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“I Stand for Sovereignty”: Reading Portia
in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English Literature
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ABSTRACT

Portia serves as a complex and often underestimated character in William Shakespeare’s controversial comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. Using the critical methodologies of New Historicism and feminism, this thesis explores Portia’s representation of Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England from 1558 to 1603. Striking similarities exist between character and Queen, including physical description, suitors, marriage issues, and rhetoric. In addition, the tripartite marriage at the play’s conclusion among Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio represents the relationship Elizabeth Tudor formed between her merchant class and her aristocracy. Shylock serves as a representation of a generic or perhaps Catholic threat to England during the early modern era. Moreover, by examining Portia’s language in the trial scene, the play invites audiences to read her as a representative of the learned Renaissance woman, placing special emphasis on the dialectical and rhetorical elements of the language trivium in classical studies. Finally, through a close reading of the mercantile language in the text, Portia can be interpreted as the merchant of the play’s title.

Chapter One

Introduction

Learned women always seem to make men nervous. As recently as our last presidential election, Americans watched as the media and the pundits mustered forces against the sole female candidate, Sen. Hillary Clinton, and effectively ran her out of the Democratic primary race, even though she earned more than eighteen million votes and won every large electoral state, including California, New York, Pennsylvania, and Florida. Interestingly, after Sen. Clinton, a Yale law school graduate, withdrew from the primary, the arguments she used against her rival, Sen. Barack Obama – that he was too inexperienced; that he lacked political seasoning – spouted from the Republican machine and its media mouthpieces like geysers. When they came from a woman, those arguments to some seemed specious; however, when men uttered them, at least 46 percent of the electorate listened.

Throughout history, learned women have faced similar efforts to marginalize or even silence their voices. Aristocrats, zealous Protestant reformers, and common folk shuddered at the thought of Elizabeth Tudor – or any woman – sitting on the throne of England. Protestant churchman John Knox sounded a trumpet blast of vitriol against female leaders, maintaining that they were too weak and feeble to rule, although he somewhat changed his tune when confronted by an outraged Elizabeth, denying that he had directed his misogynistic music specifically toward *her* (Warnicke 60-61). Fortunately for England, there were no democratic elections in the Tudor era, only

coronation ceremonies where blood heirs of anointed monarchs received their blessings from God and the peers of the realm. Perhaps one of the richest ironies of Tudor England stems from the fact that Henry VIII, obsessed with fathering a male heir, somewhat reluctantly named his daughters as rightful claimants to the throne in his Third Succession Act of 1543. Murderer of two wives, father of two queens, Henry somehow possessed the foresight to leave his kingdom to his daughters, a move which likely changed the path of English history forever. Of course, Henry assumed that his young son Edward, his first heir to the throne, would live long and father many offspring, thereby negating his daughters' claims; Henry also assumed that he would father more legitimate children with his succeeding wives. Neither happened. Still, Henry seemed more concerned with protecting the Tudor line than with whether a woman or a man sat on the throne; moreover, he probably reasoned that his daughters' husbands, if either of the two women ascended the throne, would rule in their stead (Warnicke 47-55). No man, however, would rule Elizabeth; she alone steered England for forty-five years, stabilizing the nascent nation and molding it into a European powerhouse.

Henry's enigmatic behavior may derive from the many learned women who surrounded him all of his life. His grandmother, the Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond, was one of the earliest learned women in England. In an era when most gentlewomen were illiterate, Lady Margaret wrote in English and in French; in addition, she could read French and enough Latin to follow a church service (Warnicke 11). Henry's doomed second wife, Anne Boleyn, mother of Elizabeth, enjoyed the reputation of a refined, intelligent woman. Even Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, mother of Mary Tudor, was considered a learned woman (Warnicke 32). Not surprisingly, both of

Henry's daughters received the finest education from the finest available tutors and were equal in all intellectual aspects to educated men, writing and speaking in Latin and Greek, translating verse, and using their impressive rhetorical skills to maneuver their kingdoms to their own ends.

Learned women existed not only in real life but also in the fiction of the age. No stranger to creating memorable female characters, William Shakespeare crafted Portia, the heroine of his most well-known comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, as a strong, independent woman intent on managing the men in her life to suit her own desires. Portia graciously juggles odd-ball suitors while maintaining fidelity to her father's will; she interprets law and argues logically during a trial in which she saves a man's life; and she picks the aristocrat and Venetian Bassanio as her lifelong mate, making sure that he understands from the start that she rules the roost (and manages the ducats). Perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare's female characters – with the possible exception of Cleopatra – Portia represents the ideal of the independent, intelligent learned woman, and it is within this context that I believe Portia should be interpreted.

One of Shakespeare's most complex and controversial works, *Merchant* presents an enigma to many scholars intent on unraveling its meaning. On the surface, the play appears to conform to the format of the typical early modern festive comedy: it features several simultaneous plot structures, including the "pound of flesh" conflict and Bassanio's wooing of Portia, and it juxtaposes a hazardous real world oozing with strife with a bucolic green world where music and bliss abound. By the play's end, the boy gets the girl; both get the ducats; and all the admirable characters seem happy. However, like peeling an onion, as we begin to peel the layers of *Merchant*, we begin to discover some

atypical complexity: Is this a play about love, or money? Is it a festive comedy, a tragicomedy, or a problem play? Shylock, perhaps the most studied character in the drama, likely would not find the play comic. What about the other characters? Over the decades, Shylock has taken scholarly center stage, but other characters in the play offer rich mining for critical meaning as well. For example, is Antonio really in love with Bassanio, or does their relationship simply epitomize the Renaissance bond of male friendship? Is Jessica truly a cruel, disobedient daughter or a just young woman deeply in love? Indeed, *Merchant* vexes audiences and scholars alike with layers of possible interpretations and with some deliciously intriguing characters, the most intriguing of whom, I argue, is Portia.

For all the scholarly wealth that Portia offers, she has received relatively little attention compared with Shylock, who has fascinated critics and directors for centuries. Fortunately, her star has risen in the past several decades, thanks primarily to feminist scholarship. However, a review of the literature reveals that interpretations of Portia read like so much buckshot, presenting an oxymoronic portrait of this complex figure: critics paint her as an “unruly woman” and as an obedient daughter; as the consummate teacher and the willing student; as a representative of mercy and the divine and as a master manipulator; as an emblem of the court of Chancery and as an emblem of the world of the aristocracy; as a dominant woman and as an acquiescent wife who skips happily back to hearth, home, and hubby, no questions asked. This scholarship, however meaningful, seems a bit off target, and I would submit that few, if any, of these interpretations cut to Portia’s core. I suggest that we need a fresh reading of Portia, a reading that combines the very good feminist scholarship that has recently emerged in tandem with New

Historicism, a critical method that, unfortunately, often seems to ignore female characters. This combination of New Historicism and feminism might grant us additional insight into Portia and help us to “peel away” the outer layers of this intriguing and powerful character to reveal her core.

New Historicist readings of *Merchant* are plentiful, including Walter Cohen’s seminal 1982 work entitled “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism,” but very few focus on Portia, singling out Shylock instead. Several scholars agree that Shylock represents the ill-fated Dr. Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s Portuguese-Jewish physician who, suspected of treason, was sent to the block by the Earl of Essex, who ironically followed him a few years later. Other critics have stretched a scholarly bridge between Portia’s suitors and famous writers by arguing that Boccaccio served as the model for the Neapolitan Prince; Spenser for the County Palatine; and Montaigne for Monsieur Le Bon (Kuhns and Tovey 327-328). In addition, one historian, in a piece that should only be read satirically, posits that Elizabeth herself wrote Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech and had it forcibly inserted into the play after she realized her mistake in signing Dr. Lopez’s death warrant (Baker 29). The last reference aside, most of the historical comparisons drawn by critics make sense, and they serve a meaningful scholarly purpose. But one historical comparison, the one that I believe makes the most sense of all, has yet to be clearly and unambiguously presented: Portia, one of Shakespeare’s most empowered female characters, serves as a representation of Elizabeth Tudor, undoubtedly England’s premier woman in the early modern era.

In my reading of *Merchant*, I will attempt to draw this historical comparison. Using a combination of feminist and New Historicist scholarship, I will assert that Portia

is a complex, strong, and layered character and therefore should be interpreted as such. First, I will maintain that Portia can be identified with Elizabeth Tudor and that the play offers numerous clues to support this interpretation. During the 1580s and 1590s, as England quickly expanded its merchant class, Elizabeth strove to join, or “marry,” the rising capitalist sector of the country with the landed but relatively poor aristocracy through unofficially sanctioned high-seas pirating. Indeed, Cohen and other scholars such as Burton Hatlen have alluded to the multiple strategies that exist within *Merchant*, including the characterizations of Antonio and Bassanio as representatives for the bourgeois and for the landed aristocracy, respectively. I will develop those allusions by suggesting that the historical mercantile-aristocratic marriage that Elizabeth sanctioned is represented through the tripartite “marriage” that Portia performs among Bassanio, Antonio, and herself in the play’s final act. Moreover, I will also posit that Elizabeth, as an eligible single monarch, played coy with numerous suitors from foreign lands in an effort to forge alliances while at the same time maintaining her independence, just as Portia graciously receives her brood of foreign suitors while subtly shooing them off. Furthermore, I will connect Portia’s arranged marriage with the restrictions placed on Elizabeth’s marital choice by her father’s will and by her Privy Council; likewise, I will forge a link between Bassanio as Portia’s chosen mate and Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, Elizabeth’s longtime favorite who at one time was considered the likely choice as the queen’s consort. In addition, I will maintain that as England’s female sovereign during the early modern era, Elizabeth had to walk a tightrope between her public position as an authoritative, competent ruler and her private role as a submissive, inferior female. Shakespeare illustrates this dichotomy in the contrast between the bucolic,

feminized green world of Belmont and the rough-and-tumble streets of Venice. In Belmont, Portia behaves as any female monarch might at home: she rules the roost, albeit through coyness and coercion, the strategies that Elizabeth employed to control her Privy Council. But when she steps into the male world of Venice, which arguably represents the patriarchal halls of the English government, Portia must “put on the pants” to command authority. Similarly, several Elizabethan scholars remark that the Queen frequently referred to herself as a man. Elizabeth’s famous Tilbury speech before the rag-tag militia positioned to fend off the Spanish Armada, in which she proclaimed: “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too,…” (Weir 393), offers a salient example of this strategy. Moreover, I also will contend that Shakespeare’s descriptions of Portia with her “golden locks” can be interpreted as a description of Elizabeth Tudor with her famous red-gold hair. Finally, I will argue that the settings in *Merchant – Venice*, Belmont, and the unseen marital bedroom – correlate to the Queen’s Presence Chamber, Privy Chamber, and Withdrawing Chamber.

Deepening the interpretation, I also will suggest that the play invites audiences to see Portia not only as a representation of Elizabeth Tudor but also as a portrait of the learned Renaissance woman. Educated, refined, gracious, intelligent, and alluring, Portia, like Elizabeth Tudor, represents all that men held in awe – and feared – in educated women of the early modern era. Although the following comments were written about a young Elizabeth by her Cambridge tutor, they certainly can be applied to Portia or to any learned Renaissance woman: “ the praise which Aristotle gives, wholly centres in her; beauty, stature, prudence, and industry...her mind has no womanly weakness, her

perseverance is equal to that of a man, and her memory long keeps what it quickly picks up...she delights as much in music as she is skilful in it ” (Neale 14). Furthermore, I will argue that in the play, Portia represents the “masculine” subjects of rhetoric and dialectic, two-thirds of the language trivium in classical studies, as opposed to the “feminine” subject of grammar, the final third in the trivium. In the early modern era, women were often restricted to learning only grammar (Gibson 11); however, I contend that Portia’s logic-driven trial speech in which she unravels Shylock’s claim to the bond allows audiences to see that women were capable of such high-brow rhetorical exercises.

Finally, I will submit that the “merchant” in Shakespeare’s highly ambiguous title refers not to Antonio or Shylock, as traditional critics attest, but to Portia. Indeed, it is Portia who orchestrates her choice of husband in the casket scene; Portia who, using her intelligence, cunningly maneuvers the Duke and Shylock in order to achieve the outcome at the trial that she desires; Portia who makes clear at the play’s end that she controls Belmont’s mountains of ducats as well as her husband Bassanio; Portia who conjures Antonio’s argosies intact. If anyone is the merchant here, it must be Portia, for she is the one making all the deals.

As we peel away the layers, we see Portia as a representative of many figures: as England’s Queen; as a learned Renaissance woman, who could have brains and a husband, too, and on her own terms; and as the merchant controlling the financial interests in Venice and in Belmont. Perhaps Shakespeare’s title is not so ambiguous after all.

Examined holistically, *Merchant* does not fit neatly into the traditional types of early modern comedies. Although it contains elements of the festive comedy, such as the

disordered real world of Venice and the feminized green world of Belmont, as well as the three marriages at the play's end, the drama disseminates a decidedly dark tone.

Shylock's treatment perhaps pushes the play into the genre of tragicomedy or problem play; however, if we read *Merchant* as a multilayered work, we then might view the play as an interrogative drama, a term coined by Norman Rabkin. Rabkin suggests that Shakespeare's plays, particularly this one, refuse to offer audiences and critics one clear meaning. Instead, Rabkin posits that plays such as *Merchant* force us to formulate questions that we cannot answer simply (30-31). Using Rabkin's thesis as a springboard, I contend that we can identify the numerous similarities that Shakespeare draws between his heroine and England's sovereign, similarities that previous critics seem to have overlooked.

The figure of Portia has always stirred controversy. According to Linda Rozmovits, in October of 1887 the British publication *Girl's Own Paper* invited readers to participate in a series of writing competitions on a great English author. For the first contest, the subject was "My favourite heroine from Shakespeare" (441). The response – both quantity and quality – overwhelmed the publication's editors; moreover, the editors noted that Shakespearean heroines who "successfully overcome their troubles have been six times more popular than those whose end is tragic." Not surprising, the contest's most popular heroine was Portia: more than a third of the competition's papers were devoted to her (Rozmovits 442). Despite young, nineteenth-century women's adoration of her, Rozmovits writes that the character of Portia constituted a site of struggle for Victorians: feminists praised her performance as a lawyer while anti-feminists deplored her apparent submission to her husband at the play's end (441).

More than one hundred years later, the struggle over Portia's character continues: the scholarship, primarily feminist criticism, seems to see-saw between seeing her as a strong woman and a manipulative ingénue. Perhaps this scholarly see-sawing has more to do with Shakespeare's use of language in the play than anything else; a device, perhaps, to appease his patriarchal audiences. In any case, critics cannot seem to decide whether Portia is a strong, independent woman or a subservient female moving from one dependent relationship to another. For instance, Clara Claiborne Park asserts that it is not surprising that Shakespeare, the greatest Elizabethan, was attracted by the qualities of his sovereign; in addition, Park remarks that Portia alone among Shakespeare's heroines is allowed to confront a man over matters outside the traditional sphere of a woman – and to win, not unlike Elizabeth. However, Park is less convincing when she interprets the play's title, maintaining that “no feminine name appears in (Shakespeare's) titles except as the second member of a male-female pair” (101-109). On the surface, Park may be correct; however, I contend that the “Merchant” in the title refers to the dominant, powerful woman whom Park praises, which is a link that previous critics have not forged.

Likewise, Corrine Abate comments that because Portia is the only child of a dead father and the sole owner and director of Belmont, she does not possess any “dependent and submissive inclination,” traits typically associated with women (283). Vera Jiji posits that Portia's drive for power seems to be one of her most persistent traits throughout the play; furthermore, Jiji maintains that audiences do not notice Portia's domination because she uses it for benevolent means (7). Keith Geary argues that in the casket scene, Portia makes her suitors look like fools; the scene, he observes, emphasizes Portia's superiority to her suitors and her ability to “deal with them directly,” without the aid of a man.

Furthermore, Geary maintains that Portia and her waiting woman, Nerissa, present a “united front to the world of men” (57). However, in midstream, Geary, like other critics, seems to change course, insisting that the empowered Portia at the end morphs into a subordinate wife, moving from one dependent economic relationship to another (63). Karoline Szatek seizes upon the economic connection between the play and the Elizabethan court, referring to Portia as a “sovereign,” a “vigorous tradeswoman,” and a “successful merchant,” although she stops short of naming Portia as *the* merchant in the play’s title or of connecting her to Elizabeth (335-348).

Some critics view Portia as a manipulator; John Velz compares her with Medea, even quoting a “postmodern cynic” who calls Portia a “scheming vixen” (183-184). Carol Leventen continues the dichotomous interpretations by contending that Shakespeare aimed both to evoke and assuage cultural anxieties, which were intensified by Portia’s intelligence and neutralized by her deference to patriarchal norms (62). Furthermore, Leventen asserts that Portia perceives herself solely in relation to her father’s will; the obedient daughter never “voices anger” at her father for arranging the casket “game of chance” (67). However, a close reading of the text reveals that Portia does feel some resentment at being constrained by her father’s will: “I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?” (1.2.22-26). Nerissa, however, quickly defends the tactics of Portia’s father for choosing his daughter’s husband by calling him “ever virtuous” (1.2.27). Despite this resentment, Leventen correctly observes that Portia accepts her father’s will (in both of its meanings), and I will associate Portia’s acceptance with Elizabeth Tudor’s princely acceptance of her

father's legal statute naming her third in line to the throne behind her step-brother Edward and step-sister Mary, a move that thereby erased some – if not all – hope of a companionate marriage.

Recently, several unpublished master's theses have attempted to link Portia to Elizabeth I, although only one offers a clear New Historicist reading and a definite connection between character and Queen. In her intriguing New Historicist interpretation written in 1992 and entitled *Queen O'er Myself : A Study of Portia's Identity as Elizabeth I*, Shannon Prosser interprets Portia as existing in a situation similar to that of Elizabeth: the dilemma of a woman in a position of inherited power (5). She also sees Belmont as representing Elizabeth's monarchy, a "fantasy of absolute female rulership" (6) and reads Bassanio not as a potential lover and husband but as an emblem of Elizabeth's subjects, asserting that both Bassanio and the Tudor queen's subjects sought maternal security from Portia and Elizabeth, respectively (7). Prosser also makes reference to Portia's authoritative language in her use of such words as "queen" and "lord."

Oddly, New Historicist readings of Shakespeare's female characters have received short shrift from scholars, perhaps because the critical methodology is relatively new, or perhaps because critics choose not to search for strong Renaissance women with whom to align Shakespeare's dominant female characters. However, New Historicism, blended with the enlightening feminist scholarship that has emerged in the past three to four decades, seems an ideal match for interpreting some of these dramatically powerful women. A solid scholarly foundation has been laid regarding Shakespeare's relationships with courtiers such as Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton and

Shakespeare's patron and possible lover, and Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex; using that foundation, it seems reasonable to assume that the dramatist engaged in discussions with these men about the political and social machinations of the Tudor court. Why, then, should we be surprised if his work reflects these machinations?

In his 1982 article, Cohen set the stage for New Historicist readings of *Merchant* by arguing that audiences and scholars should view the play as a symptom of a problem in the life of late sixteenth-century England (767). However, Cohen and others who examine the play through a New Historicist lens tend to focus primarily on the drama's economics and its relationship to the issue of usury in early modern England. For example, Cohen writes that historical critics of *Merchant* see Shylock as the embodiment of capitalism; England was transitioning from a feudal to a capitalist society, and banking, credit, and lending were all on the rise, thus creating uncertainty. Moreover, Cohen reads *Merchant* as a pro-capitalist play and argues that Shakespeare criticizes only the worst aspects of the emerging economic system (767-768). In perhaps his most insightful critique, Cohen links Antonio with the coming of modern capitalism and contends that the play's concluding tripartite unity of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia allows the landed aristocracy, represented by Bassanio, to assume a harmonic but dominant role with and over the mercantile class (772). Cohen comments that Shakespeare's goal is to "rebind what had been torn asunder into a new unity under aristocratic leadership" (777).

In contrast to Cohen, Marxist critic Burton Hatlen combines the focus on the feudal and bourgeois concepts in *Merchant* with Rabkin's idea of "complementarity, the capacity to hold simultaneously in mind two contrasting sets of ideas about the world," to

posit that Shakespeare was deeply engaged with the social and political issues of his time and therefore wrote *Merchant* as a critique of capitalism. To Hatlen, the play's appeal to feudalism stems simply from Shakespeare's use of dialectics, a strategy the playwright frequently employs to make his audiences think about the emerging issues of their time (101-102).

Finally, Stephen Greenblatt offers an intriguing New Historicist perspective on how Shakespeare came to create the character of Shylock. In *Will in the World*, Greenblatt contends that the dramatist likely witnessed the bloody execution of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, Elizabeth's physician who was found guilty of attempting to poison his mistress. Before the axe fell, Greenblatt quotes Elizabethan historian William Camden as recording Dr. Lopez declaring that " he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ " (277). This statement, according to Camden, prompted laughter from the crowd. Greenblatt seizes upon this reputed piece of history to insist that Shakespeare attempts not only to capture that death-scene laughter in the play's comedic elements but also attempts to unsettle audiences by portraying Shylock as a feeling, thinking, bleeding human being. Greenblatt identifies *Merchant's* trial scene, in which Shylock is stripped of most of his money and is forced to convert to Christianity, as the dramatic equivalent of Dr. Lopez's execution (286). Audiences want to laugh – this is a comedy, after all – but instead end up feeling queasy at Shylock's treatment.

Like other scholars, Greenblatt argues that Shylock is the play's most dominant character and insists that "almost everyone thinks that the merchant of Venice of the play's title is Shylock" (257). However, I will assert that if Shylock can be read as the merchant of the play's title, then Portia can be as well, and with stronger reason.

Furthermore, if Greenblatt can speculate that Shakespeare based the character of Shylock on a historical figure such as Dr. Lopez, then I will speculate that the dramatist could just as easily have based the character of Portia on another historical figure: Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England.

Chapter Two

Portia as Portrait of Elizabeth Tudor

In May of 1553, only five years before she would ascend to the throne of England, Elizabeth Tudor, second daughter of Henry VIII, rode into London to acknowledge her step-sister Mary's coronation on the death of their half-brother, Edward. In his biography of Elizabeth, John Neale describes the scene by observing that the princess was just twenty and in the full bloom of life: "some thought her very handsome, others rather comely than handsome...her hair was golden, but more red than yellow; her skin very fine, though of an olive complexion...she had striking eyes, and above all, beautiful hands which she knew how to display" (28). Perhaps her hair, hands, and eyes were her most striking attributes. Alison Weir, another of Elizabeth's biographers, writes that her eyes were "bright and piercing, beneath thin, arched eyebrows, but their colour is still a matter for dispute. If she was not conventionally attractive, she certainly had a definite charm that attracted men; not all her courtiers' flattery proceeded from sycophancy" (16).

Although *Merchant* does not offer a detailed physical description of Portia, several lines do allude to her appearance, specifically to her hair and eyes. Early in the play, when describing Portia to Antonio, Bassanio speaks of his rich lady as having "sunny locks" that "hang on her temples like a golden fleece" (1.1.169-170); moreover, he reveals to his friend that he sometimes receives "fair speechless messages" from her eyes (1.1.163-164). Later, when Bassanio chooses the correct casket and receives Portia's

hand in marriage, he joyously refers to her portrait by noting that “Here in her hairs/The painter plays the spider, and hath woven/A golden mesh t’entrap the hearts of men” (3.2.120-122); a few lines later he refers to her eyes and asks how the portrait painter could have been seen to paint both: “Having made one,/Methinks it should have power to steal both his/And leave itself unfurnished” (124-126).

Morocco, one of Portia’s many failed suitors, briefly describes the lady of Belmont as “fair Portia” (2.7.47) as he muses to himself over which casket to choose before he ultimately selects the golden casket, which does not contain Portia’s portrait. However, what is most intriguing about Morocco’s musings is not his description of Portia or his failed choice; instead, it is his seemingly off-hand reference to a gold coin. As he rationalizes to himself the choice of casket, Morocco remarks that “They have in England/A coin that bears the figure of an angel/Stamped in gold, but that’s insculp’d upon;/But here an angel in a golden bed/Lies all within” (2.7.55-59). *Merchant’s* editor, David Bevington, glosses the word “coin” as an instrument of money known as “the angel, which bore the device of the archangel Michael treading on the dragon” (198). However, I posit that the reference could also be to the English coins that undoubtedly bore the stamp of the Queen, a hidden internal comparison between Elizabeth, the “figure of an angel,” and Portia, an “angel” in a golden bed, or casket.

Portia’s physical attributes establish only one of the many similarities we see between character and Queen in *Merchant*. The locales within the play – Venice, Belmont, and Portia’s clandestine bedchamber – can also be interpreted as representing the royal Presence Chamber, Privy Chamber, and Withdrawing Chamber. According to Richard Horwich, Venice is “indeed the public sphere,” associated with mercantile

activity (191). Thus, when Portia ventures into Venice, she disguises herself as a man in order to fit into this very public – and patriarchal – scene. Her waiting woman, Nerissa, displays shock at this idea: “Why, shall we turn to men?” (3.5.78). Portia chastises Nerissa for the bawdy reference and replies that “I’ll tell thee all my whole device” when she and Nerissa are in the coach on their way to Venice (3.5.81). Portia’s plan of “putting on the pants,” which allows her to be measured not by her curves and charms but by her brain, creates physical equilibrium for her in the public sphere of Venice. In the early modern era, a woman, no matter how learned, could not practice law or argue before a court simply because of her gender. Ironically, in the public square of the royal Presence Chamber, where the monarch met heads of state, diplomats, Parliament, and pretenders to the throne, Elizabeth would have depended upon those coming before her to view her not as a woman but as a prince, a divinely-appointed sovereign who ruled not with the heart but with the head. Indeed, government in the mid- to late-sixteenth century was a masculine business, and the royal household remained “a great masculine community” (Neale 64). Several of Elizabeth’s biographers, Neale included, attest to Elizabeth’s frequent practice of referring to herself in masculine terms, a necessary balancing act in the patriarchal environment within which she ruled. Although some historians believe that Elizabeth’s Tilbury speech was written after her death, the pep-talk to the militia during the Spanish Armada crisis is still viewed by many biographers as perhaps the most vivid example of her referring to herself as a man.

If Venice can be interpreted as the Presence Chamber, where Portia and Elizabeth must allow their masculine traits to dominate, then Belmont can be interpreted as the Privy Chamber, where only those closest to the sovereign are allowed entrance. Belmont

represents a dramatic green world where advice is given and taken, lovers and friends come and go, and conflicts are settled as amicably as possible. There, Portia entertains suitors, receives advice from her waiting woman, and allows Jessica and Lorenzo to set up house. Portia has no need to “put on the pants” in Belmont as she does when she travels to Venice; instead, music plays softly into the cool night, and golden hair is undone, at least a little. Like Belmont, Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber provided a safe place where she talked with councilors and those who had special access to her; she also played cards or chess and perhaps played on the virginals (Neale 218). Interestingly, audiences do not get a peek into Portia’s bedchamber in *Merchant*; as well, very few were allowed into Elizabeth’s Withdrawing Chamber, where the Queen passed the time with a small, intimate circle of favorites (Neale 218). Certainly only a very few men – Robert Dudley, perhaps, and Essex later – would have been allowed into her sleeping quarters; similarly, Portia allows only her husband, Bassanio, into her private and mysterious realm.

Of course, before Bassanio, suitors arrive to woo the lady of Belmont. In the critical canon, much has been written about these characters; indeed, the suitors seem to interest critics as least as much as Portia herself. Richard Kuhns and Barbara Tovey assert that Portia’s listing of her discarded suitors early in the play serves no purpose in the work’s dramatic development and maintain that Shakespeare simply wanted audiences to know that Portia had many suitors of high rank from many different countries (325), a situation that corresponds to that of Elizabeth. The pair goes on to posit that the suitors represent actual writers, men who were “the most gifted, influential, and to Shakespeare – we suspect – the most interesting writers of the tradition in which he worked” (326). For instance, in their reading, the Neapolitan prince represents Boccaccio,

since horses and horseback riding are symbolically significant in the *Decameron* (326) and Portia refers to the prince as a “colt” (1.1.39). Their article concludes with the suggestion that Bassanio stands for Shakespeare himself; the critics contend that his “literary predecessors have departed the scene,” and Shakespeare has become heir to the tradition (331). In addition, Gustav Ungerer seizes upon the historical connection between the Prince of Morocco and a Moroccan sultan of the period named Ahmad al-Mansur, who was involved in negotiations with Elizabeth and her court around 1589 (89).

These historical interpretations provide a backdrop from which to link Portia’s suitors to those of Elizabeth Tudor. If Portia is the best marriage candidate available in the world of the play – no fewer than nine suitors vie for her hand, and Morocco states that “all the world desires her” (2.7.38) – then Elizabeth was the best marriage candidate available in Europe, a fact not lost on every eligible bachelor and widower in her world (Neale 69). Some of her suitors included Philip, King of Spain and widower of her half-sister Mary; the King of Sweden’s eldest son Eric; the Archdukes Ferdinand and Charles; and various Englishmen, including the Earl of Arundel and Sir William Pickering; this list reflects a hodgepodge of nationalities not unlike the list of suitors who seek to wed Portia. Indeed, in 1559, only a year after her accession, ten or twelve ambassadors representing foreign suitors competed for Elizabeth’s hand (Neale 72-75). However, as soon as Elizabeth – or Portia – shut the gate on one wooer, another, it seems, came knocking. A young heiress/sovereign would quite likely find all this romancing exhausting: In her first lines of the play, Portia states that “by my troth, Nerissa, my little

body is weary of this great world” (1.2.1-2) and Neale maintains that Elizabeth, too, frequently found courtship “wearing” (76).

Establishing a link between Portia’s numerous suitors and those of Elizabeth seems fairly straightforward. However, I wish to take the marital connections between character and Queen to another critical level. First, I will maintain that Portia’s marital constrictions reflect the restrictions placed on Elizabeth by her father’s will and by her Privy Council and Parliament; second, I will assert that Portia’s rejection of her foreign suitors and her “choice” of a Venetian husband mirror Elizabeth’s reluctance to marry a foreign prince who might have thrown England into religious and political turmoil; and third, I will argue that the edict banning the failed suitors’ future marriages in the play represents Elizabeth’s concern that her rejected suitors would turn to another eligible – and potentially dangerous – sovereign, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth’s rival to the north.

Early in the play, Portia laments that she cannot choose her husband; instead, her father’s will requires her to marry the suitor who chooses the casket that contains her portrait. Portia’s resentment spills into words when she speaks to Nerissa: “Oh, me, the word choose ! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?” (1.2.22-26). Portia cannot choose – “The lott’ry of my destiny/Bars me the right of voluntary choosing” (2.1.15-16) – but she cunningly manipulates the casket scene with Bassanio to help him make the correct selection. Although many critics, foremost among them C.L. Barber, believe that Portia does not control this scene, it seems strikingly apparent that her attendant’s song in Act 3, Scene 2, with three words that rhyme with “lead” – “bred,” “head,” and “nourishe d” – and the

song's reference to a bell, which often is crafted from lead, lead Bassanio to pick the leaden casket (63-72). Moreover, in her speech leading up to the song, Portia uses words that either begin with the letter L or stress the L sound fourteen times (40-61).

In addition, the song itself suggests that lovers should look beyond appearances, as in the shiny gold and silver caskets, and dig deeper to discover substance: "Tell me where is fancy bred,/Or in the heart or in the head?" (3.2.63-64). According to the song, the glitter of outward appearances ultimately dulls: "It is engendered in the eyes,/With gazing fed, and fancy dies" (67-68). A sovereign searching for true companionship undoubtedly would desire her lover to see beyond the jeweled gowns and mountains of ducats; as well, a sovereign also would expect a potential consort to embrace her rule not only over her realm but also over her roost. Bassanio indeed learns quickly to listen to Portia, just as Leicester likely learned early on to heed the demands of his mistress. Moreover, although Portia does guide Bassanio in his choice of casket, she does not technically violate the letter of her father's will; instead, she cleverly maneuvers around the spirit of it to get what she wants: a companionate marriage to a man who, at least on the surface, is as much in love with her as she with him and, perhaps more important, is willing to let his wife maintain power.

Likewise, by the lottery of her destiny as heir to the throne of England, Elizabeth Tudor faced – and also shrewdly evaded – paternal constrictions on her choice of mate, outlined in her dead father's Third Succession Act. In it, Henry VIII settled the crown first on Edward and his heirs "lawfully begotten;" next on any of his own future lawfully begotten children; then finally on his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, and their lawful heirs (Warnicke 53-54). Further, Henry ordered that if either daughter married without

the consent of Edward's Regency Council, they would lose their claim to the throne; moreover, Warnicke observes that by limiting their choice of husbands, who likely would govern for them, Henry could justify permitting his daughters to inherit the crown (54). After Elizabeth became Queen, her Privy Council and Parliament also attempted to control her marital status and choice of mate. As early as 1559, the House of Commons urged her to consider marriage (Neale 74); William Cecil, her beloved and trusted advisor, wrote to his mistress from Scotland that he hoped " God would direct your heart to procure a father for your children, and so shall the children of all your realm bless your seed " (Weir 92). Throughout her reign, the Privy Council and Parliament urged Elizabeth to marry, but like Portia, Elizabeth made her own rules, choosing instead a companionate, long-term relationship with the Earl of Leicester. In both Belmont and the Tudor Court, there was but one mistress and no master.

Portia rejects all of her foreign suitors and instead chooses a Venetian like herself. Indeed, Portia does more than reject: she denigrates all of the suitors except Bassanio, commenting that the County Palatine "frowns" too much; that Monsieur Le Bon mocks everything and anything, including a bird; that Falconbridge cannot speak any language except English; and that the German nephew of the Duke of Saxony is a drunk (1.2.45-85). Furthermore, after Morocco fails in his choice of casket, Portia utters "let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.79). I submit that this rejection and denigration of foreigners in the play represents Elizabeth's political and religious concerns over marrying a foreign prince. After her half-sister Mary announced that she would wed Philip of Spain, the English people reacted violently and negatively, although ultimately, the marriage whiplashed the country back into Catholicism. Elizabeth remembered the

reaction to her sister's union with a foreign prince when she broke off eight years of marriage negotiations with the Archduke Charles, who refused to agree to become a Protestant (Weir 192). The threat of religious and political turmoil in the country if a queen married a foreigner was real; in fact, it was one of the major prejudices against queens regnant. In 1549, the famous Protestant Hugh Latimer reminded Henry in a court sermon of the dangers surrounding the possible succession of his sisters, who might turn to foreigners for husbands. Not only did Englishmen fear yet another change of state religion, they also feared that a foreign king would subvert the laws of their country (Warnicke 54-55).

In the casket ordeal, Portia cautions Morocco before he chooses that if he fails, he must swear "Never to speak to lady afterward/In way of marriage" (2.1.41-42). Unfortunately for him, he agrees; similarly, Aragon vows "Never in my life/To woo a maid in way of marriage" if he fails in his choice (2.9.12-13). What dramatic purpose does this marriage ban serve? Perhaps it increases the play's dramatic tension, but I suspect that a historical connection exists as well. As Elizabeth gingerly closed the door on unwanted suitors, Mary Stuart, anointed Queen, Catholic, and a viable claimant to the English throne, threw hers open. Mary was the widow of the French king Francis II and a worthy catch in her own right. Neale remarks that suitors who had spent time and money wooing Elizabeth were turning to Mary, a woman "less virginal and elusive" (104). Some of the suitors' names circulating on courtiers' lips included Don Carlos of Spain, the Archduke Charles, and the kings of Sweden and Denmark. Any of these princes, if married to the Queen of Scots, would likely regard the English throne as a "tempting morsel" (Neale 104). Elizabeth attempted to manage this serious threat by playing coy

with her suitors and stringing them along until the very last possible moment; eventually, however, many tired of Elizabeth's amorous games and turned to Mary. Keenly aware of this dangerous situation, Elizabeth went so far as to push Leicester as a potential husband for her beautiful Scottish rival. However, the Queen of Scots ultimately married Lord Darnley, an English subject, in 1565 (Neale 130-135). Within this historical context, I contend that *Merchant* accentuates this romantic rivalry between the two Queens through its draconian restrictions on the failed suitors: Elizabeth may have *wanted* to control her rejected suitors' choices of mates; in contrast, Portia does control them through her edict. Indeed, the play can be interpreted as obliquely criticizing Elizabeth for meddling in the romantic affairs of others while neglecting her own. Never being allowed to marry seems a hyperbolically harsh punishment for simply choosing the wrong box.

In the game of love, Portia comes out on top. Without undermining the letter of her father's will, she wins Bassanio. Later, she cunningly lets him know who runs the household and the kingdom. She secures her ring intact – representing loyalty to the feminized monarchy – and at the play's end, she and Bassanio drift into the unseen bedchamber to happily consummate their union. On the other hand, Elizabeth loved a man whom she could not marry, all the while watching him enjoy at least two and possibly three marriages in his lifetime. According to Neale, the Earl of Leicester had competed with princes, staked his throw on the most glittering of all prizes, and lost (252). Near the end of his life, the Earl wrote to William Cecil lamenting his lost love: “almost more than a bondman many a year together, so long as one drop of comfort was left of any hope ” (Neale 252). Both Queen and favorite likely gave up an emotional pound of flesh for their doomed romance, a dear price to pay indeed.

Besides parallels in physical description, locales, and the issues of love and marriage, other comparisons can be drawn between character and Queen. Throughout the play, more frequently than any other character, Portia employs the language of power and ownership. Despite the critics who see her as just another dependent woman moving from one Sugar-Daddy to another, Portia maintains a sense of her own sovereignty even after she marries Bassanio. From the beginning, Portia commands respect through her princely language: “Therefore be advised” she tells Morocco when instructing him about the marriage restriction if he fails the casket test (2.1.42). Later, after she has won Bassanio, she states that she is “Queen o’er myself” as she declares herself and all her worldly goods as belonging to her lover (3.2.169). Although she politely offers her mansion and servants to Bassanio, a few lines later Portia makes clear who unambiguously controls Belmont’s purse strings. When faced with Antonio’s forfeit of the bond, Portia, like a prince, takes charge, demanding: “What, no more?/Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond;/Double six thousand, and then treble that” (3.2.299-300). As Karen Newman points out, these words are not kind offers from a subservient wife; they are commands, enunciated in the declarative voice (32). A few lines later, she again barks orders like a monarch, this time telling Bassanio to “First go with me to church and call me wife” (3.2.303). Throughout the remainder of the play, Portia speaks in the first person singular regarding her goods and property, an odd thing for an early modern woman to do – unless she is a sovereign. For instance, in Act 3, Scene 4 alone, she uses the word “my” to identify her household (line 25), her people (37) and her coach (82), goods and property that should, under early modern law, belong to her husband. In Act 5, after she and Nerissa return from Venice and the trial of Shylock, Portia states that she sees a light

burning in “my hall” (5.1.89); a few lines later, she tells Nerissa to go in and “give order to my servants” (118-119). Finally, in the last lines of the play, with her husband standing next to her, Portia states that she has not yet entered into “my house” (272-273) [Newman 32; emphasis mine]. Bassanio, meanwhile, never utters a contradictory word.

Of course, Elizabeth would have used the royal “we” when speaking of herself or of her possessions. However, the play reverses and highlights the irony of a single woman using “we” by having a married woman use “my.” Furthermore, Prosser argues that Bassanio plans to reverse his and Portia’s power roles after they marry, but that his “unquestioning acceptance” of her commands after the news of Antonio’s forfeit of the bond suggests that he has not forgotten her authority (27). Indeed, no one forgets her authority, just as none of her male Privy Councilors or courtiers forgot Elizabeth Tudor’s authority: through their command of language, neither character nor Queen allows it. Moreover, by using what Prosser calls “nearly identical means” (27), character and Queen achieve similar political ends: they legitimate and maintain their claim to power through the use of precise, masculine language. Small pronouns such as “my” may be easy to overlook, but coming from a married woman in the early modern era, they are the dramatic equivalent of tiny rubies in a queen regnant’s crown.

Indeed, speech plays a crucial role in *Merchant*, particularly with Portia; similarly, speeches played a crucial role with Elizabeth, who was known as an expert linguist whose “baffling powers as a talker justified themselves” (Neale 96). Although similarities between Portia’s and Elizabeth’s rhetorical styles will be examined more fully later in this work, it is prudent for us now to view the play’s trial scene in relation to two historical incidents. In the early modern era, the only weapon a woman had against

the patriarchy was the ability to out-maneuver a man with words. In the trial scene, Portia does just that: she engages in a verbal tango with Shylock and the court and ends up dazzling both to the point of acquiescence. Setting up the trial scene with her longest speech, twenty-two lines, Portia opens the argument with a definition of mercy, imploring Shylock to show mercy toward Antonio and not dissect a portion of his breast (4.1.182-203). Intriguingly, in this speech there are six references to sovereignty: “It becomes/The *throned monarch* better than his *crown*” (186-187); “His *scepter* shows the force of temporal power” (188); “Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of *kings*” (190); and “It is *enthroned* in the hearts of *kings*” (192) [emphasis mine]. Portia’s “quality of mercy” speech, with its frequent references to the monarchy, buttresses the link between character and Queen. Portia ends the trial by forcing Shylock to accept from the court at least what passes for mercy – which he would not give at the beginning of the scene: “Down therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke” (361). Her earlier words, that mercy is “Twice blest:/It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (184-185), ironically haunt the end of the courtroom scene when the defeated and destroyed Shylock states that he is contented. Portia has brought the argument full circle, and won, although whether or not she is truly merciful has been much debated.

Two possible historical connections inform this famous trial scene speech. According to Janet Green, in 1597, Elizabeth, then sixty-three, let loose with an impromptu drubbing of the Polish ambassador in Latin when he insulted her publicly for interfering with his country’s shipping trade with Spain (987). Green writes that “with brief but scorching words, Elizabeth not only annihilated the unfortunate ambassador but reaffirmed her own intellectual and oratorical prowess, and she powerfully demonstrated

her majestic authority” (988). The speech, though short, was recorded in what Green calls “an unusual number of manuscript copies,” which likely attests to its popularity (988). Because of its wide circulation, it is possible that in the speech in the trial scene, the play mimics Elizabeth’s rhetorical triumph.

The second historical connection centers on the trial and execution of Dr. Lopez, which occurred in 1594. Greenblatt argues that Shylock represents Lopez, Elizabeth’s physician who was accused of trying to poison her. Moreover, Elliott Baker believes that Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech was written by Elizabeth; according to Baker, the Queen, who never believed that Lopez was guilty, had the speech forcibly inserted, perhaps by Sir Robert Cecil, her secretary and the son of William Cecil (29). While this thesis is certainly questionable, it is not implausible that Portia’s opening speech on mercy – with its six references to monarchy – might have been inserted into the play in response to Lopez’s trial, confinement in the Tower, and subsequent execution. Further, Greenblatt’s suggestion that Shakespeare may have witnessed Lopez’s execution adds relevance to Portia’s imploring sovereigns to show mercy, although as noted above, the degree to which Portia ultimately shows mercy to Shylock remains a critical crux of the play. However, whatever we think about the play’s final judgment, which strips Shylock of everything that he considers meaningful, including both his money and his faith, at least, unlike Lopez, he is not stripped of his life. Significantly, both Baker and Bevington, among others, date *Merchant* between 1594 and 1598, a time frame that fits both historical scenarios discussed above.

Lastly, while *Merchant* is a play about love, it is also a play about money. In the late sixteenth century, England was moving from feudalism to capitalism, and tension

existed between the rising mercantile class and the aristocracy, which grew poorer by the decade. In his book *Drama of a Nation*, Walter Cohen argues that the aristocracy, deprived of its traditional military function by the natural protection of the English Channel as well as the futility of Tudor imperialism, grew increasingly commercial, civilian, and common (122-123). Cohen offers a fascinating parallel between the aristocracy and the rising merchant class and Antonio and Bassanio, the two principal Christian male characters in *Merchant*. In his New Historicist article, Cohen reads Antonio as “the harbinger” of modern capitalism while he interprets Bassanio as representing aristocratic landed wealth (771-772). According to Cohen, the tripartite marriage among these two men and Portia at the end of the play mirrors “precisely this interclass harmony between aristocratic landed wealth and mercantile capital, with the former dominant” (772). Furthermore, Portia’s “integrative solution reveals the compatibility of rigor and freedom, of bourgeois self-interest and aristocratic social responsibility” (Cohen 776). Indeed, Portia resolves the issue of Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship by forcing Antonio to return *her* ring to Bassanio, thus sealing the three in a mutually beneficial relationship: Antonio’s ships magically return full loaded, and he is repaid for his risk; Bassanio understands – and respects – the meaning of loyalty to his mistress, and for that loyalty he will be richly rewarded; and Portia maintains control over both men. However, if we focus our historical lens more sharply, we can perhaps deepen these interpretations. First, Antonio’s words in Act 5, Scene 1, “I am th’unhappy subject of these quarrels” (238), can be read as a reference to the aristocracy’s concern over the merchant class’s newly made wealth. If Antonio is the harbinger of capitalism, then he/it indeed would be the subject of many disputes between merchants and the

landed aristocracy, likely with Elizabeth as arbitrator. Further, assuming that Antonio represents the merchant class and Bassanio the aristocracy, I assert that the love and adoration that Antonio feels for Bassanio throughout the play corresponds to the merchant class's collective longing for a title; as well, Bassanio's feelings toward Antonio seem rooted solely in financial need, thus corresponding to the aristocracy's thirst for funds. Finally, a remote reference by Nerissa regarding Bassanio as a "soldier and scholar" (1.2.111) cements the idea of Bassanio as a member of the landed – but now broke – aristocracy, since the typical profession of an aristocrat in the early modern era was soldiering.

Elizabeth, too, formed a quasi-tripartite marriage between herself and what Susan Ronald calls her "gentlemen adventurers" and her "merchant adventurers" (xvi), groups that I maintain correspond to Bassanio and Antonio, respectively. In her book *The Pirate Queen*, Ronald outlines how these two disparate groups of adventurers "eventually deliver the security for the realm that both the queen and the country craved" (xvi). Elizabeth felt that she needed two things to secure her realm: peace and money. Through her gentlemen adventurers, Elizabeth gained security for England; through her merchant adventurers, she gained wealth, albeit through plunder and pirating (Ronald xvi). Furthermore, Ronald believes that the term "adventurer" in Elizabeth's era referred to anyone willing to take a risk (xix); indeed, Ronald comments that Elizabeth set a precedent: anyone wanting royal favor must venture his own wealth for Queen and country (22), a theme woven throughout *Merchant* and underscored in lines such as "I stand for sacrifice" (3.2.57) and " Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath " (2.7.9), a reference by Morocco to the inscription on the leaden casket. Antonio, as

representative of the rising merchant class, risks his fortune for the survival and happiness of Portia (Queen) and Bassanio/the aristocracy (country). In the end, through Portia's political astuteness and sharp rhetoric, all three win.

A master manipulator and politician, Elizabeth continued her father's policy of "fusing" different factions within her court. Indeed, Ronald maintains that fusion was a recurrent theme throughout her reign and that the essence of her statecraft depended on the concept of compromise (23). Under Elizabeth's rule, the lines between merchant and aristocracy blurred, and many of Elizabeth's top advisors, including William Cecil and Nicholas Bacon, were members of a "fresh rising class of merchant aristocracy" (Ronald 18). Moreover, John Dee, her trusted astrologer who coined the phrase "the British Empire" in his work *The Petty Navy Royal* in 1577 (Ronald 19-20), was the son of a textile merchant. Ronald further asserts that merchants and landed gentlemen, who excelled as Elizabeth's adventurers, learned over time to act in concert (21), just as Bassanio and Antonio quickly learn to mesh their desires and needs under Portia's roof and rule.

Examined individually, these links between Portia and Elizabeth Tudor may be rejected as coincidences or perhaps even fanciful reading. But audiences – and critics – do not view a play in bits and pieces: they see it as an entity, just as a suitor gazing at a portrait sees an entire image, not only a brushstroke here and there. When viewed holistically, the similarities between character and Queen in *Merchant* paint a picture that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Chapter Three

Portia as Representative of the Learned Renaissance Woman

The evidence strongly suggests that within the world of the play, Portia serves as a representative of Elizabeth Tudor. However, when examining Portia's impressive rhetorical skills, particularly within the trial scene, I assert that she represents not only Elizabeth Tudor but also the learned Renaissance woman. Elizabeth Tudor was a learned woman, perhaps the most learned in England. Not only do Portia and Elizabeth possess similar styles of rhetoric, which this chapter will explore, but also within the play, Portia employs dialectic and logic to erode Shylock's claim to the bond, elements of language that only a learned woman (or man) would have studied. Learned women were not unusual in the Renaissance: these learned women included Elizabeth's great-grandmother, the Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond; her step-sister Mary; and Lady Jane Grey, who usurped Mary Tudor's claim to the throne for twelve days before perishing on the scaffold and was considered by several Cambridge scholars as one of the most learned women in England (Neale 54). Indeed, for commoners, women's education in the early modern era received short shrift, but for some high-born women, a liberal humanist education was not out of reach, due in large part to the actions of Sir Thomas More, one of the earliest advocates of classical training for women (Warnicke 4).

According to Neale, Lady Margaret, a pioneer in women's education in England, knew French well enough to translate into English "The Mirror of Gold for the Sinful Soul" (10). Moreover, Margaret More, Sir Thomas More's daughter, mastered Greek and

Latin and had some knowledge of philosophy, astronomy, physics, logic, rhetoric, and music. Indeed, women such as Lady Margaret and Margaret More provided the “pattern of the age” (Neale 10). Elizabeth joined this elite group with help from her Cambridge tutors, including John Cheke and Roger Ascham (Neale 11). At age ten, she was immersed in Italian and French and already had a strong grounding in Greek and Latin. Furthermore, according to Ascham, the Queen “admired, above all, modest metaphors and comparisons of contraries well put together and contrasting felicitously with one another” (Neale 12-14). Many historians claim that Elizabeth typically organized her speeches around contraries and repetition. According to Green, much of the speech that verbally admonished the Polish ambassador employed the rhetorical device of antithesis, the same rhetoric that Elizabeth used so effectively in her famous Tilbury speech (997). I will focus on these similar styles of rhetoric between character and Queen to support my assertion that Portia represents both Elizabeth and the learned Renaissance woman.

In the trial scene, Portia uses repetition to underscore her theme of mercy as she systematically dissects Shylock’s claim to the bond. From her opening line, “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” (4.1.172), to her final statement, “Clerk, draw a deed of gift” (392), Portia utters the word “mercy” or its derivative ten times. Moreover, as she implores Shylock to be merciful, she employs “comparisons of contraries” first to give Shylock what he wants and then to strip him of his prize. For example, Portia begins by noting that Shylock’s suit is of a “strange nature” but that Venetian law “cannot impugn” him in seeking it (4.1.175-177). Portia continues by cautioning Shylock to show mercy: he holds the power, and the decision to excise a pound of flesh from Antonio rests solely in his hands. However, by the end of the scene, Portia has rhetorically turned the tables,

stripping Shylock of his power and his pride: “Down therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke” (4.1.361). Through cunning argumentation, Portia reverses the agent and recipient of power. Indeed, by Portia’s *allowing* the terms of the bond, she negates Shylock’s claim, stating that Shylock may have his pound of flesh but that he cannot spill “one drop of Christian blood” (4.1.308). This physical impossibility, this juxtaposition of contraries – “take your pound of flesh, but do not spill any blood” – alters the tempo of the trial and places Shylock on the defensive: “Is that the law?” (312), a baffled and deflated Shylock mutters as the scene moves toward its close.

Another example of Portia’s use of antithetical rhetoric appears in the scene when Bassanio chooses the correct casket. As Portia offers herself to her soon-to-be husband, she counterbalances contrasting ideas, leaving audiences – and perhaps Bassanio himself – wondering if she is actually submitting or not. In Act 3, Scene 2, Portia refers to herself as “an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticèd; . . . she is not bred so dull but she can learn” (159-162). She continues a few lines later with “But now I was the lord/Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,/Queen o’er myself” (167-169). Through this skillful balancing of polarities, Portia plays coy with Bassanio, even as she adeptly lets him know who remains in charge. Indeed, Portia is no “unlessoned girl;” she is a queen in charge of herself and a household of servants. She is not “unschooled;” she is a lord and, at least part-time, a doctor of law. This rhetorical fox hunt leaves Bassanio (and audiences) in a dither, and just as Elizabeth Tudor was no “weak and feeble woman” but the anointed sovereign of England, Portia remains queen over herself and everyone else.

Portia’s rhetorical skills indeed seem strikingly similar to those of Elizabeth Tudor; moreover, the speeches of both character and Queen rely heavily on logic and

dialectic, elements included under the umbrella of the trivium in classical studies. The genre of classical studies divided the disciplines of the seven liberal arts into two categories: the quadrivium, or mathematical, and the trivium, or linguistic. According to Joan Gibson, the trivium consisted of three components: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (10). Typically, rhetoric received the greatest emphasis in the training for public service until the educational reforms that occurred between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. Renaissance humanism, however, restored rhetoric's importance, placing it at the center of its educational theory, at least for men; in contrast, women's education in the Renaissance lay anchored in grammar. Gibson contends that rhetorical training served as the dividing point between the education of men and women, and the more specialized and persuasive aspects of logic and rhetoric were usually available only to male students (11). Since women, it was assumed, did not participate in public affairs, they needed both less education and an education of a different nature (Gibson 12).

However, I argue that through Portia's rhetoric throughout the play, but especially in the trial scene, *Merchant* makes a resonant statement regarding the importance of rhetorical and dialectical education for women. Through Portia's magnificent legal defense of Antonio, the play shows that women can out-argue and out-think even the slickest of men; indeed, no other character in the play employs a thesis-antithesis pattern of argument, and no other character's speeches achieve the level of rhetorical skill that Portia's demonstrate. Therefore, I assert that Portia, as a representative of the learned Renaissance woman, also epitomizes the typically masculine elements of rhetoric and dialectic in the language trivium as opposed to the typically feminine element of grammar. Nowhere in the play does Portia translate Greek poetry; however, throughout

the play she constructs sound, even devastating rhetorical arguments. She wins the trial by logically eroding Shylock's claim to the bond, and she maintains control over Bassanio and Antonio by logically arguing for the value of her ring. One of the conflicts within the play – Portia's role as both an apparently obedient wife and a strong, independent, smart woman – perhaps reflects the Renaissance controversy over the expanding educational opportunities for women and the lack of an acceptable social role for them. Indeed, women whose education bestowed authority in the early modern era were often pictured as fierce, armed maidens and addressed as honorary males (Gibson 16), much as Portia is addressed and disguised in *Merchant*.

Lisa Jardine contends that Renaissance views on learned women, with all their contradictory feelings about the value of education for females, are reproduced in the plot strategies of Shakespeare's learned women, whose noble actions, such as saving Antonio, also mobilize a set of expectations of "knowingness," of sexual unruliness and ungovernability (16). She cites the ambivalent attitudes in *Merchant* as manifesting themselves clearly in Portia's betrothal speech to Bassanio, in which her "womanly deficiencies" contradict everything that the rest of the play says about her (17). According to Jardine, the play ends with the husband's ownership and control of his wife's "ring," thus containing any unruliness that the learned Portia may have inspired (17). Jardine concludes by seizing upon the "serious and deep-rooted ambivalence" toward the educated woman in the early modern era (18). To be sure, the fantastic irony of the age lies in an educated, learned *woman's* rule of England for forty-five years. Although Jardine correctly states that the Renaissance struggled with the idea of education for women, I counter that within *Merchant*, Portia's "unruliness," or, more

precisely, her power, is not contained; in fact, Portia gives the play's final order, declaring in Act 5, Scene 1, "Let us go in;/And charge us there upon intergatories/And we will answer all things faithfully" (297-299). These lines do not indicate Bassanio's control over his wife, and although Gratiano may indeed end the play with a sexual pun, Portia commands the language of the play from start to finish.

Chapter Four

Portia as the Merchant of Venice

Throughout the play, the language of commerce surrounds Portia: she employs it to describe herself; others employ it to describe her. However, for years critics have anointed either Shylock, or more often Antonio, as the merchant of the play's title. Nowhere in the review of the literature does anyone claim that the title should apply to Portia, although some critics tiptoe around the idea. For example, Szatek refers to Portia as a "sovereign," a "vigorous tradeswoman," and a "successful merchant," but she does not go so far as to say that Portia is *the* merchant of the play's title (335-348). In the last sentence in his article, Geary writes that Portia "ultimately proves herself the most adept businessman of them all" (68), and this assertion is certainly true, because Portia controls everything and everyone at the play's end. Ultimately, however, we must return to the play's language, and there we may perhaps find the answer to the ironic question that Portia posits: "Which is the merchant here...?" (4.1.172).

In Portia's and Bassanio's betrothal speeches in Act 3, Scene 2, Bassanio introduces the mercantile language after he chooses the correct casket and observes that he comes "by note" (140). Bassanio continues the commercial metaphor in the final lines of his speech, telling Portia that he will not believe that he has won her "until confirmed, signed, and ratified by you" (148). Portia further develops the metaphor, using the terms "account" (155-157) and "sum" (157-158) twice and "to term in gross" (158) once. When Bassanio learns that Antonio has forfeited the bond, Portia opens her purse-strings and

offers six-thousand ducats; later she doubles and triples that amount, saying to Bassanio that “you are dear bought” (3.3.313). After the trial scene, Portia declares, “And therein do account myself well paid/My mind was never yet more mercenary” (4.1.416-417). At the end of the play, the mercantile language resumes, with Portia issuing an “oath of credit” (5.1.246) when addressing Bassanio about the ring and telling Antonio that “you shall be his surety” (254). Although other characters in the play refer to Antonio as a merchant, including the Duke and Gratiano, mercantile language does not define him, nor does he employ it to define himself. On the other hand, Shylock speaks almost exclusively of money and property, but often fails to refer to the trading of goods and services, focusing solely on amassing and hoarding, unlike Portia, who seems to float through the drama making deals.

Actions always speak louder than words, and Portia’s decisive actions prove even more significant than the commercial language that she uses and that others use to describe her. No character in the play drives the drama forward as does Portia. Certainly Shylock lusts after his bond, but Portia steers the double plot: she secures her marriage to a companionate partner; she intervenes in the trial to save Antonio’s life (and to preserve her marriage); she punishes Shylock; and she restores Antonio’s ships intact. Indeed, Portia behaves like a master trader and negotiator, far more than the other characters in the play, including Antonio, Shylock, or even Bassanio, although he ultimately maneuvers to get what he wants: a lady richly left, albeit only with help from Portia’s guiding hand. Portia exchanges goods and services – a life of leisure in Belmont for Bassanio; an expert legal mind to save her husband’s friend – in exchange for stability, loyalty, and companionship, commodities that for her have value. Interestingly, Szatek

cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* in defining “merchandise,” the earlier term for “commerce,” as the trading of numerous goods and services (326). Furthermore, Szatek maintains that Portia sees Bassanio only as “one more commodity she has purchased in a carefully designed, commercializing, political deal” (335), and that she is more akin to a Venetian entrepreneurial male than to “an idyllic pastoral nymph” (342).

Indeed, I maintain that Portia is more akin to Elizabeth Tudor, who famously counted her realm’s coins in an attempt to lift her country out of debt. Neale claims that Elizabeth managed to cut ordinary expenditure for her court to about 135,000 pounds a year, which left a surplus and helped liquidate her debts (296). Moreover, he writes that Elizabeth’s greatness lay in her parsimony and resolute financial sense (101). Wallace MacCaffrey concurs, stating that control of finance became one of the central pillars of Elizabeth’s entire system of government (382). Elizabeth controlled the purse-strings, and those who control the money within a marriage or a monarchy maintain power, a rule that Portia clearly understands. Szatek sees things less benevolently and contends that through Portia and Belmont, Shakespeare aimed to emphasize that “sovereigns ought not to manipulate commerce to correspond to their own economic and political ends, such as Elizabeth I’s crafty authorization of piracy and of the slave trade...” (349).

However, using our New Historicist lens as a viewfinder, I offer a contrasting scenario: sovereigns will *indeed* manipulate commerce, especially if they need to buttress their countries’ financial coffers to fend off foreign invaders, particularly Catholic ones. In the play, Portia adeptly manages Bassanio and Antonio by joining them with her in a tripartite marriage. They wiggle at her feet like lapdogs, and she showers them with goods, money, and refuge in her palace in exchange for a companionate marriage and

harmony between her husband and his friend. In contrast, Portia punishes Shylock, metaphorically castrating him and rendering him financially and politically impotent for, we can assume, practicing usury. According to historians, however, Elizabethans did not detest usury; instead, many Elizabethan thinkers such as John Dee tied trade and national defense to the prestige of the British monarchy, focusing less on the church's rejection of usury than on how commerce could serve God and nation (Aaron Kitch 147). Moreover, Kitch maintains that some Elizabethan architects of commercial policy such as Thomas Gresham approached the idea of usury from the perspective of national interest; such an approach shifted the question of usury from individual ethics to national politics (147-148).

Using Kitch's context of national politics, if Portia is indeed the merchant within the play, and her language and actions suggest that she is, she has every right to protect her goods and services (Bassanio, Antonio, Belmont, the Venetian rule of law) from a threat. Comparatively, if Elizabeth is the merchant-in-chief of her realm, she must protect her property and people from threats foreign and domestic, even if that means "manipulating commerce." To that end, I assert that Shylock stands not for usury in the play but for any generic or, more likely, Catholic threat to Elizabeth's realm, perhaps most notably from Spain or even Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Although Elizabeth executed Mary in 1587, the Catholic threat hung over England through the following year, when the Spanish Armada attempted to invade the island; the domestic threat from Catholics continued even longer. Indeed, several lines in the play allude to this generic/Catholic threat. First, in the trial scene, Portia expressly states that if Shylock sheds "one drop of Christian blood" in his quest for his pound of flesh, his lands and

goods will be confiscated by Venice (4.1.308-309). The word “Christian” can perhaps be read to mean “Protestant,” since both the Protestants and the Catholics regarded each other as infidels. Furthermore, in the same scene, Portia upholds the Duke’s ruling that half of Shylock’s wealth should go to the state, not to Antonio – although later the Duke remits this appropriation into a fine only – adding to the idea of Shylock as standing for a threat not only to Antonio but also to the nation (4.1.371). In addition, Greenblatt’s theory that Shylock represents the ill-fated Dr. Lopez reinforces the association of the Jewish usurer with the Catholic threat because his accusers thought that Lopez was in the pay of Spain. Finally, I contend that the act of cutting off the pound of flesh and Portia’s concern that Antonio, who stands for the merchant class, might bleed to death represent Elizabeth’s concern that a foreign invader would financially bleed her merchant class into bankruptcy if the country engaged in a war. Additionally, Portia states that Bassanio, who represents the landed aristocracy, is “dear bought,” and she will “love (him) dear,” suggesting that she will use any means possible to keep her aristocratic soldier from going to war against a foreign threat (3.3.313), as Elizabeth often attempted with Leicester and with Essex, both of whom eventually persuaded their sovereign to allow them to lead forces in the Netherlands and Ireland, respectively.

Antonio and Shylock demonstrate little, if any, business acumen. Antonio loses ships and almost his life; Shylock loses his daughter, his ducats, and his religion. However, Portia loses nothing and gains everything, evidence indeed of a successful merchant. Scholars suggest that Shakespeare crafted his titles carefully, and I maintain that the title of *Merchant* is interrogative, deliberately left open for audiences’ interpretations, much like the titles of the other comedies. Using New Historicism as a

critical methodology, the muddled question becomes clearer, because it is Portia who appears unambiguously in the viewfinder.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that *Merchant* invites audiences to interpret Portia, one of Shakespeare's most intriguing and powerful female characters, as multidimensional. First, I argue that the evidence indicates that Portia stands for Elizabeth Tudor. Next, I assert that Portia, as a representative of the learned Renaissance woman, stands for the traditionally masculine elements of rhetoric and dialectic, two of the three elements that comprised the language trivium in classical studies. Finally, I submit that the language and actions of Portia invite us to read her as the merchant of the play's title. In closing, I wish to offer some additional considerations on character and Queen to help put our New Historicist reading into perspective.

For all the patriarchy and misogyny that surrounded her, Elizabeth was a decidedly modern woman. Neale insists that there was "a touch of feminism" in the way that she protected her rights; moreover, he contends that the Queen's mind was "essentially modern" (180, 259). Playing coy with suitors, manipulating restrictive edicts in an attempt to find some happiness, and punishing intruders and threats to her realm demonstrated Elizabeth's strength as a monarch; moreover, the necessity that she refer to herself in masculine terms says as much about the myopia of her era as it does about her political savvy. Elizabeth ruled for forty-five years, stabilized England's economy and religion, staved off the Catholic threat, and survived more than a dozen assassination attempts. She protected her rights as an anointed sovereign, as the law and God allowed.

She pampered favorites and punished traitors. In a word, she was a powerbroker: in exchange for her favor, she expected loyalty, service, and fealty to the crown. Men who abided by her rules grew wealthy and powerful; men who did not were often treated severely.

Within the play, Portia conducts business in much the same way. She too shows more than a touch of feminism as she goes about protecting her rights as a woman and her goods and property as a landlord. She cunningly maneuvers to get the husband she wants; she intervenes and uses her intelligence to thwart a threat to her happiness and to her realm; she punishes all those who would defy her: all this, while staying true to the letter of the law, as a sovereign must. Like Elizabeth, she also richly rewards those who understand the meaning of loyalty. Portia is a powerbroker as well, controlling all the deals and relationships in the play through either stealth or strength, thus becoming both the fox and the lion.

Perhaps the most daunting question that critics face when reading Portia as a strong woman is the question of sacrifice: does Portia sacrifice any of her power when she marries Bassanio? I maintain that she does not. The play's language does not support her relinquishment of power; indeed, her last word of the drama is "faithfully" (5.1.299), a fitting close for a character who demands fealty from her subjects. Moreover, I contend that the play invites readers to see that learned Renaissance women were intelligent enough to find a balance between duty and home and politically savvy enough to make everyone else see that as well. The play's conclusion with a misogynistic sexual pun on Nerissa's ring does not mean that Portia's power is contained, as many critics attest. Portia's husband does not utter the remark; indeed, he refers to his wife as "sweet doctor"

(284) in his final words of the play. Antonio, the merchant of traditional readings, states that “I am dumb” in his last utterance (279). These are not the words of mighty merchants or powerful, controlling husbands; they are the words of respect and submission.

As a comedy, *Merchant's* ending fits neatly into the early modern pattern: the pairs of lovers marry and live happily ever after; the strife of the real world concludes; the admirable characters return to the bucolic green world where music abounds. However, peering through our New Historicist lens, we see that the play also attempts to resolve several relevant issues of the day. First, Elizabeth/Portia joins the merchant class as represented by Antonio and the aristocracy as represented by Bassanio in a mutually beneficial relationship for England/Venice. Second, the trial settlement allows Antonio/the merchant class to be paid back for its risk, so that Bassanio/the aristocracy is free and clear. Next, Antonio/the merchant class is rewarded for its risk-taking when Portia returns Antonio's ships “richly come to harbor” (5.1.277). Finally, Elizabeth/Portia teaches the value of loyalty through the ring episode. Through the ring, which I assert represents fidelity to the feminized rule, Elizabeth/Portia shows the aristocracy/Bassanio and the merchant class/Antonio that she will not stand for usurpation: Bassanio attempts to subvert Portia's rule by giving away the ring to honor his friend's savior, but only the sovereign has the power to bestow such favors. Comparatively, I suggest that the play attempts to teach early modern audiences what to believe regarding the rule of Elizabeth I and the risks associated with silencing learned women.

In addition, I submit that the irony within the play addresses the irony of the age. Scholars cite the deep-rooted ambivalence that people in the early modern era felt regarding learned women, which in itself is ironic because a highly educated woman

ruled England exceedingly well for almost half a century. Therefore, I suggest that the trial scene, in which Portia, the smartest character in the play, must disguise her appearance and dress like a man to help save Antonio and her husband from Shylock's wrath, spotlights that deep-rooted ambivalence surrounding learned women in the Renaissance. Elizabeth grasped that ambivalence – and in some cases outright hostility – toward female rulers when she often referred to herself as a man in an attempt to placate masculine fears. I maintain that this tactic demonstrated not only her political savvy but also her understanding of the irony of her rule.

Moreover, I contend that the irony surrounding Portia's quality of mercy speech at the beginning of the trial scene and the fact that she does not show mercy to Shylock interrogates the princely *ideal* of rule in comparison to the princely *obligation* to keep lands and subjects safe, and I believe that a line in the play supports my assertion. Near the beginning of the trial, Bassanio responds to a question from Portia regarding Antonio's ability to pay the bond, stating that he can pay the bond "ten times over" (4.1.209) and that if that amount is not enough, Shylock must be filled with "malice" (212). He continues: "Wrest once the law to your authority/To do a great right, do a little wrong" (213-214). I suggest that this line echoes the Machiavellian advice given to monarchs, and that as a representative of the aristocracy, Bassanio, through his words, is simply giving advice to his sovereign regarding the threat that Shylock presents. Staying true to the letter of the law but skirting its spirit, Portia does do a "little" wrong – she severely punishes Shylock – but she does so to protect her subjects, land, and the rule of Venetian law, therefore doing a "great right." Likewise, Elizabeth may indeed have aspired to the quality of mercy that Portia outlines, but as a monarch, she often had an

obligation to be firm, particularly regarding the Catholic threat. Numerous critics condemn Portia for her sternness in this scene, but I maintain that Portia, as a representative of Elizabeth Tudor, acts as a responsible monarch would.

Indeed, I contend that those who malign Portia for her behavior see her character as either black or white, good or bad, either an “unruly woman” or an obedient daughter. Perhaps critics view Portia dichotomously because throughout the play she appears to serve as a study in contrasts. She stays true to the letter of her dead father’s will but violates the spirit of it; she desires “only to stand high” in Bassanio’s account (3.2.155) but dominates him through her actions and words, such as the repetitive use of “my” after she marries; and in the trial scene, she speaks eloquently of mercy but brutally punishes Shylock as the Duke, Antonio, and Bassanio look on in awe. However, a close reading of the text using a New Historicist perspective brings Portia’s words and actions into stronger focus and allows us to view her not as a hypocrite but as a pragmatic early modern woman playing the patriarchal system – in effect, giving it lip service while pursuing her own course – and winning. Portia, like Elizabeth, acts in ways that promote her self-interest and the interests of Belmont/England. I submit that if we peer beyond the surface, beyond where “fancy is bred” and look deeper into Portia’s character, we see a shrewd, highly intelligent woman managing a repressive system to her own ends and that of her kingdom, much as a modern-day CEO manages the competing demands of the marketplace. Portia, like Elizabeth Tudor, should not be interpreted as black or white, good girl or bad; instead, both are kaleidoscopic, multidimensional women who made their own mark in an often severe patriarchal system.

Authors do not create within a vacuum. The political, social, and cultural implications of the day swirl amid their lines like a mist enveloping the English countryside. When applying a New Historicist reading to *Merchant*, I suggest that there are too many similarities between character and Queen to ignore. From the descriptions of her hair and eyes to the metaphoric castration of Shylock to the tripartite marriage, Portia is a multilayered character who stands not only for Elizabeth Tudor but also for all learned Renaissance women who survived and thrived in a misogynistic world. Elizabeth protected her nation by using whatever means necessary to keep her shores safe. In 1603, when she died, no enemies battered the walls of England's castles, and the country was on its way to establishing its empire. Likewise, Portia protects the shores of Belmont and Venice from threats, knowing full well that the ends justify the means when she renders Shylock impotent and restores harmony to her world. When *Merchant* closes, as when Elizabeth died, Belmont and its inhabitants, like Elizabeth's England, are safe, happy, and prosperous. Both real and fictional events can credit learned women who would not allow their voices to be marginalized or silenced.

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