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Portia's Power

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is a play largely concerned with power—who wields it, and especially who wields it unexpectedly. The action begins with Bassanio, a young Venetian, appealing to his friend Antonio for money so that he may travel to Belmont to meet the beautiful heiress Portia. Antonio in turn approaches Shylock the Jew, who agrees to lend him three thousand ducats on one condition: if Antonio cannot repay the debt, he owes Shylock "an equal pound of flesh" (I.iii.146). Bassanio goes on to win Portia's love, and Antonio, whose ships are lost at sea, finds himself penniless and captive to a deadly oath. Unpredictably, it is Portia who is the ultimate hero of the story: dressed as a male lawyer, she extricates Antonio from his agreement by pointing out that Antonio owes a pound of *flesh* but not a drop of *blood*, a technicality that ultimately saves him. Modern readers of *The Merchant of Venice* often see the play as a reflection of anti-Semitism in Renaissance England, pointing to the depiction of the Jewish merchant Shylock as deceitful and violent. However, a closer look at the play within its historical context reveals that Elizabethan theatergoers may have been just as interested in the portrayal of women in the play as they were by the critical characterization of Jews. Produced just a few years before the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 (Hebron 264), *The Merchant of Venice* is steeped in the ideologies of Renaissance culture—a culture in which women were supposed to be "chaste, silent, and obedient" (Newman 265). Looking at the play's context, we

can see how Shakespeare incorporates—and tests—Elizabethan cultural ideals about women through Portia, a character who subverts the image of the subservient woman through all five acts. By gaining the upper hand in traditionally male-dominated systems of exchange (notably marriage) and cross-dressing as a male lawyer to defend Antonio in court, Portia assaults the idea of the weak Renaissance woman from every angle. Her presence on Elizabethan stages likely jostled the traditional mindsets of more than a few theater-goers. However, a fresh look at *The Merchant of Venice* reveals that Portia—in a strange way—may have reflected Renaissance culture just as much as she contradicted it.

To understand the full impact of Portia's role on Elizabethan audiences, readers must consider the expectations and beliefs those audiences held. British literary theorist E.M.W. Tillyard writes of the theory of Chain of Being, a system of classifying people, as one of the ideas that greatly influenced Elizabethan culture and literature (23-24). In the Chain of Being, white, Anglo-Saxon males would be superior "links" on the Chain while women, non-white males, and those belonging to a non-Anglo-Saxon faith would be considered inferior "links." In *The Merchant of Venice,* Antonio is presumably the dominant figure due to his Anglo race, his upbringing, and his status as a merchant, whereas Shylock the Jew is deemed an inferior "other" because of his Judaic heritage and social standing as a usurer. Likewise, Portia would certainly be considered at the bottom of the Chain due to the simple fact that she is a woman. Tillyard insists that Elizabethans were terrified lest the order of the Chain of Being should be upset (13); they believed that any change or mobility would result in social chaos, and so stubbornly conformed to defined roles. Thus, though probably much less shocking to modern audiences, Portia's agency in her marriage and in the courtroom would have placed her far outside of

normalized gender roles in the eyes of Elizabethan theater-goers.

Traditional marriage was a powerful component of Elizabethan culture, and Portia's subtle resistance to its leverage over her is one example of her opposition to the Chain of Being. As the only "living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (Shakespeare I.ii.23-24), Portia is beholden by the instructions her father left her: that she must marry the suitor who chooses the correct casket when presented with gold, silver, or lead (I.ii.25-32). Though Portia does follow her father's will, the fact of his death requires Portia to deal with her suitors herself. According to Corinne S. Abate in her essay "Portia's Wifely Empowerment in *The Merchant of Venice*," Shakespeare wrote Portia without any "dependent and submissive inclinations, those traits traditionally associated with women, to turn to men for anything because she has always already dealt with men directly in the absence of any male figures in her life" (283). Having already decided that she prefers Bassanio over her other suitors, Portia interacts with the first two men, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon, very curtly. When the Prince of Morocco announces his intention to choose the wrong casket, Portia does not try to direct him towards the right one; she just says, "There, take it Prince; and if my form lie there,/ Then I am yours." (II.vii.61-62) In contrast, when Bassanio prepares to select a casket, Portia implores him to delay so that they can spend more time together. Her statement to Bassanio that "I could teach you/ How to choose right, but then I am foresworn" (III.i.10-11) is rather coy: Portia knows that her father's will prohibits her from *telling* Bassanio which casket to pick, but she hopes that another month or two in her company would give him some insight as to how to choose correctly. Though Portia never overtly defies her father's instructions regarding her engagement, her opinion about which man would best suit her—and the fact that she expresses that opinion—is in

itself an undermining of the patriarchal hierarchy.

Just as Portia hijacks some of the agency traditionally reserved for a father figure in choosing a suitor, when she marries Bassanio, she continues to subvert Elizabethan ideals rather than deferring to her husband. Initially, Portia fulfills the duties of a Renaissance woman by giving Bassanio her ring, an object that then conveyed ownership as well as commitment. As critic Karen Newman writes in "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*," in bestowing the ring, Portia is providing her new husband a "visual sign of her vow of love and submission" of all she has to give—her body, house, status, fortune, etc. (Newman 260). Yet, Newman explains, by giving herself away into marriage, Portia is bestowing more than Bassanio can reciprocate (261). Portia inhabits the traditional male role of giving the engagement ring, and since she is the source of Bassanio's improved standing and newfound wealth, *she* has the upper hand. Portia demonstrates her ability to manipulate the traditional politics of exchange most vividly in the courtroom scene in Act IV when, posing as the male lawyer "Balthazar," she saves Antonio's life on a legal technicality. In exchange for saving his friend from having to give up a pound of flesh, Bassanio offers "Balthazar" a gift, and the disguised Portia demands that Bassanio hand over the ring. Later, in Act V, Portia (now dressed as herself) derides Bassanio for giving away the object that represents her affection and tells him, "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed/ Until I see the ring" (V.i.190-191). With that, she deprives him of what was considered in Renaissance times to be a husbandly right. Through all of these exchanges of the ring, Portia is in complete control; without Bassanio even knowing it, she is able to manipulate the usually male-dominated giver-receiver power dynamic to her own advantage.

Throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's masculine and manipulative character opposes the image of the ideal Elizabethan woman and theoretically disrupts the order of the Chain of Being. So why did Renaissance audiences find Portia, a character who supposedly went against their system of beliefs, to be an appealing and even sympathetic character? New Historicism, a school of literary thought that emphasizes consideration of the historical circumstances surrounding a piece of literature (Hebron), suggests that audiences were drawn to Portia because she resembled a real-life rebellious woman of the time: Queen Elizabeth I. As Lisa Hopkins and Matthew Steggle point out in *Renaissance Literature and Culture,* Elizabeth I delighted in being a muse for the modern playwright, poet, and author (58). Shakespeare was no exception, and the parallels between Portia and Elizabeth I are apparent. Both women entertained suitors from across Europe, even though Portia's admirers were written to be fictional with comic characteristics while the Queen's potential husbands were very real with strict ambitions. Both women were highly esteemed and greatly sought after for reasons that did not involve the romantic idea of love: wealth, power, and potential increase in social status. As the sole authority over England's monarchy, Elizabeth I is comfortable in her status. Correspondingly, Portia is a woman in a "privileged position of empowerment to which she has become accustomed" (Abate 284). Even though England 's queen was considered to be past childbearing years by the time she came to the throne (Hopkins and Steggle 6), she never married and thus maintained the power to rule given her by Divine Right. Similarly, even though Portia marries, her choice of husband allows her to remain in her home country and retain her status. In Portia, Shakespeare supposedly tests his audience's belief that a woman could not feasibly have power equal to or greater than that of a man—but Queen Elizabeth I was already challenging these beliefs in real life.

As a playwright, Shakespeare also used the theatrical space to probe key social issues. In Elizabethan times, the stage often served as a safe setting to invert gender roles and to present contentious social scenarios. New Historicists reason that the "theatre itself, although advertising itself as the space of fiction and illusion, also allows certain relations… to become visible," almost creating an alternate world that reveals multiple possibilities (Brannigan 7). Since no women were allowed to act on stage during Shakespeare's time, strong female characters such as Portia were played by male actors, which perhaps made them less threatening. On stage and with men dressed as women, Shakespeare could suggest female authority without ever overtly disrupting the order of the Chain of Being. Thus, Shakespeare was able to publicly present controversial questions of power, gender, and authority through the medium of theater.

The historical context of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, combined with the setting of the theater, allowed Shakespeare to test the boundaries of Elizabethan culture without blatantly crossing them. Although the institution of marriage is questioned in the play, *The Merchant of Venice* concludes with marital reconciliation. Even though Portia does not adhere to societal ideologies about women, appearing masculine with extensive knowledge and power, it is with this same authority that she continuously fights for Bassanio's love. By letting Portia ultimately win her husband, Shakespeare depicts the power a woman has in creating heterosexual relationships, which Elizabethans considered the natural order within the Chain of Being. New Historicists note that a "text is part of the process of historical change" (Brannigan 203). In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the play is not ahead of its time—rather, it is embedded in the process of women's empowerment that was already underway in the Elizabethan era, thanks to Queen Elizabeth I and her own unconventional lifestyle. By giving Portia agency in *The Merchant of*

Venice, Shakespeare signifies that society will not succumb to chaos if a woman obtains levels of knowledge and power comparable to a man's.

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