenge. In 1741, actor and director Charles Macklin restored the play to its original form at Drury Lane, with Clive enacting the role of Portia and Macklin playing Shylock. According to Clive's "friends, critics, and biographers, [her interpretation represented] one of her greatest failures." She played the part for laughs, and "adopted the cheap device of imitating the peculiarities of noted lawyers or judges" (Fisher 19, 24).⁸ In Clive's defense, however, the rehearsal process probably provided her with no clue to Macklin's interpretation. "By his own admission, Macklin kept his interpretation a secret from the other actors until he revealed it in performance" (Fisher 25). Clive probably expected a clownish Shylock, like that of Granville's adaptation, but Macklin enacted a tragic villain, and her comic stylings apparently seemed out of sync with her co-star's performance.

Sarah Siddons proved a reluctant but much more memorable Portia. In 1784, David Garrick selected Siddons for the role, although she was hesitant, expressing "regret that Garrick's choice for her London debut had been Portia, saying that she was 'a character in which it was not likely that I should excite any great sensation'" (Hankey 434). However, Siddons became one of the most significant Portias in theatrical history; she was the first actress to enact the mercy speech as a response to Shylock's question, "On what compulsion must I?" (McDonald 26). By speaking directly to Shylock—rather

⁸ I have standardized all punctuation and spelling to reflect modern American usage, with the exception of the word *theatre*. Because the English usage predominates, both in older texts and many newer ones, I have used the English spelling throughout.

than declaiming the passage—Portia became more sympathetic, since her approach presented a Portia who hopes to convince rather than simply pontificate.

Helen Faucit, who played Portia in 1836 with Charles Kemble as Shylock and later in 1839 with William Charles Macready in the role of the Jewish money-lender, added a new dimension to the role. According to theatrical scholars, Faucit interpreted Portia as “Bellario’s long-standing pupil;” thus, presumably, she is aware of the Venetian law and has her defense of Antonio planned before her entrance in the courtroom. Moreover, Faucit apparently stressed Portia’s intelligence, basing her “characterization on Portia’s breeding and intellect, [seeking] to anchor each scene in its underlying reality. She succeeded best in the trial scene, whereas in the opening scene with Nerissa the comic exuberance was missing” (Foulkes 27, 28, 35). Thus, like many Portias, Faucit apparently failed to achieve a balance between the comic and serious aspects of the play.

Portia finally came into her own in the performance of Ellen Terry, who created both a complex and very sympathetic mistress of Belmont in 1879. Perhaps the most famous of the early Portias, Terry remained more renowned for her Portia than for any other role. In an article published upon her death in 1928 by the *New York Times*, Allen Raymond writes, “Ellen Terry made an ideal Portia, full of grace and power. It was the part she had been more desirous to play and she more than justified the choice of the Bancrofts. ‘Everyone,’ says Ellen Terry, ‘seemed to be in love with me! I had sweethearts by the dozen, known and unknown’” (“Theatre” 1928)⁹. Terry took an intellectual approach to preparing for her roles: “For Portia, . . . she learned everything she could about the Venetian Empire in the Renaissance. Intelligence and imagination

⁹ Many of the early theatre reviews are uncredited.

then began to intermingle with the information gathered, and the result was a generative process that built the character from both inside and out” (McDonald 79). A promptbook at the Folger Library reveals that in the trial scene, “Portia’s speeches are spoken at Shylock, though apparently addressed to Antonio” and on her line “You must prepare your bosom for his knife,” “Shylock watches the effect of Portia’s words on the Duke” (Shakespeare, Prompt 1). Terry reveals some details of her approach to the “no jot of blood” moment in the trial scene; unlike Faucit, who portrayed a fully prepared Portia in complete command of the courtroom scene, Terry interpreted a heroine relying on her intuition, stating: “I am convinced that this bit of casuistry was not conceived by Shakespeare as being carefully planned. It strikes me as a lightning-like inspiration—just such an inspiration as a woman might have when she is at her wit’s end and is willing to try anything to avoid defeat” (Terry, *Four* 121). Literary critic Russ McDonald also praises Terry’s acting style, asserting that “throughout the nineteenth century English acting was in the process of becoming less ceremonial, more apparently spontaneous thanks in no small measure to the style and influence of Ellen Terry” (70). Be that as it may, a recording of Terry reciting the mercy speech reveals a declamatory style and a fair amount of vibrato.

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY TO WORLD WAR TWO

After the turn of the twentieth century, some notable productions with an international flavor appeared in New York, but commentators focused solely on Shylock’s interpreters, almost totally neglecting the actor playing Portia. This attention to Shylock continued the pattern that had begun under the actor-manager system. One of the

first of these productions featured a Shylock who spoke in Yiddish, while the other actors performed in English. Writing in 1903, a reviewer for the *New York Times* comments on Jacob Adler, “the great Yiddish tragedian of the Bowery,” while ignoring the rest of the cast: “He overlaid the rough ground plan with a character so truly and sympathetically rendered that one sees Shylock, as it were, in the full round of life” (“Yiddish”). In a letter to the *Times*, the Italian actor Antonio Maiori disagrees with Adler’s rendition of Shylock, insisting “Shylock is detestable, avaricious, full of cupidity which can be seen in all his scenes A hearted man cannot meditate, nor actuate vengeance; if he does he is bad. This is Shylock, and it will be in this way I will impersonate Shylock.” Maiori opened in the role of Shylock at the People’s Theatre just two days later: “The theatre was filled, all the boxes being occupied by black-eyed beauties, who showered bouquets upon the stage just about the time that poor Shylock was most in need of consolation. For he had been roundly hissed by the gallery, one overwrought auditor remarking quite audibly that it ‘serva him righta—he wassa badda fell’” (“Italian Shylock”),¹⁰ and once again the critics neglected Portia.

Although not commanding center stage, Julia Marlowe, who played Portia opposite her husband E. H. Sothorn in the 1905 production, was not totally ignored by critics. However, the promptbook for this production tells us that it conflated the first four Belmont scenes into one long scene, placed at the beginning of act two. Unfortunately, the conflation altered the structure of the play, diminishing Portia’s significance; thus,

¹⁰ I have been continually shocked by sexist, racist, homophobic, and ethnocentric remarks made by some of the earlier critics. Besides the above comment, readers will notice, as this chapter moves on, references to a “bitchy Portia,” a “faggoty Aragon,” and a Morocco who looks “too Negroid.” Although such statements are shocking to modern sensibilities, I am including them for the sake of historical accuracy and evidence of the play’s reception.

although not totally marginalizing Portia, reviewers seemed to regard her as one-dimensional, an attractive orator, nothing more: “If *Hamlet* has become to the modern audience a string of familiar quotations, *The Merchant of Venice* has become a chain of fine speeches. This is where Miss Marlowe comes in. Her charming voice and faultless diction are the great things in listening to this Shakespearean revival” (“E.H. Sothern”). The production cut Gratiano’s last bawdy pun, “Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (5.1.306-07), and concluded with Portia’s line, “And we will answer all things faithfully” (5.1.299), thus ending on a more harmonious key than many productions. Singers then reprised the song “Tell me where is fancy bred,” and the curtains closed (Shakespeare, Prompt 42).

Whereas Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1906 production focused on Shylock, the actor-manager also recognized the importance of the romantic plot, although we have little record of the quality of his Portia, portrayed by Alexandra Carlisle. Tree went to great pains to accurately represent the Jewish Ghetto of Venice: “I have had a great deal of help from high Jewish authorities, and I believe that this scene of Mr. Joseph Harker’s gives a very exact picture of the Ghetto of Venice as it must have been at the time of the story.” However, despite his heavy emphasis on an accurate depiction of Shylock’s home, Tree acknowledges, “*The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy after all, and I am therefore giving great prominence to the charming love scenes at the end of the play” (Sharpe). John Ripley’s extensive analysis of this production notes that Tree also staged the Belmont scenes “with care, treating them almost as a melodic counterpoint to his primary theme, a series of brief respites from the indignities of Venetian racism, despite the ubiquitous presence of Venetian bigots” (407). Unfortunately, an interview with

Carlisle, who played Portia, reveals little about her interpretation of the role: “When I was quite a little girl I used to play truant from school so that I might revel in the most shocking melodramas, but even then my most ambitious dreams would have been more than fulfilled if I could have foreseen the day when I should be playing Portia to Mr. Tree’s Shylock at His Majesty’s” (Sharpe). The meaninglessness of Carlisle’s remarks can perhaps be excused by the inanity of the interviewer’s only question: “How do you like playing Portia?”

If Carlisle made little impact as Portia, Mary Hall, who enacted the role at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York in 1921, aroused mixed reviews from the critics. According to one reviewer, Hall enacted a “substantial and robustious [sic] Portia who reads always with clarity and humor but who manages to worry along through this play without ever suggesting the great lady of Belmont that Portia was,” while Walter Hampden played a “senile, dirty, and singularly malignant Shylock” (Woollcott). Despite Hall’s plucky portrayal, as is often so, the critical focus remained fixed on Shylock. Hampden responded to the audience’s enthusiastic applause by interrupting the play after the trial scene to give a “graceful” curtain speech. Then, a theatre representative told the reviewers that they could leave; the actors would perform the final scene “as a matter of principle,” but Hampden would not appear in it (Woollcott). Apparently the reviewers were not interested in the play once Shylock had departed, and presumably the audience, too, had little curiosity concerning Portia and Bassanio’s return to Belmont and the comic resolution of the play in act five.

More successful was Peggy Wood, who starred as Portia in the 1928 staging, again at the Broadhurst Theatre. This production departed from tradition by stressing the

romantic comedy elements, thus making Portia central. One critic remarked that, in contrast to many earlier, declamatory Portias, Wood played the role as “a keen-witted, merry girl with a whimsical smile. Even under her earnest plans she has a bubbling sense of humor and lightness of touch which make her refreshingly real and attractive” (“Theatre” 1928). This production was sufficiently popular that Woods’s absence from one performance due to laryngitis justified a notice from the *Times* (“Peggy”).

STAR PORTIAS

Merchant often becomes a star vehicle for the actor playing Shylock, but a celebrity’s playing the role of Portia occurs less often. However, during the first decades of the twentieth century, several American stage luminaries attempted the role with varying degrees of success. Ethel Barrymore, sister to Lionel and John and great aunt to Drew, graced the New York stage as Portia in 1905. One reviewer observes, “She seemed rather inert at times, but, if she had played the part in a more vigorous spirit of gayety, she would have been out of key with what Mr.[Walter] Hampden has chosen to make a rather low-pitched performance of *The Merchant of Venice*” (“Theatre” 1925). In 1938, Helen Hayes played Portia in Chicago; clearly she very much wanted to enact this role, as she even paid for the costumes and sets. Moreover, like the Portia of Ellen Terry, Hayes’s Portia was not thoroughly prepared to defeat Shylock when she first entered the Venetian courtroom and her idea about ‘no jot of blood’ came to her “out of the blue,” as a commentator for the *Times* relates: “Hayes pauses in her speech, opens her eyes wide, breathes an ‘ah,’ and then proceeds (“Helen”). However, despite these observations, in

the reviews that I found available, the critics say little about Hayes's effectiveness in the role.

Two theatrical giants joined forces in a memorable *Merchant* produced in 1938, when Peggy Ashcroft starred with John Gielgud, whose nuanced portrayal allowed Portia to shine. According to one reviewer, "this is a Shylock who deliberately abstains from capturing and so unbalancing the play. Belmont is not overwhelmed by Venice, and Portia is permitted to rule in her own country" (Rev. 1938). Commentator Charles Morgan observes the effect that this balance has on a production: "Peggy Ashcroft's treatment of the part admirably compares the gaiety and fairy-tale qualities appropriate to the casket scenes with a seriousness which, though it cannot finally reconcile the trial scene with reason, does at least give us an excuse for believing that Shylock and Portia are characters in the same play." This evenhanded production seems to have paid sufficient attention to Portia, but attention would revert to Shylock again after the horrors of the Holocaust and World War Two.

Some years later, in 1957, the American Shakespeare Theatre in Connecticut played host to Katharine Hepburn. The fifty-year-old Hepburn gave the impression of "the Victorian spinster," and one critic asserts that "her voice is large enough for the courtroom doings when she wants it large, but on balance she is considerably more flibertygibbit than pundit" ("Theatre" 1957). The disconnect between Hepburn's performance as Portia and that of Morris Carnovsky as Shylock seems to have derived from her interpretation two years earlier in Sydney. The Australian production featured Robert Helpmann as Shylock, who employed a "baroque, stylized portrayal," which Hepburn apparently mirrored. When she performed in the U.S. production, Carnovsky

played Shylock realistically, while Hepburn retained her stylized interpretation (Edwards 306). These reviewers' remarks give a rather muddled impression of Hepburn's performance, but they imply that the movie star, no matter how talented, was probably too old to play the role convincingly.

Joan Plowright starred opposite her husband, Laurence Olivier, at the Old Vic in 1970; the production also featured a young Derek Jacobi as Bassanio. Critics were thrilled with Olivier but less happy with Plowright: "Olivier is marvelous—a boardroom Shylock, stuffed with interest rates, impersonal to the point of credibility Joan Plowright is less than ideal as Portia—the quality of mercy and almost everything else is all too strained" (Barnes, "Shakespeare"). I discuss the production, which was filmed for television several years later, more thoroughly in the "Big Screen and the Small Screen" section below. However, this quotation from director Jonathan Miller delineates his attitude toward the mercy speech, which he employed for both the stage and screen versions:

On one evening I wasn't doing anything in particular, but I overheard in my mind's ear Portia speaking the line 'the quality of mercy is not strained' and in place of the ringing feminine rhetoric of the familiar version, I heard and saw a brief flash in which I saw a rather boyish figure leaning forward over a table on one elbow, saying those first lines in a rather irritable, explanatory tone of voice, as if trying to push something which someone rather stupidly misunderstood previously. (Berry 29-30)

Miller's conception suggests a rather unsympathetic and condescending Portia, and in the filmed production, Plowright delivers the speech exactly as Miller describes. Taken in a

vacuum, her portrayal seems overly harsh. However, when viewed in context with Olivier's villainous interpretation, Plowright's superciliousness seems in tune with the rest of the scene.

Movie and theatre goers around the world recognize the name of Judi Dench, but in 1971, although a successful RSC actor, she was not widely known. In fact, Murray Biggs's article "A Neurotic Portia" does not even mention Dench by name, calling her "one of our most skillful actresses, Stratford's Portia of 1971" (153). When discussing this production, reviewer Robert Speaight seems to be in denial about the nature of the Bassanio/Antonio relationship: "I also thought she took the comedy of the rings far too seriously; Portia was a woman of the world, and she would not have cried like an ingénue because Bassanio behaved as any man with an average sense of gratitude would have behaved under the same extenuating circumstances" (361). Dench herself disliked the ring scene, as well as the entire play, as she explains: "But I didn't like playing Portia. I hated the play, and I hated the characters in it, and I should never have done it . . . How dare she behave so churlishly over that ring at the end? That's so petty—and boring. Oh, I loathe that play!" (Pitt 205). Be that as it may, the production must have some happy memories for Dench; she shared the stage with her new husband, Michael Williams, who played Bassanio. Someone had gifted the newlyweds with a kitten, which became part of each performance; in an action that must have appeared quite charming, Morocco would present the kitten to Portia upon his arrival in Belmont. The next year, the spring tour featured a new Portia, Susan Fleetwood, who "held kitten auditions in Newcastle" (Gilbert 92).

Sigourney Weaver was already a movie star after the success of films like *Ghostbusters* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, but the summer of 1986 saw the release of *Aliens*, and it is hardly possible to imagine an actor epitomizing the empowered woman more than Weaver when she opened as Portia in December of 1986 in New York. According to June Schlueter, she embodied a multifaceted character, who, despite her verve and variety, does not hint to Bassanio concerning the correct casket; thus she does not control this particular moment of the play: “Weaver creates an intelligent Portia, capable of delightful humor (as in the scene where she and Nerissa catalogue and mock her suitors), uninhibited joy (when Bassanio chooses well), tender concern, (when she hears of Antonio’s peril), and spunky authority (in the trial scene)” (Schlueter 15). Weaver’s portrayal seems to have captured Portia’s complexity, similar to her portrayal of Ripley in *Aliens*, which combined fortitude and intelligence with vulnerability and compassion. Moreover, her six-foot height and slim build must have enabled her to convincingly impersonate a man in the courtroom scene.

Kelly McGillis had recently appeared in the box-office hit *Top Gun* and in the more intelligent film *Witness* when she took on the role of Portia at the Folger in Washington, D.C. These two film roles may have informed her theatrical performance; in *Witness* she played a woman whose cultural restrictions inhibit her desires, while in *Top Gun* she plays an intelligent professional who falls in love with Tom Cruise’s arrogant and unsympathetic character. Reviewers praised her interpretation of Portia, noting that she was “as squirmish as a schoolgirl” in the Belmont scenes, but that the “joyous solemnities of love, however, deepen her into a self-assured woman, who will go on to don lawyer’s togs and celebrate ‘the quality of mercy’” (Richards). This Portia got some

help from her friends in the casket scene since her household singers “continuously punch[ed] the words that rhyme with ‘lead’ while supplying musical background for Bassanio’s deliberations” (Tocci 19).

MAJOR POST-WAR PRODUCTIONS IN THE USA

The Great White Way in New York is not the only venue for respectable theatre in the United States. Besides the famed stages of Broadway, venues specifically devoted to classical theatre exist in San Diego, Chicago, New York’s Central Park, and Washington D.C, among others. Moreover, the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut produced Shakespearean plays from 1955 until its demise in the mid-1980s. The San Diego Shakespeare Festival produces Shakespearean plays at its Old Globe Theatre, and in 1961, Morris Carnovsky, who had recently played Shylock opposite Katharine Hepburn in Stratford, Connecticut, reprised the role on the California stage. Critic Virgil Whitaker commented that this was “Portia’s play as well as Shylock’s.” Jacqueline Brookes assumed the role of Portia in what was apparently a balanced production: “Brookes’s portrayal of the role could hardly have been bettered, and she had worthy support in Ludi Claire, whose Nerissa was a lady-in-waiting, as she should be, and not a maid There remained no doubt whatever that Bassanio came as more than a fortune hunter” (Whitaker 405). Apparently, Brookes also created the empowered Portia that many contemporary critics endorse. Robert Hapgood agrees that Brookes’s Portia was, “like Shylock, a center of integrity, and the great moment of this production came at the first encounter of these two, giving new life and excitement to the ‘quality of mercy’ speech” (349). Moreover, Whitaker remarks that the singers in 3.2

placed obvious emphasis on the rhymes in “Tell me where is fancy bred,” thereby accentuating the degree to which Portia hints to Bassanio concerning the correct casket, controlling the casket ordeal as well as the courtroom trial.

Brookes appears to have held her own against the eminent stage actor Morris Carnovsky; however, Nan Martin had a more difficult task playing opposite screen star George C. Scott in 1962. The Shakespeare productions in Central Park are a mainstay of New York theatrical life, and the Delacorte Theatre opened with an inaugural production of *The Merchant of Venice*—directed by Joseph Papp, founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival—with Nan Martin playing Portia and George C. Scott enacting Shylock. Inevitably, critics focused primarily on Scott, a well-known movie star and the production’s big draw. As Melvin Maddocks comments, “The other members of a rather uneven cast—including Nan Martin as Portia and Albert Quinten as Antonio—make minor decorative effects under Joseph Papp’s direction, like ripples in the concentric outer circles of Mr. Scott’s big splash.” However, at least one commentator appreciated Martin’s effort, remarking: “In addition to Mr. Scott’s fiery and tormented Shylock, the production boasts a Portia who is both lovely to look at and self-confident. As Nan Martin plays her, Portia is graceful, coquettish, dignified and flawlessly articulate. Her rendering of the trial scene is memorable” (Gelb). Conversely, another reviewer complained that “Nan Martin’s portrayal of Portia conveyed to the audience little if anything of Shakespeare’s characterization; her movements and voice were closer to those of a soap-opera heroine” (Griffin 554). Papp’s production opened on June 21, 1962, and on the same night CBS broadcast it nationwide. The telecast was supposed to have taken place after the play had opened, but performances were rained out the first two

nights and the two events thus occurred simultaneously. Televising such a controversial play evoked trouble for the network, as one hundred and fifty people—representatives of the Jewish War Veterans and its women’s auxiliary—picketed the CBS building in protest of the telecast (“Bard” 52). Reviewer Jack Gould offers some prescient words in those early days of television: “It does not take inordinate imagination—and how the evening cried for color TV—to see that TV theatre, so painfully introverted in production techniques, could have a new world ahead if further experimentation along the lines of last night’s innovations were pursued.” If only Mr. Gould could have fast-forwarded to 1973 or 2001, I am certain he would have been thrilled with Jonathan Miller’s and Trevor Nunn’s productions for television.

Critical response to Barbara Baxley’s Portia exemplifies one of the challenges of the role: How to make this empowered woman, who criticizes her suitors, totally destroys Shylock, and mercilessly teases her husband about the lost ring as sympathetic as many of us believe that she should be. The now-defunct American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, enjoyed a prestigious status until its demise in 1985, its proximity to New York City affording opportunities for actors and spectators alike. However, critics seemed puzzled by Barbara Baxley’s interpretation of Portia in Michael Kahn’s 1967 production of *Merchant*: “[She] has the ‘cuckoo’s voice’ required by the text, but not the meadowlark merriment that can bubble beneath it. She is not merely bored by her clownish suitors in the first part of the play, she is petulant. There is a by-rrote quality to her words in the trial scene, and a hint of meanness in the teasing of the final episode” (Sullivan). One commentator characterizes Portia as a “teasing, bitchy millionairess” toying “cynically with her various suitors with the arrogance of privilege” (Cooper 132).

Years later, Kahn shed some light on his interpretation in an interview with the *New York Times*: “[I staged the play] as a reflection of my feelings about the 1960s. I made the Venetians dreadful, only caring about money and treating each other as objects” (Henry). In focusing on the materialism of the Venetians, an interpretation popular with twentieth-century critics, Kahn apparently stressed the ironic undercutting of Portia as well as the citizens of Venice.

Penelope Windust, who played Portia at the 1973 San Diego Shakespeare Festival, also failed to win the hearts of critics. The Old Globe revived *Merchant* again in 1973, although this time with less success than in 1961. According to one disenchanted reviewer, “the only thing [Penelope Windust as Portia] seemed to care about was getting home early, if we can judge by the staccato, rapid delivery of her lines. At least half the time she was totally unintelligible” (Horobetz 1973). Critic Jon Whitmore was likewise unimpressed, calling the production “straightforward” and “uninspired” (509). Unfortunately, neither of these critics provides much insight into Windhurst’s interpretation or details on the many choices an actor playing this role must make.

Far more winning was Geraldine James, who created a Portia at once empowered and sympathetic. In 1989 the theatre world anticipated greatness when Dustin Hoffman assumed the role of Shylock under the direction of Peter Hall. The successful production played in both Washington D.C. and New York, and although Hoffman received much of the attention, James as Portia held her own against the movie star, garnering much critical praise. Moreover, she was nominated for a Tony—as was Hoffman—and won the Drama Desk Award. (*Ibdb*). James relates some of her theories about the character in an interview with Mervyn Rothstein for the *New York Times*:

Portia could walk into the courtroom and go: 'I'm sorry, there is no argument here about a pound of flesh because there is an ancient law in Venice which says that even if you think about hurting somebody else you lose all your money. So you've had it, Shylock.' She could do that, but she doesn't. Now she either doesn't because she's cruel or because she wants to give Shylock a chance to step down, to drop his demand voluntarily. She's saying, 'For God's sake, don't be stupid. You must be merciful. Mercy is everything.' (Rothstein C13)

James's interview clarifies her views on two of the critical cruxes of the play. First, she makes it plain that, unlike Ellen Terry, she believes that Portia has already decided what she plans to do before she enters the courtroom. Also, she interprets Portia's great mercy speech as an attempt to save Shylock as well as Antonio. Thus, she envisions a more merciful Portia than many interpreters.

According to reviewers, Kate Fry, who played Portia at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Merchant* at the Navy Pier in 2005, also captured the complexity of the role and endeared herself to the audience: "In its look and feel, the production was modern and stylish, but with a certain slick eclecticism that often felt more corporate than hip." Director Barbara Gaines had some cast members seated amongst the audience during the trial scene "so as to clearly implicate it in the proceedings" (Ko 76,77). Moreover, Portia was not relegated to the sidelines. As one critic announces, Kate Fry's "Portia was more than just a spoiled rich kid; she was alternately edgy, beleaguered, wry, plucky, and buoyant and in ways that deepened our sense of her character and gave her debutant *prima donna* persona a touch of the likable underdog" (Ko 78).

One of the most exciting Portias of the twentieth century is Lily Rabe. When the 2010 *Merchant* opened at the Delacorte in Central Park, all eyes were on its movie-star Shylock, Al Pacino. However, while the production earned almost universal raves, both for Pacino and for its ensemble, Lily Rabe's Portia produced effusive praise. *Newsday's* Linda Winer states that Rabe made "a smashing classical debut as a world-wise [sic] but fresh Portia. When she disguises as a male lawyer to save what's left of humanity's day in court, her intelligence reminds us that the gender oppression of her day is almost as cruel as what happens to Shylock"(Winer). The *Daily News'* critic is equally laudatory: "Rabe, a rising star and the daughter of Jill Clayburgh, is fascinating as Portia—sly and girlish early on with her maid Nerissa (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), fierce and full-bodied as she engineers Shylock's destruction in court at the trial of Antonio, who's defaulted on the loan" (Dziemianowicz). Even a big name like Pacino's could not keep the critics from falling in love with Rabe's performance, which headed to Broadway in October of 2010, where it enjoyed enormous success, averaging a million dollars a week at the box office.

REPERTORY PRODUCTIONS AROUND THE U.S.

Regional Shakespeare festivals abound in the U.S.; the *Electronic Shakespeare* website lists over one hundred of them. Some of these groups are more professional than others, and their productions are generally fairly straightforward. However, these companies are important since they bring the plays of Shakespeare to corners of the country far removed from Broadway.

In 1961, Professor James W. Yeater directed *Merchant* for Arizona State University. This description of the opening scene sounds like a Zeffirelli production; he

“opened the play with a stage full of people, festive in mood and brightly dressed. Animated groups merged and separated. All was gay and cheerful; Antonio entered, melancholic and sad, garbed in a sedate, ankle-length robe and wearing a black beard. Against the background of festivity, his sadness was sadness indeed” (Bryant 449). Unfortunately, this reviewer gives no information on how the opening scene in Belmont was staged, or on the centrality of Portia to the production. However, apparently Marjorie Jones did not disappoint; she “made a very pleasant and a very pretty Portia, satisfyingly unable to hide her feminine manners even as the stern judge” (Bryant 449), which is about all anyone seemed to expect of Portia in 1961.

Le Clanche du Rand Morgan departed from tradition by depicting a much more empowered, if not always sympathetic, Portia in the production at the Mary Rippon Outdoor Theatre in Boulder, Colorado in 1966. Director Albert Nadeau outlined his concept of the play in the program notes: “There are no villains in the piece . . . rather, the play concerns the treatment of three ‘foreigners,’ Morocco, Aragon, and Shylock, by a comfortable ‘in-group’ exercising its prejudices. Thus, while we may like all the characters, we should ‘abhor their ancient grudges’” (Willis 423). Portia clearly controlled the casket scene, cheating more obviously than most Portias in 3.2, “singing with great gusto all the ‘ead’ sounds in ‘Tell Me Where Is Fancy Bred’”; moreover, Willis points out that “few decisions were reached onstage (424),” which assumedly would mean that Portia knew about the “jot of blood” and the law against aliens before she entered the courtroom. Evidently, this Portia had made her plans in advance and controlled both the casket and the courtroom scenes.

In the 1970s feminist critics discovered Portia, and this movement may have influenced the portrayals of Portia in a number of productions, including Kate Webster's interpretation of the role at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival in 1970, where *Merchant* ran in repertory with Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. Webster played Portia as "very sturdy, brisk, confident and business-like, almost a bit worldly-wise and weary." Robert Ornstein remarks that Webster's choices helped to link her romantic role in Belmont with her serious role in Venice, and [her] portrayal "almost tempted one to think of Portia's victory over these men as a kind of revenge for the terms of her father's will. Perhaps the Women's Liberation Movement did start in Belmont after all." Moreover, Robert Allman's Shylock was sympathetic but not exaggeratedly tragic (474).

Lee McClelland also shared center stage with Shylock in the Theatre at Monmouth's 1974 production in Maine. This production followed hard upon the 1973 television *Merchant* with Joan Plowright and Laurence Olivier, and in the years immediately following a successful film release, reviewers tend to compare stage productions to the film; such is the case with the production at Monmouth. Critic Herbert Coursen remarks that "while director Earl McCarroll's *Merchant* lacked the power of Olivier's recent version, the Monmouth production was the most balanced and coherent *Merchant* I have ever seen." Coursen praises McClelland's Portia, noting that she "must riffle in panic through Venice's law book for an escape clause" when Shylock remains unmoved by her mercy speech, adding that "Wallace Rogers did a fine job with his cameo role as the faggoty Aragon" (Coursen 430, 431). Clearly, McClelland's Portia, unlike that of James and Morgan, did not plan her defense before entering the Venetian courtroom, but, like Ellen Terry's Portia, relied on her instincts to save the day.

Two Southern productions in 1978 featured two very different Portias, although each, in her own way, retained her centrality. In North Carolina, “Maya Stancikas . . . chose to play Portia as a mature, fully self-controlled mistress of Belmont whose reason for being was nevertheless unclear. . . . despite her speech on the quality of mercy, her stern tone and unremitting logic destroyed any vestige of self-pride left in an awestruck Shylock” (Moehlmann 202). Conversely, in Alabama, “Lynn Fitzpatrick’s Portia . . . was a bright coquette, whose sense of humor kept her from becoming pompous or schoolmarmish” (Kay 207). The Alabama production placed Portia at the center of its production and left the bond plot in the periphery. Portia seemed to have a positive effect on all those around her: “Antonio’s melancholy lifted when he met Portia. Even Jessica brightened more and more the longer she stayed at Belmont, her emotional state reflected in the increasing lightness of her dress. In the final scene she wore flowing white, and Portia’s joyous world of Belmont nurtured everyone—everyone, that is, receptive to its enlivening forces” (Kay 208). These two Portias evoke opposing views of Portia and mercy: while Fitzpatrick embodied Heinrich Heine’s rhapsodic description of “sunny” Portia, a force for good, Stancikas’s harsh treatment of Shylock endorsed the negative view of Portia that unfortunately many contemporary critics espouse.

Formerly strictly a touring company known as the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, in 2001 the American Shakespeare Center gained its own venue in Staunton, Virginia: the Blackfriars theatre, a popular destination for Shakespeare enthusiasts. The ASC boasts that it performs “Shakespeare with the lights on” and emphasizes the importance of the audience’s experience. When Ralph Allen Cohen directed the production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1992 with Lauren Kerr playing Portia, he had

very clear ideas about the protagonist: “Certainly the play’s champion is Portia . . . she is the play’s primary voice and ultimate insider, its most compelling locus of identification, and the person in the play with whom an audience most wants to agree” (3). However, although Cohen was deeply concerned about racism in the Morocco scenes, expressing his thoughts in a 1999 article, “Unpalatability in the Web of *The Merchant of Venice*,” he does not give much detail about his staging of these moments except to point out that Taunya Martin doubled the roles of Morocco and Jessica. Lauren Kerr’s Portia, according to Maureen Connolly McFeely, played up the comedy in her role and “could barely control the girlish giggles as she put Darren Setlow’s Bassanio to the test” (18).

Similarly, Claire Christie played Portia for laughs in a 2006 production in Atlanta, imbuing the Belmont scenes with comic energy in her interaction with Nerissa. The production had its share of problems with the Morocco scenes, however, which produced unexpected hilarity. Yu Jin Ko speculates that the laughter may have been caused by a recent protest concerning a blasphemous cartoon, which depicted Muhammed at the gates of heaven, telling some Jihadists, “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins.” Ko continues to note the “comic energy” of the production consistently evoked inappropriate mirth: “When Portia produced her ace in the hole, it became unmistakably evident how much the comic and emotional thrust of the scene (and play) was with the Christians. Gratiano was able to whip the audience into giddy laughter as he taunted Shylock” (Ko 83).

Stacia Rice, a charming Portia who acted the role for the Ten Thousand Things group in Minneapolis, suffered from a problem that plagues many productions: an unsympathetic Bassanio. This production “stressed language and character, both of

which were underscored by bare-bones staging,” but, according to Douglas Green, “Matt Guidry’s Bassanio, as shiny as the gold casket he rejected, appeared so shallow and self-absorbed that he called into question both the tragic attachment of Antonio and the comic attraction of Portia to this man whose love has consistently coincided with financial advantage. Stacia Rice’s Portia—so intelligent, lively, and witty, particularly in the courtroom and final scenes—deserved better” (45,48). Green compares the production to the recently released Michael Radford film: “the thematic force of its treatment differed little from that of [the] film version with Al Pacino. Like the film it retained the comic force of the romantic plot while underscoring the ironic lack of mercy, given Portia’s famous discourse on the topic, toward Shylock at the end” (Green 49).

Michelle O’Neill’s Portia should have been the focus of the Guthrie Theatre’s 2007 production, based on director Joe Dowling’s “belief that *The Merchant of Venice* feels like one of Mozart’s comic operas.” However, Bruce Brandt points out that “although Dowling’s perception . . . derives primarily from the love stories, his production’s focus was not on Portia and Bassanio, centering on the plights of Antonio and Shylock” (2). Katherine West Scheill observes that in the trial scene, Portia was “completely in control, with the solution to invalidating Shylock’s claims at the ready. Clearly she had this in mind the whole scene, and calculatingly planned to use it if necessary.” Scheil also points out that this production skirted the problem of Portia’s alleged racism by excising her distasteful line about Morocco’s complexion (117-18).

Marni Penning at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre in 2009 created a Portia who was both passionate and comical. Director Jim Helsinger sought to present an evenhanded production, placing equal emphasis on the romantic plot and the bond plot.

Penning appeared in the early Belmont scenes like a princess in the tower, dressed in an ultra-feminine frock and girlishly voicing her frustrations, while in the trial scene she sported newly-shorn hair and a serious persona who thinks up the “jot of blood” clause on the spot. *Merchant* ran in repertory with *Much Ado about Nothing*, and most of the actors doubled roles. Critic Elizabeth Maupin declares that “Marni Penning brings the same down-to-earth spirit to Portia that she does to Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Her Portia may be self-pitying, but she’s also smart, and she leaps to action more quickly than any man.”¹¹

CANADIAN CONTROVERSY

Canadian productions have often been marked by discord due to a perceived anti-Semitism, racism, or insensitivity to Muslims in the play. Of course, these are issues that haunt all productions of this controversial play, but perhaps because of the very diverse population of Canada, missteps at times created a particularly negative response. At any rate, the six productions discussed below were often upbraided by critics and audiences for their insensitive treatment of ethnic and religious issues.

The Stratford Shakespeare Festival—a mainstay of the Canadian stage since 1953—presented its first production of *Merchant* in 1955. Tyrone Guthrie’s interpretation “powerfully confronted anti-Semitism, notably in its masterly handling of Shylock’s final exit” (Shaugnessy 132). Actor William Hutt recalls, “everybody booed and roared and spit and baited this Jew; there was a sudden hush, and *one* person on stage started to cry . . . That was Shylock’s exit, that man crying” (Rossi 184-85). It remains

¹¹ See Chapter 4 for a complete discussion of this production and an interview with Marni Penning.

unclear whether Portia was among the roarers and spitters, but reviewers again focused on Shylock, and this production seems to have centered on him as well.

In 1970 at the National Theatre of Canada, Maureen O'Brien portrayed a fresh, lively Portia but may have endorsed a somewhat declamatory style; Clive Barnes notes that "she seemed unable to remove all the quotation marks that lingered around her most famous speeches" ("Another"). Arnold Edinborough agrees that O'Brien fails to capture the nuances of the role: "There was no pathos in the Court scene—just Portia's triumph. There was no ultimate degradation of the Jew when he was forced to convert to Christianity. His Jewishness was worn so lightly, it seemed not difficult to put it off" (459). However, Edinborough's comments do not allow for viewing Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity as an act of mercy, a widely-accepted historical reading. John Pettigrew's remarks, on the other hand, reveal a homophobia that was, sadly, common to commentators at that time: "Is any of Shakespeare's titular heroes—even Cymbeline!—less exciting than Antonio? . . . M. Gascon's desperation showed, in one of his few departures from sanity, . . . in his attempt to give some dimensions to Antonio by having his melancholy spring from an unconscious homosexual attachment to Bassanio" (14). Pettigrew joined the other critics in his displeasure with the production's Portia, calling her "merely competent" and lacking in "warmth and soul" (14,15).

In 1989, "*The Merchant of Venice* returned [to the Stratford stage] with a coterie of critics crying anti-Semitism" (Alex Newman 36). In fact, to appease the public, Antonio's line "that, for this favor, / He presently become a Christian" was cut, and "the Festival's own handout for schools, "Stratford for Students," drew attention to the cut by including among questions for discussion this one: "Would Antonio appear to be merciful

at the end of the trial if the lines about Shylock's religious conversion were cut?" (McGee SQ 114). In fact, the play had been largely banned from the curriculum of the schools in the area (McGee SB 12). However, audiences were won over, and "by the end of the summer, *Merchant* was sold out through to the end of its run" (McGee SB 12). Its sensitivity to anti-Semitism notwithstanding, Langham left the comedy intact, especially in the Belmont scenes. "Leading the comic action was Seana McKenna's mature Portia, a character almost as varied and interesting as Bedford's Shylock" (McGee SQ 117).¹² Carolyn Asp was less happy with McKenna's Portia, however: "dressed in Victorian furbelows and frills, topped with a wig of cascading curls, Seana McKenna conveyed a silliness and girlishness foreign to the controlling, powerful, and quick-witted character Shakespeare created. Although her performance was strong in the trial scene, it was impossible to see any connection between Portia as lawyer and Portia as courtly lady" (376). Although Asp disparages McKenna's "girlishness," the Canadian actor was deliberately projecting an innocent youthfulness, as she explained to me in our interview.

Susan Coyne, perhaps best known to bardophiles as the lovable Anna Conroy on *Slings and Arrows*, took to the Stratford stage as Portia in 1996.¹³ Perhaps following the lead of Tim Luscombe's 1990 production,¹⁴ director Marti Maraden set the play in Fascist Italy. According to Alexander Leggatt, Coyne presented a multi-faceted interpretation: "She was bright, sardonic, engaging; as an intelligent woman who wanted control of her own life, she chafed under the restrictions imposed by her father's will But while she made Portia largely sympathetic, Coyne also showed Portia's

¹² See Chapter 3 for a complete discussion of this production and an interview with Seana McKenna.

¹³ Coyne also conceived and co-wrote the series, along with Mark McKinney and Bob Martin.

¹⁴ See page 96 for a discussion of Luscombe's production.

limitations”(24). Leggatt does not specify what those limitations might be, although presumably the line about Morocco’s “complexion” was left intact. Moreover, the anti-Semitic controversy was still alive and well in Canada, while the homoerotic reading had become commonplace. Seeking to lessen the play’s offensiveness, “Maraden attempted to soften some of the anti-Semitic cruelty in the Trial Scene, but other things also mitigated against the production: the lack of at least an implied homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio; an unconvincing Nerissa, [and] a Portia who couldn’t pull off her male impersonation in the Trial Scene” (Garebian 164).

Controversy returned to the Stratford theater in 2001 with the staging of act two, scene seven; in an act that angered Muslim Canadians, Morocco “prostrated himself at Portia’s feet.” Director Richard Monette seemed to be working overtime to avoid charges of anti-Semitism: “Eschewing censorship yet rightly anticipating trouble, director Monette brought in a rabbi to work with his cast The production did indeed offend Canadian sensibilities, but not by its depiction of anti-Semitic Venetians but by its tasteless staging of the Prince of Morocco” (Jenstad 30). Kate Taylor opines, “apparently, Monette inhabits some cultural bubble where anti-Semitic jokes have been banished but anti-Islamic ones are still hilarious.” The critics’ attention to the Morocco uproar left them little space to address Lucy Peacock’s performance as Portia, although Royal Ward describes some moments from the early Belmont scenes that seem oddly out of place with the trouble that was brewing: “Playing on a lute, Portia sings a setting of John Donne’s “Go and Catch a Falling Star” and smiles as Nerissa describes the way the caskets will work. Her light-hearted descriptions of the suitors betray no mean-spiritedness. She clearly loves her father and trusts his casket scheme” (Ward 36).

Perhaps in response to the adverse publicity in 2001, when the Stratford Festival staged *Merchant*, in 2007, director Richard Rose tried something new for the first Belmont scene: “All the luckless suitors were on small tables, like statues. As each was described, he jumped down and did a little skit demonstrating his folly, and then carried his table off with him. Moreover, this Portia—Severn Thompson—seemed “angry about being restricted to the terms of her father’s will, but she was excitedly happy at the mention of Bassanio”; moreover, her problematic line in 2.7 became “Let all of his persuasion (instead of “complexion”) choose me so” (Liston 73). In another unusual choice, “Portia read “The quality of mercy” speech, denuding it of spontaneity and force (Liston 73); perhaps this Portia had come to the courtroom fully prepared to rescue Antonio and had no real interest in persuading Shylock to be merciful.

THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY AND BEYOND

Britain’s premiere theatrical company remains the gold standard for Shakespearean theatre, performing in both Stratford and London. Its actors are classically trained, mostly at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), a school whose list of luminous alumni include Vivian Leigh, Derek Jacobi, Kenneth Branagh, and Imogen Stubbs. The United Kingdom’s theatre-going public also enjoy such prestigious venues as the London Globe, the National Theatre, and the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, among others.

Long before he led the 1989 *Merchant* in Ontario, Michael Langham directed the play at the Stratford-upon-Avon for the RSC in 1960, with Dorothy Tutin and Peter O’Toole, both RADA graduates, taking the lead roles. The production was highly

successful and received rave reviews, especially for O'Toole.¹⁵ However, in the pre-feminist days of 1960, the theatrical reviewers, like the literary critics, seemed to expect Portia to be simply bright and charming, like this unnamed critic from the *Times*: "The Portia of Miss Dorothy Tutin has a sunny vivacity and she most engagingly points her lines with mischief. She is at her finest when she welcomes Bassanio to Belmont and confesses her dearest hopes for him" ("Shylock"). Robert Speaight sounds like a Victorian commentator as he extols Tutin's performance: "When she entered for the casket scene with Bassanio, you saw a girl suddenly transformed. The princess of fairy tale had stepped out of her gilded cage into the sunshine of love's reality; and you remembered that look on her face long after criticism had had its say" (449). Not only was 1960 pre-feminist, it was also pre-civil rights, and Speaight's comments on Morocco are shocking to modern eyes: "Mr. Hardwick [who played Morocco], though he was given too negroid a physiognomy—I wish producers would go to Morocco and see for themselves that the rulers and chieftains of that attractive country do not look in the least like Mr. Lumumba—struck the right note of bronze from his splendid voice" (Speaight 448).¹⁶

Thelma Holt portrayed an unsympathetic Portia when the Open Space in London presented *Merchant* in 1977. Director Charles Marowitz chose "to set the play in post-war British-occupied Jerusalem against back-projections of the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946. Shylock is removed from his individual isolation in Shakespeare and made, with Tubal, the leader of the Zionist liberation movement, responsible,

¹⁵ Although these days O'Toole is a household name, in 1960 he had yet to appear in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the 1962 film that made him an international star.

¹⁶ Patrice Emery Lumumba was Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo for ten weeks in 1960.

ostensibly, for acts of urban terrorism such as the hotel bombing” (Itzin). Critic Catherine Itzin seems clueless that Portia could be unhappy with her father’s arrangement: “Thelma Holt made Shakespeare’s saccharine Portia into enough of a cynic and a bitch to give a new perspective to that hard-to-swallow courtship set-up in Belmont. With a daughter like Holt’s Portia one could well imagine the dead father playing malicious posthumous games.”

One of the most acclaimed productions of the twentieth century, staged at Stratford in 1976 by John Barton, tended to minimize Portia and the courtroom scene, which is usually the central dramatic center of the play. Marjorie Bland played Portia with Patrick Stewart depicting a decidedly unsympathetic Shylock, and Barton placed heavy emphasis on the struggle between these two characters. The Other Place, the RSC’s intimate black-box theatre, provided a snug setting for the play, of which Barton took full advantage: “Portia started ‘the quality of mercy’ seated at the edge; then, warming to her task, she moved to the center to dispute with Shylock; he brought the debate back to judicial relevance with an insistent ‘I crave the law’” (Warren 204-05). Patrick Stewart, in an essay for *Players of Shakespeare*, explains his interpretation of the trial scene: “Portia is stubborn and Shylock, not really understanding her, and thinking himself back in the market place, tries to bargain with her. He will settle for his principal” (27). Stewart’s understanding of the role, while unusual (and somewhat reductive), did not seem to give Bland much to work with, and Ned Chaillet comments that Portia was stronger in the Belmont scenes than in the trial: “Marjorie Bland, who is fine and fetching as a girl, does nothing to effect her transformation into a male magistrate. In the pleasant balance of rowdy and gentle comedy, that does not matter, and the courtroom scene

becomes less important than in other productions, but it is the only place where something is missing” (“Shylock”).

In 1981, Barton took his production to London with a new Portia, Sinead Cusack, and a new Shylock, David Suchet. Critic Roger Warren thought Cusack commanded the audience’s attention “throughout,” and, after praising her performance in great detail, declared: “With such a Portia, Mr. Barton was able to emphasize more clearly than before how Portia encourages Shylock to redeem himself and show mercy”(141). Warren suggests that in Cusack’s performance, the goal of Portia’s mercy speech is the redemption of Shylock as well as the salvation of Antonio. Perhaps because Suchet’s performance did not receive the accolades that awarded Stewart’s, Cusack’s interpretation enjoyed more critical attention from leading critic and author Irving Wardle, who lauded her for staying in character during the mercy speech but betrays a hint of misogyny in his assessment of her early scenes: “She first appears on a leaf-strewn bench in Belmont, glumly contemplating the caskets and laughing at her suitors to keep herself from crying. There is no trace of the bitch or the boss lady.” Cusack, like Stewart, wrote an essay for the *Players of Shakespeare* series, in which she outlines her approach to the casket scenes:

Taking her predicament seriously, I decided to play Portia’s words, ‘my little body is weary of this great world,’ not in the bored voice of a child who has too much of everything, but as a cry of anguish from one who finds the whole business of the caskets very painful. But I did not feel that Portia submits merely from filial obedience. There is something in her nature that is attracted by the idea of ‘a test.’ Marriage is not to be

embarked on easily and thoughtlessly, and that, I thought, is why Bassanio's betrayal of her later in the play will cause her such distress.

(Cusack 342)

At the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, Elizabeth Millbank embodied Portia for a 1987 production directed by Ian Wooldridge. John Clifford, writing for *Plays and Players*, declares that "Millbank's Portia was outstanding, throwing herself with verve into the legal masquerade," while Robert Scott notes Portia's "commanding presence" and identifies her as the fulcrum of the production, although his expectations seem to be rather low: "Dressed in white against the men's heavy black coats, Elizabeth Millbank lights up the stage most attractively, falls in love quite convincingly, makes extremely good sense of about half her lines and generally contrives to turn the whole play into a romantic comedy."

If Cusack presented an unusually engaging and charismatic Portia, Lois Harvey depicted a decidedly unsympathetic Portia in Tim Luscombe's Venetian double header (teaming *Merchant* with *Volpone*) for the English Shakespeare Company at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London in 1990. Luscombe set the play in the 1930s, a choice echoed in 1996 by Marti Maraden and in 1999 by Trevor Nunn. I asked Luscombe why he chose this time period:

It made the play do-able for me because I had to find a way to make the Christians the baddies in order to play Shylock as the hero. How else, post Holocaust, could you do it? And while I've been flattered that some terrific directors including Trev [Nunn] have stolen my idea, I also acknowledge

it is inevitable, as it is, in my opinion, the only way to solve the problem of this problem play, save setting it in 1595 or whenever it was written.¹⁷

Many critics, however, while embracing Luscombe's setting, remained unconvinced by Lois Harvey's Portia; Murray Biggs gives some vivid details on what he maintains was an unappealing depiction: "Our dominant visual impression of her is of the trim blonde, both Jean Harlow and *femme fatale*, bored, heartless, vacuous, and vain, meandering with long cigarette-holder among the miscellaneous detritus of German Expressionism, Cabaret, Fassbinder, and, as the director himself has acknowledged, *film noir*" (Biggs 12). According to Peter Smith, in the courtroom scene, "Portia became too obviously a center of focus. She got laughs as she attempted a manly gait around the table and, as Bassanio interjected and addressed her directly, she hid coyly behind her hand and pretended to scratch her face" (Smith 79). Luscombe disagrees with Smith's remarks, however, and delineates his and Harvey's approach to the role: "We played her for style and aloofness with a hidden heart, i.e. 1930s suppressed emotion, given that she was as much a prisoner of her circumstances as Shylock, and a victim of men's choices, at least on the surface."

Merchant came to the RSC again in 1993; Pennie Downie's Portia "was characterized by a recognizably modern feminist intelligence which was able to speak with authority and confidence in a world hitherto ruled by men. The play became, in this production, as much Portia's discovery of her own potential to direct affairs (signified by the briefcase and business dress of her arrival home), as it remained a modern Jew's tragedy" (Gay 448). Director David Thacker's "vision of Venice was of a generalized

¹⁷ Comments from Tim Luscombe in e-mail correspondence with the author.

racism: when a black yuppie spoke feelingly to Solanio and Salerio, in the bar where they had gone with a couple of secretaries, of Antonio—‘A kinder gentleman treads not the earth’ was transferred to him—he was very pointedly ignored. It was a pity then that he had not allowed the resonance of the same emotion in Belmont, for Portia was neatly sanitized by the cutting of her objectionable final comment on Morocco. Thacker’s attentions were hardly directed at the Belmont scenes and that side of the play seemed dull by comparison with the events in Venice” (Holland 199).

Kathryn Pogson dominated the play when Richard Olivier—son of the revered actor Laurence—staged *Merchant* at the newly opened Globe Theatre in London in 1998. Olivier’s production emphasized comedy and physicality. The play opened with “a street scene of a *commedia dell’arte* troupe in beautiful masks, the Arlecchino strutting and tumbling, mocking his masters, the Pantaloon and the pedantic Dottore-lawyer. The Arlecchino’s energy and irreverence were then picked up by the play’s *bona fide* servant, Launcelot Gobbo” (Nichols 20). Olivier stressed the romantic plot and played down Shylock’s role. John Mahon notes the attention to the comic plot, and thus to Portia, as well: “Asked how his father might have influenced his concept of the play, . . . Olivier responded that Sir Laurence influenced him to the extent that he wanted to avoid a star like his father or Dustin Hoffman in the Shylock role—that immediately emphasized the character. Modern productions tend to ‘over-weight’ the Shylock” (Mahon 29, 43). Olivier’s refusal to draw excessive attention to Shylock likely placed more emphasis on his Portia, Kathryn Pogson. Lois Potter, a leading performance critic, weighs in on the subject: “Unlike most Shylocks, this one did not seem terminally ill when he left the courtroom, and it was possible to feel that the story was not yet over” (76). However,

Potter also remarks on Shylock's reaction to the mercy speech: "What [Shylock] had in common with . . . Portia was a respect for argument. [Norbert] Kentrup, after Portia's 'Then *must* the Jew be merciful,' asked, 'On what compulsion *must* I?' like a teacher politely pointing out a pupil's failure in logic; nevertheless, he listened to, and seemed moved by, the famous speech with which she answered him" (Potter 76).

In one of the most noteworthy productions of our time, in part because it was memorialized on film, Trevor Nunn directed *The Merchant of Venice* for the RSC in 1999, casting Irish actress Derbhle Crotty as Portia and Henry Goodman as Shylock. Like Tim Luscombe before him, "Nunn set his production between the two world wars and a climate of anti-Semitism." The set design employed a traverse stage, with Shylock's house and Belmont on either ends (White 301). Goodman's performance received universal raves, which slightly overshadowed Crotty, but most critics praised both performers: ". . . this superb Shylock has to overcome such trembling revulsion that you wonder whether Derbhle Crotty's captivating Portia needs to intervene to forestall his second knife-wielding attempt" (Paul Taylor). The trial scene dominated especially, as Susan Fischer points out: "It would be difficult to imagine a trial scene better conceived and more poignantly enacted than the one in this production" (Fischer 26). Nunn adapted the production for television in 2001; the "Screen" section below offers more detailed commentary on Crotty's intelligent and empathetic performance.

The original Portia for the 2007 production at the Globe in London, Michelle Duncan, unexpectedly left the cast, and Kristy Besterman, originally slated to play Nerissa, took over the role. The production emphasized the comic elements of the play, like its predecessor in 1998, although this production seems to have taken its lighthearted

approach too far: “as Portia catalogued her suitors for Nerissa, we saw four or five of them in quick succession—one thrusting his groin at her, one lasciviously gesturing with his outstretched tongue, one trying to grab her breasts and so forth. They tumbled one another offstage with arse kicks and other unfunny stage business” (Smith 191).

Although these weak attempts at comedy were unsuccessful, Peter Smith relates a moment of perhaps unintentional humor: “As Bassanio opened the correct casket, he hinged back the lid to reveal a Barbie doll wearing the same green dress as Portia; this generated the most disproportionate audience hysteria I have ever witnessed” (191). The set design included “a miniature, unadorned wooden Rialto Bridge, stage right, that led into the groundlings.” (Shurgot 77). The bridge became the locus of both Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, Portia’s return to Belmont and her observation, “So shines a good deed in a naughty world,” and also served as a convenient place for entrances and exits.

Georgina Rich had just starred on the West End in *Dirty Dancing* when she performed Portia for Tim Carroll’s production at the RSC. Carroll had directed many plays at the Globe and seems to have brought elements of the interactive experience to his 2008 production for the RSC: “When Portia delivered to Antonio the news about the safe arrival of three of his argosies, she plucked a paper from a gentleman seated in the first row and added: ‘You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter’ (5.1.278-79)” (Dessen 53). Carroll staged the casket scenes in an unusual way, which puzzled reviewer Michael Billington: “For reasons I do not fully fathom, Portia’s palace is dominated by stalactites, the caskets are represented by ice blocks, and disembodied hands make music with wine glasses.” However, Billington praises the

nuances of Rich's interpretation, commenting that she "suggests Portia is a sexually passionate heiress who can't wait to get her hands on Bassanio. She also implies in the final scene, by her studied evasion of physical contact, a deep disillusion with her new husband." Billington's remarks about Portia's sexual energy suggest a vital and spirited woman; perhaps Carroll was trying to portray her as a princess trying to break free from her icy confines.

GLOBAL PRODUCTIONS IN TRANSLATION

Merchant has sparked international interest and translated versions have been staged in countries as diverse as Israel, Hungary, Sweden, Brazil, Spain, and New Zealand. Since 1961,¹⁸ at least eleven professional productions have been presented in Italy, one of which actually took place on the streets of Venice. Germany, however, far supercedes that number, with an astounding one hundred productions, beginning with the great German director Max Reinhardt. A sample of these productions is discussed below.

Elsie Heims played Portia when Reinhardt first brought *Merchant* to the German Stage in 1905. The production employed "a new style of acting, based on a fast rhythm, and the critics almost universally complained about it, decrying its lack of realism and psychological plausibility" (Fischer-Lichte 174). In 1934, Reinhardt again produced *The Merchant of Venice*, this time for the first *Festival Internationzale del Teatro di Prosa* in Venice with Italian actors. He staged his production in a quiet square near the *Accademia* and "exploited to the full all the possibilities which this space, this very unique environment, had to offer." Reinhardt made use of bridges and houses, even having

¹⁸ According to the World Shakespeare Bibliography

Aragon make a grand entrance on a sailing barque floating gently down the canal (Fischer-Lichte 174). Unfortunately, in both presentations the critics focused on the spectacle, always an important element in a Reinhardt production, virtually ignoring Portia.

Much more central to the production, Gláucia Rodrigues presented Portia as a rich Brazilian aristocrat in a 1993 production in Brasilia that “gave the play three distinctive voices—the outsider, the clowns, and the carnival lovers—through which it established a three-tier cultural context, reflected in three different styles of acting and dialects,” which reviewers appear to have found effective. Edney Giovanazzi’s Shylock employed a formal, classical style, and his “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech was moved to the courtroom scene, spoken in response to Portia’s question, “Art thou contented, Jew,” while Morocco and Aragon used a Northern Brazilian dialect “characteristic to manual laborers and servants,” and Rodrigues’s Portia, as well as Nerissa and the other Italians, spoke in the “flippant, shallow, and formulaic acting style of the *telenovelas*.” Portia emanated arrogance and “upper-class assurance.” Moreover, the translator omitted Portia’s alleged racist line about Morocco; he was presented as ridiculous even as the production eliminated his racial differences (De Sousa 470-73).

Intimately familiar with the play after editing the Oxford Shakespeare edition and publishing “Portia: Shakespeare’s Matlock?” along with two other articles on *Merchant*, Jay Halio reviewed a production in Cyprus in 2005. Halio admits that he does not speak much Greek, but his thorough knowledge of the play enabled him to follow the action. He notes that the production “did not play up any homoerotic element,” and that the casket scenes were staged in an innovative manner: “The first two casket scenes were

transposed but not omitted,” featuring a pretentious Morocco and a flamenco-dancing, foppish Aragon “whom Portia (Stella Fyrogeni) mimicked behind his back.” Halio observes that the “audience loved this comic interlude.”(66).

In 1992, Luigi Squarzina staged the play in Rome at the *Teatro Nazionale*. In his *Note di Regia (Director’s Notes)*, Squarzina outlines his thoughts on the play, maintaining that *Merchant* is “a theatre of love: romantic and carnal, lawful and illicit, ‘normal’ and homoerotic, adding that in part it is a fairy tale and in part a concrete business story” (113-14; my translation). Although Squarzina also emphasizes the commercial nature of the play, from his remarks about the romantic, the carnal, and the homoerotic, I conclude that Portia and the romantic plot remained central to this production.

Laura Marinoni played Porzia seven years later when Stéphane Braunschweig presented the play at the chic *Teatro Piccolo* in Milan. Marinoni’s Porzia may have been overshadowed by directorial innovations, however; the play met with scathing criticism from Alistar Macaulay, who blamed the director for dominating his actors. The critic detailed the production’s depiction of Venice and Belmont: “[Braunschweig’s] Venice is modern-dress; his Belmont is period-dress [Therefore] Bassanio has to transform himself drastically into a Renaissance courtier to woo Portia (in Italian, Porzia). In the final scene, he is devastated to find that Porzia has taken the liberty of becoming a man, and a successful man, and in Venice. He, Bassanio, flounces out, slamming a door after him.” Braunschweig’s placing the two settings in different eras is an inventive and intriguing choice; Portia’s casket dilemma and her father’s attempts to control her work best in an earlier time period, whereas the bond plot, with its emphasis on religious

intolerance and marketplace transactions, fits well into a modern setting. However, logistically, the idea must have presented significant problems that were too difficult to overcome.

Within the gardens of the *Villa Borghese* in Rome sits the Silvano Toti Globe Theatre; in this theatre, in 2009, Loredana Scaramella not only directed the play but also enacted the role of Porzia, presenting an exciting possibility for Portia to occupy center stage. However, some critics judged this a lightweight production, surprisingly comic but lacking in complexity. (Bucci, Lo Gatto): “From Loredana Scaramella’s *Merchant of Venice* one can appreciate the rhythm, the fluency, and the choice not to take itself too seriously, but perhaps a dash of cruelty would not have broken the spell of lightness and comedy. It would have, in fact, if it is possible, emphasized the director’s ingenuity and knowledge” (Lo Gatto; my translation). An emphasis on the comic certainly marks many contemporary productions, especially the stagings at the London Globe, and perhaps Scaramella was following that tradition.

Ngarium Daniels starred as Portia when New Zealand joined the *Merchant* bandwagon in 2002 and produced a Maori film version, directed by Don Selwyn. The director fused two diverse cultures to create his Venice, “populated entirely by Maori actors, who live and dress like Renaissance Europeans” and spoke in the Maori language. Mark Houlahan describes the opening scene of the film: “the striking procession we see as, by moonlight, suitors travel to Portia’s Belmont. These suitors are the only non-Maori actors on screen. In Selwyn’s film Belmont is not a coastal estate, somewhere near Venice, but rather a romantic retreat in the New Zealand bush, which gleams in the moonlight” (143). The film premiered at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 2002,

winning the audience favorite award for Best Feature Film. Critics agreed with the spectators; *Variety* noted the film's "impressively novel approach," while Houllahan remarked upon "the daring quality of Selwyn's achievement" (147).

SHAKESPEARE'S *MERCHANT* AND MARLOWE'S *JEW*

Several times theatre companies have staged *The Merchant of Venice* together with *The Jew of Malta* in the misguided belief that the presence of a Jewish character in a prominent role makes the plays similar and thus apt for repertory production. However, while the Jewish merchant Barabas dominates Marlowe's play, Portia prevails in Shakespeare's comedy.¹⁹ The two works have been produced together four times, and an emphasis on the common denominators between the two plays tended to minimize the romantic plot

The two works were first staged together for Clifford Williams's 1965 productions. Janet Suzman played Portia but did not appear in *The Jew of Malta*, while Eric Porter performed the dual role of Barabas/Shylock. The star double billing accorded to Porter relegated the romantic plot of *Merchant* to the background, and the *Times's* critic denounced Suzman for her declamatory style, asserting that she captured "neither the Belmont fairy tale nor the Venetian drama."

In 1987 *Merchant*, directed by Bill Alexander, appeared on the main stage at Stratford, with Barry Kyle's *Jew* relegated to the Swan Theatre. Deborah Findlay's Portia did not please the critics. Irving Wardle declares: ". . . not since Joan Plowright's

¹⁹ These are the issues, as I see them, that affect the play in production. However, literary analysis reveals some other intriguing similarities. For a complete discussion of the parallels between these two plays, see chapter five of Robert Logan's excellent study *Shakespeare's Marlowe*.

governessy Chatelaine have I seen so unappealing a Portia as Deborah Findlay, a stately heiress in ringlets and copious silks”(“Revenge”). Findlay’s remarks in an essay for the *Players of Shakespeare* series gives us some insight into her interpretation. She rather reductively asserts that the most important thing about Portia is that “she is never mean” (56), even though she will stretch the rules if she has to: “Is the song a clue? I think it has to be. This is as far as Portia will go to help Bassanio while not cheating her father” (60).

Theatre for a New Audience’s dual production of *Merchant/Jew* in 2007 garnered much publicity. The company employed full repertorial casting; Kate Forbes played the dual roles of Portia and Bellamira, while F. Murray Abraham enacted Shylock and Barrabas. Irene Dash expresses her disillusionment while noting the lack of a comparable role for Portia in Marlowe’s play: “Kate Forbes, an accomplished actress who showed her skills as Portia, was hardly convincing as Bellamira the courtesan” (118). Although the dual production drew much attention, almost all the critics found the production of *Merchant* far more successful than that of *The Jew*.

The York Shakespeare Company presented the two plays at New York’s Jewish Community Center in December of 2009. Director Seth Duerr sought to recuperate both plays from charges of anti-Semitism and to refocus *Merchant* on Portia. In a message to the *Clyde Fitch Report*, Duerr emphasized that Shylock is not the main character; he explained the difficulties of audience expectations when he told me, “Most of my audience walked in with an opinion about Shylock before they sat down and I tried to refocus the play towards Portia to give a more accurate portrayal of what Shylock is actually doing on the page. It’s very hard to wake the audience up to something new and,

by new, all I mean is what's already on the page, but it's been distorted for two centuries.”

HOMOEROTIC PRODUCTIONS, HOMOPHOBIC CRITICS

The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio has aroused considerable controversy among literary commentators as well as theatrical reviewers and has been treated very differently in stage and screen productions. Although this performance history focuses on Portia, the liaison between her husband and his closest friend impacts her motivations and actions; the manner in which this friendship is interpreted on the stage thus becomes central to any study of Portia in performance. As I see it, there are three possibilities. (1) Bassanio and Antonio can share a reciprocal homoerotic relationship; (2) Antonio can have a same-sex crush on Bassanio, of which the latter remains unaware; or (3) Bassanio is aware of Antonio's feelings and chooses to exploit them for his own financial gain. This last option produces a very unsympathetic Bassanio, as in Trevor Nunn's filmed production. Of course, a fourth viable interpretation, which dominated the stage through the latter part of the twentieth century, precludes any same-sex desire between the two men, situating the relationship within the Neoplatonic tradition of male friendship, resulting in an Antonio who seems much like a doting uncle and a Bassanio who is free to pursue and love Portia without ambiguity. The productions discussed below represent some of the earliest attempts to portray a homoerotic relationship between the two men and are notable also for being vehemently repudiated by the critics.

In a 1973 production at Lincoln Center Rosemary Harris played Portia to Christopher Walken's Bassanio. Gary Williams's comments reflect a shocking level of homophobia: "Harley Granville-Barker once described *The Merchant of Venice* as a 'fairy tale'; his point had nothing to do with homosexuality. But Ellis Rabb, preferring his own talent to Shakespeare's, decided to make homosexuality the chief point of his chic production of the play" (10). Rabb completely refuted the idea of same-sex love between Antonio and Bassanio, calling it "morally repugnant" and not a "noble alternative of a world of avarice and indolence" (10). Williams continues his tirade in his description of a moment from the trial scene: "Bassanio throws himself passionately at Antonio's feet, clutching his thigh, saying, 'Life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life.' I thought she might assist Shylock with the surgery, but no" (11). Although Williams says little about Portia in his review, his comment about the surgery suggests that Portia's motivation for going to Venice is to win her husband back from his same-sex lover. Even though it largely ignores the homoerotic overtones of the production, Jack Kroll's description stresses the world of avarice and indolence noted by Williams: "in an idealized modern Venice beautifully designed by James Tilton—cocktail bars, beach chairs, bikinis, photographic projections—this Shylock moves through an atmosphere charged with languorous hedonism, decadence and voluptuous money lust." Like Williams, Kroll fails to treat Harris's Portia in detail.

1979 Michael Attenborough dramatized his interpretation of the play at the Young Vic, and Ned Chaillet seems mildly alarmed: "the tight white trousers and affectionate camaraderie of the young men was read more as gay abandon than Italian exuberance, however, and at times it seemed to slightly panic the performers who sought

masculinity through bolder movements” (“Shylock”). Although most of the reviewers focused on the homoerotic overtones of the production, G. M. Pearce provides some valuable detail on Kate Versey’s performance as Portia: “her sense of timing was good, and there was a breathtaking moment of suspense with Shylock standing, knife poised over Antonio, before her final pronouncement came, preventing the taking of the bond. She showed good comic timing also in her interplay with Nerissa and their respective partners in the pretence over the rings” (Pearce 99).

Reviewing a 1994 Israeli production, Calev Ben-David quotes John Gross: “the most effective way of making the play acceptable to post-Holocaust sensibilities, in the view of many directors, is to underscore the prejudices of the Christian characters, and generally show them in an ugly light.” Ben-David continues: “This approach is taken to an extreme in the Cameri’s new *Merchant* This time, extrapolating on the very slight homosexual subtext in some of Antonio’s lines, he dresses the entire male population of Venice in pink-velvet bellbottoms and has them carry on like refugees from a gay Fire Island disco. The women fare little better: Portia is presented as a ball-busting dragon-lady and Jessica as a horny bimbo” (Ben-David 45). Ben-David’s remarks, while lacking decorum, may be uncomfortably accurate; another reviewer notes that the production also had dramatized Jessica being gang-raped by Gratiano and his friend, while Portia resembled a “Tel Aviv prostitute” (Bayer 486).

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Most directors seek to put their own individual stamp on a play, but some, as in the Israeli production noted above, go further than others in their efforts to distinguish

their work, often creating radical interpretations that can bear little resemblance to Shakespeare's plays. *Merchant* has inspired a number of such experimentations, from John Brougham's 1896 burlesque to Edward Hall's presentation set in the unforgiving environment of a men's prison. All-male or all-female casts, multiple doubling of roles, and alternative settings (even a swimming pool!) are just a few ways of shaking up *The Merchant*. Peter Sellars used various ethnicities to highlight racial tension in the U.S., while Peter Zadek sought to bring theatre to the masses with his in-your-face style.

In 1869, John Brougham served as producer, writer, director, and played Shylock in a burlesque he called *Much Ado about a Merchant of Venice*. Brougham included eleven songs, sung primarily by Shylock, Lorenzo, and Bassanio. He enhanced the Jessica/Lorenzo episode while minimizing the Belmont plot and included local references to Wall Street and hot shot Philadelphia lawyers like the one that Portia (Mrs. J.J. Prior) would impersonate. Furthermore, the show relied heavily on puns for its humor; Portia borrows a *law*-suit for the trial scene, and comforts Bassanio with offers of money: "My *purse* belongs to you / With that you can *sue* him, and *pursue* him too." Mercifully, there was no singing in the trial scene. On the page, at least, this adaptation seems to have been rather humorous, though certainly not Shakespeare; Portia's role, although cut drastically, maintains a flair both comic and topical:

The quality of mercy is so strained
In this, our day, and all our prisons drained
By legislative pardons, that our city
Will need, I fear, a Vigilance Committee
To stem the current of outrageous crime

That leaves blood marks on the banks of time

The Chief Justice eventually pardons Shylock, and, in the last moments of the play, Lorenzo surprises his father-in-law with some unexpected news: “I’ll tell you a secret—I’ve turned Jew!” (Brougham).

In 1972 in Berlin, Peter Zadek sought to return the Bard to his popular roots and intended to scandalize the *Abonnenten*, the “ageing, middlebrow season-ticket holders whose tastes he felt hamstrung the repertoire” (Rorrison and Billington); to this end he “invited audiences to vocalize their feelings and emotions while watching a production Zadek’s *Volkstheatre* called for a new audience, an invitation to the other 90 percent who do not attend the theatre” (Kennedy 95). The production met with mixed reviews; unfortunately, “Rosel Zech’s Portia was not highly appreciated, seeming rather forced . . . and even compared to Marlene Dietrich on the warpath in an American Western” (Langdon Brown 442).

Peter Sellars set his 1994 Chicago production in Venice, California, employing a multiethnic cast. He also made “elaborate use of audio-visual technology,” suppressing what Sellars at the time called “the comic gift-wrapping of the play” (M. Shapiro, *SB* 32). Then-unknown Philip Seymour Hoffman played Launcelot Gobbo, while—coincidentally—an actor named Portia Johnson portrayed Jessica. Unfortunately, according to one reviewer, Elaine Tse, who played Portia, “gave the production’s one crippling bad performance” (Loehlin 94). Michael Shapiro delineates Tse’s unusual interpretation of Portia: “Whereas Portias are usually the agents of comic wit and intrigue, Elaine Tse plays the role as victim. Her emotions run from petulance at her father’s lottery to fear of the wrong suitor making the right choice, briefly to love for

Bassanio, and to anger and then resignation over his tie to Antonio” (SB 32). Not having seen this production, I cannot comment on Tse’s performance; however, based on Shapiro’s remarks, it seems to resemble Lizzy Carter’s interpretation in the 2009 film version described below. Perhaps reception of Tse’s Portia got lost in all the hullabaloo surrounding Sellars’s version. The production invoked much controversy, and the local press focused on “the high percentage of walkouts in the midst of this four-hour staging” (Wolford 157). The multi-ethnic cast—Latinos as Venetians, African-Americans as Jews, and Asians at Belmont was formulated “to explore racial tensions in Southern California, with specific reference to the Rodney King verdict and subsequent L.A. uprising” (Wolford 157).

Several all-female productions recently appeared in Japan and California: In 1994 director Kaoru Edo presented *The Woman Merchant of Venice* in Tokyo; in 2001 a San Francisco company called Women’s Will staged *Merchant*, with Jubilith Moore playing the role of Portia; and in 2005, the Los Angeles Women’s Shakespeare Company mounted a production of the play, with Kara Goldman enacting Portia. Although all-female casting may appear rather odd, some critics found the substitution appropriate; as Madeleine Shaner maintains, “The natural emotional androgyny of several of Shakespeare’s characters is even enhanced by the substitution of women for men. It all seems very human and totally acceptable.”

Isabel Pollen portrayed both Portia and Solanio when Actors from the London Stage toured American colleges and universities with *Merchant* in 2005. The production used only five actors for the entire play: Christopher Staines played all three suitors, along with the role of the Duke, the jailer, and a couple of servants, and Tim Hardy

doubled as Shylock, Lorenzo, and Old Gobbo. Staines comments on the effects of multiple doubling: “The audiences watches five actors working through different formations relative to each other, morphing individually and together to adapt to the shifting shapes of the bigger organism that is the play itself” (54). Pollen’s doubling of Portia and the largely unsympathetic Solanio makes me wonder: did her Portia ameliorate her Solanio in the audience’s eyes, or did Solanio’s gossipy ways and poor treatment of Shylock tend to denigrate her Portia?

Kelsey Brookfield, a young black man, enacted a most unusual Portia in an unconventional setting for Propeller Theatre’s 2009 production. Edward Hall, son of acclaimed director and RSC founder Peter Hall, created the company to produce Shakespeare’s plays clearly and imaginatively. Hall set his *Merchant* in a prison, and Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica were presented as feminized men. Charles Isherwood comments on the effect of this unusual setting: “The slammer setting naturally brings a new perspective . . . the affection between the merchant of the title, Antonio, and the young Bassanio, often portrayed as latently homoerotic, is made blatantly so here Kelsey Brookfield as Portia and Chris Myles as her companion Nerissa are dressed in tatty drag—clunking heels, ragged fishnets, corsets that scarcely hide hairy chests—that make it impossible to take the characters seriously as women (or even as respectable cross-dressers)” (“Shylock”). Hall gave us a thoroughly unsympathetic and frightening Shylock, and as he delivered his “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, “Richard Clothier’s powerfully physical Shylock exoculated [sic] a terrified Salerio” (Mentz 677-79). Brookfield’s charming Portia had no idea how to save Antonio when he entered the courtroom, and like Terry and Hayes before him, came up with “not a jot of blood” on

the spot. Hall's all-male cast and his re-setting of the play produced an intriguing dynamic, which is further discussed in chapter five.

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival presents a wide array of artistic ventures over a three week period in August. The presentations are often experimental, even outlandish; in 2010, the Gems of Mazal group presented *The Merchant of Venice* in a swimming pool. Director Alexa Christopher-Daniels claims in the program notes that the setting produces “. . . a suffocating world with water to both free and inhibit.” For the trial scene, the director made Portia “a dominatrix, having her disguise herself in full bondage gear when she becomes the lawyer and then revealing her true self to Bassanio by removing the mask, chains and whip.” In keeping with the bondage theme, the production employed an “extra-large cock ring.” Ruth Thompson, who played Portia, explained how the production used this unusual piece of equipment.²⁰ Besides the practicality of using a large prop in the pool, it emphasized “Portia's sexual confidence as she gives it to Bassanio herself. I played Portia as someone who very much knows her own mind and self and would not have been scared to show a man what she wanted or to make a sexual joke.” All things considered, although this production may have coincided with the Fringe Festival's aim to “present shows for every taste,” its extreme nature hardly allows it to be taken seriously.

THE BIG SCREEN AND THE SMALL SCREEN

Although a filmed version of the play cannot capture the immediacy of a theatrical experience, it can provide a worthy adaptation of a successful stage production

²⁰ Both Alexa Christopher-Daniels's and Ruth Thompson's comments come from e-mail correspondence with the author.

that would otherwise be lost to modern viewers. In the case of Michael Radford’s film, the act of actually filming amidst the canals of Venice and the *Palazzo Ducale* lends authenticity and a strong sense of place. Versions produced by the BBC, as well as Douglas Morse’s 2009 film, have the advantage of employing the full-text, granting a boon to scholars.

The formidable Joan Plowright played Portia when Jonathan Miller adapted his 1970 stage production to the medium of television in 1973. The filmed version apparently differed little from that of the stage; in fact, Laurence Olivier’s “only concession made to his small screen performance was to install a smaller set of false teeth” (Olwen 207), and the costumes, hair, and makeup resemble the photographs of the Old Vic production. Plowright’s Portia clearly rules at Belmont. As Morocco pontificates in 2.7—which has been conflated with 2.1—she seems unconcerned, and as he leaves, a very elderly Aragon arrives. Portia and Nerissa look bored, as if they already know he will go for either silver or gold. Miller plays 3.2 for laughs, as two older women sing “Where is fancy bred” in an operatic fashion. Bassanio becomes so irritated that he seems not to notice that they stand right in front of the lead casket and keep glancing pointedly at it. Another humorous moment follows; by the time Bassanio has come to the end of his long discourse on ornament, Portia has left, changed her clothes, and returned. In the trial scene, Portia arrives, exuding confidence. She demands, “then must the Jew be merciful” as if it is a given, but Shylock answers nastily and angrily. Plowright delivers the mercy speech calmly as the camera moves in for a close-up. She condescends to Shylock, almost like a schoolmarm, and pronounces the “not a jot of blood” bit as if she knew about the clause all the time. Plowright points to the page, which has already been prepared, and declaims

the sentence against the “alien.” Shylock leaves and we can hear him moaning and crying offstage, but Portia is distressed at this turn of events, perhaps because she finally sees him as human.

Directed by Cedric Messina for the BBC’s “Play of the Month” series, the 1972 television presentation features Maggie Smith in the role of Portia. Unfortunately, production values are rather minimal, and the film retains the dreary look of the BBC’s Television Shakespeare series. Smith as Portia seems bored and sad in the Belmont scenes, betraying little emotion and zero exuberance. However, she has one small moment of humanity when she delivers the line, “Let all of his complexion choose me so,” becoming slightly embarrassed when she realizes one of her dark-skinned servant boys has heard the remark. In 3.4 Lorenzo finds Portia reading in her library, obviously preparing for the trial. She stacks Nerissa with books as they prepare to leave, and the two women—dressed as men—are then shown walking through the streets of Venice in an added scene. Smith becomes authoritative and a bit condescending in the trial scene, evoking her famous role as Miss Jean Brodie. Standing stiffly apart while delivering the mercy speech, she is completely calm as she states, “It must not be” but registers complete shock when she reads the bond: “nearest the merchant’s heart.” Smith plays the ring scene in a cloyingly sweet manner, although she smirks when Bassanio looks away, making the scene one big joke.

Another BBC series presented virtually full-text versions of all 37 plays from 1978 to 1985. Although the ambitious project provided a filmed version of even the most unpopular plays, many of the adaptations suffer from lackluster costumes and sets and uninspired interpretations. Its *Merchant of Venice*, directed by Jack Gold, gives us an

insipid Portia, portrayed by a miscast Gemma Jones. In fact, the only interesting moments in this production —perhaps ironically, considering the scope of this dissertation—occur when Warren Mitchell’s clownish Shylock appears on the screen. Jones and Susan Jameson (Nerissa) display a stiff boredom in act one, scene two, rendering the scene soporific in the extreme. Things improve little with the appearance of Morocco, and Portia remains in the background of the shot, looking mildly apprehensive. Marc Zuber’s light-skinned Morocco is not especially threatening, as he is often portrayed. However, his fairness renders Portia’s line “Let all of his complexion choose me so” harmless, and *complexion* here takes on its alternate meaning of humour or temperament. Jones’s Portia seems finally to wake up as she plans her escapade with Nerissa, displaying a playful quality that has thus far been lacking, but when she arrives in the courtroom, she is all business. Jones delivers the mercy speech to Shylock, didactically but not condescendingly. Warren Mitchell often gets very close to Portia, even looking over her shoulder at the bond, and their exchanges take on an intimate quality. Unfortunately, the camera does not focus on Jones as she intones, “Tarry a little,” but once the shot shifts to her face, she gives the impression that she had planned this trap all along. Jones then performs the ring scene with wide-eyed disbelief, elaborately offended that Bassanio would give the ring away, and the play, thankfully, ends.

In 2001 Trevor Nunn wanted to bring his well-received production to the small screen, but was well aware that adaptations would be necessary, as he related to James Rampton: “The trick is to make a completely new piece of work while preserving the essence of the old piece of work Theatre works as a live collective experience, and the power of the audience and the actors in the same room makes it the most potent

possible form of entertainment. But you can't capture that on celluloid; you can't make a real experience for someone watching a TV screen. That's why you have to provide something different for the television viewer." I did not have the opportunity to see Nunn's stage play, but the filmed version—especially the courtroom scene—is absolutely riveting, building an almost unbearable amount of tension in act four.

Act one, scene two, presents a privileged Portia, played by Derbhle Crotty, frustrated with the bonds of her father's will and surrounded by the accoutrements of 1930s luxury: martini, cigarette in a holder, Victrola. As Crotty speaks her lines "I would rather he should shrive me than wive me," Morocco—standing in the doorway—overhears, and she is mortified at her *faux pas*. However, Crotty's Portia soon becomes genuinely enthralled by Morocco and sincerely delivers the line, "In terms of choice I am not solely led . . ." Wisely, after this display of sexual attraction, Nunn cuts "Let all of his complexion choose me so." Nunn's Bassanio (Alexander Hanson) is perhaps the least sympathetic I have seen. He appears to be about 40; he and his friends are self-indulgent, almost hedonistic, and he takes full advantage of what appears to be Antonio's crush on him. However, the smitten Portia suspects nothing when she promises twelve times the 3,000 ducats needed to deface the bond. Crotty shines in the trial scene, as does the entire cast. Her disguise—three-piece suit, short wig, wire-rimmed glasses—is very convincing, lending authority and gravitas to her courtroom presence. Crotty delivers the mercy speech as a real effort to convince Shylock; she grabs a chair near the beginning of the speech, sitting eye to eye with her antagonist. Henry Goodman—a tragically sympathetic Shylock—seems torn, struggling with his conscience, and she cannot believe that he is not convinced. However, Portia does not give up, even begging, "Shylock, there's thrice

thy money offered thee.” Crotty and Goodman enact an epic struggle, both remaining sympathetic and anguished throughout the scene. As Shylock prepares to cut the pound of flesh, both he and Portia pray silently; she thinks of the solution at the last minute and also thinks of “nothing but the penalty” on the spot. Later, after totally destroying Shylock, she seems genuinely regretful, rendering her even more sympathetic. Also, she seems both astonished and aggrieved when Bassanio sends Balthazar the ring. After such an intense trial scene, an overtly comic ring scene would be quite out of place. Thus, Nunn brings a level of seriousness to act five unusual in performances of the play; Bassanio seems to forgive Portia for her supposed unfaithfulness, and at this moment the newlyweds have a poignant moment of mutual forgiveness.

Lynn Collins performs the role of Portia in Michael Radford’s 2004 film version, which stuns with its visual beauty. The Venice episodes—actually filmed in the *Serenissima*—are cast in a pale blue, somber tint, while sunny golden tones warm the Belmont scenes. However, the film heavy-handedly attempts to ameliorate Shylock while denigrating the Christians. Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) and Antonio (Jeremy Irons) have a blatantly homoerotic relationship, making the former’s pursuit of Portia nothing more than a money-making ploy. Radford accentuates the degeneracy of Venetian society by including topless prostitutes in almost all of the shots with the Christians, with Salerio and Solanio presented frequenting a brothel. Shylock, however, receives better treatment from his director, who cuts his unsympathetic “I hate him for he is a Christian” speech, along with the line, “my daughter, my ducats.” Virtually all of Shylock’s other lines remain intact, making his role proportionally larger than the other characters, since Radford omits many of Portia’s and Bassanio’s speeches. Lynn Collins presents a

beautiful and intelligent, but conniving and manipulative, Portia. In the casket scenes, she clearly knows from the start which casket contains her “counterfeit,” allowing herself a small smile of triumph when Aragon chooses silver. However, she delivers the “You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand” speech with heartfelt sincerity, leaving Joseph Fiennes’s Bassanio “bereft of all words” and giving him his first sympathetic moment. Radford adds a short scene for Portia; we see her poring over books with her cousin, saying, “Is it not so, Cousin Bellario?” The interjection emphasizes both her intelligence and her cunning, making it obvious that she knows about the obscure law even before she enters the courtroom. In fact, she clearly sets a trap for Shylock when she asks if he has a surgeon standing by to staunch the flow of blood and declaims her famous mercy speech without even addressing Shylock. Later, in act five, Portia and Nerissa revel in their taunting of their husbands; they chew sensually on chocolates and even share a kiss on the lips before revealing their charade, echoing the same-sex desire that Bassanio and Antonio display.

The opening image of Douglas Morse’s film presents Portia on a balcony as the play opens, clarifying the director’s vision from the outset. *The Merchant of Venice: A New Perspective* is actually a filmed version of Morse’s stage production at Cambridge in the U.K. Morse used student actors whose skills vary. Happily, Lizzy Carter’s talent impresses, giving us a Portia quite unlike any other I have seen: desperate over the terms of her father’s will and deeply in love with Bassanio. This production completely rejects the homoerotic reading; Bassanio’s infatuation with Portia thoroughly charms Antonio. Carter and Ed Martineau (Bassanio) are both quite young, which works very well. Unfortunately, however, the actors playing Antonio and Shylock are just as young and

have not been aged significantly with hair and makeup. In the Belmont scenes, Portia displays anger and exasperation with the restrictions of her father's will. While Morocco is not threateningly virile or martial, as he is so often played, he is ridiculous, and Portia suffers visible anguish waiting for him to choose a casket. Morse focuses a close-up on her distressed face and trembling jaw; she shows restrained relief when he chooses incorrectly and is emotionally exhausted as the scene ends. However, Carter has a different look in her eyes as 3.2. opens, and she and Bassanio achieve a nice rhythm in their dialogue, flirting and displaying clear interest in each other. Because the film employs the full text, Bassanio's long set-speech on ornament gives the two plenty of time for "fair speechless messages." In 3.4, Portia wears a black veil that covers her hair, seemingly like a widow in her husband's absence. However, she rips it off when she tells Nerissa of her plan, revealing newly shorn hair, thereby endowing the scene with a lighthearted air. In the trial scene, Portia is reasonable and expects Shylock to be reasonable too. She delivers the mercy speech matter-of-factly, to Shylock, and her tone in "bid me tear the bond" seems to be saying, "come on, you've made your point. Let's go home now." After the Duke and his train leave, Portia clearly looks forward to dropping the charade, but Bassanio does not recognize his wife, surprising and disappointing her, and she maintains her disguise. At the return to Belmont, Morse plays the ring scene for laughs, with a fair amount of physicality, and the film's final shot focuses on Portia and Bassanio as the lights dim. Although I, personally, endorse the homoerotic reading, I must concede that Morse's interpretation gives us a Bassanio who is actually likeable and establishes a credible romance between him and Portia. As the play ends, I actually believe that we are looking at a happy couple in love.

PRÉCIS

The rich and varied history of Portia's depictions proves that she need not be overshadowed by anyone. Originally played by a boy who might also be capable of enacting Rosalind and Beatrice, the role was clearly not intended for an actor in a minor supporting role. Although the actor-manager system that took precedence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and still exists in some companies today) highlighted Shylock while mercilessly cutting Portia's scenes, Sarah Siddons managed to create a memorable moment by sincerely directing the mercy speech directly to Shylock, while Ellen Terry's innovation was to invent the "no jot of blood" defense on the spot, a choice that would be echoed by many others, including Helen Hayes. Some actors, on the other hand, make it clear that their Portia knows about the escape clause from the outset and is setting a trap for Shylock. Joan Plowright took this approach, as did Lynn Collins. However, Geraldine James presented a Portia who, although she had prepared her defense, truly sought to convince Shylock to be merciful in order to save the Jew as well as the Merchant.

After World War Two, directors focused heavily on Shylock, hoping to portray him sympathetically and reject charges of anti-Semitism. Many productions seem to have minimized Portia's importance, and in those pre-feminist days, critics seemed to expect only that she be pretty, charming, and able to enunciate, as the consensus on Dorothy Tutin and others confirms. Eventually, however, critics began to take note of Portia's intelligence and empowerment, and Sigourney Weaver's cinematic image affirmed that interpretation. Another feminist issue concerns the unfairness of her father's will. Sinéad Cusack and Lizzy Carter both agonized over the limitations that the casket contest placed

on them and their choice of husband, while Jacqueline Brookes and Kelly McGillis seemed completely in charge of the situation, manipulating the ordeal so that Bassanio would select the correct casket.

Portia, although usually played by a young woman, has also been depicted by older actors, with varying degrees of success. Katherine Hepburn, at the time of her portrayal perhaps the most famous of the actors to play the role, depicted a lackluster Portia whose stylized manner remained out of sync with the production's Shylock. Moreover, at fifty years of age, she may have been too old to play the part effectively, although many older actresses have enjoyed success in the role. Joan Plowright, at the age of forty-four, depicted, not a green girl, but a mature woman, fully in charge of her domain, and Ellen Terry, who first played Portia at the age of twenty eight, reprised the role many times throughout her career, including an enthusiastically received performance at the Old Vic when she was seventy!²¹

Casting issues are not limited to age; physical characteristics like height and body type determine whether a woman can convincingly appear as a man. Edward Hall overcame this obstacle by using a man who clearly is male even when "cross-dressed." On the other hand, a woman of ample curves or short stature may look foolish in lawyerly garb, depending on costume design. For me, this is one important reason that Derbhle Crotty was so successful as Portia. A female actor playing Rosalind can pull her hair into a pony tail, smack a cap on her head, and be completely believable as Ganymede; her feminine appearance is part of the fun. However, the courtroom scene in

²¹ Such was the fervor for Terry's performance that at the curtain call, the theatre manager presented her not with flowers, but with a basket of six eggs and a pound of butter, a valuable gift considering the wartime rationing in effect at the time.

Merchant works best when Portia embodies a figure more masculine than androgynous. Tall and slender, Crotty appeared in a three piece suit, certainly with some sort of binding under the vest; this costume, combined with her makeup-less face, short wig, and manly gait, lent an authenticity to her Balthazar. This masculine persona contrasted sharply with the glamorous figure she embodied in Belmont. Because Crotty presents a believable “young doctor,” there is nothing comedic about her appearance in the court, and her one-on-one discussion with Shylock projects the empathy that is the hallmark of her Portia.

Crotty, unlike many Portias, received her fair share of critical attention, as did the star turns of Ethel Barrymore, Helen Hayes, Sigourney Weaver, and Katherine Hepburn. These are the exceptions, however, not the rule; critics and audiences almost always center their attention on Shylock. However, a recent trend has appeared that endorses Portia as the protagonist of the play. Not only do directors like Ralph Allen Cohen, Edward Hall, Seth Duerr, and Douglas Morse espouse this view, but even sophisticated New York audiences and critics lauded Lily Rabe’s Portia more than the performance of a box-office draw like Al Pacino. Rabe received universal raves; perhaps the tide is turning and Portia’s moment to “shine forth all her divine self” has come.

Chapter Three

Seana McKenna

In Shakespeare the prize goes to the one who articulates best. (S. McKenna)

A luminary of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario and a mainstay of Canadian theatre, Seana McKenna has interpreted a broad sample of the Shakespeare canon, from Helena in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1982) to Paulina in *A Winter's Tale* (2010); in 1989 she played Portia for the Festival's production of *Merchant of Venice*. Michael Langham, who had served as artistic director of the Festival from 1956-1967, returned to Stratford to direct, while English actor and RADA alumnus Brian Bedford enacted Shylock. The cast also featured Geraint Wyn Davies as Bassanio and Nicholas Pennell as Antonio.

Media coverage that centered on the play's alleged anti-Semitism preceded the production's opening; when the Festival released its season's lineup, the Canadian Jewish Congress requested that the organization host seminars about the characterization of Shylock and the widespread anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's time for student audiences. According to reviewer John Bemrose, the Stratford organization "feared a repetition of a 1984 incident in which some children who were part of a school audience at the same play threw pennies at a group of Jewish students." Langham made several textual cuts, most notably Antonio's line, ". . . that for this favor, / he currently become a Christian" (4.1.384-85), an excision that critics assumed was a move to avoid any *contretemps* but the director maintains was an artistic choice; he wanted to highlight the romantic and

comic elements. Critic Edward Hayman noticed the emphasis: “the chemistry between McKenna and Wyn Davies is rich, as are all the bonds between characters who are supposed to have feelings for each other. This is a hallmark of Langham’s subtle yet lusty, clear-eyed approach to Shakespeare.” Seana McKenna herself says that it was easy to fall in love with Wyn Davies’s “charming and lovely” Bassanio.

I caught up with Seana McKenna in May of 2009 while she was starring in *Doubt* for the Canadian Stage Company. She graciously invited me to her *pied-a-terre* in Toronto for a cup of coffee to discuss a performance that took place twenty years earlier. Articulate and forthright, McKenna clearly does her homework before she assumes a role; her observations are insightful and intriguing, often refreshingly different from those of literary scholars. When she took on the role of Portia in 1989, she was already very familiar with the play, having portrayed Jessica in a 1984 production led by Mark Lemos:

. . . but in the production with Michael Langham, he was very positive about Portia, which is why I was glad to be playing Portia in his production; she was irrepressible in her wit, irrepressible in her desire to help, irrepressible in her joy. However, she was a young girl who had lived in a protective world in Belmont. Her world is not an evil world; if there’s anything wrong, it’s a naughty world, so she has a young woman’s or young girl’s sense of the world. She hasn’t experienced true evil. She’s experienced greed through the death of her father, but she has been sheltered from those masculine hatreds and need for money.

As we have seen, literary critics have commented on Portia’s munificence; Anna Jameson notes her generosity of spirit while Anne Barton declares that she delights in

giving gifts and is “characteristically generous.” McKenna discussed Portia’s attitude toward money:

“Oh, if that’s all it is, we can fix that. No problem.” That’s the last time she’ll probably think of money that way because there is a journey for her. She’s always learning. I remember Michael talking about her delight in words, her delight in communion with people and her being an enabler. “Let me help you” is her spirit. All of these qualities are important, as well as her spontaneity and her effortlessness in speech.

I observed that Portia is very quick witted, and McKenna agreed: “All these qualities lend themselves to the court scene. They allow her to impersonate this young lawyer even without whatever she’s gotten from Bellario.”

Judi Dench said famously that she hates *Merchant* because all the people treat each other so horribly. Dench has a valid point; people do treat each other badly and say awful things to one another, but McKenna believes that the 1989 production dealt with this problem effectively: “Yes. It is hateful, which is why, I suppose, Michael wanted Portia to be an antidote to that, a figure of love and kindness, although she’s not too kind about the suitors who come.” On the other hand, perhaps Portia’s distaste is excusable, as McKenna points out: “. . . but tempering that is she’s a young girl who goes, ‘Blahhhh!’ like a kid. ‘Oh, he was gross. I hate him.’” In keeping with the youthful freshness of this approach, McKenna remarked on Portia’s effervescence:

The fun was never far from her personality. Even when she was thinking, it was not intellectually frowning as much as grasping thoughts from the air, so there was a lightness to her, and her joy was boundless when she

meets Bassanio. [Langham] staged that scene in such a way that “I pray you tarry” was a kind of re-creation of the first time they saw each other. They entered from opposite sides of the stage and then did a circle. He was about to do the casket thing, and she says, “I pray you tarry—wait a minute,” wanting to stop time, to elongate time with this man because, once he chose, if he chose the wrong one, she’d never see him again, and she really wanted him to stretch out the moment that she could be with him.

I mentioned that the Victorian critics really loved Portia, which did not surprise McKenna, and referred specifically to E.K. Chambers’s remarks about her “sunny wit” and “sunny temper.” This exchange evolved into one about costuming in the 1989 production and how it can inform characterization: She recalled that in the first scene she wore a “vibrant orangey-gold color, overlaid with black, like a butterfly coming out of the cocoon.” I asked if the black was meant to signify mourning, and she replied, “Yes. They took the black away. That was the idea. And then the final dress was a sumptuous yellow.” Some critics see her as the bringer of light in the last scene, so I imagine that yellow would have worked quite well. McKenna concurred:

Yes. And there was a lot of moonlight in that night scene. I think it was yellow; that was her traveling dress. That whole scene was to restore the comedy. It’s very hard to make that comic but Langham’s intent was to serve the playwright and, well, he cut a lot. He edited the more horrific things that come out of her mouth to our ears, like, “I’d rather marry anybody but someone of color.” That was gone.

The reason many critics, at least nineteenth century critics, admire Portia is that she embodies the perfect wife. Linda Rosmovits' research demonstrates that many young women in the Victorian period found Portia praiseworthy because of the "You see me as I am" speech. McKenna shared this view:

Oh, yes. "You see me, Lord Bassanio, standing here before you..." You know what's interesting about that speech? Everybody loves that because it's a speech at the moment of love that you see it. It's the moment when he's got the girl; she wants him to get the prize, and they want to be together. So it's this great moment of joy—immediate joy—and we see it. It's the same speech as *Taming of the Shrew*. Also, there is the understanding that it's give-and-take. She has that sort of non-thinking generous spirit that says, "I want to give you everything I have because you're the whole focus of my world." Of course, that's going to temper down the road as we see in Shakespeare's married couples.

McKenna may have oversimplified here; many modern female critics do not like this speech at all, and indeed, it constitutes a major crux in the play. However, McKenna seemed unaware of the controversy, observing, "Shakespeare gives [Portia] many wonderful lines; a lot of men in the audience would think, 'Oh, if only my wife would say that to me'; Portia is loved by the men and admired by the women because she is strong-willed and intelligent and forthright."

While some critics noted that the production emphasized the comic in the casket scenes, another complained that they were "ethnically shaded." McKenna responded that "usually most of the suitors are played to be kind of ridiculous. Sometimes Morocco is

portrayed as the beautiful, imperious black man . . . which is probably what they were referring to, a questionable stereotype, but it is a stereotype, and comic characters usually are stereotypes.” One critic said Aragon seemed more “Castilian than Aragonese” (Sidnell 151). McKenna noted that Aragon spoke with a lisp, which may be what the reviewer was referring to; he also travelled with his mother. She suggested that this depiction of a “Mama’s boy,” although another stereotype, can be quite humorous in performance:

It’s funny to play it. And I don’t know if Peter [Donaldson as Aragon] did a Castilian accent. I have seen several productions that did. I think he did stress the humor quotient; . . . although, you know what? Actually, along with Morocco, there was a moment of mutual respect. It is a bit scary, but father never said you can’t marry a black man, an Arab, or whatever. You take whoever chooses the right quality, the right value, and is not seduced by gold or self-aggrandizement which is, “Who chooseth me will get as much as he deserves.” If one thinks he deserves a lot, he has an ego. And all those suitors are preparing her for the world she’s about to enter when she goes to Venice. These are introductions of the male persona into Belmont.

I asked McKenna whether she thinks Portia trusts her father: “Oh, I think she is frustrated by the tethers. I think she’s frustrated that she can’t choose her own as any young girl would be. Curfew? What do you mean, curfew? I don’t get to choose? What is that about?” I observed that these are themes we see throughout the comedies: arranged marriages, fathers dominating daughters, daughters chafing at the bonds. One way for

Portia to regain control is to hint to Bassanio that the lead casket is the correct one. When I asked about the casket episode, McKenna replied, “Well, she knows at the time Bassanio comes that the lead is the one. There are little hints in that song that he choose the lead casket. Michael heightened those a bit, but she, I think, becomes aware of her father’s wisdom only when the one she loves chooses correctly.”

The dynamic between Portia and Nerissa is an important aspect of the early Belmont scenes. Nerissa can be Portia’s servant or a good friend or a lady-in-waiting. Their affiliation forms the core of the feminine sphere of Belmont, and McKenna’s relationship with her Nerissa was very amicable: “Oh, I love my relationship with Nerissa. Actually, the woman who played Nerissa [Kim Horman] is one of my best friends, and she’s my age. She’s like an Emilia in the sense that she’s smart and sexually charged and ready for the game and, ‘I’m with you.’ Portia and Nerissa are one of these great female pairs that, together, could do anything.” So, I inquired, was she more of a friend or a lady-in-waiting? “She was a lady-in-waiting, but more like a maid of honor.” I mentioned a production that I had recently seen in which Nerissa was a bit older than Portia; to me, the two women displayed a sort of “Lucy and Ethel” dynamic:

I think that’s true. I don’t think that’s a bad thing; it is Lucy and Ethel. I think, again, they are like one of the great comic couples: In *The Comedy of Errors*, Adriana and Luciana had that bond, as did Celia and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Portia and Nerissa have this great relationship; they both get guys at the end. They enjoy each other’s company. They banter, their wit goes back and forth.

It would seem that the four of them—Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano—will live happily ever after in Belmont together, but Shakespeare never gives us a picture of wedded bliss; Sara Munson Deats has noted “the almost total absence of mutually fulfilling marriages in Shakespeare.” (1212). McKenna points out, “We don’t know what’s going to happen down the line; he could give away jewelry or get himself into more fixes. He came for the money, originally, as did Petruchio, but the problem is then he meets the person and it goes beyond that.” In performance, however, the credibility of Portia’s and Bassanio’s love for each other depends heavily on the interpretation and skill of the actors. As McKenna suggested, “It depends on if you want it to be a real comedy or not. In a comedy, you want to think that they are rightly suited, and they will have at least a fighting chance at a long and happy life together. That’s the true meaning of comedy, and there will be children and rejuvenation in the spring and renewal.”

As talk turned to the trial, we discussed again Portia’s “sunny” reputation, which McKenna found a bit reductive:

That word diminishes her in a way because it seems to say, “Oh, she’s just a happy girl,” but I think, there are optimists and there are pessimists and her true spirit of optimism allows her to venture forward as do most of Shakespeare’s heroines. They are rewarded for their faith and their optimism. In the comedies, they are rewarded; in the tragedies, they are not. Viola is rewarded; Cordelia is not. In the comedies, they are rewarded for their “rest reposed” spirit. “Let’s go and do this. Let’s put on the boys’ pants and venture into that world we know nothing about” and “I can give

as good as they can.” There is that spirit of adventure as well. It is released when they put on the britches; of course, when boys were playing them they were in their actual normal attire, so they could be totally free and very good impersonators of males.

McKenna pointed out the difficulties a woman on stage faces today: “The modern actor has a different challenge when she’s playing the britches part. We all start doing impersonations of boys, but one has to remember these boys were really in their boots, in their natural state.” I observed that Portia is, of course, different from the other cross-dressed heroines. In order for the trial scene to work, she has to be credible in her male disguise. I believe an audience can accept a feminine-looking Rosalind but not a Portia. Bryce Dallas Howard pulls her hair into a ponytail and sticks a cap on her head in Kenneth Branagh’s film *As You Like It*, and the audience can easily accept the pretense; it is part of the fun. Portia, however, is held to a different standard. McKenna agreed: “Yes. She’s entering a male bastion, and it’s a judicial bastion; she’s crossed over into the other world. She’s left the feminine world of Belmont and gone into this very masculine bastion in Venice, which is money, law, greed, revenge, all the disputes and the litigation of the Venetian world.”

One of the cruxes of the play, especially in performance, is Portia’s level of foreknowledge concerning the “no jot of blood clause.” If Portia is aware of the clause and deliberately sets a trap for Shylock, she becomes very unsympathetic indeed. The actor has two possible ways to ameliorate her character here. She can think up the solution on the spot, as Ellen Terry did, or she can enter the courtroom with full

awareness but still try to convince Shylock to back down. I asked McKenna if her Portia knew about the clause as she began the trial scene.

She knows she has an ace up her sleeve. Yes. I believe that. I believe she knows, but what's she trying to do, I think, is to convince Shylock to settle out of court. "Why don't you take this deal?" Because, in the back of her head, she thinks, "If you don't take this, I know what can happen to you." Once she talks about mercy, she is appealing to Shylock, but she is also appealing to every man in that room, which is all about the letter of the law. Once one becomes entangled and involved in the judicial process, there is no disentanglement. She talks about the intents and purpose of the law; if one follows the letter of the law and insists on the letter of the law, then one has to be prepared to face the consequences of the letter of the law. The intent of that law is clear; anybody who would sign a bond or allow this bond to exist is allowing murder because that's the intent. In a true, just society, the law and its intent have to go hand-in-hand because laws are written by human beings and there are oversights, loopholes, and ways of twisting words. There are ways of using words to one's benefit, but they can also destroy one. There is a double edged sword in words, and I think her speech about generosity and mercy has to linger in that room when they are making the final pronouncement on Shylock.

This last statement illustrates how the actor's approach can differ from the literary scholar's. The idea that the sounds of the mercy speech echo in the room comes from an attention to the spoken word, and unless the scene is read aloud, a reader might not notice

this subtlety. Also integral to performance is physical appearance, and I asked McKenna about her disguise. Was her Balthasar believable as a man? She responded yes, that “he” looked like “a funny little guy.” She elaborated: “ I mean, yes, an odd, strange little intellectual guy. I was covered up; I had a white wig with the curls, and I was bound, whereas Portia was lots of hair, lots of movement, lots of frills—very, very feminine. Ultra feminine. Fantastical feminine.” This seems to be an excellent design choice which I imagine worked quite well, emphasizing Portia’s femininity in the earlier scenes in order to create a sharp contrast with her male persona.

The cutting of Shylock’s forced conversion in Langham’s production garnered much publicity. McKenna gave me a behind-the-scenes look at the decision to eliminate Antonio’s infamous line:

Langham’s whole reasoning for that was, at that time that it was written, and in context, this conversion was a way to save his soul. He wanted to serve Shakespeare’s view, which was that this is a merciful sentence. Shylock was going to join the flock, but this was a beneficent action rather than a horrific one, but, of course, we see it differently now. Then Shakespeare was speaking to a homogenous audience, directly to their views and values. Thankfully the centuries have changed our attitude towards plays.

And, I would add, toward religion. Of course, some historians would go along with this reading, although others would vehemently oppose it.

Another important crux is the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. What is the nature of the relationship? Is Antonio in love with Bassanio; does Bassanio love him back, or is this a friendship that conforms to the neo-Platonic ideal?

Our Bassanio, Geraint Wyn Davies, was quite charming and lovely, and who—male or female—could help but be enamored by this boy? Of course, Antonio had a big crush on him. Antonio was played by the wonderful late Nicholas Pennel, who adored Bassanio and would do anything for him. In the end, Portia and Antonio have a little moment: “That’s right, Bassanio is passing over to me, but you are welcome in our home. We will include you.” It’s an inclusive household. “You are welcome,” she says. I think she means it. “You are his friend; you are my friend.” She’s seen the extent of that love in that courtroom, and that’s what I think has opened her eyes as well. There are depths and complexities there that she is going to learn about as she gets older and goes through a marriage.

Of course, if the Antonio/Bassanio relationship ventures past the neo-Platonic into the homoerotic, we wonder how Portia feels about that, and what (if anything) will she do about it? Many readers will interpret Antonio’s line, “And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love” as indicative of same-sex attraction, while others will see this declaration as one of close friendship; the word *love* would not have been interpreted in the sixteenth century as it is today. I asked McKenna her view on the subject: “That’s, I think, the one thing; . . . [long pause] . . . she knows. Now, it depends also how overtly it is depicted. If that relationship is played as an older

man/younger man, a homosexual relationship, even if it is played as Antonio being in love with Bassanio, who has used it to his advantage . . .” As McKenna trails off in thought, I asked her if she thinks Bassanio reciprocates Antonio’s love:

Yes, but I don’t think Portia believes that it was reciprocated sexually. I don’t even know if she thinks of that. She knows; I think she experiences twinges of jealousy that he could do all this for Antonio, but she also thinks, “If he can love that much, he would do the same for me.” If he is capable of that kind of care for another human being, this is a good thing. It also depends on how Bassanio is played. If he’s really a callow kind of shyster, then it’s harder. It depends on how the whole story is told.

McKenna talked about the fluidity of sexuality, both then and now: “And what does it matter, ultimately? Love is love. ‘He is with you now.’ I mean, I know people who are married to men who were gay before who’ve had homosexual relations before. I know men who are with other men now who were married to women before; love is love.”

Why does Portia go to Venice? Does she go, as critics like Lawrence Hyman assert, to regain her husband from Antonio’s clutches, or is she trying to protect her money, as Lars Engle maintains? These, of course, are the arguments of literary critics. In my experience, actors tend to be less cynical than many literary critics:

Well, yes, because they’re not playing it. Because they don’t need a reason or to find out an individual character’s motivation. If she wanted to protect her money—money is nothing to her. She is independently wealthy. Part of it is because she can’t bear to be away from him. Part of it is she’s got some connections. This Bellario guy, obviously, is an old family friend. I

don't think she can bear to miss anything. She wants to know what's up. And she is curious about this man. She's seen the effect this letter has had on her husband and thinks, "What's that about?" I think she's extremely curious. Bassanio's stricken pale.

I joked that Portia may simply want to get out of the house for a while, now that she's married, but McKenna attributed more noble intentions to her:

Sure, she's pure, but she thinks this is a horrible thing. He's going to die. Then she starts looking into it and Bellario—that's another thing. Did she find the loophole or did Bellario? We don't know, but it really does ultimately rest in the Duke's hands, right? She knows what's in store for Shylock. If he had gotten out earlier and taken the money, that would be fine.

McKenna paraphrases Portia's lines into modern parlance: "I'm trying to give you options here, pal. Listen to me carefully. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind? No? Okay."

Although this interview and this book have Portia as their central focus, I cannot ignore Shylock completely. There must be a balance to the play, and if one side leans too far it can destabilize the production. I asked McKenna if Shylock is portrayed as extremely sympathetic, does Portia become unsympathetic?

No. Yes, well, that's true. There is always a balance. I think Michael Langham was sympathetic to both; Brian (Bedford as Shylock) was very human; there were reasons why he wanted his vengeance. We all have to defend our characters to the best of our ability and let them hammer it out

themselves, and I think there was a balance to the way Brian and I played it. At times Brian was very likeable as Shylock. It doesn't mean we approve of what he does. As for Portia, certainly, the judgments come across as very harsh, but she had been trying to get him to change his mind earlier, to just end it. She's appealing to his sense of mercy, trying to get him to let go. The grace of forgiveness is seen throughout Shakespeare, not just for others, but for oneself, what it does for one to let go and forgive. Whether it's *The Tempest* or *The Winter's Tale*, actually letting go of rage and that feeling that one has to get back. Shylock can't retrieve his losses by buying an act of vengeance. His daughter's gone; his wife died a long time ago. There was also no feminine principle in his life, which is not "an eye for an eye." But for Shylock, it's about hurting as much as he's been hurt or more, and, ultimately, wanting to kill Antonio.

Many people find the act five ring scene to be discordant and insensitive after the intense trial scene. However, the 1989 production in Stratford eliminated Shylock's forced conversion, providing a segue into a light-hearted resolution that did not seem so out of place. C. E. McGee explained the scene's staging in *Shakespeare Quarterly*: "[Bassanio's] balanced clauses and Portia's rejoinder were both delivered as the four lovers moved diagonally across stage, weaving their ways among one another, the men in desperate pursuit of the women" (117). McKenna recalled the specifics of act five:

It certainly was buoyant and effervescent and fun; she was in total control, and he was chasing in a figure eight pattern. Also, the skirt made this whole sort of flurry effect, so then the quiet time came when she went

offstage. This scene is foreplay, as those last scenes before the end of a comedy are; it is an enticement. It's wild. "Oh! She's talking about bed," and "Oh! I slept with him." Part of it is wicked teasing because she knows she's going to take him back. She's not thinking, "here's the ring and we're going to get divorced."

These remarks spell out the production's lighthearted approach to the ring scene.

However, Portia's words to Bassanio upon bestowing the ring are "Which when you part from, lose, or give away, / Let it presage the ruin of your love / And be my vantage to exclaim on you." Nevertheless, McKenna maintained that "she never thinks he's actually going to be unfaithful. It's not that severe or a threat that this will be over because she thinks, 'How could he possibly be unfaithful to me?'" I wondered if Portia is truly hurt when Bassanio gives the ring away or is she just a bit disappointed? McKenna explained:

She is surprised. She thinks, "Oh, my goodness! I didn't think he would do that." That's cold. "Wow! We're going to be talking about this when he gets home." But it's not as if she doesn't love him because she knows that the letter of the law says: if you give this ring away or lose it, I will know you don't love me anymore. However, the intent is, if you are unfaithful to me because you've given this to a woman you love, I know you're unfaithful. There's a difference, again, between intent and the letter. He was not unfaithful. He gave that ring in gratitude for the deliverance of his friend. He's trying to say, "No. You don't understand. I gave it away because..." She said, "It doesn't matter; I said you made a vow." It's all about vows, promises, oaths, throughout the whole courtroom scene. This

is the actual wording of the oath. “What’s in the contract? Is it written down? Is it written down?” Well, if it’s not written down, I don’t have to do it. But that was not the intent. The letter of the law—this is how lawyers make their profession—words, words, words.

The 1989 production brought two great actors—Seana McKenna and Brian Bedford—together for what must have been an enjoyable performance. No video recording of the production exists, however; McKenna related that it was somehow damaged, but fortunately, her excellent memory provides some intriguing details. McKenna’s range continues to grow; in 2010 she graced the Stratford stage with performances of Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale* and the Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons*, and in the summer of 2011 she will really stretch herself by taking on the role of the Machiavellian Richard III.

Chapter Four

Marni Penning

Everybody understands a girl in a ball gown talking about how there are no guys anymore.(M. Penning)

Marni Penning, a veteran of American regional theatre, has performed in forty nine productions and twenty three of Shakespeare's plays. A founding member of the Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival, she won the Best Actress title from the Cincinnati Entertainment Awards for her portrayal of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and even played Hamlet there. She has performed with the American Shakespeare Theatre and the Woolly Mammoth Company in Washington, D.C., as well as the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, the Maryland Stage Company, the Georgia Shakespeare Festival, and the Folger Shakespeare Theatre. Her Shakespearean roles include Lady Macbeth, both Adriana and Luciana in *A Comedy of Errors*, Hermia, and Rosalind. She also works as a classical coach.

In 2009 Penning brought her talents to the Orlando Shakespeare's Margeson Theatre for its productions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing*.²² The Orlando group, headed by Artistic Director Jim Helsinger, ran the two shows in rotating repertory. I sat down with Penning at an Orlando restaurant a few days after seeing her perform the role of Portia.

²² See *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.4 (2009): 617-21 for my review of the *Much Ado* production

The Margeson Theatre has a semi-Elizabethan configuration, with a thrust stage and an upper balcony-like stage above it; although the stage is not raised above the “groundlings,” the audience in the first few rows remain very close to the actors. I asked Penning how this type of theatre affected her performance:

Because I’m an American Shakespeare Center person, I grew up as an actor in those types of theatres, knowing that those are the conditions for which Shakespeare was writing. Having people all around is actually more true to the original text. I love being surrounded by the audience and having people to go to and talk to, having eyes all around me in the casket scene. I thrive on that. Usually when I do something on a proscenium stage, I feel like the audience is so far away.

The proscenium arch creates the “fourth wall” that is also emphasized by the difference in lighting; the actors are lit, while the audience sits in the dark. Even though this production did not employ the universal lighting that many Elizabethan-style theatres do, the audience is visible to the actors onstage, and Penning explained, “They’re fairly close; even though they’re in the dark, I can still see them.” Moreover, the Margeson has two small platforms in the midst of the seats on house left and right, which gives the director some flexibility in staging. For *Merchant*, Portia and Nerissa performed their act five entrance lines on one of these mini-stages, which Penning enjoyed: “The audience also gets to be part of it when we’re in the upper above, coming home from Venice. It’s wonderful being in the middle of everybody. It feels like the Globe, parting the seas and coming down through the audience.”

Penning has performed for regional festivals both large and small throughout the United States. I asked Penning how the Orlando company compares to some of the others with which she has worked:

I really enjoy working here. We are devotees of text work, heavy text work. Eric Zivot, who was our text person, is also Jewish, and there was a rabbi involved. We took all the Jewish subject matter really seriously, wanting to make sure that we were building our characters true to the Jewish faith, because a lot of Jewish patrons come to the shows. So Eric went through everything line by line, and we discussed not only the meaning of the text but also the historical background and alternative readings for the different lines. I like chewing on all the little nuances— Jim [Helsing] is also such a fantastic actor in his own right, and he's a wonderful director. He doesn't make anyone do anything that he himself wouldn't feel comfortable doing. He has the effect that he wants in his mind, and how each actor gets there depends on her or his artistic process. As for Shakespearean theatre, I've loved working in Pennsylvania and in Baltimore and Cincinnati, but Orlando has been a unique experience because it's been a really long contract, three months here. The cast is just phenomenal, not a weak link in the entire bunch. So we've all gotten really close. I think that from the moment we stepped on the stage, we were so well prepared to go into the performance process that we just slipped on the costumes and fell into the rhythm. It was an amazing process. By the time we went up, we were ready.

I had noticed that the cast for this production, which contained a mix of Equity and non-Equity actors, all seemed to have an intelligent understanding of their lines, and asked Penning if this is part of the Orlando's process:

It wasn't optional; it was mandatory going in. We're seasoned veterans, a lot of us. Even then, there are some things that I learned about dual and triple meanings in my lines. I was fascinated to learn facts like that; it makes such a difference. I don't start a project until I know exactly what every single line I'm saying means. I do it with the kids I coach in New York, too. The first thing I have people do is to go through and put their lines into the modern vernacular so they know exactly what they're saying. Hopefully that comes through in everybody's performance.

I mentioned that so often the comedy of *Merchant* gets lost, and retaining a balance seems to be the most difficult challenge that a director faces. This production of *Merchant* was a very comedic version, and, of course, the play is a comedy. People get so absorbed in the Shylock plot and the pound of flesh plot that, often, they forget that the play is a comedy. I asked Penning for her views on this issue:

Well, the general play is about the comedy. Jim would say the same thing: there's a romantic plot, a comedy plot, and a tragedy plot. We wanted very much to keep those three plots, and for each to have their own full place in the play. The tragedy couldn't go fully tragic because it has the comedy to balance it out. The ring scene is so necessary because after what's been done to Shylock, the audience has to have this release or else they're going

to go home and gash their eyes out or something. So we have the ring plot, but then we have the epilogue afterwards.

This production added a coda to act five; after the ring scene and Gratiano's final line about "Nerissa's ring," Shylock returned to the stage for a dramatization of his baptism into the Christian church. Penning explained that the epilogue served to remind the audience that Venice is not a happy place: "people are mean to others because of their ethnicity or their religion; their life goes on, and they're completely oblivious to what they've done to other people. However, I think Portia, in particular, does have a lot of comedic moments. She starts off talking about big guys coming to woo her. Everybody understands a girl in a ball gown talking about how there are no guys anymore."

This characterization recalled Harley Granville-Barker's assertion that *The Merchant of Venice* is a fairy tale; Penning submitted that Portia is a "poor little rich girl" who has "all these guys coming after her and none of them are the one she wants. Especially Disney audiences around Orlando can get that. It's the princess in the tower, and she doesn't see Prince Charming coming to rescue her." I asked if the "Disney" interpretation intruded into the rehearsal process. Did anyone ever actually consciously say, "This is a Disney moment?"

No, not at all, but in Orlando, you can't help but think it. My hair right now is a little toned down from what it was initially. On opening night, we went with a deeper blond, but in the previews, the first day out of the week, it was "Barbie" blonde so we were joking about Barbie and Skipper and all the other "Barbie people." Ken comes to the castle, and it is very much like a Disney plot. There's a task that the prince has to come and

pass the test in order to win the fair maiden's hand in marriage. But after he gets there, that's not the end of the story. Happiness and joy are replaced with "Oh, my God, my best friend is going to die." Sweet little Portia turns out to have a really good brain, too, and she happens to be related to the foremost law doctor in Italy. It has also been in my head that Portia's father was obviously a lawyer so that she knows how to behave in the court.

This kind of invented back-story can help inform an actor's interpretation, a point on which Penning elaborated: "She [Portia] has this great ability as an orator, not just to talk but to tell people, essentially, 'There are things that are right and things that are wrong in the world, and here's what you should think about that.'"

Within the "fairy-tale" world of Belmont, Penning played the early scenes with humor and vivacity. However, when Portia first saw Morocco, she seemed quite frightened by this very masculine intrusion into her ultra-feminine world. Penning agreed and explained: "He's too much man for me. I'm complaining that none of these guys are man enough for me and here's this guy who's too much man." Once she recovered from the initial jolt of testosterone, however, Penning's Portia resumed her inscrutable expression. We might speculate on what she would say when she was alone with Nerissa, but she remained unreadable while Morocco and Aragon played out the casket scene. However, when Bassanio chose correctly, Portia rendered her speech of surrender and compliance with deep emotion: "You see me, Lord Bassanio, such as I am . . ." (3.2.149 ff.). I wondered if Penning thought Portia was only strategically pretending here, as

Kate's final speech is often played in *The Taming of the Shrew*, but Penning rejected this reading:

I think she really means it. Everyone before has been so wrong for her, and it is so heartbreaking. Bassanio is the one man she's been dreaming of. For God's sake, if he chooses the wrong casket, she could never see him again. It's pure panic: "I could teach you how to choose right." She knows that if she gives him any hint, the jig is up, and she forfeits the man she loves. She's just got to have full faith and know that if she does love him, she will find him. I think that the speech to him "You see me, Lord Bassanio . . ." is so much about, "This is me. You chose not by what I look like or by how much money I have, but you chose a lead casket knowing that what was inside was more valuable than what was on the outside." I think Armistead [Johnson, who plays Bassanio] is so adorable. He's just got goodness shining out through his eyes. Every time he looked at me, I thought, "I just adore you."

I commented on Penning's portrayal in the early moments of 3.2, in which she enacted the giddiness of a schoolgirl, and Penning clarified her motivation:

Yes. I think that she's just finally about to know him. Before, when Bassanio came in the company of the Marquis of Monferrat, in her father's time, they never got to speak to each other. All she knows is that he's a soldier and a scholar. Everybody talks very highly of him, but he's poor, and I think that she truly does come to love him. I think at the end of the court scene, when he doesn't give up the ring, and she says, "Well,

peace be with you” (4.1.446) she really meant, “You passed the test. You are the man I love.” Then when Gratiano comes running up to her with it, she thinks, “Wait a minute. I’m not going to let him forget this one.”

I commented that Penning and Anne Hering, who played Nerissa, displayed effortless chemistry together, to which Penning replied:

I think that without her father in this world, the only person that she has is Nerissa. She’s got her servants, and they’re lovely and wonderful, but she can’t talk to them. I get the feeling that Nerissa really has been her constant companion for her whole life, and I don’t have a feeling that she knew her mother. She never speaks of her mother, like many of Shakespeare’s characters.

Scholars have commented, of course, on the missing mothers in Shakespeare. Penning suggested that perhaps this absence was merely a practical consideration: “With an all-male cast, there’s only so many women to go around. ‘Who wants to be a woman this time? Not me.’ But Portia starts the scene talking about how she has been cruelly affected by her father’s will, and the only person that she has to talk to is Nerissa. I think that bond is really strong there from the start, and goes all the way through the play.”

Critics have different theories concerning why Portia actually goes to Venice. Penning asserted her belief that Portia’s purpose is pure: “I think her motivation to go after him is simply to help. That’s her dearest love, and if she can help in any way, she’s going to do it. Plus the language, all the things that she said to him, tell us that she loves him. You’d really hate her if she didn’t truly love him, I think.” Penning stressed Portia’s naïveté as she expounded on the subject:

What she says when she comes back is that she's trying to do a good deed in a naughty world. Living in Belmont, she thinks that the world is perfect and that everybody should get exactly what they need. She can help by going to see the foremost doctor of law in all of Italy, because a case of this magnitude involves her dear love and his best friend in the whole world. However, she hasn't seen Antonio at this point, and she doesn't know the extent of their relationship. While I think she can't know the homoerotic nature of the relationship before she goes, I think she sees it, which is why she gives Antonio the ring in the very end. "Sir, you're very welcome to our house."

In her performance, Penning asserted her power over both men by underscoring the pronouns, saying "*our* house" to Antonio—thus emphasizing her status as Bassanio's wife—and "*my* house" to Bassanio, even though she had told him in 3.2 that everything she has is now his. However, Penning stressed that Portia did not suspect how attached Bassanio was to Antonio before she went to Venice:

I think that she doesn't believe that the money is going to help, but she gives him the money to go. Then she thinks, "You know what? I think I could help. I think that I know how to talk in that kind of situation." She's got that kind of delusional thing; she's sure that if she just talks to Shylock, he'll see reason, take the money and be merciful. Anybody would, right?

The heroine's male disguise remains impenetrable, by convention. However, Penning is quite petite, and the men in the courtroom scene, including Joe Vincent's

Shylock, were rather tall. Despite the theatrical conventions and the convincing costume, the disparity in stature made we wonder why neither Bassanio, Gratiano, nor anyone else noticed that something was amiss. Penning disagreed, however, detailing the differences in her appearance: “That’s true, but Bassanio has never seen me with my hair back. He’s never seen me with glasses obscuring my face or obviously never in boys’ clothing. My Portia gowns are off-the-shoulder and very close to the body at the top and wide at the bottom. My boy costume looks very large on top and close to the body on the bottom. It’s a completely reversed silhouette.” As we continued to discuss the cross-dressed heroine, I asserted my belief that the trial scene is more effective if Portia really looks like a man, being quite different from Rosalind and Viola and Julia. Critics have also noted that Portia has more stage time before and after she cross-dresses than any other Shakespearean heroine. Moreover, she is not an object of desire when cross-dressed, and she is more proactive than reactive. She takes action by disguising herself as a man rather than just reacting to a set of circumstances. Penning expanded on this idea:

Yes, she dons male clothing just for the one thing. It’s for this purpose, and then she will go back to being Portia. Also, she’s doing it to fool Bassanio, whom she knows she’s going to see again later. That’s very, very different. Bellario’s letter tells everyone that he’s really young, which acts as a setup for everyone to believe she’s a boy. There’s one line, “I never knew so young a body with so old a head” (4.1.162). It’s a funny line. Shylock said, “How much more elder art thou than thy looks?” Obviously, a young boy played the Portia character, and it wouldn’t have been so hard for that boy to appear like a boy because he *is* a boy. It would

have been harder to pull off actually being Portia than it would be the cross-dressing part. In our day and age, I think it is really important that we at least make a concerted effort to have her look somewhat masculine so that it doesn't take the audience out of the world of the play. You have to buy that all these people are fooled by the change of clothing.

The production did something unusual with Portia's hair. In the Belmont scenes, she appeared with long, blond, curly hair, which is partially a wig. As she and Nerissa prepared for their sojourn to Venice, Portia revealed her newly-cropped short hairstyle.

Penning explained:

That was a happy accident, actually. When I auditioned for this production, I had hair down my back. In December, I had cut off my hair. Then I got the role. So I called the theatre company to tell them that my hair is short now, and the plan was for them to wig me. When I got here, we had been talking about going blonde for Portia; my real hair color is brown. When I got here, Jim [Helsing] came up with the idea, "I want them to really have cut their hair, to have gone the extra mile. It would have been shocking in this day and age for them to have cut all their hair off." So now I have actual blonde hair for *Merchant* and I'm wigged for *Much Ado about Nothing*.²³

As talk turned to the trial scene, I asked Penning if her Portia had a plan from the beginning. For me, it seemed quite clear that she was thinking things through while in the courtroom:

²³ Penning played Beatrice in *Much Ado*.

It's an interesting position to be in. I've seen it played before where Portia knows from the get-go what she's doing as soon as she walks in the courtroom. To me, that seems like it just kills all the drama. I think she doesn't even come up with what's not in the bond until Shylock says, "I cannot find it; it is not in the bond. Then she thinks, "What else is not in the bond? What is in the bond, and what is not? Are there balances to weigh the flesh? Then she waits until that moment to say, "Tarry a little, there is something else."

For the "balances to weigh the flesh" the production used a large, antique scale, a visual cue which aided in the building of tension. Penning explained: "Initially they had a little scale, a little balance thing, but Jim said no; I want a big meat scale, something you'd find at a butcher shop. It's so clear that that cup is to hold the pound of flesh. Kurt Bippert, who was the Properties Master for this production, finds some amazing stuff." The scale played a role in the tension of Shylock's exit, as well. After Gratiano's lines, "In christening shalt thou have two godfathers / Had I been judge, though shouldst have had ten more / To bring thee to the gallows, not the font" (4.1.396-98), Shylock removed his prayer shawl in a move that mimicked Antonio's earlier removal of his shirt, placing the garment on one side of the scale. Penning clarified the director's intent with this motion: "That was Jim's idea to show the balance of what Antonio has lost, even if he doesn't show it."

I asked Penning how much of Portia's courtroom brilliance comes from her own mind, and how much she learned from Bellario:

I think what she gets from Bellario is that she has to prove it's premeditated murder, because she obviously comes in with, "It is enacted in the laws of Venice that if it be proved against an alien . . ." That, I think, is what she has coming in, but she has the burden of proof. She has to go through the proceedings to prove that it's premeditated murder, or premeditated attempted murder. She gets that when he says, "I had a daughter / Would any of the stock of Barabas / Had been her husband rather than a Christian" (4.1.296-95). Up until that point, all she knows is that there's this bond, and he has sealed to it. They have both signed onto it that Shylock gets the pound of flesh if the date has passed. Now the bond is forfeit because Antonio hasn't paid it and Shylock is fully within his rights. When he says, "I cannot find it. It's not in the bond," Portia has got to think, "Okay, what's not in the bond?" He gets the pound of flesh. I see that. Have a surgeon to stop his wounds lest he bleed to death. He doesn't get a surgeon because it's not in the bond. If he cuts the flesh, he'll bleed to death. That's her train of thought. Now that she's got that, okay, you can take the flesh, but you can't have the blood. Go for it. If he still goes through with it, then that's murder and she can get him. He starts saying, "Well, you know what? I give up. Give me the money." "No, no, you already refused the money. You can't have the money. It's the flesh or nothing." Then when he says, "You know what? You win. I'm not going to do it," then she's got the premeditated murder. She's got that he would

have done it had it not been for the fact that Antonio would have died, and he can't have the flesh without the blood.

Penning performed the mercy speech as if she were answering Shylock's question "On what compulsion must I [be merciful]?" As we have seen, this interpretation dates back to the 1700s, when Sarah Siddons delivered the speech in response to Shylock's query. A more declamatory style would be tedious to our sensibilities today. Penning detailed her motivation as follows:

So she goes in there. She says, "You've got to be merciful." He replies, "Why do I have to be merciful? What's making me?" She explains, "You don't understand mercy. Let me just tell you a little bit about this for a second. Just know that where your course of action is just, nobody can stop you, but if you're not merciful, a man is going to die. You don't want that on your head, do you?" But when he says, essentially, "Screw you," that's where the whole panic of the trial starts for her. I don't think she ever thought that it would be so hard.

Penning's Portia was not always so pleasant in the courtroom, however. She spit the word *Jew* rather cruelly, several times, especially on "Art thou contented, Jew?" Penning described her reasons for this sternness:

At that point she's so angry that he didn't take the money. He wants to kill this guy, my husband's best friend. I don't know him from Adam, but I'm in love with that man, and you're trying to hurt this man. Antonio's in love with him too, but anyway. When Shylock won't listen to reason and be merciful, she thinks, "What's wrong with you?" I think that's why she

spits it out. Almost every other time she says it, the word comes in the middle of the line, and it's very gentle. When she spits it at him, it comes at the end of a line: "Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture / To be so taken at thy peril, Jew."

After the heavy tension of the trial scene and Shylock's heartrending exit, the production presented a very light-hearted, comic ring scene in act five, in which the actors all seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. Penning concurred, telling me that "We do have a great time. We've talked about the fact that the scene works so well because the audience really needs to have something to laugh at after the trial scene."

The mood had already started to shift after the trial scene. When Portia told Bassanio, "I pray you know me when we meet again" (4.1.417), I felt that she stressed the sexual sense of *know*. The line garnered a big laugh from the audience, although not all of them may have been aware of the dual sense of the word. Penning agreed, and attributed some of the laughs to an appreciation for dramatic irony: "That's totally true, and it's a subtle double entendre. I think the reason they were laughing is because he hasn't realized it's Portia the whole time. There is nothing an audience loves more than knowing something that someone on stage doesn't."

As our time together drew to a close, I asked Penning if it bothers her at all that Shylock gets most of the critical attention. She assured me that she doesn't mind and remarked that Joe Vincent, who played Shylock in the Orlando production, gave an excellent performance. I agreed, and I am certainly not trying to diminish Vincent or any other Shylock. However, I commented on the remarkable lack of attention paid to Portia

until recent years. Until the later years of the twentieth century, many reviewers never even mention her. Penning concurred:

Yes, that's a shame, because there's nothing for actors to go back to. It is such a wonderful role and incredibly complex. There is the sort of lighthearted feeling at the beginning, but she's got to be smart enough to pull off the trial scene and witty enough to get back at her husband for giving away his ring without making everyone think she's a total bitch. I think the audience has got to feel for her. Otherwise, the play stops at the trial.

Some productions do, of course, end at act four, which Penning complained was "such a rip-off," since this excision turns the play into a tragedy:

I think that ring scene is there for a purpose. It can make people see the hypocrisy of what people can do to each other and then go on and lead normal lives. At the very end of the play, Nerissa tells Lorenzo here's a gift from the rich Jew: "After his death, of all he dies possess'd of" with Jessica sitting right there! She doesn't say *anything*! Her last line comes way before: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music." Antonio's penultimate line is, "I am dumb."

Penning's noting of each actor's last lines displays a player's emphasis on the spoken word, and I believe she may be on to something. Perhaps Portia's last line demonstrates the playwright's desire to place her as the omnipotent center of the play: "We will answer all things faithfully."

Chapter Five

Kelsey Brookfield

There's a lot in this play that humans can learn from. (K. Brookfield)

Edward Hall, son of the RSC's founder, Peter Hall, created his all-male Propeller Theatre Company to "rediscover Shakespeare simply by doing the plays as we believe they should be done: with great clarity, speed, and full of as much imagination in the staging as possible. We don't want to make the plays 'accessible,' as this implies that they need 'dumbing down' in order to be understood, which they don't" ("About Propeller"). For his 2009 production, Hall set *The Merchant of Venice* in a brutal prison, with the Jews and the Christians depicted as rival gangs. The production visited the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and its cutting-edge setting, its all-male cast, and its highly physical approach blatantly broke with convention. In Propeller's version, Portia, played by the young black actor Kelsey Brookfield, was presented as a man who had feminized himself to survive in the harsh prison environment. Therefore, many of the issues concerning the cross-dressed heroine disappeared. Brookfield did not have to be believable as a woman, and he—obviously—had no problem presenting a believable male Balthazar in the courtroom. I interviewed both Edward Hall and Kelsey Brookfield about their interpretation of the play, the unusual setting, and the depiction of Portia. Both men, intelligent and forthright, provided some intriguing insights into their views of *Merchant*.

The atypical location seemed designed to provoke the audience and discover new truths in the play. I asked Hall why he chose a prison for his setting:

Two reasons. The main reason was first I wanted to find an environment that took away the need to answer the question what do people look like; how Christian do the Christians look; how Jewish does the Jewish person look; is he more or less Hassidic-looking and to what degree, which can be a major stumbling block in terms of how people perceive the anti-Semitism. Incidentally I don't think *Merchant* is about that; it's about a bunch of anti-Semitic people, but it's complicated because it's mixed. But I wanted to help people to see the theatricality of the play. In prison everyone looks the same. There's a uniform, so you take that problem away. We've personalized people's costumes somewhat, but essentially we have the same template.

In fact, many of the actors looked very similar, and it was often difficult to tell one from the other. All the "men" wore the same prison uniform and sported shaved heads, while Shylock, perhaps in a nod to his heritage, wore a wool stocking cap, subtly reminiscent of a yarmulke. Meanwhile, the "women," Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica, added feminine accessories to their prison ensemble: high heels, ragged fishnet stockings, corsets, and lipstick. Portia even donned a gold-colored shawl for the casket scenes—an obvious reference to the Golden Fleece that she represents. Hall continued to explain his prison locale:

The second reason was that I wanted to find an environment where the audience watching the play wouldn't instantly get repulsed by someone

calling somebody a Jew dog or a currish Christian. I think that wouldn't have surprised people when the play was originally presented; it was a very different time in terms of attitudes towards different races and cultures—in fact we think there were New World indigenous tribes in the Lord Mayor's Procession in 1600 or 1601 in London—but attitudes toward other tribes were much less sophisticated than they are now. I think the audience at the time would have had a natural reflex to say those kinds of things; I wanted to find an environment that radicalizes people's behavior and pushes them into their groups more intensely. Christians become more Christian and come together and protect each other, and underneath the surface there is a potential for sudden and immediate violence. It's also an environment where there's a certain internal judicial system that no one breaks and that helps runs things. The warden and all the prisoners need that to keep things glued together.

All of this sounded rather frightening to me and reminiscent of prison films like *The Shawshank Redemption*. In fact, Brookfield commented on the harsh setting, coupled with the ambiguity of the all-male cast: "That's what makes it more fun, but then it makes it kind of scary as well," and Hall also noted the frightening nature of things in this production:

It is very scary. Venice is a scary place to be, I think, if you're Shylock. The play seems to me to have both these radical elements in it but also a mix of high romance and beautiful language, coupled with a sharp, cynical look at relationships, oaths, and bonds; every oath is broken but no one

really gets off scot-free. That trial between Bassanio, Antonio, and Portia is very intense, but all three of them behave badly, one way or the other. Actually, this place remained frightening for all its inhabitants. Providing a harsh and shocking twist to the “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, a vicious Shylock ripped out Salerio’s eye in a brutal riff on *King Lear*’s most violent moment.

The all-male environment of a prison seems tailor-made for a company like Propeller, and Hall explained his thoughts on the double plot: “Off-setting the bond plot is a sort of high-romance, two very different colors, and I thought that prison would be an interesting place to pursue that, and of course it’s an all male company; prison is an all-male environment, and it’s full of men that feminize themselves.” A man’s assuming a female persona to survive in prison is not a new phenomenon; Hall did some historical research on the subject: “There’s plenty of anecdotal evidence, pictorial evidence of men being women in various institutions, dressing up as women. I found a picture of someone from the early thirties who went to jail in full drag.”

Prison, like sixteenth-century Venice, is an isolated place: “. . . the truth is you don’t really know; you have to dig around because these places are closed off; they’re walled places, and Venice is as well; it’s sort of crushed together.” The production’s set design helped reinforce this insularity. A backdrop of prison bars and cells upstage, with two movable cages downstage, helped create a claustrophobic feeling of entrapment. Since the prisoners cannot leave, the actors, when not taking part in a particular scene, were “locked” in their cells, observing the events that occurred center stage. Therefore, Portia witnessed the negotiation of the bond and Bassanio’s rapport with Antonio before he has even stepped foot in “Belmont.” Hall told me that his Belmont was the “west

wing” of the prison; in reality, it seemed the same as the rest of the facility, with the exception that Portia and Nerissa lived there, the casket contest took place there, and a man’s white suit, whose owner had been Portia’s departed father, hung ominously on the wall.

Kelsey Brookfield was one of the newest members of Propeller when I interviewed him in the spring of 2009. Fresh out of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, he auditioned for *Merchant*, never expecting to be cast as Portia: “My agent told me Ed Hall was auditioning, and I went down to London. I don’t remember what I was auditioning for, actually, but after I read, Ed asked me if I would like to have a look at “the quality of mercy” speech. I just love that speech, and I came back in. A couple of hours later I got the call, and now I’m a member of Propeller.” I asked Brookfield about his initial view of Portia:

I saw her as someone who was under incredible scrutiny. The situation that she’s in is terrible, and she’s not going to just sit back and feel sorry for herself because she is a very strong woman. The casket contest is a sort of arranged marriage, and Portia is a modern-day woman; she wants to get in the way of that, as far as possible. She says to Morocco, “Okay, you can choose, but if you were to choose wrong, you could never talk to another lady again, so you might not want to do it.”

In fact, this Portia openly tried to dissuade both Morocco and Aragon from attempting the casket contest. Moreover, as Morocco left, Portia’s infamous line, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” remained in the script and took on quite a different resonance. Both Brookfield and Jonathan Livingstone, who played Morocco, are black, but

Livingstone's skin is several shades darker than Brookfield's. Therefore, Portia's comment became not about her distaste for his ethnicity, but a more subtle assertion of her preference.

In prison where so much individual control had been taken away, everyone was trying to gain a measure of control over their lives. This Portia could not control whether the suitors made a choice, but she could control all the extraneous things around her which might influence the choice. The casket contest in this production seemed to include a mandate that Portia be locked in her cell while the suitors chose a casket; however, she entered the cell of her own accord and shut the door herself, again attempting to assert control whenever possible. Even Jessica, who was presented as Shylock's very meek "daughter" who scrubbed his toilet and cleaned his cell, sought control by changing her faith and her destiny. Within the tank of the commode she so dutifully cleaned, Jessica had hidden a strong box full of Shylock's money. Nerissa, portrayed as a close confidante of Portia, controlled and manipulated the casket scene. Brookfield elucidated on the dynamic between the two characters:

Chris Myles—who plays Nerissa—and I have a little dialogue in act one, scene two. We're kind of in the yard, and I tell her I'm not happy with my situation. She knows the kind of people that I go for, and she says, "he [Bassanio] is gay."²⁴ She says we'll let true love take its course, which is a risk; when does that truly happen in life? She could have manipulated the scene with the lead casket the same way she did with the gold and the silver. Bassanio could've gone against that, or he could've just gone for

²⁴ Up until now, Bassanio had been in a relationship with a "masculine" man, Antonio, not a "feminine" man, such as Portia.

that, but I think it is kind interesting; Nerissa just leaves it with him. She says to Portia, “yes, it’s a bad situation that you’re in, but the one who loves you will be the one that you’re going to be in love with. He’s going to be the one who sees through the pretensions of life.

Thus, Portia gave up control when Bassanio tried his luck with the caskets, a point upon which Brookfield commented: “She suddenly gets caught up in this whirlwind, and she can’t quite contain herself. At the same time, she’s being watched by everyone around her, and she can’t tell him which one is the right casket. She has to allow the thing to go its course. *The Merchant of Venice* is life-changing; it’s both fantasy and reality.”

Brookfield and Myles enacted the casket scenes in a way that made clear that they had been through this ritual many times before. Of course, no matter how the scenes are played, as audience members we know by the time Bassanio arrives in 3.2 that the lead casket holds Portia’s counterfeit. I noted that one critic maintains that Nerissa manipulates the whole thing, which Brookfield found interesting:

In our production she’s the only one—putting Bassanio aside—whom Portia can trust; in our world you have to be very careful. Look at someone like Salerio who will obviously tell anybody anything. Nerissa for me is the only one that Portia can feel comfortable telling anything to. Yes, Nerissa likes to tease her a bit, pretending she has more money than she actually does, but at the end of it she’s really a special friend

Yes, the two “women” portrayed special friends that shared an unfathomable bond; both were living the roles of women as a survival tactic. Furthermore, when they cross-dressed as women, the audience was aware that they were men dressed as women;

therefore they did not need to be plausible as women; they were obviously feminized men. In fact, Portia remained completely believable in both gender roles, a unique aspect of this production. Hall commented on Portia's dropping of the façade in 3.2:

When Portia says to Bassanio, "up to now I am an unlessoned girl," it's very interesting, because Brookfield takes off his shawl and high heels. I said to him, that's your way of saying, the elements of femininity that you've been wearing like a mask are not really you. Love always transforms people, especially in Shakespeare; suddenly they find truth. When she looks into Bassanio's eyes, when he chooses the right casket—this is what's so romantic—she realizes what her mask is and takes it off and says, I'm just a girl; I hope I can live up to what I want to be for you.

Hall asserted that Portia is spoiled at the beginning but goes "on a journey towards something else."

For me, one of the most important elements of any production is Portia's believability in the courtroom. Hall noted that "when you have a guy playing the part, the scene has a very different resonance." Brookfield and I discussed some productions in which the female actor seemed unwilling, perhaps, to completely de-feminize herself. Brookfield commented, "Of course, it's a huge leap. I saw the Michael Radford film, and there was a lot of trying to be male and trying to hold oneself, and it was very interesting really."

One detail that this *avant-garde* production had to iron out was the nature of the relationships between the "men" and the "women." Portia was sought after as a wealthy "wife" and perhaps a cellmate, but what was her relationship with her father, and who

was he? Brookfield explained that during the rehearsal process, the cast and director discussed this issue; they came to the conclusion that Portia's father was not her biological parent but a paternal figure who had "adopted" her within this world: "They have tried to create a little family for themselves in a weird kind of way, within this prison environment." Portia's relationship with her father, like Jessica's with Shylock, mimicked a father-daughter relationship. The older man furnished protection and guidance for the younger. In Jessica's case, in return, she provided companionship to Shylock and performed menial chores.

Portia differs from the other cross-dressed heroines in many ways, as we have seen. She has more stage time before she meets her lover. She has more stage time after the initial "We're going to get married" moment. She is not a cross-dressed object of desire, and she makes the choice to cross-dress, but not for her own protection. I mentioned these points to Brookfield, and he agreed that all of them became irrelevant in this production: "I mean, in our version here, originally, during rehearsal, I asked, 'Was I playing a woman? Was I playing a man playing a woman?' And, eventually, we came to the idea, I was feminizing myself." More importantly for performance, Portia does not have the confidential relationship with the audience that Rosalind and Viola have. A moment analogous to Viola's "I am the man" speech does not usually exist in this play. However, in the courtroom scene, Brookfield interacted with the audience, metaphorically "winking" at them, since they were in on the joke; he was a man, but he was not a man, and in this particular production it truly was ridiculous that he not be recognizable as Portia while disguised as Balthasar. In fact, the change of costume for Portia and Nerissa was the only element of the production that seemed a bit implausible.

Where would these two inmates have gotten the suits and topcoats that they wore for act four? Suspension of disbelief, however, was easy, as the early moments of the scene were presented with brio and a bit of tomfoolery.

Portia usually misses out on the fun with the audience that Viola and Rosalind can enjoy. However, the gender switch in Propeller's production allowed for some charming moments of levity. When Portia informs Nerissa that they will disguise themselves as men and head to Venice, the scene is generally not especially humorous. However, in Hall's production, Portia's line "we will disguise ourselves as men," followed by Nerissa's incredulous reaction, produced appreciative laughter from the audience.

Portia's costume, while its foundation was the same as the other prisoners, became feminized by little details. She rolled up the cuffs of her trousers to create Capri pants and added high heels. She wore a corset instead of a prison shirt, red lipstick, and the gold shawl for the casket scenes. Brookfield talked about the process: "Originally we had done up the costume a little more, but when we realized that it was wrong, we backed off from it a little bit. We didn't want her to look like she was in drag. So we just added bits to the prison uniform, and I think it's really much better. The Golden Fleece, of course, is the shawl." Brookfield donned high-heel pumps for the role; I wondered how much difficulty they presented for him:

I had to practice a lot. It was pretty tough. During rehearsal, I would just try and stay in them as long as possible. At the beginning, I was in such pain, but after a while, the shoes would just cause discomfort; the pain threshold goes up. It's kind of like playing guitar; it's really painful, but eventually your fingers just become numb to that. Now my feet have

become quite numb to it, which is great. I also had to stay in the corset for rehearsal, but posture-wise, it made me feel kind of regal, and Portia is essentially a regal kind of person.

As talk turned to the trial scene, I mentioned the way some actors have played the scene in the past. Lynn Collins, for example, in the Michael Radford film, knew exactly how she could trap Shylock as she entered the courtroom. Ellen Terry famously thought up the solution on the spot, and Derbhle Crotty knew she had an ace up her sleeve but tried to convince Shylock not to pursue the bond. Hall weighed in on the subject:

Well, you can't ... a lot a people think she knows exactly what she's doing and she's in complete control when she walks in. Well, where's the drama in that? I think she walks in and has no concept of the intensity of the stubborn wall that she's going to hit, which is Shylock's determination to claim his bond. I think she underestimates it, slightly. She has one of the greatest scripts on the nature of mercy in the English language, and Shylocks just turns around and says, "no."

I commented that Portia would be justified at this point in asking Shylock if had been listening, and Hall agreed:

Didn't you listen to me? Didn't you hear me? This is the way we've done it. I said to Kelsey, you're very nervous; I mean you're not sure what's going to happen, and you walk into that courtroom, and bam! All those people are looking at you and you get a little confused, slowly you find your feet, and everyone around her, or him, is thinking, who is this guy? What's he going to do for us? We're lost; this is hopeless! And she goes

on talking, finding her muse. I said, it is a muse you find; you don't know what you're going to say, when you come in, no one does. How do I know what I think until I hear what I say? And because of Shylock's stubbornness, because of the moment and the intensity of the situation in which you find yourself, you find a voice, which is about mercy and justice, and when he rejects that, you're scrambling around frantically, trying to find a way of turning the tables.

I noted that this interpretation elevates Portia's character; if she begins the scene with the intent to trap Shylock, she becomes less sympathetic, although, of course, if her mercy speech is designed principally to save Shylock—since she knows that she has the legal means to rescue Antonio—then she becomes ever more sympathetic. However, Hall maintained that if Portia knows ahead of time what she is planning to do, the scene is undramatic; he emphasized that “the basic principle of any drama” is the building of suspense:

Because if you know what's going to happen next, there's no buildup of drama. If there's no suspense, the possibility of what might happen next as opposed to what does happen, and if the actor or actress can't persuade themselves of a number of possibilities other than the one that does actually happen, then it starts to get very dull for the audience, for everyone really, and very pedestrian. Also, she can sound like this sort of irritating head girl that you just want to tell to go out and drink a lot and behave badly; “get out of here, live a bit,” you know?

Portia can easily become unsympathetic here, especially if she condescends too much. The scene works best if the audience remains on Portia's side, at least until "Tarry a little." Hall acknowledged the complexity of act four, scene one:

There's a lot going on in that scene for her when she cross-dresses. I've tried to explore the credibility issue as fully as possible. She walks in. No one is convinced. Everyone's worried. She's very nervous. She finds her feet and then hits a wall and then tries to get around it. She just manages and then offers Antonio the opportunity of showing mercy to Shylock; I mean, he [Shylock] hasn't shown it, but surely *he* [Antonio] would, and in an awful, sort of classic piece of judicial hypocrisy, Antonio *rewards* Shylock.

Of course, Elizabethan audiences may have responded rather differently to Shylock's conversion. Some critics have theorized that Antonio—and the audience—would have believed that he was saving Shylock's soul with this conversion, but Hall was not convinced:

I know, but I don't quite buy that. I mean, I buy that if you're a right wing radical priest. I feel that the audience would be thinking, "that's really going to nail him"; they'd be thinking "gotcha," not, "okay, good, he's saved." The action is to try to destroy him without killing him; it's a fate worse than death, and I feel that vehemence, and dramatically I feel quite uncomfortable seeing it. The theory is, you're saving him from himself. What it is, depending on which religion you are, out of billions of people, there's only a small group of us that have got it right. All the rest of us are

damned. So the theory is, we've got it right, and we're using the system to bury him, and it's great, wonderful revenge, and revenge it is.

Because of the similar appearances of the "prisoners," Brookfield was able to pull off an interesting twist to the opening of the courtroom scene. The line, "Which is the merchant and which is the Jew" produced real confusion on Portia's part, and she initially mistook Antonio for Shylock. Usually the question is rhetorical in nature, since either a yarmulke or prayer shawl or some other element of his appearance makes clear that Shylock is "the Jew." For me, this moment created a sort of equality between the two men, a sense of balance. However, Brookfield pointed out another reason for Portia's *faux pas*:

By pretending that she doesn't know who any of these people are, she is trying to keep her identity hidden. When Bassanio says to Portia, "I beseech you" to get in there with whatever power you have, she can't look him in the eyes. I think she has moments when she actually forgets about Shylock, and she is just focused on Antonio. She's trying to get him off the hook, and at the same time, she's trying to figure out what the relationship is between Antonio and Bassanio. As a human being, she's probably overcome with emotion at times; she forgets about Shylock and goes on the attack with Antonio when she says, "there's nothing I can do; you are going to have to die."²⁵ But then we get to a point where she is trying to save him.

²⁵ "Why then, thus it is, / You must prepare your bosom for his knife" (4.1.42-43).

The more we discussed it, the more I realized how much the prison setting changes the play. One of the ambiguities, of course, is why does Portia go to Venice? Is she checking up on Bassanio, or is she protecting her money, as Lars Engle opines. Hall refuted any monetary motivation:

I don't think she's going for the money because she doesn't say it. I think it's what she says: "I'm going to teach these 'bragging jacks' a lesson." Character-wise, she's quite impetuous; she has quite a short fuse at times, and she's very articulate, very quick, very sharp, but spoiled, you might say. She doesn't have an enormous amount of patience. She loses patience with the whole lot of them. There's a buildup—getting her guy, the release of tension at the caskets, the discovery that he's got a friend—now she's going to teach him a lesson.

Portia is often portrayed as a pampered princess, and in Hall's version she was a pampered princess within this little world, but the director maintained that her financial situation allowed her to be free from monetary issues:

The thing with Portia is she has money—money is not an issue. Never once anywhere in the play does she say anything about needing money, worrying about money. The only thing she says is, "I've got more than enough, take it. Have more." She is one of the few people not governed by money. She's governed by her father's will; she's not governed by financial pressures. Everyone else's life is governed by that.

If Portia's going to Venice is not motivated by monetary issues, perhaps she does go to recapture her man from Antonio. On this issue, Hall saw no ambiguity at all:

“Antonio and Bassanio—let’s be clear. It’s not something you can choose to play or not to play. It’s there in black and white. They are lovers, in a relationship, and I don’t think the Elizabethans had such an obsession with labeling people’s sexuality.” In fact, the label of homosexual did not even exist until later, as Foucault has pointed out, and Hall completely removed any ambiguity. As he put it, “It’s a couple of guys in prison.” Many directors tend to choose subtle—or not so subtle—little ways to suggest a relationship between the two men that transcends friendship, but Hall’s setting removed the need for any hints: “It’s sort of obvious straightaway. It’s a very simple but brilliant triangle; the situation is very simple, but the exploration of that triangle becomes wonderfully complex and ironic.”

Of course, if Antonio dies for Bassanio, Portia’s love could never live up to that sort of sacrifice, as Lawrence Hyman has pointed out. I asked Brookfield if such thoughts may be in Portia’s head:

How could one live after something like that? One could just imagine a life with Bassanio after that; he’d become depressed. I think Bassanio just doesn’t think sometimes, and then in that final casket scene when he’s told that Antonio’s ships have all been lost and Shylock wants his money, Bassanio realizes he adores Antonio, which is really interesting because I think that up until that point the relationship was just kind of a lark for him. He loves him and all, but you never really know where he stands. Now he’s got enough money to pay back his debt because he’s married to Portia.

On the page, Bassanio is not a very sympathetic character; I see him as a gold-digger who profits from his friendships with Antonio and the Marquis of Monferrat and pursues Portia for her money. In fact, the first thing he says about Portia is “In Belmont, there is a lady richly left.” Brookfield, however, had a different theory about this line and the ones that follow it: “Maybe Bassanio feels like he has to pretend to Antonio that he’s only interested in her because she’s rich. ‘She’s fair, but I really like you much better. She’s rich, but I don’t love her. I love you.’”

Perhaps the most problematic of the many knots in *Merchant* is act five. How does a production successfully play the comedy of the last act and justify its levity after the darkness of the trial scene? I asked Hall his view on the final scene’s comedy: “I don’t know. Comedy, what’s comedy? Comedy is irony. We laugh recognizing fallibility. Portia’s so angry. I mean, curiosity killed the cat. Does she know the ring is under the gloves when she asks for Bassanio’s gloves?” This seemed to me a perfect moment to illuminate the text for the audience with a simple physical act, and Hall elaborated: “She says, just give me your gloves, it’s fine. The whole thing starts when she says, “your thanks are enough,” and he says, “no, really.” Then when he takes the gloves off, she sees the rings and says, “You know what, I’ll have that ring.” I think it’s a spur-of-the-moment reflex. It’s not planned.” Hall always strives to make the plays clear for the audience, and this moment seemed very human:

I think he’s so pleased he’s passed the test. And she leaves because he doesn’t give it to her, and then Antonio turns to Bassanio and says, “Give the guy your ring!” Because he certainly doesn’t want Bassanio’s wife to hold sway over him; he tells him that in the first place. “Don’t let your

wife's word sway you on this," and that hits another chord. Bassanio gives the ring up partly because he thinks Antonio's right and partly because he doesn't want to say to Antonio, "my wife's more important than your honor," which is what's on the table, because the guy who he's offered the ring to saved Antonio's life, so again, the emotional triangle exerts its pressure. In the last scene, Portia is sickly depressed; back comes Bassanio and she punishes him. It really gets out of control, and it *is* funny, but it also comes from deep inside her gut. She's not going ho, ho, ho. She's dealing with a lot of feelings and emotions, and it's a great argument, and it turns into a fantastic spat, especially when Nerissa gives her ring. They come back to Belmont; it's a gray dawn. Although it is funny, it's still a sort of anti-romantic ending.

The last few lines of the play wrap up everything. The script suggests that the main players go off to bed in pairs, and Antonio is left alone on stage. Hall disagreed with this staging: "Even if the script did say, "*exeunt* all but Antonio," Antonio says that Bassanio 'will never more break faith advisedly.' I think he's back to square one." In fact, no one can really leave, including Shylock. All of the characters remain imprisoned with each other, and all remained on stage as the play ended, while the Duke came forward to intone the extratextual line that opened the play: "Which is the Christian and which is the Jew?"

In an audio clip on the internet, I had heard Hall comment in an interview, "If people walk out saying, 'I understood that,' I've done my job." It seemed to me that the

moments like the one with the gloves helped the audience to understand the play. Hall concurred:

I hope so. That's what you do; you try and hunt down possibilities . . . an accidental event that causes massive uproar. That's life. It's what happens in life. Extraordinary things are not planned; the gods laugh, and I think that's always an interesting direction to go in because it sort of humanizes everything; there's something appealing about random happenings; it takes away any academic heaviness and tries to put drama in terms of human accidents.

Propeller has a home base at the intimate Watermill Theatre in England, but it is also a touring company, which travels internationally to many different venues. I asked Hall to talk a bit about moving from a small space to a large one:

We started in a big space, and then we shrank things down for the Watermill. In a small space like the Watermill, you've got a kind of claustrophobia; the audience members are sitting almost on the stage with the actors. It's very, very small. Then when you go back to a bigger space, you get more of a picture; it has a different kind of power. We get all the sets back, all the lights, we get a stronger atmospheric in terms of place, whereas in the smaller stage you get a different kind of claustrophobia for the actors and the audience. So both are good, we just adjust. We're used to playing different venues over the last ten years. The key thing is to fit things to the space because theatres are big things, and you can't change

them. We can't change the architecture of what's there, so I think the trick is always to fit things into your surroundings.

I wondered if things constantly changing tends to keep actors on their game:

Yes; it's very hard keeping things fresh when doing eight shows a week; the actors in Shakespeare's time never performed eight shows a week. It's a huge undertaking, so if you're moving around from week to week, it's quite good. Different audiences, fresh spaces, different environments—part of it, especially foreign touring, can be a little bit challenging; actors are really tired; they can't read the street signs to get to the theatre and don't know how to order food. It can be bad, or it can be an extraordinary adventure. There's sort of a mix between the two.

Brookfield commented as well on how the different places where the company played could produce dissimilar audience reactions: “Even in the U.K. in some places we have an upper-middle-class gentry-type audience with not many Jewish members. It was really kind of strange. Sometimes we get the odd laugh at inappropriate moments.”

Propeller's production produced mixed results at BAM. Although I thoroughly enjoyed this unconventional approach, many people were conspicuously absent after the intermission. However, the performance I attended also included a post-show talkback with the cast; a large proportion of the audience remained for the event, producing a lively and engaged discussion.

Chapter Six

Her rage at Bassanio is completely infusing her punishment of Shylock. (L. Rabe)

When the Public Theatre announced that its 2010 production in Central Park would be *The Merchant of Venice* (in repertory with *The Winter's Tale*), the headlines shouted that Al Pacino was returning to the role of Shylock for this mainstay of New York theatre. As expected, the information triggered much excitement, but the casting of Lily Rabe as Portia brought little attention. The press reported that the daughter of actor Jill Clayburgh and playwright David Rabe had won the role, without seeming to expect much from her. Director Daniel Sullivan knew better, however. In fact, Rabe was the only actor he considered for Portia, as he related on *Charlie Rose*:

Lily was my first and only idea for the role because she has the combination of sensitivity and girlishness, but extraordinary maturity, and she is vocally perfect. I would generally cast an actor in Shakespeare only after I had seen them do Shakespeare, which I had never seen Lily do. I had seen her in *Heartbreak House*, and she had a kind of maturity with the language, and Shaw can often be more difficult than Shakespeare.

Sullivan had directed twice before for Shakespeare in the Park, including the very popular and much-praised *Twelfth Night* of 2009 that starred Anne Hathaway. When Sullivan agreed to direct the 2010 production of *Merchant*, he did not even know that Al Pacino would perform the role. Pacino soon called the director to express his interest in

revisiting Shylock: “He had done the movie. He said that he wanted to continue to explore the role, and he wanted to continue to explore the relationship between Shylock and Portia; he felt that had not been quite explored in the movie.” Indeed, Portia’s courtroom-scene lines were heavily cut in the Michael Radford film, and the film rather heavy-handedly sought sympathy for Shylock.

In short order, Lily Rabe became the toast of New York, earning universal praise for her Portia. Terry Teachout, in his rave review for *The Wall Street Journal*, declared that the production “knocked Shakespeare out of the park” and that Portia was “sensationally well acted by Lily Rabe,” while Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* affirmed that “this increasingly accomplished and commanding actress convincingly traces Portia’s painful evolution from a wry, epigrammatic rich girl . . . to a woman who sees her world too clearly to be comfortable in it.” Brantley also astutely declared that “Ms. Rabe’s Portia is, as she must be, the moral lodestone of the play, but not in the usual manner.” In fact, critical accolades for Rabe even outshone those of her co-star: “Mr. Pacino’s performance was interesting but problematic—and the rest of the show was so good that it didn’t matter” (Teachout). Not since Ellen Terry won the hearts of audiences and critics in 1879 had an actress received so much attention for a performance of Portia. Moreover, like Lily Rabe, Terry’s accolades were doubly remarkable, since she vied for attention with popular theatrical star Henry Irving. When Sullivan’s wildly popular production moved to Broadway later in 2010, Rabe continued to dazzle. Scott Brown of *New York Magazine* enthusiastically declared that “Rabe, an actress of superb poise and brilliant emotional economy, taps into the character’s impatience, her almost debilitating insight into absurdity, and the insistent physical passions that vie with her towering

intellect.” Moreover, Rabe produced these magical moments under extremely difficult personal circumstances; Jill Clayburgh had passed away on Friday, November 6, while the play was in previews. Rabe missed four of those performances to stay by her mother’s side during her last days. She returned to the stage on November 7, just a few days before the official opening night. Rabe felt certain that her mother would have approved of her swift return to the stage, as she related to David Rooney in an interview for *The New York Times*: “She would have wanted me to do it, and she would have done the same thing. In a moment of tremendous struggle, making that decision on Saturday morning wasn’t a struggle. I knew it was what I had to do. And it was also a way to feel close to her.”

I interviewed Lily Rabe by telephone shortly after the extended Broadway run ended and was shocked to discover that she had no idea how much praise her performance had garnered, since she never reads reviews. She also was completely unaware that Portia has the fourth largest female role in the canon and that she speaks considerably more lines than Shylock. Moreover, she had never seen a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. She told me, “I hadn’t seen the [Michael Radford] film either; I had of course read it and studied it, but I was grateful not to have seen it because it was Al.” Perhaps Rabe’s lack of preconceptions and other distractions helped her to create her outstanding rendition of the heiress of Belmont.

I was fortunate enough to see this production and was just as impressed as the critics with Rabe’s performance and the entire production. Director Daniel Sullivan managed to present the play in a way that balanced humor with pathos, and the consistently talented cast created a *Merchant* of extremely high quality. Rabe strongly believes that the production’s excellence is the direct result of Sullivan’s gifts:

I think he is the greatest director walking the earth. He's so confident and clear and brilliant; he's operating on another level as far as understanding of text and his ability to deliver material; he's genius. But on the other hand there are a lot of geniuses that are not accessible or easy to work with, and he's sort of an actor's dream. I think his confidence and his brilliance allow him to in fact be very relaxed because when you know what you want, and when you have a clear vision of what is needed, it creates tremendous freedom. I think Dan's confidence sets everyone free. I hope and plan to work with him as many times as I possibly can.

Sullivan's production of *Merchant* reinforced the motifs of alienation, financial power, and cold-heartedness with its set design and its opening moments. Scenic designer Mark Wendland created a circular structure of steel, prison-like bars that dominated the stage; the Christian bankers were inside, while a Jewish boy with *payot* curls remained outside, unable to enter. Antonio (Byron Jennings) and friends, dapperly dressed in Edwardian-era costumes, entered, and after the brief repartee that opens the scene, Bassanio's (David Harbour) exchange with Antonio hinted only slightly at a romantic attachment. The next scene introduced us to Portia, a modern, intelligent woman, in full command of her domain even while she wisecracked with her companion Nerissa (Marsha Stephanie Blake) about her potential suitors. Rabe told me that she initially had difficulty with this scene:

That was a tricky scene. I will say that was the last scene that I felt like I figured out. We struggled a lot with that scene because it stands outside of the play in a lot of ways. I remember in rehearsal, coming home and just

saying to whoever would listen, my mother, my friends, just how much I was wrestling with that scene, and I remember being really worried about it. The director would just sit there and say, “I’m not worried about it.” He was super-relaxed about it; I think he knew that the one thing I needed in that scene was an audience because she’s kind of doing a bit of a standup act in that scene. It’s almost like a giant monologue once she gets going.

Eventually, Rabe found that having an audience was indeed the key for her: “The first night in the park I opened my mouth and got this huge two-thousand-person laugh and then just thought, ‘Oh, this is going to be a lot of fun.’ The scene *is* really funny, but it’s still very accessible. I was just worried that the jokes wouldn’t land, but Dan said the scene is so much about the relationship between Nerissa and Portia, and I think that relationship—especially for women—is a very accessible relationship.”

Rabe’s Portia fully commanded the Belmont scenes; the production conflated 2.7 and 2.9, when Morocco (Isaiah Johnson) and Aragon (Charles Kimbrough) make their misguided choices. Morocco danced about and waved his swords flamboyantly; he was as ridiculous and inappropriate a husband for Portia as the elderly, dribbling Aragon. Sullivan retained Morocco’s words that opens 2.1, “Mislike me not for my complexion,” but eliminated Portia’s two controversial lines about complexion, which generally make her unsympathetic. Portia was collected and in control in this scene and seemed as if she knew already which casket contained her “counterfeit” even while she remained faithful to her father’s wishes. Rabe explained the difficulties Portia faces, as she sees them: “It’s actually a very impossible situation that she is in, she’s screwed no matter what. She really wants a way out; she really wants to be in the world, and I think that is very

poignant. She loves her father but she wants to do the right thing and to honor his wishes; on the other hand she's really in this rather impossible and ridiculous set of circumstances."

Rabe related director Dan Sullivan's displeasure with previous Portias; he had never seen a production in which he believed that the Portia of the Belmont scenes was credible as the Portia of the trial scene. Rabe agreed with his assessment, asserting that "Shakespeare wrote one woman. She is *one* woman, and I very much believe that woman could exist. You have to tie all the pieces together and calibrate them so that the story is told but that it's one piece instead of completely separate women." This idea permeated Rabe's portrayal of the Belmont scenes. We discussed how many times actors portray Portia as a bored, blasé rich girl, but Rabe found this interpretation problematic: "I think if she's just bored in the tower, to me as an actress, you're just dead in the water because it's not who she is. . . . I thought that's *exactly* what I don't want to do. She hasn't resigned herself to these circumstances. She's not sitting back; she's trying desperately to figure out how to live her life and find a way out." This point is key to Rabe's portrayal; the audience must believe that the woman we meet in Belmont is capable of Portia's act four words and actions: "Even though [the events of act four] are in a different forum, it's the same woman, and I just don't see how [someone with a] "woe is me" attitude can ever end up doing the things that she does."

Although the courtroom scene is often the most compelling, this production placed heavy emphasis on 3.2, the structural center of the play. As the lights came up, Portia and Bassanio stood together on a spiral staircase, kissing softly but passionately; their barely repressed sexual ardor simmered just below the surface. Rabe discussed the

evolution of this moment: “I remember coming in and saying to Dan, “we have no time to fall in love on stage.” I mean, they’re not together, and then we open the second acts and they’re completely gaga, head over heels, and then we go right into ‘You see me, Lord Bassanio’.” Rabe noted that in other plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience watches the couple fall in love. In this play, “we hadn’t really figured out how much time they had together and clearly they haven’t had sex, but they want to; he definitely wants to.” As her suitor descended the stairs to make his casket choice, Portia directed the action from above, telling the servants to “stand all aloof” (42) and cheering Bassanio on with “Go, Hercules!” (60). In the most poignant moment of this scene, everyone on the stage froze when Bassanio correctly chose the lead casket, while Portia, alone in the spotlight, slowly descended the stairs with tears in her eyes. We in the audience felt Portia’s enormous relief and moving release of pretense, resplendent with joy over this fortuitous turn of events. In our interview, Rabe had very specific and insightful comments about this moment:

I believe so much of that relationship is projection. He comes in, and it’s as if she has dreamed him up. She’s held onto him from that time that they had seen each other and just absolutely infused him with everything that she wants and needs and truths that she wants for herself, for her life, for her future. I think it’s all tangled up with her father. And there he is, but I think that it doesn’t ultimately have that much to do with him; I think it has so much to do with her. . . . Dan did this beautiful kind of freeze, and I really think in that moment, when he looks up at her, there is that moment, the most frightening moment in the world, when you get everything that

you want and it stops your heart. It's so easy to want things, but then there's the moment of actually getting it. It can be the most terrifying moment in the world because then you have to actually show up, and you have to actually bring yourself into the picture.

When I saw the production, this moment represented a highlight of the evening; Rabe delivered her "You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand" with passion and sincerity, emotionally naked. I felt, even though she had been surrounded by the members of her household, how deeply lonely she had been and her profound desire to love and be loved. Until now, she had been making an outward show of strength in the face of the constraints of her father's will. For me, Rabe's delivery of the speech represented a complete dropping of Portia's facade of toughness and control. Rabe agreed with this assessment:

Of all of it! I think that's exactly right, and she's saying, I may be witty and have really beautiful clothing and have a lot of people traveling from all over the world to try and win me, but really this is what I am, and I'm terrified. I'm inexperienced, and I don't know if you're still going to want me when you see what's under all of this. Shakespeare tapped into all those things; he puts every single human experience into his plays.

This fairytale picture quickly fell out of focus for Rabe's Portia, however. As 3.2 drew to a close, Bassanio read Antonio's letter aloud, and Portia intuitively sensed a worrisome tenor in the merchant's words: "If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" (20-21). Thus her plotting with Lorenzo and Nerissa in 3.4 took on a somber tone;

this highly intelligent Portia had already realized that something was out of joint, as Rabe related:

Well, it's very serious business, and Dan cut a couple of the jokes out of there. I do think on the one hand she is excited because she finally has a plan, and she's such a doer; she so proactive, and now she has a plan. She has something to do, so that is invigorating, but I also think it is very serious. The way he responds to the letter—she tries and tries to get him to pull himself together. She has gotten the things that she wants, and then has to say “I'm worried you're not going to want me,” and that all goes okay. Then everything starts to crumble very rapidly. She looks at Bassanio and isn't quite sure who she is looking at. Of course they don't know each other. It was a very delicate balance because we didn't want to tip the scales too early. She's not drawing any grave conclusions at that point, but I think that something is definitely amiss there, something unknown for her about who this person [Antonio] is to him [Bassanio] and just how quickly he falls apart. He's not able to rally, which I think is disturbing.

As Portia headed to Venice, she assumed her alter-ego, Balthasar, which can be a problematic element of production. Oftentimes, the disguise remains unconvincing; costumes can overpower a small frame, fail to hide a very curvaceous one, or just be plain ridiculous. Sullivan's production featured the group of magnificoes that the text calls for in 4.1, dressed in legal robes with unusual but plausible-looking hats. The audience had time to digest and accept this attire by the time Portia and Nerissa entered,

clad in almost identical fashion. Thus the “look” had been normalized by the time Balthasar appeared so that the men on stage accepted her without question. As Portia entered, she pointedly looked at Bassanio—perhaps hoping or assuming that he would recognize her—but did not speak her notorious line, “Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?” (4.1.172). Moreover, Rabe had decided that her Portia knew about the “escape clause” but hoped not to use it. I commented that sometimes Portia entered the courtroom with the intent to entrap, an interpretation with which Rabe vehemently disagreed:

No way! Not in a *million* years! Dan and I talked very early on about whether it was possible to play the scene in such a way that she in fact comes up with that on her own in the room, and it isn't. It just doesn't track. We both felt very strongly about it. I came in saying, “this is the only way for me into this scene,” and it was exactly what he'd been thinking all the time. She has this information from her cousin, but there is just no scenario that she can fathom where she's going to have to use it. Because of course he's going to be merciful; there's absolutely no way this man is going to cut a pound of flesh off another man's chest. It's never going to happen; even though her brain is very big, it's not a thought that she can hold in it—I don't believe—and so I think that she goes in thinking she's going to say, well, then you have to be merciful. Case closed, end of scene, which wouldn't even bring her to the quality of mercy. Then he turns to her and says, why? Why do I have to be

merciful?” From there on, the earth just absolutely shifts for her. She just can’t imagine being asked why do I have to be merciful.

Indeed, during the production, Rabe paused for a long while before responding to Shylock’s question with the mercy speech, giving the impression that she was taken aback by this query and discoursing on mercy from the heart, which was precisely what she was doing. Rabe explained her approach to the mercy speech:

Well I think it’s exactly that—sometimes it was a longer pause than others, and that so much depended on what was going on between Al and me. I think when she starts talking she doesn’t really have her footing because she’s not anticipating any of this, and there’s a tremendous amount of disbelief. This sort of foreign creature is standing in front of her, and she’s never met someone like him. She is actually thinking on her feet, but she’s good at it because as she gets going, her value system, her set of beliefs, her feelings about what it is to be a human kick in. She may be very inexperienced, but her feelings about that are actually very strong, even though she has never had to articulate them in this way. Once it starts it comes pouring out of her. That speech is not just her pontificating; she’s *really* thinking on her feet in that moment, and I think that moment is absolutely terrifying. As she locates all of her beliefs and these things that lie so strongly at her core and connects with them, she gains courage and power. Not until the very last moment does the switch happen, the full switch. It maybe starts to happen [during the mercy speech], but she is still thinking, “you know Shylock, there’s three times your money.” She’s

desperately pleading and giving him every opportunity to save himself and hoping that he will. These are not tests for him to fail; she's trying to help him. I'm sure it has been played that she knows she's going to play this card and is just setting it up the whole time, but I don't believe that at all. I just don't believe that's the story of Portia and Shylock.

The idea that Portia enters the courtroom with the intent to trap Shylock has indeed formed the basis of many interpretations; Lynn Collins' Portia in the Michael Radford film clearly had this objective in mind during the trial. Moreover, critics of Portia often assert that she speaks beautifully about the nature of mercy and then fails to show mercy herself. I asserted that when Portia asks Antonio, "What mercy can you now render him?" (4.2.376), she completely expects Antonio to show mercy to Shylock, but Rabe, in her reply, expressed different ideas on the matter:

I don't know if I agree with that, but I do think she gives a beautiful speech on mercy, and she spends a lot of time trying to get him to be merciful. And what he keeps saying to her is: the law. Follow the law. I challenge you by the law. I want the law, and I want justice. Mercy is not going to factor into it. She is essentially on her knees, trying to take his face and shove it into reality: "Don't you see why you absolutely must not do this as a human being?" Then I think when he doesn't, she completely flips, and then she *buries* him, ruthlessly, mercilessly, buries him, and to me the beauty of all of these characters is that everyone is vulnerable, we all are driven to things. In the same way that he wants revenge, Portia, then, when her entire world is falling apart, and she's watched Bassanio

completely fall from grace, she shows Shylock exactly what he’s asked for. She has given him every opportunity not to take it but I don’t believe that there’s any kind of wishy-washiness. When she commits to what she does at the end, she commits to it, but she’s not planning on ever, ever having to do that. That’s what’s so amazing about that relationship; he drives her to it. Her rage at Bassanio is completely infusing her punishment of Shylock.

When she appeared on *Charlie Rose*, Rabe referred to this fury as the “perfect storm.” I brought up this intriguing comment, and she told me that “There is tremendous rage that comes out of her, and then she wants her revenge, it comes out at Shylock. That’s what the sequence of events leads to—and then to me—the rest of the play is aftermath of the trial, but I don’t think when she says, “what mercy are you going to render him” that she is hoping that Antonio is going to be merciful.”

During the mercy speech, Pacino’s clownish Shylock—vastly different from his interpretation in the Radford film—listened intently but remained unconvinced. As the scene progressed, Rabe as Portia watched closely for Shylock’s reaction to Antonio’s “death speech” to Bassanio: “I am armed and well prepared / Give me your hand, Bassanio; fare you well . . . ,” but then shifted her attention to the two men when Antonio continued:

Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;

And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge

Whether Bassanio had not once a love. (4.1.273-75)

These words seemed to be too much for Rabe's Portia, and Bassanio's avowal that Antonio's life is more important to him than his wife brought a heavily sarcastic response: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that" (4.1.286). I pointed out, in our discussion, that Portia's displaced rage at her husband in fact mirrors Shylock's ire at Jessica and Lorenzo, which precipitates his enforcement of the bond and his desire to punish Antonio. Rabe concurred and expounded: "Exactly. I think the rage at Bassanio and the rage at her father is all taking place in the trial. When she says, 'beg mercy of the Duke,' I think she believes that there is still mercy in the courtroom, but she's not going to give it to him anymore."

The act five ring scene, often discordantly played for laughs, took on a different tenor in this production, as Rabe delineated: "I think the entire fifth act is just absolute devastation. Dan has created a world in that fifth act, that's Dan, and it's for every audience member to feel whatever they feel, but to me, it's absolute devastation; there is no hope for anyone. And there is no hope for any of the relationships whatsoever."

Rabe's Portia clearly remained upset with Bassanio's betrayal, giving her a valid reason to be angry rather than a bratty annoyance at her husband's giving up the ring. The scene opened with a sense of fun and mischief that quickly accelerated into harsh anger.

Harbour's Bassanio, oblivious to the torment that he had caused his wife, acted like an oversexed teenager who could not wait to get her into bed. Moreover, if Portia has a legitimate reason to be upset, Nerissa needs one as well, or she becomes simply overly touchy. Sullivan solved this crux by having Gratiano (Jesse L. Martin) draw back as if to slap Nerissa in the early moments of 4.1, thoroughly bursting the bubble of their romance. Rabe elucidated Sullivan's intent here:

Well it changed a little bit. We had Jesse²⁶ almost to the end, and then we had Aaron Baker for the last three weeks, who was wonderful. Everyone was wonderful but very different, [including the two Bassanios], Hamish Linklater and David Harbour, but with all four of those actors, I do think Dan encouraged an underlying suggestion of violence. I think it manifested itself in slightly different ways, whether it was completely overt, as when he raises his hand. That sort of changed when the actor changed, but I think that [menace] is right under the surface. Dan said, between Portia and Bassanio, it is sort of a shaken baby situation, men who just take it one step too far. He's not trying to say these are abusive husbands, but they're not really completely in control, and the relationship is certainly not going to be harmonious.

Although Pacino earned excellent reviews for his performance, a few negative appraisals popped up from time to time, unlike the almost universal accolades for Rabe. I, personally, did not care for Pacino's excessively clownish performance. He played an angry Shylock, spitting and wagging his tongue. The audience at the Broadhurst on the night I attended, however, was deeply appreciative of his efforts, which perhaps egged him on to such excess. Stephen Greenblatt remarked on this strange performance in an article for the *New York Review of Books*:

Pacino's miming of a Jew was itself an odd piece of artifice, bearing roughly the relation to any imaginable Jewish reality that the figurines for

²⁶ Jesse L. Martin played Gratiano in the production that I saw on Broadway, while Aaron Baker played the role in Central Park. Hamish Linklater was the first Bassanio, in the park, and David Harbour took over the role for the Broadway run.

sale in Warsaw bear to Roman Vishniac's photographs of the doomed inhabitants of the ghetto. "Ay yam contendt," his broken moneylender, reluctantly agreeing to convert to Christianity, declared in accents that only alluded to the way Jewish immigrants actually sounded.

In fairness to Pacino and the laudatory critics, however, I must surmise that he was better some nights than others. Sullivan remarked on the changeable nature of both Rabe's and Pacino's performances: "If you saw them the next night it would've been different. There is a center to what they do that they never really go off of, but around which they can emotionally improvise" (*Charlie Rose*). Rabe commented on this flexibility in our interview:

I think that that's really the ideal thing in theater, being with a group of actors—but more importantly in a production—that is solid. If the earth that was created for you to stand on is solid, you can dance all over it. You can take steps forward and steps back without looking where you're going because you know there is ground underneath you. That's maybe not the best metaphor, but really Dan created such a solid foundation that just allowed freedom, and then, of course, that freedom will carry from night to night. I also believe that Al is such an investigative actor, such a brave actor, that no stone is going to be left unturned. When you have actors like that on the stage with you, it's what can happen. The audience is also very different from night to night. When you are doing a play like *The Merchant of Venice*, when doing Shakespeare, it's the gift that keeps on giving; it just never stops revealing itself to you. You certainly can get to

those points in long runs of things when things feel stale, but there is a difference between trying to shake things up versus just living in the world and discovering the world every single night. I think there's a danger in being on stage with someone who doesn't like to get bored and is just going to try different things every night, but that's not what was ever happening. We were able to just keep discovering the play. Each moment can grow, and then a moment that felt like it was one moment can then become one thousand moments. Everything was just getting fleshed out in more detail all the time.

Rabe shared with me one enchanting moment that occurred while delivering the mercy speech during the Central Park run, when gentle rain was dropping from the heavens:

It had been raining that entire night, and it was this incredible rain, a steady mist and the sky was very dark, but it was a gentle rain. Everyone was drenched in the audience, and we were all drenched on stage, so everyone was anticipating that speech, and of course it is also a very famous line, and there was this moment that happened that we could never re-create in a million years, a moment between Al and myself and the audience. That was very exciting; it was a moment that everyone in the park, close to two thousand people felt.

I was heartened to learn, from our interview, how eager Sullivan had been to bring Portia to the forefront of the play, just I am attempting to do in this dissertation:

I think that was Dan's goal too, in a way he always felt that they are the counterparts of each other and that really that is what's important. They [Portia and Shylock] are the equal and opposite forces of the play and one can't exist without the other. That was very much his feelings from the beginning and certainly for Al and for me too.

Clearly, Sullivan and Rabe succeeded. Together with Al Pacino and a stellar cast, they created a thoughtful and innovative reinterpretation of this most problematic of plays.

Epilogue

Obviously, there are many different paths that an actor can choose when playing the role of Portia. There is no right way or wrong way to perform any particular scene or line, but some ways seem more valid than others. Of course, the cast, the setting, and the director's vision necessarily affect any interpretation of the play. Although I am not a director, I do have some ideas for production that I shall set forth here.

Clearly, there is no ideal "look" for Portia. Who would have thought that a young black man with a shaved head, high heels, and a corset could play the role so convincingly and charmingly? Traditionally directors tend to depict Portia as a blonde, perhaps because she represents the Golden Fleece for Bassanio and the other suitors, but Derbhle Crotty's dark curls and screen-siren satin fit the bill just as well. Age is important; Katherine Hepburn—who enacted the role at the age of fifty—remained largely unsuccessful, and, for me, a mature Portia, such as Joan Plowright, seems a bit ridiculous in the casket scenes. Ellen Terry played the role until the age of seventy, but that seems to have been more a tribute to her beloved status as theatre icon than her believability as the heiress of Belmont. Lily Rabe, whose Portia dazzled with her intellect, charm, and tenacity, was twenty-eight but looked younger when she debuted the role in New York in the summer of 2010. Portia needs to be fairly young in order not to appear too cynical. Having been cocooned in the world of Belmont, her naiveté, innocence, and ignorance of the harsher realities of the world allow Shylock's

vindictiveness and Bassanio's unexpected betrayal to thoroughly shock her. Additionally, no matter the time period in which the play is set, Portia must present a plausible male in the courtroom. If she looks too feminine and the disguise appears too contrived, Portia's presence and the men's inability to recognize her become too much of a distraction. Therefore, body type remains an important consideration in the casting of this role. Ideally, the actor should be tall and slender; a curvaceous figure would be difficult to disguise in a man's suit or judicial robes.

Physical appearance also becomes important in the casting of Bassanio and Antonio. Although I do not find Bassanio sympathetic, he must be handsome and charming enough to captivate both Antonio and Portia. Although poor due to his prodigality, his noble status should be reflected in his appearance and demeanor. Presumably Antonio is fairly wise in the ways of the world; he lives in Venice, a center of commerce and corruption, and is an older man. As a man of substance, Antonio should display his wealth outwardly and should never appear pathetic. I prefer to see him portrayed as a well-off but otherwise ordinary man; his superficially normal life conceals a sadness that he cannot quite identify. This interpretation would make him very human and invite audience identification; Antonio is depressed, but he does not know why.

Portia's first appearance presents her frustration with her father's will and the casket contest. This fairy tale-like device of the playwright seems to function best in an alternative time period or unrealistic setting. A completely modern dress, twenty-first century *Merchant of Venice* would render the scene absurd; the production needs to have enough of a fantasy quality to make the Belmont scenes credible. Portia can be irritable, frustrated, terrified, or a combination of the three. If I were directing the play, I would

want to see Portia display a reluctance to be bartered while still maintaining girliness, filial obedience, and a modern repugnance for arranged marriage. If this repugnance seems anachronistic, one should remember that by the time the play was written the arranged marriage was already being questioned, and the consensual, companionate marriage had become an ideal, at least to the younger members of the audience.

Directors usually present Morocco and Aragon as ridiculous in some way, and this interpretation works quite well with Aragon. Morocco's scenes, however, remain more complex and hence problematic. The play contains three references to complexion; the first foreshadows Morocco's arrival and the other two bracket his appearance in the play. Portia heralds Morocco's arrival by declaring that "If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (1.2.127-29). Morocco introduces himself with "Mislike me not for my complexion, / the shadowed livery of the burnished sun / To whom I am a neighbor and near bred" (2.1.1-3), clearly a reference to his dark skin. Finally, Portia sends the Prince on his way with "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.79). The first line tells us that Portia has prejudged Morocco based in part on his appearance and perhaps in part on her experience with the unacceptable suitors that have preceded him. This statement represents one of Portia's least attractive moments, although the insularity of her life and its resulting ignorance of men and the world mitigate her statement somewhat. When Morocco enters, he clearly knows that complexion will be on her mind; he addresses skin color in his boastful discourse, touting his skill in deflowering virgins. These claims of sexual prowess would be rather intimidating to a young, innocent girl and certainly abhorrent to almost any woman in any time period. Thus with the third remark on complexion, "Let

all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.79), Shakespeare may have been employing the alternate meaning of complexion, “disposition” or “temperament.” Solanio uses the word in this context in 3.1, as he taunts Shylock about Jessica’s elopement: “And Shylock for his own part knew the bird was fledge, and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (3.1.27-29). In fact, one Canadian production highlighted this nuance by changing *complexion* to *persuasion*. Morocco, obnoxious and arrogant, would obviously repulse Portia, but most members of the audience would not recognize the alternate meaning of the word, so in my production I would endorse this verbal amendment.

The center of the play resides in act three, scene two, and the scene should begin with sexual tension. Portia finally has a suitor she believes to be worthy of her and clearly does not want to let him go. She may even be suffering from the “green sickness” that so worries Juliet’s parents in *Romeo and Juliet*. Portia wants Bassanio to choose correctly; she is ready to marry and tired of the casket ordeal. Does she hint to him? Portia has promised not to teach any suitor to choose correctly, but we do not know the details of her oath. Did she promise not to sing in a certain way or to drop her handkerchief in a certain spot? Especially when taking this scene in context with the legal hair-splitting that occurs in 4.1, I think the text allows for Portia artfully to influence events, and such actions do not necessarily denigrate her character, as some critics maintain. This is the type of thing that one can discover when playing around in rehearsals, with actors seeking out possibilities and trying different approaches. Portia could sing the song with emphasis on the words rhyming with *lead*, or her attendants could sing it; we could have drumbeats, pointed looks, or some kind of physical gesture. It would be humorous to

have Portia dropping these hints, upping the comic stage business, while Bassanio does not notice at all, which would preserve the integrity of his choice.

Why does Portia go to Venice? Some productions have her going to check up on Bassanio and his rapport with Antonio. However, I think that she does not suspect anything is amiss when she leaves Belmont. Furthermore, if Portia were going to Venice to check up on her new husband, that action would betray a cynicism that should not be present, at least not yet, and would detract from the vivacity of 3.4, when Portia tells Nerissa that they will see their men “in such a habit / That they shall think we are accomplished / With that we lack.” This moment mimics the delightful brio of 1.3. in *As You Like It*, in which Rosalind and Celia decide to disguise themselves and venture forth in the Forest of Arden.

Lars Engle’s wonderful article “Thrift is Blessing,” so meticulous and insightful as literary criticism, was universally disdained by every actor and director to whom I spoke. Of course, if the play were produced to reflect Engle’s theory that Portia goes to Venice to protect her money, she would become very unsympathetic indeed, and not many actors would be interested in playing her that way. I believe that she goes there for fun, adventure, and to show off her savvy. Her only experience of men seems to have come from her imperious father and the parade of fools that have traveled to Belmont in pursuit of her. Now that she has found Bassanio, perhaps Portia cannot bear to be separated from him so soon. She knows that she is smart: “I have within my mind / A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks / Which I will practice” (3.4.76-78), and because she has never encountered someone as immovable as Shylock, she believes that she can persuade him to relinquish his hold on Antonio. Moreover, Bassanio’s successful

resolution to the casket contest has freed her; although the text does not specify any mandate that Portia remain at Belmont until she marries, she seems to be tethered there by her father's will.

The nature of the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio remains one of the most debatable elements of this play. During the course of my research, I interviewed a director one morning who adamantly maintained that the two men are absolutely enmeshed in a same-sex love affair: there is no need to be coy about it; the evidence resides right on the page. That same afternoon, I spoke to another director who just as unwaveringly insisted that no such relationship exists. I, for one, believe that the men share a connection that transcends friendship. Of course, we must bear in mind that the neo-Platonic ideal of male-male friendship so valued by the Elizabethans was a very close relationship, deeper than that typically shared by male friends in our society today. However, some of the words that Antonio uses suggest a stronger bond: "My purse, my person, my extremest means lie all unlocked to your occasions." For me, Antonio's meaning is clear. Paraphrasing like actors often do in preparing a role, I interpret this line as "I will lend you whatever money I can; my body lies open to your needs; and I will do whatever I possibly can to help you." Bassanio's feelings on the matter, however, remain somewhat enigmatic. He does not respond directly to Antonio's words but instead launches into an account of his school days, with an obscure metaphor about shooting arrows; even the love-blinded Antonio recognizes this tale for the circumlocution it is: "You . . . spend but time / To wind about my love with circumstance" (1.1.153-34). Thereafter, we get another look at the nature of their friendship when Salerio and Solanio discuss Antonio's farewell. The older man advises Bassanio to "slubber not business for

my sake” and to offer “fair ostents” of love to Portia, and he is so distraught at the younger man’s departure that his eyes well up with tears, and he can no longer look Bassanio in the face. The two “Salads” seem to be rather gossipy types, making their report of Shylock’s lament, “My daughter! Oh my ducats!” (2.8.15) suspect. However, the specificity of what they report concerning Antonio’s words and actions, coupled with their decision to go and attempt to cheer him up, lend credence to their account.

Some productions explicitly depict a relationship between the two men; some use subtle gestures to suggest such a bond, while others imply that Antonio alone has tender feelings for Bassanio, which the younger man either does not reciprocate or of which he remains blithely unaware. However, I have never seen a production which takes their rapport seriously. Whatever the relationship between the two men, directors and literary critics generally depict it as the “wrong” relationship; Bassanio must cleave to his heterosexual partner in a “correct relationship.” This impasse lies at the heart of Alan Sinfield’s argument: “[F]or most audiences and readers, the air of ‘happy ending’ suggests that Bassanio’s movement towards heterosexual relations is in the necessary, the right, direction (like Shylock’s punishment perhaps)” (120). Of course, if a production were to present the two men as partners in a committed, mutually satisfying relationship, the question would still remain; why does Bassanio pursue Portia in the first place? I believe his intentions are purely pecuniary. The legal marriage that he can share with Portia will give him jurisdiction over her money, and Bassanio’s riches will flow through his bank account as well as his veins. However, when Antonio falls into the perilous clutches of Shylock’s bond, perhaps Bassanio realizes just how much he loves the older

man. In the final moments of the play, therefore, Bassanio could look sorrowfully back at Antonio as he exits with Portia.

Concerning the courtroom scene, I have laid out three options for Portia's awareness of the jot of blood clause: (1) She knows about this bit of law from the outset and deliberately seeks to trap Shylock, (2) She thinks of the clause on the spot, in a sudden epiphany or discovery, or (3) She knows what the law is but genuinely urges Shylock to relinquish his hold on Antonio in order to save him. I completely disagree with using the first option as it makes Portia far too unsympathetic and conniving. The second choice can be very engaging and highly dramatic in performance. If everyone on the stage remains convinced that Antonio is about to die and nothing can be done about it, Portia's sudden realization can be spectacularly theatrical. However, I endorse the third option as the most valid. Portia has previously told Nerissa that she has "a thousand raw tricks" at her disposal. I believe she, and only she,²⁷ knows about the "escape clause," but hopes that its use not be necessary. Thus the mercy speech should dramatize Portia's sincere attempt to convince Shylock. Confident in her ability to sway him, she never imagines that she will need to employ the legal loophole that Bellario has identified.

The second obscure clause she raises in the courtroom, which prohibits an alien from plotting to murder a Venetian, becomes more problematic to stage. Up until this moment in the trial, Portia could have simply let Shylock go. She has saved Antonio's life and ensured that Shylock not get his money, seemingly retribution enough for his actions. However, Portia continues to heap revenge on Shylock, ensuring that he lose his

²⁷ Excepting, of course, Bellario.

fortune and leaving his life at the mercy of the Duke. Under Portia's proclamation, Shylock must give half his goods to Antonio, half to the state, and he faces possible execution. Why does she exhume this arcane statute? Perhaps Portia feels that the punishment does not fit the crime of attempted murder. Moreover, she seems to be certain—just as she was earlier that Shylock would see reason and be merciful—that the Duke will show mercy: “. . . the offender's life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke” and “Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke” (4.1.353, 361). The Duke does indeed set aside the death sentence and agrees to decrease the fine if Shylock shows sufficient humility. However, Antonio adds insult to injury by ensuring that all of Shylock's assets go to Lorenzo and that Shylock be forced to convert to Christianity. Arguably an Elizabethan audience might have seen Shylock's forced conversion as an act of mercy designed to save Shylock's soul, although this reading is quite controversial. However, clearly, no contemporary, Post-Holocaust audience would interpret Antonio's demand in that way. Shylock's forced conversion, however, is not Portia's idea; I think she is horrified at Antonio's demand and never expected things to spiral so badly out of control. Out of her element in the male bastion of a Venetian courtroom, she gets caught up in the malice of the environment and raises the second obscure clause. Moreover, by now she realizes that she does not have her husband's unwavering devotion; he is still in love with his former flame.

As for the ring “episode,” perhaps Portia is not so angry that Bassanio gave the ring away but that he gave the ring away at Antonio's behest. The script specifies that she exit on “Well, peace be with you,” after her husband has refused to part with the ring. Antonio then makes his case to his friend: “My lord Bassanio, let him have the ring / Let

his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.447-49). I would like to stage this scene in such a way that Portia overhears Antonio's comment. Thus she would know exactly why the ring was relinquished, in a sense, that Bassanio placed his obligation to Antonio above his allegiance to his wife. If Portia does not have a specific reason to be upset with her husband, she can appear excessively peevish and mean-spirited in act five. Moreover, if the solution to this crux is to reduce Portia's testing of Bassanio in act five to light-hearted teasing, the merriment makes light of Shylock's calamity.

Is it really possible to have comic resolution in this play? The three young couples will go off to their respective bedrooms, presumably to copulate and reproduce, the typical comedic ending that promises rebirth and renewal. Antonio's ships have come in and his finances have been restored to their former state. However, all is not well; almost everyone has treated others deplorably. Portia, Antonio, and the Duke have destroyed Shylock. Bassanio has taken advantage of his friend's kindness and betrayed his wife's trust, and Shylock is guilty of attempted murder.

As the play ends, we can see that, despite Gratiano's bawdy pun, felicity is certain to be absent a while. Antonio has lost his dear friend; Shylock has been forcibly converted to Christianity and left destitute; and Jessica and Lorenzo seem to be trapped in a doomed marriage, much like the ill-fated lovers they enumerate at the start of act five. Bassanio has Portia's wealth to enjoy but has lost the trust and good will of his loving wife, and Portia has lost her innocence and her idealism.

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Appendix

List of Productions

Although not exhaustive, this list of productions discussed in chapter two comprises a variety of performances from a wide-range of venues, approaches, and locations. I selected productions for inclusion based on a desire to maintain variety, because the productions were of especial historical significance, or because there simply was good, reliable information available about them.

Year	Portia	Director	Location or Company
1596	Unknown	Lord Chamberlain's Men	The Theatre
1605	Unknown	The King's Men	Whitehall
1701	Anne Bracegirdle	George Granville (<i>The Jew of Venice</i>)	Lincoln's Inn Fields
1741	Kitty Clive	Charles Macklin	Drury Lane
1784	Sarah Siddons	John Philip Kemble	Drury Lane
1836	Helen Faucit	Charles Kemble	Covent Garden
1839	Helen Faucit	William Charles Macready	Haymarket
1869	Mrs. J.J. Prior	Brougham	Burlesque on Broadway
1879	Ellen Terry	Henry Irving	Lyceum
1903	Meta Maynard	Jacob Adler	American Theatre – NY
1905	Concetta Arcamone	Antonio Maiori	People's Theatre - NY
1905	Julia Marlowe	E.H. Sothern	US tour
1905-21	Elsie Heims Agnes Sorma	Reinhardt	Germany
1906	Carlisle and Elsie Ferguson)	H. Beerbohm Tree	His Majesty's Theatre
1907	Olga Giannini	Ermete Novelli	First Italy, then NY
1921	Mary Hall	Walter Hampden	Broadhurst, NY
1925	Ethel Barrymore	Walter Hampden	Hampden Theatre
1928	Peggy Wood	George Arliss	Broadhurst, NY
1938	Peggy Ashcroft	John Gielgud	Queen's
1938	Helen Hayes	Unclear (Abraham Sofaer played Shylock)	Erlanger Theatre, Chicago
1953	Peggy Ashcroft	Michael Redgrave	Shakespeare Memorial Theatre

1954-5	Katherine Hepburn	Robert Helpmann	Australian tour
1955	Frances Hyland	Tyrone Guthrie	Ontario
1957	Katherine Hepburn	Morris Carnovsky	Stratford, CT
1960	Dorothy Tutin	Michael Langham	RSC
1961	Jacqueline Brookes	Allen Fletcher	San Diego
1961	Marjorie Jones	James W. Yeater	Phoenix
1962	Nan Martin	Joseph Papp	Central Park
1962	Gunn Wällgren	Alf Sjöberg	Stockolm
1965	Janet Suzman	Clifford Williams	RSC Stratford
1966	Le Clanche du Rand Morgan	Albert H. Nadeau	Colorado
1967	Barbara Baxley	Michael Kahn	Stratford, CT
1970	Maureen O'Brien	Jean Gascon	National Theatre of Canada
1970	Kate Webster	Lawrence Carra	Great Lakes
1970	Joan Plowright	Jonathan Miller	Old Vic
1971	Judi Dench and Susan Fleetwood	Terry Hands	RSC
1972	Rosel Zech	Peter Zadek	Berlin
1973	Penelope Windust	Eric Christmas	San Diego
1973	Rosemary Harris	Ellis Rabb	Lincoln Center, NY
1974	Lee McClland	Earl McCarroll	Maine
1976	Marjorie Bland	John Barton	RSC – Other Place
1977	Thelma Holt	Charles Morowitz	Open Space, London
1978	Maya Stancikas	Malcolm Morrison	North Carolina
1978	Lynn Fitzpatrick	Martin L. Platt	Alabama
1979	Kate Versey	Michael Attenborough	Young Vic
1981	Sinead Cusack	John Barton	RSC
1986	Sigourney Weaver	Jim Simpson	Classic Stage Company, NY
1987	Deborah Findlay	Bill Alexander	RSC
1987	Elizabeth Millbank	Ian Wooldridge	Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh
1988	Kelly McGillis	Michael Langham	Washington DC
1989	Geraldine James	Peter Hall	RSC and Washington
1989	Seana McKenna	Michael Langham	Ontario
1990	Lois Harvey	Tim Luscombe	English Shakespeare Co.
1992	Lauren Kerr	Ralph Alan Cohen	Shenandoah Shakespeare
1992	Erica Blanc	Luigi Squarzina	Teatro Nazionale, Roma
1993	Gláucia Rodrigues	C. T. Gonzaga	Brazil
1993	Penny Downie	David Thacker	RSC
1994	Cláudio Torres Gonzaga	Peter Sellars	Chicago
1994	Unknown	Kaoru Edo (<i>The Woman Merchant of Venice</i>)	Japan
1994	Unknown	Omri Nitzan	Israel
1996	Susan Coyne	Marti Maraden	Ontario
1998	Kathryn Pogson	Richard Olivier	London Globe

1999	Derbhle Crotty	Trevor Nunn	RSC
1999	Laura Marinoni	Stéphane Braunschweig	Teatro Piccolo, Milan
2001	Lucy Peacock	Richard Monette	Ontario
2001	Jubilith Moore	Erin Merritt	Woman's Will
2005	Kate Fry	Barbara Gaines	Chicago Shakespeare Co
2005	Stella Fyrogeni	Kyriazis Varnavas	Cyprus
2005	Kara Goldman	Lisa Wolpe	Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Co.
2006	Claire Christie	Jeff Watkins	New American Shakespeare Tavern
2006	Stacia Rice	Michelle Hensley	10,000 Things – Minneapolis
2006	Isabel Pollen	None (actors)	Actors from the London Stage
2007	Michelle O'Neill	Joe Dowling	Guthrie – Minneapolis
2007	Kirsty Besterman	Rebecca Gatward	London Globe
2007	Severn Thompson	Richard Rose	Ontario
2007	Kate Forbes	Darko Tresnjak	Theatre for New Audience
2008	Georgina Rich	Tim Carroll	RSC Stratford
2009	Kelsey Brookfield	Ed Hall	Watermill/BAM, etc
2009	Marni Penning	Jim Helsinger	Orlando
2009	Ruth Thompson	Alexa Christopher Daniels	Edinburgh Fringe
2009	Emily Robin Fink	Seth Duerr	York Shakespeare Co.
2009	Loredana Scaramella	Loredana Scaramella	Globe Theatre, Rome, Italy
2010	Lily Rabe	Al Pacino	Delacorte Theatre

Films and Television

1972	Maggie Smith	Cedric Messina	BBC
1973	Joan Plowright	Jonathan Miller	Made for TV
1980	Gemma Jones	Jack Gold	BBC
2001	Derbhle Crotty	Trevor Nunn	First ran on TV in the UK 12/31/2001
2002	Ngarium Daniels	Don Selwyn	The Maori Merchant of Venice
2005	Lynn Collins	Michael Radford	Sony Picture Classics
2009	Lizzy Carter	Douglas Morse	Films for Humanities and Sciences