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John Mahon et al (ed)
—The Merchant of Venice:
New Critical Essays—

"Mislike Me Not for My Complexion"

Whose Mislike? Portia's? Shakespeare's? Or That of His Age?

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The most significant issue in *The Merchant of Venice* is of course the fate of Shylock. But this concern has assumed the proportions it has during the past fifty years on account of the Holocaust, the culminating horror in the long history of the persecution of the Jewish race in Europe. Shakespeare, ahead of his times, adumbrated in the play a racial conflict that in the twentieth century displayed in full measure what was still embryonic when the play was written at the close of the sixteenth century. History has unlocked the play's secret. Hitherto, understandably, the bulk of criticism has concentrated on this aspect, almost to the exclusion of the strands that the title of my essay indicates.[1]

For, besides Shylock as the Other, there are other Others like the first two suitors who make a bid for the hand of Portia and have, in general, been eclipsed by Shylock. I propose to show that beneath the apparent surface of the happy union of Portia and Bassanio, following the dismissal of the suitors, lies a troubled text that encapsulates what might well be Shakespeare's own unfashionable predilection for "black" that would run counter to the taste of his times. The contradictions that this gives rise to, in what is "express'd, and not express'd" (3.2.183),[2] set off ripples that implicate even a country as remote from Morocco as India, the complexion of whose native women invites a quite unexpected, dual perspective within the play, each one cancelling out the other thereby creating obscurity. Further, I shall argue that paradoxically Portia herself is the Other with reference to the six European suitors whose very absence is a defining presence, and whose ungallant treatment of her, as seen in their having unanimously declined to make a bid for her hand, is endorsed at the play's end in her subjugation and appropriation of her wealth by her own countryman while she, at the same time, becomes the threatening wife.

I

It is all too easy unconsciously to substitute London for Venice, but the specificity of the play's geographical locale in its title should alert us to the importance of its situation, Venice being approximately equidistant from Morocco and Aragon in the southwest, and from England and northern Europe in the northwest. Hitherto recognized in critical opinion on the play as being one of the most prominent trade and financial centers of Renaissance Europe, Venice has not, however, been looked at for its geographical location in southern Europe that Shakespeare invests with sociocultural significance, contextualized by race and color, in *The Merchant of Venice*. Of the eight suitors, six come from northern Europe, inclusive of the English suitor Falconbridge whom Portia anatomizes: though she approves of his looks ("he is a proper man's picture" 1.2.69), a concession that Shakespeare makes to his English audience, no communication between her and the Englishman is possible because "he hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian," while her knowledge of English, she confesses, is but "a poor pennyworth" (66ff). Understandably, Shakespeare makes Portia let him off lightly, but her remark must give us pause: the text self-consciously and pointedly disowns its own linguistic identity, English, and asks the audience to imagine its medium to be Italian—a transposition unique in the canon—to which I will return in the last section of this essay. Of the six suitors only the Englishman and the Frenchman have names, though neither of them becomes Portia's husband—another point that will assume importance in my argument.

Further, though she dismisses each of her European suitors disdainfully while discussing with Nerissa their national traits, ironically *they* have already rejected her, not regarding either her beauty or her wealth as sufficient inducements to offset the risk of being doomed to celibacy should their choice of the right casket miscarry. When she expresses her revulsion at the prospect of being married to a "sponge" (the German suitor), Nerissa assures her that all six of them have backed off:

> You need not fear lady the having any of these lords, they have acquainted me with their determinations, which is indeed to return to their home, and to trouble you with no more suit, unless you may be won by some other sort than your father's imposition, depending on the caskets. (1.2.96–100)

Surprisingly, this inversion of choice, or rather, of no choice, has not been commented upon, as far as I am aware. Rejected by the Europeans in humiliating fashion, Portia nevertheless tries to maintain a brave front before Nerissa by replying,

> I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence: and I pray God grant them a fair departure. (1.2.104ff)

The six northern suitors have refused to submit to the patriarchal authority exercised by Portia's "dead father" (1.2.25), while the three southern suitors—Morocco, Arragon, and Bassanio—tamely accept the penalty of castration[3] for making the wrong choice; after all, this is what the prohibition amounts to:

> . . . if you choose wrong
> Never to speak to lady afterward
> In way of marriage . . . (2.1.40–43)

True, Morocco makes a show of preferring a duel for the winning of Portia, but he submits to the terms laid down:

> Mislike me not for my complexion,
> The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,
> To whom I am a neighbour, and near bred,
> Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
> Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,
> And let us make incision for your love,
> To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine. (2.1.1–7)

Morocco's identification of Portia with Scandinavia in the extreme north, as his reference to "icicles" suggests, is, of course, erroneous, though understandable, and would have amused the Elizabethan audience. To Morocco anyone belonging to regions beyond the Mediterranean would be "northward born." In *Merchant* geographical distinctions give rise to distinctive phenomenological perceptions, and it seems reasonable to assume that the ears of Shakespeare's audience were more sensitive to such nuances than are those of today's, belonging as we do to a time when even the distinctiveness of various currencies merges into the all-embracing Eurodollar.

Thus at the very outset the play establishes a dichotomy between north and south: the former assertive, preserving selfhood; the latter submissive, yielding to the effacement of self-identity. While Portia's southern suitors idolize her, the northern suitors reject her, thereby undermining her putative supremacy as a universally desirable object of appropriation. Whereas Morocco rapturously exclaims, "From the four corners of the earth they come / To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint" (2.7.39ff), we know that this is an overstatement from an African suitor who, Othello-like, desires a fair-skinned wife, even as in *Titus Andronicus* the Italian male's preference for the Nordic over the Mediterranean may be seen: Saturninus, after proposing to Lavinia, Titus' daughter, summarily rejects her and chooses Tamora, queen of the Goths, despite her being old enough to be his mother, as Tamora herself observes (1.1.331–32). Saturninus frankly spells out his reason for this sudden transfer of his affections: "A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew" (262ff). And a few lines later he declares her to be more attractive than "the gallant'st dames of Rome" (371).

The question of complexion was, and still is, a powerful factor in sexual relationships. As recently as 1972, when a referendum on joining the European Union was held in Norway, the Opposition's blunt question to the voters was, "Would you want your daughter to marry a Sicilian?" Portia of course belongs to southern Europe, then as now regarded generally by northern Europe as racially and physically inferior. The French geographer Jean Bodin (1530–96), whose works were highly influential and very well-known during his lifetime, gives a series of sharply contrasting physical and temperamental characteristics of the inhabitants of these two regions from which there can be little doubt that superiority, in his eyes, rests with the northerners. The inhabitants of southern Europe, he informs his readers, are

> of a contrarie humour and disposition to them of the north: these are great and strong, they are little and weake; they of the north, hot and moyst, the others cold and dry; the one hath a big voyce and greene eyes; the other hath a weake voyce and black eyes; the one hath a flaxen haire and a faire skin, the other hath both haire and skin black. (279)

The text of *Merchant* seems to be imbricated with anxieties resulting from Shakespeare's endeavor to give Portia the traits of the northerners in contradiction to her actual southern origin. A strange unease may be detected in Bassanio's reflections as he contemplates the caskets. An Italian himself, he is conscious that the women of his country are in general dark-haired and, therefore, looking at the gold casket he is not unexpectedly reminded of golden-haired wigs that belie the reality lying beneath:

> Look on beauty,
> And you shall see 'tis purchas'd by the weight,
> Which therein works a miracle in nature,
> Making them lightest that wear most of it:
> So are those crisped snaky golden locks
> Which make such wanton gambols with the wind
> Upon supposed fairness, often known
> To be the dowry of a second head,
> The skull that bred them in the sepulcher. (3.2.88ff)

And enumerating instances from classical literature of the power that golden hair exercises, Robert Burton (1577–1640) concludes his catalog with an ironically whimsical mention of the use of golden-haired wigs by (especially) "Venetian ladies" so as "to catch all comers":

> flaxen hair: golden hair was even in great account, for which Virgil commends Dido, *Nondum sustulerat flavum Proserpinina crinem* (not yet had Proserpine put up her golden hair), *Et crines nodantur in aurum* (the hair is tied in a golden knot). Apollonius will have Jason's golden hair to be the main cause of Medea's dotage on him. . . . Homer so commends Helen, makes Patroclus and Achilles both yellow-haired, *in aurum coruscante et crispante capillo* (with bright curly golden locks). . . . Leland commends Guithera, King Arthur's wife, for a fair flaxen hair . . . Which belike makes our Venetian ladies at this day to counterfeit yellow hair so much, great women to calamistrate and curl it up. . . . In a word, "the hairs are Cupid's nets, to catch all comers, a bushy wood, in which Cupid builds his nest." (Pt. 3, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 2, p. 81)

The Anatomy of Melancholy was not published until 1621, but as Barthelemy notes, it "codifies opinions that were in currency long before its publication" (155n). Bassanio's reflections come close to Burton's, or the other way round. Bassanio deplores "those crisped snaky golden locks" that turn brunettes into blondes "to entrap the wisest" (92–101) and, twenty lines later, on discovering Portia's picture in the lead casket, describes her hair in the portrait as "a golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men / Faster than gnats in cobwebs"—a dubious compliment in the light of his earlier animadversion.[4] A peculiar oppositional current is in evidence here which, I think, must be attributed not so much to Bassanio as to his creator. If this suggestion is rejected, then it seems to me that we are compelled to conclude that Bassanio suspects Portia of wearing a golden-haired wig, both in reality as well as in her portrait. Here we should recall that Julia of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, studying the picture of her rival in love, Silvia, wishes she had Silvia's auburn locks—an interesting chiasmus in terms of hair color—so that Proteus might love her instead: "Her hair is auburn, mine is perfect yellow. / If that be all the difference in his love, / I'll get me such a colored periwig" (4.4.194–96), she resolves, while noting, "And yet the painter flattered her a little" (192). And Shakespeare's audience knew of course that after her execution when the decapitated head of Mary, Queen of Scots, was held up by the hair for the viewing of the spectators, it was seen that she had worn a wig for the occasion, while Queen Elizabeth herself, it was discovered after her death, had no less than eighty wigs in her wardrobe. It is not only in Shylock that multiple perspectives emerge, ranging from a broadly farcical character to a martyred Old Testament prophet, but problematics of race, complexion, and culture permeate the entire play.

The message of the lead casket is congratulatory of those who "choose not by the view" (131), yet Bassanio sees the beauty of Portia's hair as a snare. True, he himself is masquerading under false colors insofar as his "wealth" is all Antonio's, but to suppose that Shakespeare intended Portia also to be implicated in the practice of deception by using artificial aids to her beauty would be, perhaps, too farfetched for dramatic credibility—despite the clear message of the text. Perhaps, then, a happier alternative would be to turn from semantics to biographical criticism, namely, Shakespeare's mind and art, to borrow the phrase from the title of Edward Dowden's book, one of the great milestones in nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism. "In such a study as this," Dowden writes in his introduction, "we endeavour to pass through the creation of the artist to the mind of the creator: but it by no means prevents our returning to view the work of art simply as such, apart from the artist, and as such to receive delight from it" (3).

II

Besides golden-haired wigs and the entrapment of men's hearts in Portia's hair like gnats in cobwebs, what is it that causes Bassanio's thoughts, while contemplating the gold casket, to travel to distant India? One of Antonio's ships, according to Shylock, is bound for "the Indies" (1.3.16), but this can hardly account for Bassanio's thought process. Deprecating "ornament" for being deceptive, he describes it as

> the guiled shore
> To a most dangerous sea: the beauteous scarf
> Veiling an Indian beauty. (3.2.97–99)

The Arden editor, Brown, rightly points out that the lack of contrast between "beauteous scarf" and the "Indian beauty" it veils is deficient, but his explanation—"the Elizabethan aversion to dark skins gives sufficient meaning to the passage. The emphasis is on 'Indian' " (82)—is inadequate: while the first part of his statement is most probably correct, being, as we shall soon see, substantiated by Shakespeare himself in his sonnets, the second is unconvincing. G. B. Harrison offers the same explanation—"dark, which was not considered beautiful: see sonnet 127" (599). For Arthur Quiller-Couch and Dover Wilson the passage is "much annotated and possibly corrupt; but if emphasis be laid on the word 'Indian,' and the Elizabethan horror of dusky skins be borne in mind, does the passage present any real difficulty?" (151). Likewise John Munro: "Indian beauty means a dusky beauty, beautiful in Indian eyes but not to Western" (I, 465). Other ingenious emendations offered by various editors as substitutes for "beauty" are "dowdy," "deformity," "idol," "gipsy," "favour," "beldam," "bosom," "visage," and even "suttee."

This raises the question of the construction of "India" in Shakespeare. Does the reference denote a specific region, or is it a generic term for all that lies east of Arabia? As I have argued elsewhere, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the "lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king" (2.1.22), whose mother, dying in childbirth, was Titania's companion and sat by her side "in the spiced Indian air" (2.1.123–25), becomes the bone of contention between Oberon and Titania, the boy's very absence from the play being an overruling presence, and the locale suggestive of a specific region on the west coast of India—the modern state of Kerala—famous then (as now) for its export of spices, particularly pepper and cardamom, to all parts of the known world ("England" 4; see also Margo Hendricks). *Dream* was written shortly before *Merchant* and, given the importance attached to the "lovely boy" and his Indian parents, should be sufficient to disabuse our minds of the pejorative meanings attributed to "an Indian beauty" by the numerous editors mentioned earlier. Neither Shakespeare, nor Burton, would have agreed with them. Burton praises "the Indians of old" for practicing selective breeding, the basis of the caste system so greatly admired by Yeats, "the caste system that has saved Indian intellect" (15–16). "An husbandman," Burton observes,

> will sow none but the best and choicest seed upon his land, he will not rear a bull or a horse, except he be right shapen in all parts. . . . In former times some countries have been so chary in this behalf, so stern, that if a child were crooked or deformed in body or mind, they made him away: so did the Indians of old. (Pt. I, Sec. 2, Mem. 1, Subs. 6, p. 215)

Did Shakespeare know of this practice, inducing him to use the adjective "lovely" for the Indian boy? Thomas Bowrey, fifty years after the publication of Burton's work, explored the Coromandel coast of India and pronounced the natives of that region as "for the most part very Streight handsome featured and a well limbed people" (14).

But my aim here is not to offer an explanation for the lack of contrast in lines 97 to 99, but rather to draw attention to the problem as indicative of the trouble the playwright seems to have had in a scene dealing with appearance and reality in the context of skin color, hair color, golden-haired wigs, Indian beauties, and the general Elizabethan attitude to race. In 1596, the year in which *Merchant* was most probably written, the Queen issued a proclamation for the expulsion of "Negars and Blackamoors" from "Her Majesty's dominions" (Jones 20–21; Fryer 10–12), an order consistent with the opening line of sonnet 127, "In the old days black was not counted fair," which posits the general attitude of Europe to the complexion of the Other, but contradicted by Shakespeare's personal attitude: "Thy black is fairest in my judgement's place" (sonnet 131), and, "Then will I swear beauty herself is black, / And all they foul that thy complexion lack" (sonnet 132). Is the celebration of Portia's putative blonde beauty a concession to "the million," as Hamlet might have said, while contradicting Shakespeare's own predilection? Was he going against the grain of his age by expressing his own personal preference for the dark complexion?

For, as we recall, at least two of his most engaging European heroines are not blondes. Beatrice is dark complexioned and therefore unlikely to attract a husband: "Thus goes every one to the world but I," she whimsically laments, "and I am sun-burnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'heigh-ho' for a husband" (2.1.332), and Perdita, daughter of a Russian mother and a Sicilian father, has her mother's features (5.1.224–26) and her father's complexion, which makes Florizel's assertion that "she came from Libya" (5.1.156), though an untruth, plausible.[5] If in these plays the heroines are presented as unabashedly dark-complexioned, in *Merchant*, an earlier play, the heroine's complexion has ambiguous connotations, the subversion of conventional attitudes seeming to surface whenever the question of complexion is addressed.[6] Thus, Portia confides in Nerissa twice: first regarding her apprehension about Morocco's bid for her hand, and then her relief at his discomfiture. For Shakespeare's audience this, presumably, would have been the 'correct' reaction to Morocco's presence. Her first statement, "If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (1.2.123–25); and her second, "A gentle riddance,—draw the curtains, go,— / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.76–77) are both, however, contradicted by her categorical assurance to Morocco himself:

> Your self (renowned prince) then stood as fair
> As any comer I have look'd on yet
> For my affection. (2.1.20–22)

We are left with two choices: either to regard Portia as a hypocrite and a dissembler, or to believe that the last quoted utterance is expressive of Shakespeare's feelings, projected onto Portia, or, to put it differently, that the negative capability Keats attributed to Shakespeare does break down occasionally. My colleague, Professor Urmilla Khanna, tells me of a production of *Merchant* that she saw at Stratford over ten years ago in which, at the first appearance of Morocco, tall, coal-black, strikingly handsome, magnificent in his loosely flowing garments, there was a long pause as he and Portia stared at each other. Portia was surprised and dazzled. Consequent upon this silent exchange, and based on its unspoken implications, I would like to suggest that at the end of 2.7, after Morocco's departure, Nerissa knows that her mistress has fallen hard for him. With Portia's oxymoron, "A gentle riddance,—draw the curtain," Nerissa looks at Portia for a long moment quizzically, without moving. Portia knows that Nerissa knows: "go," Portia orders sharply, her tone a whiplash. And as Nerissa goes, Portia reassures Nerissa, and the audience, and herself (?) that all is well with her sinking back into conventionality: "Let all of his complexion choose me so."

For Morocco, of course, should be depicted onstage as uncompromisingly black, not brown (Figure 10). As is well known, in many nineteenth-century productions of *Othello*, the Moor was shown in the latter coloration despite his describing himself as "black" (3.3.263; 3.3.387; also 1.1.88; 2.3.29). Likewise, the Arden editor of *Merchant*—and he is not the only one—suggests reassuringly for his light-skinned readers that the stage direction for Morocco being "Enter Morocco (a tawny Moor all in white)," his complexion is, "possibly, in contrast to a 'black' Moor," tawny (p. 32). But from Aaron's unambiguous statement in *Titus Andronicus* regarding his son's complexion, it is clear that for Shakespeare "tawny" meant "coal-black." Aaron addresses the boy as "tawny slave," and four lines later sarcastically observes, "But where the bull and calf are both milk-white, / They never do beget a coal-black calf" (5.1.27–32). Strenuous efforts to mitigate Morocco's complexion from black to brown in order to suit European notions of acceptability are misplaced, for Morocco is proud of his complexion: "I would not

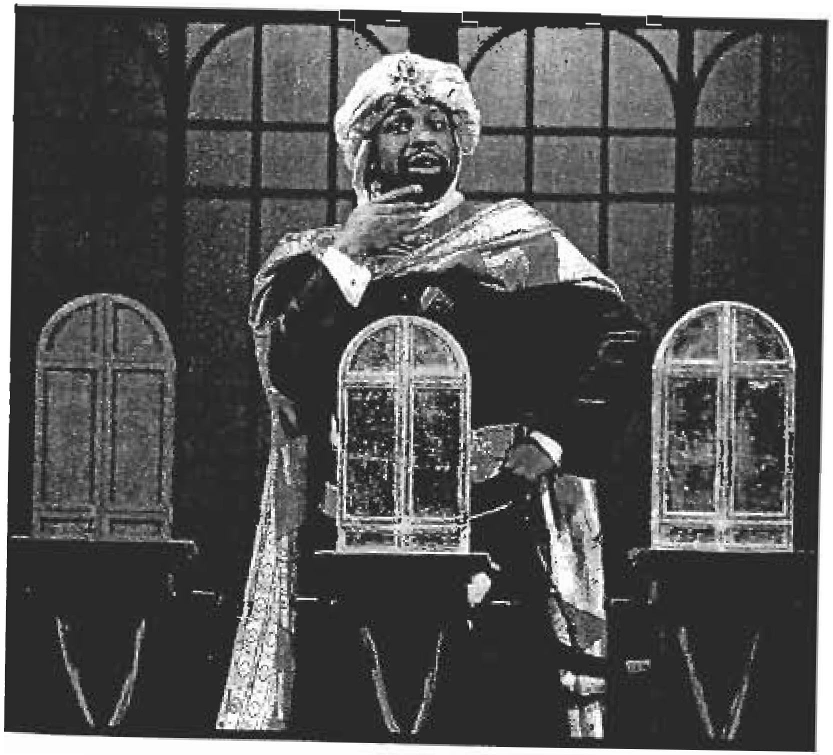

Figure 10. Morocco (Tyrone Wilson) in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production, 2001. Photograph by David Cooper. Courtesy of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

change this hue," he declares to Portia, "Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen" (3.1.11–12), and Aaron asks belligerently, "Is black so base a hue?" (4.2.71).

III

A curious little scene (3.5) at Belmont that has puzzled readers is clearly a reversal of conventional attitudes in the play to the black skin. In an undercutting and dethroning of the white monopoly on sexual attractiveness, Launcelot—the Englishness of whose name is not without significance as I suggest in note nine below—has made pregnant a "negro" woman who, perhaps, belonged to Morocco's retinue since she is called "the Moor." The scene has been dismissed by editors as problematic,[7] but in a recent, perceptive essay Kim Hall shows "that this pregnant, unheard, unnamed, and unseen black woman is a silent symbol for the economic and racial politics of *The Merchant of Venice*" (94). I would like to divert her argument at this point into a parallel channel and suggest that this woman is once again an expression of Shakespeare's personal challenging of the stereotypical belief that gentlemen prefer blondes. The scene, a vignette, needs to be looked at in its entirety before such an interpretation can claim validity.

Replete with sexual innuendo, it begins with Launcelot questioning Jessica's paternity, then Lorenzo suspecting Launcelot of trying to seduce Jessica, followed by his accusing Launcelot of "getting up of the negro's belly," and concludes with a dialogue between the two men in which food/dinner becomes a metaphor for sexual appetite: "stomachs" = desire; "cover" = intercourse; "meat" = the flesh trade (Partridge 88, 147, 192). Launcelot rounds off the exchange by saying, "for your coming in to dinner, sir, why let it be as humours and conceits shall govern": in other words, every man to his own taste, as was Launcelot's for the Moor. Thus, the scene is a corrective to Portia's dismissal of Morocco for his "complexion," for, as Professor Hall drily notes, Launcelot and the Moor "are the only immediately fertile couple presented in the play . . . in threatening contrast to the other Venetians' seeming sterility" (108).

Besides this "unheard, unnamed, and unseen black woman," a suitor who has attracted little or no critical attention is the Prince of Arragon. It is all too easy to consider him simply as the second suitor who will, inevitably, choose the silver casket so that we (as well as Portia) might know the secret of the third casket before Bassanio has his turn. But perhaps there is more to him than just this. If Morocco is represented onstage as "tawny" = black, I suggest that Arragon be represented as dark brown, not white. The reason for this is historical. Aragon was under Roman rule till the fifth century, after which it came under the control of the Goths, until the Arabs conquered the kingdom in the early part of the eighth century: Tamora, queen of the Goths, and her liaison with Aaron, the Moor, in *Titus Andronicus*, reflect this confluence. Consequently there was a large exodus of the European-Christian population and an influx of Arabs which went on until around the beginning of the thirteenth century when Aragon, Castile, Navarre, and Portugal were reconquered by the Europeans from the Arabs, and this process continued up to the end of the fifteenth century, when the last Islamic strongholds in Spain were recovered. In 1516, when Charles I of Spain ascended the throne, Aragon became part of a unified Spain while preserving its regional systems of justice, taxation, military service, and currency (Barraclough 124, 143, 150). At the same time, it should not be forgotten that Ottoman power, though losing its grip in the far west, was steadily advancing throughout the Levant, and especially in Syria, Egypt, Tripoli, Algeria, and Tunisia. Accordingly, at the time that Shakespeare was writing *The Merchant of Venice* in the final decade of the sixteenth century, neither the Europeans nor the Arabs could claim ethnic purity, as has been pointed out by Marjorie Raley in her study of *The Tempest* (95–119).

Shakespeare's introduction of the princes of Morocco and Arragon as suitors indicates a carefully crafted ethnic and racial semiotics without which *Merchant* is an emasculated text. Readers of this collection of essays on the play are no doubt aware that unlike the other major themes—the caskets, the money-lending Jew, and the legal legerdemain—all of which Shakespeare derived from his sources *Il Pecorone* and the *Gesta Romanorum*—the roles of Morocco and Arragon feature in none of his known sources and are, therefore, unless some other source comes to light, entirely his own invention. Modern productions of the play that elide differences in complexion among the characters, reducing all—except Morocco—to a common denominator, are as insensitive to the play's message as were eighteenth-century productions in which these two roles were often omitted.

Thus, both Morocco and Arragon are the marginalized Other as far as Portia is concerned, while she, in turn, is, ironically, the Other to the six northern European suitors who have not esteemed her worth the hazard, and have departed unscathed. The "wiser sort" in Shakespeare's audience who knew their history would have seen in Arragon's complexion his hybrid origin, while noting his ouster as well as that of Morocco's from the matrimonial arena as the counterpart of the Jew's ouster from the mercantile arena. If Shylock is prevented from "thriv"[ing] through "the work of generation" and "breed"[ing] of his ducats by the Venetians (1.3.77–84), Morocco and Arragon are literally prevented from breeding "in way of marriage" (2.1.42 and 2.9.13).

Accordingly, a pattern emerges as to the differing complexions of Portia's suitors, a detail that directors of the play ought to consider: the six absent northern European suitors, presumably white; Morocco, black; Arragon, swarthy; and Bassanio, tan. To the extent that Portia is finally matched with the suitor of her choice, and for other reasons, the closure of the last act may seem satisfying, as effecting a reconciliation of one set of values with another in terms of its treatment of law, commerce, friendship, and love, as Danson argues persuasively, but without any consideration of racial difference. As has often been pointed out in contemporary critical studies of the play, some disturbing questions remain unanswered (Drakakis 52; Lyon 131–40).

IV

If, as I have tried to demonstrate, whenever the question of color comes up the play spills onto two levels—the "proper" one ensuring the rejection and dismissal of the threatening alien, the Other, and the "sympathetic" one which seems to partly negate the former, this oppositional presence giving rise to difficulties in interpretation—then such a tendency may also be discerned in the play's last scene, in particular the ring episode, which, as everyone knows, has received abundant critical attention, though not quite from the angle adopted in this paper. Going back to the trial scene, we recall that there Portia's eloquent appeal was for mercy; when this was not forthcoming she applied the letter of the law and scrutinized the terms of the contract with absolute legal exactitude, rendering Shylock's bond infructuous because impossible of implementation. The ring episode likewise polarizes into two possible lines of interpretation: viewed through Portia's legal lenses Bassanio (and Gratiano) stand condemned for having broken their bond with Portia (and Nerissa) by parting with the rings, but viewed in terms of the common humanity that Portia had herself advocated they are justified in what they did, and their wives' anger is unfair. "I was enforced to send it after him, / I was beset with shame and courtesy" (5.1.214–15), Bassanio pleads.

In retaliation, Portia threatens, "If I be left alone, / Now by mine honour (which is yet my own), / I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow" (252–34). Derived from *Il Pecorone*, the ring episode has a significant input from Genesis 38, hitherto unnoticed as far as I know, where Judah believes his daughter-in-law, while in disguise, to have played "the whore." "Bring ye her forthe and let her be burnt," he commands, realizing his own complicity in the deed when she produces his "signet," "cloke," and "staffe" that she had demanded as a "pledge" (Geneva Bible); traces of this episode are present in Portia's ring which first implicates her in illicit sexual activity, as just noted, and then exonerates her ("Were you the doctor, and I knew you not?" 280). Her brinksmanship is of course a joke because we know the truth, which the husbands don't—but it is, nevertheless, a blueprint of Iago's assurance to Othello that "in Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.206–207)—and at this point Antonio offers his soul as the forfeit for Bassanio's integrity:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.249–53)

The symbolic "death" of Antonio, "the merchant of Venice," and the actual death of Desdemona, "that cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.91), as the by now thoroughly deluded Othello describes her, suggest the displacement of Venice on both counts. Thus, in *Merchant*, after the elimination of Morocco and Arragon, the two alien suitors, what follows is the subjugation of the two Venetian suitors/husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano, by their wives. If, on the one hand, Portia is the docile wife who submits herself to "her lord, her governor, her king" (3.2.165), on the other she is the intransigent female who with her body holds out the threat of making her husband a "cuckold" (5.1.265, 281). Newman perceptively traces the path traversed by Portia's ring—initially signifying the faithfulness and chastity of a Renaissance lady—from Bassanio to Balthazar to Antonio and back to Bassanio, picking up in its journey murky associations with "cuckoldry and female unruliness, female genitalia, woman's changeable nature and so-called animal temperament, her deceptiveness and potential subversion of the rules of possession and fidelity that ensure the male line" (130–131), and Belsey argues that the ring episode captures "a specific cultural moment when the meaning of marriage is unstable, contested, and open to radical reconstruction" (48). The body, and in particular the female body, "this muddy vesture of decay" (5.1.64), as Lorenzo describes it, is the site of cuckoldry, of deception, of spurious "crisped snaky golden locks," a contrast to the "floor of heaven . . . thick inlaid with patens of bright gold" (5.1.59) in the night sky, which transcends the vagaries of the body, including its "complexion." But as I shall argue in the next and last section of this essay, this is not all: the play adumbrates an additional dimension in its racial and cultural definition of the heroine.

V

I'd like to conclude by going back to the point I made at the beginning of this essay: that our perspective on the play should be conditioned by what we know concerning the views of Shakespeare's English audience on race and culture, and that we should not superimpose London upon Venice—something we might do inadvertently. Keeping in mind that the English suitor Falconbridge, along with the other European suitors, has escaped entanglement in the "crisped snaky golden locks" that the Italian *femme fatale* displays, we might usefully consider at least one—perhaps representative—opinion stated matched with the suitor of her choice, and for other reasons, the closure of the last act may seem satisfying, as effecting a reconciliation of one set of values with another in terms of its treatment of law, commerce, friendship, and love, as Danson argues persuasively, but without any consideration of racial difference. As has often been pointed out in contemporary critical studies of the play, some disturbing questions remain unanswered (Drakakis 52; Lyon 131–40).

IV

If, as I have tried to demonstrate, whenever the question of color comes up the play spills onto two levels—the "proper" one ensuring the rejection and dismissal of the threatening alien, the Other, and the "sympathetic" one which seems to partly negate the former, this oppositional presence giving rise to difficulties in interpretation—then such a tendency may also be discerned in the play's last scene, in particular the ring episode, which, as everyone knows, has received abundant critical attention, though not quite from the angle adopted in this paper. Going back to the trial scene, we recall that there Portia's eloquent appeal was for mercy; when this was not forthcoming she applied the letter of the law and scrutinized the terms of the contract with absolute legal exactitude, rendering Shylock's bond infructuous because impossible of implementation. The ring episode likewise polarizes into two possible lines of interpretation: viewed through Portia's legal lenses Bassanio (and Gratiano) stand condemned for having broken their bond with Portia (and Nerissa) by parting with the rings, but viewed in terms of the common humanity that Portia had herself advocated they are justified in what they did, and their wives' anger is unfair. "I was enforced to send it after him, / I was beset with shame and courtesy" (5.1.214–15), Bassanio pleads.

In retaliation, Portia threatens, "If I be left alone, / Now by mine honour (which is yet my own), / I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow" (252–34). Derived from *Il Pecorone*, the ring episode has a significant input from Genesis 38, hitherto unnoticed as far as I know, where Judah believes his daughter-in-law, while in disguise, to have played "the whore." "Bring ye her forthe and let her be burnt," he commands, realizing his own complicity in the deed when she produces his "signet," "cloke," and "staffe" that she had demanded as a "pledge" (Geneva Bible); traces of this episode are present in Portia's ring which first implicates her in illicit sexual activity, as just noted, and then exonerates her ("Were you the doctor, and I knew you not?" 280). Her brinksmanship is of course a joke because we know the truth, which the husbands don't—but it is, nevertheless, a blueprint of Iago's assurance to Othello that "in Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.206–207)—and at this point Antonio offers his soul as the forfeit for Bassanio's integrity:

> I once did lend my body for his wealth,
> Which but for him that had your husband's ring
> Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
> My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
> Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.249–53)

The symbolic "death" of Antonio, "the merchant of Venice," and the actual death of Desdemona, "that cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.91), as the by now thoroughly deluded Othello describes her, suggest the displacement of Venice on both counts. Thus, in *Merchant*, after the elimination of Morocco and Arragon, the two alien suitors, what follows is the subjugation of the two Venetian suitors/husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano, by their wives. If, on the one hand, Portia is the docile wife who submits herself to "her lord, her governor, her king" (3.2.165), on the other she is the intransigent female who with her body holds out the threat of making her husband a "cuckold" (5.1.265, 281). Newman perceptively traces the path traversed by Portia's ring—initially signifying the faithfulness and chastity of a Renaissance lady—from Bassanio to Balthazar to Antonio and back to Bassanio, picking up in its journey murky associations with "cuckoldry and female unruliness, female genitalia, woman's changeable nature and so-called animal temperament, her deceptiveness and potential subversion of the rules of possession and fidelity that ensure the male line" (130–131), and Belsey argues that the ring episode captures "a specific cultural moment when the meaning of marriage is unstable, contested, and open to radical reconstruction" (48). The body, and in particular the female body, "this muddy vesture of decay" (5.1.64), as Lorenzo describes it, is the site of cuckoldry, of deception, of spurious "crisped snaky golden locks," a contrast to the "floor of heaven . . . thick inlaid with patens of bright gold" (5.1.59) in the night sky, which transcends the vagaries of the body, including its "complexion." But as I shall argue in the next and last section of this essay, this is not all: the play adumbrates an additional dimension in its racial and cultural definition of the heroine.

V

I'd like to conclude by going back to the point I made at the beginning of this essay: that our perspective on the play should be conditioned by what we know concerning the views of Shakespeare's English audience on race and culture, and that we should not superimpose London upon Venice—something we might do inadvertently. Keeping in mind that the English suitor Falconbridge, along with the other European suitors, has escaped entanglement in the "crisped snaky golden locks" that the Italian *femme fatale* displays, we might usefully consider at least one—perhaps representative—opinion stated by a northern European on the sexual machinations of—specifically—Italy's females. In *The Schoolmaster* Roger Ascham (1515–68), an Englishman and the Queen's tutor, cautions his countrymen who must "needs send their sons into Italy" that

> [they] shall sometimes fall either into the hands of some cruel Cyclops or into the lap of some wanton and dallying Dame Calypso, and so suffer the danger of many a deadly den. . . . Some siren shall sing him a song, sweet in tune, but sounding in the end to his utter destruction. If Scylla drown him not, Charybdis may fortune to swallow him. Some Circes shall make him of a plain Englishman a right Italian. (831)[8]

The tacit, underlying assumption here is, of course, that the English as a race are honest, straightforward, "plain," while the Italians, particularly the women, are devious, dangerous, "wanton." *The Schoolmaster,* published posthumously (1570) and then reprinted in 1571 and again in 1589, was a highly influential work, being one of the earliest educational treatises to be written not in Latin but in English, offering a spirited defense of English as a vehicle for thought and literature. In this context it is possible to see the author's warning against the wiles of Italian women as consistent with his wider aim to establish the English tongue as a worthy substitute for the Latin. At the present time when postcolonial studies have proliferated as a consequence of the great wave of what were former colonies in Asia and Africa becoming free in the wake of India's independence in 1947, it is appropriate that we recognize the parallel between the attitude of these erstwhile colonized peoples to their colonizers, and, correspondingly, the attitude of the Britons to the Roman empire which ruled for nearly 600 years, from 54 B.C. to A.D. 577.[9] Political freedom is seldom accompanied by cultural freedom.

The preoccupation, almost obsessive, even ten centuries later, of Elizabethan dramatists including Shakespeare with Italian (Roman) plots has its parallel in modern India: for example, Satyajit Ray being given a national award only after he had won an Oscar, or some of the most successful contemporary India-born novelists like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth being lionized in the home country only after they had been granted recognition in the west. The opposite, the "hate" side of this love-hate relationship is to be seen, or, rather, heard, in terms of the shrill denunciation of certain carefully selected items of western culture like beauty pageants, fashion shows, or the observance of St. Valentine's day coming from the self-proclaimed guardians of the old traditions who, however, see nothing contradictory in sending their children to the best English-medium schools, or encouraging them to pursue computer studies with a view to emigrating to the west. I'd like to suggest that *Merchant* encapsulates similar contradictions.

The English*men* watching *Merchant* may, vicariously, through Falconbridge, the unseen and unheard English suitor, have congratulated themselves for having escaped the clutches of the Italian community which emasculates its men, including Shylock who is stripped of his possessions not only by the Italian state but by his own daughter, an Italian-Jewess. To them, the entrapment of Bassanio, an impecunious Italian, by Portia might have seemed as unenviable and entirely appropriate as was his reciprocal appropriation of her, an heiress, true, but not worth the risk of enforced celibacy. The global vision of Portia's father in which his daughter's "worth" and "sunny locks" attract suitors from all over the world—"For the four winds blow in from every coast / Renowned suitors" (1.1.167–69)—paralleled and reinforced by Venice's international mercantilism covering Tripolis, the Indies, Mexico, and England (1.3.16–18), remains unrealized, for Portia finally gets a husband from nearby Venice: she marries the boy next door. The play seems deliberately to undercut its own large agenda with which it opened. As noted earlier, Shakespeare does not make the English suitor Falconbridge the winner of Portia's hand—something he could easily have done—but faithfully follows his sources whereas, as is well known, in many other plays he made changes with the source material to suit his dramatic purpose.[10] The significance of what he did *not* do in *Merchant* may well be as important as what he did do in his other plays.

To the Elizabethan audience watching the play, the ending would have seemed to stress the divide between play and audience, not just in terms of the unreality of drama or the distinction between fiction and fact ("The best in this kind are but shadows," as Theseus says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while watching the enactment of *Pyramus and Thisbe*: 5.1.208–209), but more vitally in *Merchant* than in any other play of Shakespeare's, in terms of an enactment dealing with characters from another country, another culture, another code of values, even another language, in other words, an *Elizabethan* audience watching an *Italian* play. As noted at the commencement of this paper, Portia's admission to her poor knowledge of English is a reminder to the Globe audience that the play is really in Italian, the play that they are witnessing on the stage—Shakespeare's play—being merely a translation. This Otherness that the play emphasizes places the action—the reconciliation and restoration at the play's ending—on a detached plane, a spectacle which the audience is intended to admire but not necessarily empathize with.[11] So complete is this divide that even the miracle of Portia possessing secret knowledge of the safe return of three of Antonio's ships becomes acceptable within the play's picture frame:

> Antonio you are welcome,
> And I have better news in store for you
> Than you expect: unseal this letter soon,

> There you shall find three of your argosies
> Are richly come to harbour suddenly.
> You shall not know by what strange accident
> I chanced on this letter.
> *Ant.* I am dumb! (5.1.273–279)

All the men in the play are subjugated by Women on Top:[12] Portia and her minions. Antonio is rendered "dumb"; Bassanio and Gratiano are afraid of being made "cuckolds ere we have deserved it" (265); Lorenzo is suspicious of his wife's fidelity on account of Launcelot getting her "in corners" (3.5.26); and Shylock has been completely routed.

If the perspective I have outlined on the play merits plausibility, then though it be true that *Merchant*'s movement from Venice to Belmont is celebratory of matrimony, of identities restored, of synthesis and integration, it is also celebratory of an escape, not only by the six European suitors but the two non-white ones as well, from a possibly disastrous union with an Italian "siren"—to employ Ascham's descriptive term. After all, in the play that Shakespeare wrote just six years later, which also begins in Venice and then moves to Cyprus, miscegenation (narrowly averted in *Merchant*) takes place, and then ends in disaster.[13]

Notes

1. For example, in his recent book-length study of the play, Graham Holderness mentions the Prince of Morocco only in passing (12, 13, 56).
2. Quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from the Arden edition, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1967).
3. For a well documented uncovering of trace elements of castration/circumcision/cannibalism in Shylock's design on Antonio's life, see Shapiro (73–91).
4. For a startling analysis of hair as "excrement"—Bassanio's term: 1.87—see Wilson (152).
5. As far as I am aware, stage and screen versions of these plays have missed this point. For a detailed examination of this issue, see Desai "What means?" (311–24). Cleopatra, an Egyptian, is of course dark complexioned, as she herself says: "that am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black" (1.5.28).
6. Interestingly enough, Shylock's complexion (and Jessica's) in stage and screen productions of the play are shown as "white" which, Biblically speaking, is incorrect. The Jews are the descendants of Shem, Noah's second son, while the Europeans claim descent from Japheth, his eldest son. Metaphorically, and perhaps literally, this distinction is hinted at in Salerio's reference to Shylock's flesh being "jet" (3.1.35). For some excellent insights into these and other related racial issues, see Kaul (1–19).
7. Brown: "This passage has not been explained; it might be an outcrop of a lost source, or a topical allusion" (99); Harrison: "The scandal is obviously topical but cannot be explained" (603); Quiller-Couch and Wilson: "We are inclined to interpret the reference as a topical one" (158); Munro quotes Furness: "An overlooked fragment of the Old Play which Sh. rewrote" (478).

8. For Freud, it will be recalled, Portia is the Goddess of Death in the guise of the Goddess of Love (67), and for Goddard she falls short of becoming "the leaden casket with the spiritual gold within" (vol. 1, 112).
9. That Shakespeare named Hamlet's "mighty opposite" after the Roman emperor Claudius under whom the actual conquest of Britain took place is surely not by accident.
10. The most drastic change of course being the ending of *King Lear*, but also, equally significant, in *The Winter's Tale* where the jealous husband is Sicilian, not Bohemian. For an examination of this change, see Desai "What means?" (312).
11. In *Merchant* the names of all the characters are Italian—Portia's identity being pointedly associated with her Roman namesake and predecessor (1.2.165–66)—except, remarkably enough, for that of Launcelot Gobbo whose first name is very English, linking him to his predecessor, Malory's Lancelot, also sexually involved with the forbidden woman. In *Hamlet*, written most probably two or three years after *Merchant*, not all of the names are Scandinavian: Claudius, Horatio, Marcellus, Barnardo, Francisco, and Reynaldo are Roman names. That this period was important for Shakespeare is indicated by his making it the historical setting for *Cymbeline*. *Merchant*, we are entitled to speculate, unlike *Hamlet*, was not intended to have an international ambience but to be quintessentially Italian.
12. A phrase taken from Natalie Zemon Davis' chapter "Women on Top."
13. The most powerful modern evocation of Venice as destructive is, of course, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

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