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‘The Women of Belmont and Venice’

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Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* is often considered for its male storyline: Bassanio’s wooing of Portia and Antonio’s foolhardy loan, Shylock’s revenge, and the uncomfortable relationship between the two Christian men. But an analysis of the two heroines, Portia and Jessica, whose marriages are relegated to a subplot, reveals much about the men with whom they interact and the worlds which they inhabit. Though Portia comes from a fictional world, Belmont, and Jessica comes from an essentially real world, Venice, on the surface they have much in common: They are both hugely wealthy, and bound to their father’s wills because of that wealth; they are both missing mothers. They both attempt to cross between Belmont and Venice, disguising their gender to do so. Both marry men whom they seem to love, but from whom there is a substantial disconnect. But whereas Portia sacrifices little and maintains her position of power throughout the play, Jessica gives up her entire world and finds herself an outcast from both Venice and Belmont. Whereas Portia addresses her marital concerns through the fantastical ring trick in Act Four, Jessica addresses hers through conversation, in Act Five. In many ways, the two are perfect foils; even their interactions with each other are strained, with Jessica expressing infinite respect for Portia, and Portia hardly acknowledging her existence. Nevertheless, their struggles are similar, though they play out on separate tracks: both marry without fully knowing their husbands, then seek to ensure that their husbands respect them both as women and as wives.

To understand the way Shakespeare contrasts his two heroines, it is necessary to consider the two locations they move between. Belmont is a fairytale world, established by Bassanio’s

speech in the opening scene: “In Belmont is a lady richly left...and many Jasons come in quest of her” (I.1.161,172). This lady, of course, is Portia, whose “sunny locks hang on her temples like a golden fleece,” whose suitors are blown in from every direction by the four winds, the feminine object of extravagant desire and the center of this fantastical world (169-170). Without Portia, there is no Belmont; with her, Belmont is the place where clearly impossible things can happen without the audience protesting—most notably, the challenge of the three caskets. Venice is the masculine world of money and business transactions. On the surface, it is the world of realism, but impossible things happen there, too, when Portia arrives disguised as a man.

Wealth means different things in Belmont and in Venice, though the heroines of both worlds are wealthier than can be imagined. Portia’s wealth is obvious, since it is the reason for her many suitors and the reason Bassanio must borrow money to pursue her: it is the impetus for the plot. The exact sum of her inheritance is never stated; according to Peter Holland, however, her offer to “pay the debt twenty times over”—to give Shylock sixty thousand ducats, when Antonio struggled to raise even 3,000—places her among the richest people in the world (III.2.307; *lvi*). But figures such as these belong in the commercial world of Venice, not in Belmont; Portia’s wealth is essentially uncountable, perhaps infinite, belonging to the fairytale world. Jessica’s money—that is, the money she takes from her father—is less apparent because it is even less hers. True, Portia’s wealth is controlled by her father’s conditions, but she has the full use of it; Jessica’s wealth, on the other hand, is obtained against her father’s wishes, and we learn of it only from Shylock. Unlike Portia’s money, it is countable: “Two thousand ducats...and other precious, precious jewels,” according to her father (III.1.79-80) This might not seem like much compared to Portia’s sixty thousand ducats, but it is. According to Holland, the “fourscore ducats” she is said to have spent on dinner is equivalent to at least £10,000 (III.1.99; *lvi*). She is anything but thrifty, and she goes so far as to pawn the ring given to Shylock by her dead

mother. This act, though we never see it, reveals a darker side of Jessica's character and highlights the essential difference between the two women's wealth: hers, unlike Portia's, is stolen; she has no money of her own.

In part because of the issue of money, both Portia and Jessica are bound by the wills of fathers, one living and one dead. Portia must take part in the casket challenge because it was her father's wish, but it is also a means of controlling the transfer of his money. (Since her husband will be the one to control her inheritance, her marriage is a kind of monetary exchange.) Jessica, on the other hand, is controlled by a living father who is keen to keep his daughter and his ducats within arms' length. Though Shylock is a much more intimidating figure than any dead man, it is Jessica, not Portia, who disobeys her father's wishes. Why does Portia not rebel when Bassanio faces the caskets, when she breaks all expectations for women in the famous trial scene? "I could teach you / How to choose right," she says in Act Three, Scene Two, "but then I am forsworn" (10-11). But giving him the answer is not so simple as whispering a word in his ear: though Portia and Bassanio are the only ones to speak for several pages, they are not alone. They are accompanied by "Gratiano, Nerissa, and all their trains" (49). Depending on the scale of the production and what kind of Belmont the director wants to create, these trains can be a large crowd, so that the casket challenge is as much a piece of theatre for them as it is for the audience. This raises a question about the song Portia sings "whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets": is it for the crowd's benefit or for his? (51) This song, with its rhymes "bred" and "head," has often been considered a hint for Bassanio to choose "lead," but according to W. Moelwyn Merchant, such a simple explanation "belittle[s] both their relationship and her good faith." In fact, the song is about the death of fancy and makes a subtler suggestion, that if he abandons concern for outward appearances he will find Portia's likeness in the vessel with the least extravagant exterior. (132)

The fact that Portia does not give him an explicit answer—that she does not cheat—makes the casket challenge not a petty stipulation of her father’s will but a real test of Bassanio’s love and worth. The audience knows, of course, not only that Bassanio will choose lead but that the first suitor will choose gold and the second choose silver: both the sequence of three suitors and the illusion of physical splendor are fairytale tropes, believable only in Belmont. But not only is Bassanio unsure of the answer; it is possible that Portia does not know until she has seen the first two suitors fail. Portia can be played as either a knowing conspirator in her father’s challenge or as an uninformed pawn who has no choice but to go along for the ride, and the interpretation of this point will affect both her relationship with Bassanio and her willingness to be a prize in this fairytale quest. Whether or not she knows the answer, however, Portia’s relative inability to help Bassanio is not simply because they are not alone, or because Bassanio’s worth must be tested. Portia has power not just because she is wealthy but because she is sought after; her role as mythical quest object would be nothing without the casket challenge. If she invalidates the test by helping Bassanio, she will still be one of the richest women in the world, but she will not be the gravitational center of Belmont.

Despite the love she professes, Portia never risks her status for Bassanio, which may be evidence for unevenness in their relationship. “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath,” reads the inscription on the lead casket. (II.7.9). Bassanio certainly hazards everything he has, and more, for he endangers the life of his friend. In fact, all of Portia’s suitors take a great risk, swearing never to marry any woman if they fail to win her. The seemingly ridiculous requirement that they give up marriage makes sense to the prince of Morocco, Portia’s first suitor, who says, “men that hazard all / Do it in hope of fair advantages” (18-19). To him, the quest for Portia is a gamble, and marriage is an exchange, an idea that Shakespeare carries through the play, connecting the ideas of love and trade in a manner unique to *The Merchant of*

Venice. Bassanio's wooing of Portia is as risky as Antonio's merchant shipping, and both belong more to the business world of Venice than the fantastical world of Belmont. But successful love, according to the inscription, is more than just risk. "Who chooses me must hazard all he hath" would be comfortable iambic pentameter, but that is not the line; the presence of an extra metrical foot draws attention to the double duties of a lover, to "give and hazard." Portia may not hazard much for Bassanio but she gives him everything, offering not only her money but the use of her inventive power, transforming herself into the man who saves Antonio at the eleventh hour. Conversely, Bassanio, who hazards all for Portia, may not actually give her much. What does she gain from the exchange? Nothing but a husband she likes, which is significant, though the wisdom of their match is put in some question by the ring incident in Acts Four and Five.

The inscription, which may be seen as the moral of the casket scenes, can also be used to evaluate the other two marriages in the play. Neither Nerissa nor Gratiano risks much for the other, nor is there any particular exchange of status or power, and their ability to maintain the status quo is evidence for the superficiality of their relationship. The marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo, on the other hand, is a different matter. Jessica gives up family, religion, and even Venice itself to marry Lorenzo. Her elopement has been widely analyzed for its influence on Shylock; according to John Palmer, "No incident in the play has so richly contributed to the transformation of Shylock, the comic Jew, into a lamentable victim of Christian bigotry and license" (121). But Jessica's desertion of Venice and Judaism says just as much about her own lack of belonging. Despite her conversion to Christianity, the two things she cannot rid herself of are her gender and her race.

Venice is entirely masculine. Not only is it run by men, but Jessica seems to be the only woman living there. Certainly there are no Christian women spoken of (Holland xxv). The only other woman mentioned is a prostitute, the Moor whom Lorenzo accuses Launcelot of

impregnating (III.5.35). None of the men seems to be married (*xxv*). The only wife spoken of is Leah, Jessica's dead mother. Jessica, like Portia, is one of Shakespeare's many motherless heroines who seem entirely unconscious of the missing presence in their lives. Though she does refer to her mother once, the only mention of Leah as an actual person comes not from Jessica but from Shylock, whose disregard of his daughter would lead one to expect he cared similarly for his wife. "I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor," he says of Leah's ring, which Jessica pawned to buy a monkey. Though this loss is still a material one, its juxtaposition with the fourscore ducats spent on dinner, which Shylock has just mentioned, highlights the difference between the two. Ducats are a commodity that can be traded and used in business transactions; a ring may be exchanged as well—for a monkey, for example—but "a wilderness of monkeys" will not have the personal value of the ring (112-113). According to Peter Holland, it is unlikely that Jessica would not know something of the ring's history as the symbol of her parents' betrothal (*lxi*). Especially in light of her astronomical dinner bill, her decision to pawn it cannot be considered an act of necessity. Does she do it to spite her father, whose house she calls hell? (II.3.2.) Does she do it simply because she has no memory of her mother and no need for a physical link to her? Does she do it to break the final tie to father and mother, to Venice and her Jewish life? The answer is most likely a mixture of the three; but whatever the reason, her decision to sell the ring, the only thing Shylock cannot price in ducats, is a stain on her character.

Interestingly, the fact that we only hear of this incident allows us almost to gloss over it; though some of her action is reprehensible, we maintain a level respect for her that we could not if we saw just what she did with Shylock's money. That is not to say that a morally alert audience should not support her: Jessica is one of the most sympathetic characters in the play, and the empathy we fail to feel for Shylock we do feel for her. If anyone is the depository of the sufferings of the Jews, as William Hazlitt called Shylock in 1817, it is Jessica. In contrast to

Shylock's rants about the Old Testament, the tribulations of his people, and the righteousness of revenge, Jessica's quiet acceptance of her position as an outsider is particularly compelling. Her attitude toward her race is apparent in her use of terminology; whereas Shylock describes Tubal and Chus as members of his "tribe," Jessica calls them his "countrymen" (III.2.285). Part of this difference may be Jessica's attempt to dissociate herself from Shylock, and part may be her desire not to appear associated with him while speaking to her hosts in Belmont. But certainly part is that Jessica does not identify with the Jewish race to the same extent that her father does. In fact, her conversion to Christianity does not seem to be a sacrifice at all, though Shylock's forced conversion at the end of the play is, for him, tantamount to death. "I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian," Jessica says (III.5.18). Does she believe, as the people of Belmont seem to, that her soul must be saved? Or does she mean simply that she her husband has saved her from the hell that is Venice and her father's oppressive household? This line is the closest Jessica comes to expressing her religious convictions, if indeed she has any.

Though Jessica's conversion allows her to marry Lorenzo and escape Venice—in fact, it is the only way she can—she will never truly be a part of Belmont. This is especially clear in Act Three, Scene Two, her first scene in Belmont. "But who comes here?" Gratiano says. "Lorenzo and his infidel!" (118) This line fills the traditional purpose of announcing the new characters on the stage, which makes the word "infidel" almost a substitute for her name. Clarity is not an issue, since she is the only Jew who would enter Belmont, and the only one associated with Lorenzo, but the line ignores her identity. Certainly, Gratiano means the word as an insult, but it is up to the staging to decide whether he says it to her face or not. Later in the scene, he seems hesitant to address her at all, telling Nerissa to "cheer yond stranger" (237). This line can serve to call the audience's attention to Jessica, who has been onstage this entire time but has not yet spoken or been called by name. The only time she does speak, however, she plays a crucial role

in the scene, delivering the information that Shylock will not accept Portia's money in lieu of Antonio's pound of flesh. Peter Holland points out that Portia never answers Jessica's speech; rather, she says to Bassanio, "Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?" (291) This "refusal of the normal mechanism of dialogue" can say a lot about Portia (*xxxix*). Is she deliberately ignoring Jessica? If so, is it because she is Jewish? (Portia's comment about Morocco in Act Two, Scene Seven, is just one piece of evidence that she is prejudiced.) Because she is a threat to Portia's power? After all, she is the only other woman with real independence. Interestingly, Portia does later ask Lorenzo and Jessica to stand in for Bassanio and herself when they go to the trial; in a sense, Jessica gets to masquerade as Portia. But we never see this in a scene, and it seems unlikely that Jessica would be as successful at playing Portia as Portia is at playing the male lawyer. Portia can slip between the play's two worlds with ease, but Jessica, the only woman in Venice and the only Jew in Belmont, will never belong in either.

Portia is, in modern terms, the "it girl"—the one every young woman wants to be but can never figure out how to be. The opening scene describes her as the epitome of desirability: "And she is fair," Bassanio says, beginning a series of adjectives that contrasts her with Nerissa (whose name comes from the Italian meaning "dark-haired") and, implicitly, with the Jewish Jessica. When asked what she thinks of Portia, Jessica replies that "the poor rude world / Hath not her fellow" (III.5.77-78).). If she minds that Portia barely acknowledges her, she does not say so. Despite her extreme wealth—and her extravagant waste of it—Jessica has, or claims to have, modest aspirations. No one comes in quest of her—not even Lorenzo, as we do not see him in Venice until after she has run away; rather, she must meet him in Belmont, disguised as a boy. (This disguise is another example of her limited freedom of movement; whereas Portia masquerades as a *man* and fools the entire court, Jessica pretends to be a boy and cannot even fool Lorenzo.)

Another example of Jessica's seemingly low expectations is her response to Lorenzo's thoughtless praising of himself. When she praises Portia, he says, "Even such a husband / Hast thou of me as she is for a wife." "Nay, but ask my opinion too of that!" she replies. (III.5.78-80) Lorenzo's crassness, though well meant, is particularly distressing because it comes after Launcelot's double insult: first, that she is automatically damned, by virtue of being a Jew's daughter, and second, the ridiculous assertion that by converting, she will raise the price of pork (1-23). Her response to both men seems teasing, but she stands up for herself by pointing out their follies. By restating Launcelot's fallacious argument, she ensures that he is the one who looks ridiculous. (John Palmer makes the case that this is one of the many reasons *Merchant* is not a racist play: though many characters, especially Launcelot and Gratiano, spout anti-Semitic ideas, Jessica's rebuttals are much more intelligent and convincing.) And her response to her husband's self-promoting comment, though it may be a loving rebuke, also says that she expects him to ask her opinion.

Jessica has her say again in Act Five. The opening of the act's only scene has often been praised for its "gracious lyricism...in contrast to the sombre trial scene." But, according to W. Moelwyn Merchant, the somberness of this scene is clear when one considers the lovers whom Jessica and Lorenzo mention to each other: Troilus, Cressida, Thisbe, Dido, and Medea—lovers whose stories have ended tragically, who have been misled or betrayed. (144) "In such a night," says Jessica, continuing the pattern of their speech, "Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And ne'er a true one" (16-19). Holland calls their marriage an "ill-advised match," and in this scene Jessica certainly addresses her fears that this is true (*lxii*). Lorenzo's response is not exactly comforting, either: "In such a night / Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew, / Slander her love, and he forgave it her." While he may be attempting

to reassure her, it is painfully patronizing. If Lorenzo has ever truly tried to look at things from Jessica's perspective, we don't see it in the play.

According to Holland, *The Merchant of Venice* was, before 1879, often performed without this last act and the exchanging of rings in Act Four, ending instead with the trial scene (*lxxii*). This decision, while allowing the play to focus more on Shylock, ignores the two heroines, whose romantic fates are yet to be determined. The exchanging of rings at the end of Act Four is Portia's attempt to evaluate her husband's fidelity. One could argue that Portia simply wants to see how far she can take her disguise and assert her power further by manipulating Bassanio, but it is more likely that she, like Jessica, is genuinely afraid she has made an ill-advised match. This incident, like the rest of Portia's story, is much more inspired by fairytale, and it requires more suspension of disbelief than Jessica's confrontation of Lorenzo. Most important, it means that Bassanio must have no idea of the lawyer's identity (unlike Orlando in *As You Like It*, who in many productions is aware that the disguised Rosalind really is his beloved). It must be this way for two reasons: First, Portia can only defeat Shylock if her disguise is completely successful, and the connection between Bassanio and Antonio means that if the former figured out her identity, the latter would soon know as well. Second, though Portia does have a freedom of movement that Jessica lacks, she too must change her identity and her gender in order to cross between the two worlds; the "mortal breathing saint" of Belmont could never have power in Venice, and her legal advice would never be believed (II.7.40).

Does the fact that Bassanio falls for the ruse make him an ill-suited husband for Portia? It would suggest he does not know her very well, but it also enables her to save his friend. Though he does give Portia's ring away, he respects it as more than an expensive trifle: "There's more depends on this than on the value," he tells his disguised wife (431). He—unlike Jessica, who sells her father's ring for a monkey—appreciates the difference between economic value and

personal value. The comic conclusion of Act Five suggests that all has been in good fun and all marital problems are resolved. But Gratiano's closing words, "Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring"—an unpleasant sexual pun in which the ring is also her vulva¹—reminds us that that, to a certain extent, the men have missed the point (306-307; *liv*).

Do Portia and Jessica get happy endings? Since *The Merchant of Venice* is a Shakespearean comedy, the simple answer is yes. But even that must be qualified; both marriages have taken place by Act Three, and Acts Four and Five show mostly conflict between the lovers. Using the lens of marriage as an exchange (a rather Venetian idea that makes its way into Belmont in the casket scenes), one can see just how unbalanced the relationships are. Bassanio hazards all he has for Portia, to the point that she must intervene to save his friend's life. In rescuing Antonio, Portia certainly gives Bassanio something beyond value (not to mention her enormous wealth, to which he gains at least some access). But she does not really risk anything for her husband, and at the end of the play she is in much the same position she was at the beginning—the only character with real power—except that now she is married. Portia and Bassanio are still probably more evenly matched in terms of give-and-take than Lorenzo and Jessica, however. To marry Lorenzo, Jessica sacrifices family, not only her father but her mother's memory; religion, becoming a Christian without ever expressing her true religious convictions; and even race, for she can never again identify herself with the Jews as her father does, if she ever did at all. What does she get? She becomes the outcast from everywhere, belonging neither in Venice nor in Belmont, and her husband remains comfortably self-centered, deflecting most of her concerns.

¹According to Peter Holland: "the line alludes to an old joke, which assumes that the right way, indeed the only way, for a husband to keep his wife faithful is not to keep her ring on one's finger but to keep a finger inserted in her vagina" (*liv*).

A production of *Merchant* that ended with the defeat of Shylock would largely overlook these concerns. But the exchanging of rings and the lyrical dialogue of Act Five allows the two heroines to address their marital fears. Portia does so in a fairytale manner, and it may be she learns something she does not want to know, since once her ring has been given away it can never be ungiven. But despite Bassanio's complete ignorance of her identity—which must be distressing even if Portia enjoys the power it gives her—he has now passed two tests of his worthiness: he has recognized, first, the difference between outward appearance and inward reality (choosing the lead casket), and second, the difference between monetary value and personal value (telling her the ring's importance). Jessica, in contrast, addresses her concerns in a realistic way, through conversation, without the artifice of disguise. Though she is again dismissed by Lorenzo, it is worth noting that it is he who begins the conversation, citing the first two doomed lovers. This suggests a remarkable concord of their thoughts; though he never really does address her fears, his ability to broach the subject shows that he is at least somewhat attuned to his wife's feelings. Despite the disconnects in their marriages, both Portia and Jessica are happier by the end of Act Five than they were in Act One; but it is also clear they can never undo the events of the play: they can never uncross the lines between Venice and Belmont, never take back the things they have sacrificed, never become unmarried.

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