

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE:
WIVES AND DAUGHTERS AHEAD OF THEIR TIME

By

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of the female characters in William Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice. Through contextualizing the characters of Portia, Nerissa and Jessica within the world of early modern England, this study explores the ways in which these characters do not conform to traditional Renaissance values regarding the role of women as daughters and wives. By using historical documents such as behavioral manuals, sermons, and "defenses" of women from the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, this thesis explores the ways in which Shakespeare's female characters challenge traditional social norms. Through the comparison of the female characters with Queen Elizabeth and Patient Griselda, this study discusses the implications of the rebellious behavior of the women in The Merchant of Venice. This thesis concludes that Shakespeare purposely challenges strict social views put forward on women by creating female characters who challenge male authority and are celebrated for their behavior.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When a scholar sits down to write criticism about a play by William Shakespeare, the most obvious question to those in the know may be – why? With the overwhelming and exhausting amount of material available regarding the life and work of arguably the world's most celebrated playwright, the difficulty becomes finding something new to say. However, with work as nuanced as Shakespeare's the opportunity for further discussion is never-ending, particularly in the relatively new realm of feminist studies. While many scholars have written millions if not billions of pages regarding the work of Shakespeare, the majority of feminist scholarship is quarantined into the later half of the twentieth century extending into today.

The Merchant of Venice can be read ostensibly as the story of Christian men whose lives almost take a tragic turn due to the lack of forgiveness of a Jewish moneylender. Traditionally, scholars focused more on the issues about religion and the relationships between the male characters, often contextualizing the events of the play within the Elizabethan era and citing the anti-Semitism rampant in the period by using historical documents (see Shakespeare and the Jews by James Shapiro and Shylock edited by Harold Bloom, for just two examples). In other instances, scholars have focused on perceived homoerotic behavior between the male characters Bassanio and Antonio, again relegating the role of the females in the play to a secondary sphere. Finally, when scholars do focus on any female character in the play, almost exclusively, and understandably, they focus on the complexity of Portia, and Nerissa and Jessica are

reduced to a side note. While Portia will certainly demand a reasonable amount of focus in this study, I hope to give Nerissa and Jessica their due attention as well.

It is important to note that I am writing this thesis in our modern world in which many scholars do not accept William Shakespeare as the author of the plays ascribed to him. While I acknowledge the contrary opinion, I begin by clarifying that this work presupposes that Shakespeare indeed was the author of the Shakespearean canon. This issue needs to be clarified because the discourse regarding Shakespearean heroines is impossible to separate from the time period in which it was written – certain social prejudices can easily creep into textual analysis in various ways. For instance, many scholars from earlier eras celebrated a different archetype in regards to his female characters than we might today. Pre-twentieth-century critics could often be loath to celebrate Shakespeare as having forward-thinking women in his plays. Also, many of these critics were men whose societies did not celebrate women as men's equals (see the later reference to the nineteenth century Human Life in Shakespeare by Henry Giles). Furthermore, even female writers discussing Portia were trapped by the confines of the communal thought processes of their time. For an excellent example see the 1853 text by Mrs. Jameson entitled Characteristics of Women. The book as a whole details various Shakespearean heroines and asserts ideas such as, “The intellect of woman bears the same relation to that of man as her physical organization; —it is inferior in power, and different in kind” (1). In the section specifically on Portia, the author states that Portia’s “wit has not a particle of malevolence or causticity” (4). I raise this issue because it makes clear how time colors the image of the play; there would be few today who would

not read at least some level of “malevolence or causticity” in Portia’s descriptions of her suitors.

Because of the relative lateness of feminist scholars joining the discourse regarding the work of Shakespeare, large gaps still exist, particularly when dealing with his female characters and their environment that have yet to be fully explored. Many feminist and non-feminist critics have explored the character of Portia in the elapsed time frame since the 1859 source mentioned above. It was an uphill struggle to be taken seriously in this genre as Deborah E. Barker and Ivo Kamps recount that “Particularly in the early stages, feminist critics of Shakespeare have had to operate on the fringes of a fairly homogeneous and privileged domain of male scholarship” (1). Perhaps this struggle explains why I have yet to come across any criticism of length that directly contextualizes the female characters in The Merchant of Venice within the world of Elizabethan England. As this era and place was the world in which these three incredible female characters were created, it is critical to view them within their context. With the wealth of texts available from the early modern period that deal with the duties of women within the family, a valuable opportunity is available. I intend to utilize these documents to compare the role of the women in the play with the way wives and daughters were presented in contemporary guide books on proper behavior, as well as written defenses of women from the period. For the purposes of this study, I am limiting my documents to those which were created between 1558, when Elizabeth took the throne, through 1660, the year most historians date the end of the Renaissance in England (Travitsky 8).

In 1631, a remarkably late date for such a claim, author Robert Snawsel wrote in a book he published in London entitled Looking-Glasse For Married Folkes, that he had heard, with griefe in heart, in many places wither [he had] come, wicked and unquiet living betweene man and wife: the which caused [him] many a time to consult with [him]selfe, how [he] might be a means to reforme the same. [He] considered and thought with [him]selfe, that many wanted means to be reconciled one to another, and that there was no booke extant of this subject in English; and that for want of meanes many have liued ignorantly . . . (A3-A4)

Snawsel's statement contradicts all we currently know about Elizabethans' excessive writing on the subject of male/female relationships. As Richard L. Greaves states in his massive study Society and Religion in Elizabethan England, "Elizabethan authors wrote prolifically about the relations of husbands and wives, their parental responsibilities, and the duties of children to elders" (251). These contemporary guide books and other written admonitions provide the basis for the textual study I will undertake throughout this thesis.

The purpose of these guide books was straightforward; they were meant to help women (and to a lesser degree men) achieve the status of good English subjects and Christians. If one followed all the advice offered by these decidedly conservative books, these traits would mold a woman whose husband or father could be proud to call her his wife or daughter. As Sara Jayne Steen puts contextualizes the documents from the era, "The research reveals Renaissance stereotypes of a good woman to have been remarkably

consistent and sanctioned by the patriarchy” (136). While it is obviously unknown which specific texts from the period Shakespeare might have seen or read, with the sheer number of guide books and treatises dealing with Elizabethan views of marriage and the father/daughter relationship that survive, it seems likely that he would have known of their existence and the ideas contained therein.

Additionally, I have been careful to select documents that are indicative of guide books as a whole. While my date span makes it impossible for Shakespeare to have read the later treatises I cite before he wrote The Merchant of Venice (first thought to have been published in 1600), or before his 1616 death, I do not consider it problematic. As so many documents from the era are derivative of other writings, the basic ideas are repeated over and over again, despite publication date. While there might have been slight changes in tone from 1616 to the beginning of the Restoration in 1660, the overriding ideas and themes are remarkably consistent. The repetitious nature of many of the documents leads one to believe that even if Shakespeare did not have specific access to a document used in this study, he would have had access to one with a similarly expressed viewpoint. After all, Shakespeare himself was both a married man and the father of daughters so it is certainly possible he went looking for inspiration in dealing with the women in his life.

Also, as many of the documents represent sermons, it seems fair to assume that the ideals were not only set down in writing but also in the weekly experiences of Elizabethans when attending church. The “ordering of the family” constituted a topic that was critically important to both laymen and ecclesiastical men alike, but religious

leaders in particular wrote extensively on the subject. Regardless of where women turned, they would have received the same messages as Steen explains, “English law, religion, and . . . literature supported the image of the ideal woman as humble, submissive, quiet, nurturing, sexually chaste, pious, and obedient to appropriate male authority” (136). It is this idealized female image that interests me and with which I mean to compare the female characters from The Merchant of Venice.

I am also interested to compare the female characters with other visions of the “Renaissance woman” available to men and women living in Shakespeare’s day. The role models I am particularly interested in evaluating are Queen Elizabeth and Patient Griselda. Both of these women were iconic images of the English Renaissance. The former was obviously a real woman who lived during the Renaissance, and therefore her image and experiences are invaluable in evaluating life for women at the time. The latter, Patient Griselda, was an icon of that age, similar to our fairy tales told to young girls which endorse visions of princes on white horses riding in to save them. Griselda may not have had as pleasant a life as many characters in modern tales, but she was certainly the ideal held up by those whose penchant was for women to know their place and be subservient. In addition, I find it important that the women represent two completely different levels of society. While Queen Elizabeth was the supreme ruler of Britain and therefore had, in some ways, more freedom than the average female, Patient Griselda was often described as a lower-class woman. I find compelling the idea of comparing the lives of these very different role models of women with the characters in Shakespeare’s play.

When the female characters and their relationships with the “dominant” males around them are examined within the context of the time period, it becomes clear that through his portrayal of the female characters in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare challenges the stricter contemporary beliefs about the submissive role of women as wives and daughters. Specifically, the more conservative social beliefs are what interest me in this study – those put forward in guide books, marriage manuals, sermons and other printed documents. In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, I will examine the Elizabethan period through both contemporary documents as well as the work of modern scholars to examine the stricter social tenets of the day and put into context where the theatrical world fell into these social customs and beliefs.

As many of the stricter beliefs find justification in church doctrine, I will also contextualize the church within early modern English society. Finally, I intend to give evidence for Shakespeare’s use of Italy as a location that mirrors London, thereby allowing the playwright more freedom for social criticism through the substitution of a foreign location in place of his own country. By combining modern historical perspective along with examples from actual period texts, I will examine the socially accepted view in Shakespeare’s day of men’s “superiority” to women in marriage and the family in general. In addition, I mean to discuss the female characters in relationship to two female figures from the day: Queen Elizabeth and Patient Griselda. By evaluating the female characters in contrast to the more misogynistic and stricter contemporary views of women, I will illuminate the manners in which the three female characters in

The Merchant of Venice do not correspond with the prevailing period ideas of women's inferiority.

CHAPTER II: ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

In his excellent biography of William Shakespeare entitled Will in the World, Stephen Greenblatt describes Elizabethan London as being “a city in ceaseless motion, transforming itself at an unprecedented rate” (164). It is far beyond the scope of this study to attempt to undertake a complete historical perspective on the evolution of London during Shakespeare’s day, much less of the Elizabethan era as a whole. It is even beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a full historical perspective on the stricter views of women’s perceived roles during the early modern period. However, before venturing into an analytic study of the female characters in The Merchant of Venice, it is necessary to discuss a small amount of Elizabethan history, including historical information about the church and the theatre of the day in order to contextualize the play. Following this broad historical perspective, I will put forward information about the role of women in the period.

Rather than attempt to give an expansive view of the women in day-to-day life in Renaissance England, I have chosen to highlight two “representations” of women in the early modern period that are relevant to this study as well as the historical context on behavior manuals from the day. The two “representations” I have chosen to illustrate are aspects of the life of Queen Elizabeth I and details of the popular pre-Elizabethan story of Griselda. In addition to these two representations I will present historical context for behavior manuals and printed defenses of women. I intend to emulate Lisa Jardine’s studies of Shakespeare, many of which make use of historical documents and context to

analyze any work from within the period. Therefore, before chronicling the representation of women I have selected, the barest amount of Elizabethan history and the church and theatre of the era proves crucial.

Elizabethan England: A Broad Overview

Providing basic background information of the world in which Shakespeare lived and wrote is critical to understanding his plays and the social attitudes and conventions they contain. William Shakespeare lived from 1564-1616, during one of the most revolutionary times the modern world has ever seen. Elizabethan England was a world of order challenged by chaos, learning humbled by skepticism and religion subverted to monarchy. The times were tempestuous at best and brutal at worst. The country's identity as a great world power was just being formed, helped along by no little means by the "defeat" of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (McMurty 202). Despite the fact that much of the credit for the Spaniards' ill-fortunes on the seas went to nature, many people living in England at the time still interpreted the event as an act of God demonstrating the might and right of their way of life.

The population influx from the rural areas into London made the city one of the few bustling metropolises of the day. Though exact population estimates vary, it is generally agreed that from 1520 to the end of the sixteenth century the population of London swelled from an estimated 60,000 to 200,000. The population of England as a whole is believed to have hovered somewhere between 4 (Hull 22) and 4½ million

(McMurty 82). This ratio means that approximately 1 out of every 20 to 22.5 people living in England in the year 1600 lived in London. To a person living in Britain at the time, London very well could have seemed like not only the center of British life, but it could have seemed the center of the world. As Angela Locatelli states, “London [was] keenly creating its own myth in the Elizabethan age because this [was] the period in which it [was] fast moving, beyond national relevance, towards international recognition” (71).

Along with the growth of the population and the expanding geographical size of the city itself came innovation in literature, art and, of course, the theatre. The outpouring of the work from the era is staggering, particularly when one takes into account that more once existed, as much has been lost throughout the years. A wide variety of original documents from the era survive, and these documents provide the basis for much of the contextual historical information used in this study. New plays, poems, books, pamphlets, and pieces of art constantly appeared all over London. As the popularity of printing rose, the written word was spread further than previously possible.

Furthermore, more people were able to read the printed word than ever before since the rise of printing in England beginning in about 1475 (Hull 16). Translations of popular writing from other countries made their way into England and people, if they could read the language, or a translation was available, were able to hear thoughts directly from many different cultural viewpoints. Italy in particular exerted much influence over English thought throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In The Renaissance, Alison Brown explains, “The Renaissance passions

generated in Italy were soon infectiously transmitted to the rest of Europe and beyond – just as the Black Death had been – by boats, trade, goods and human contact” (79).

Of course, along with the creativity and energy, there existed a dark side to London’s densely crowded streets. The plague had ravaged the population multiple times throughout the preceding centuries and decades leading up to Shakespeare’s time as a playwright in London. Population estimates suggest that by Shakespeare’s day the city had finally and barely recovered from the Black Death of the fourteenth century (McMurty 18). Poverty and child mortality rates were high; prostitution and begging were the only ways some Londoners could make enough money to eat. Public torture and execution of people convicted of treason were a commonplace entertainment of the day. As Stephen Greenblatt explains, one of the “major tourist attraction[s], always pointed out to new arrivals . . . were severed heads, some completely reduced to skulls, other parboiled and tanned, still identifiable” impaled on poles for all to see (172-73). These were the heads of traitors, and Shakespeare may well have taken the sight of them to heart. Greenblatt claims this vision would have taught Shakespeare to “keep control of [him]self” . . . [to] be smart, tough, and realistic” and perhaps, most importantly to “master strategies of concealment and evasion” (173).

Perhaps this was the crucial lesson that Shakespeare learned from his time in London, a lesson that is echoed in his plays. Shakespeare does seem to have mastered the skill of not *directly* challenging authority and put this skill to good use throughout his written works. If Shakespeare had ever directly challenged the status quo without couching his criticisms in other terms, he could very well have found his head on a pike

along the River Thames. The government's decisions were absolute and the threat of finding oneself an inadvertent traitor to the crown was very real. But by taking London's harsh realities to heart, a playwright might just be able to write great work that could be seen as challenging to authority, but only if viewed in the right light.

Religion and Elizabethan Society

To understand anything about the mindset of the English people as a whole during the early modern period, one cannot underestimate the power of the Church of England. Despite the fact that some of the following events took place before the birth of William Shakespeare, the repercussions of these events were still highly influential throughout his entire lifetime. Before King Henry VIII, England had been a Catholic nation, answering officially to Rome and the Pope. However, when Henry's almost twenty-year marriage to Catherine of Aragon failed to produce a male heir to the throne, he determined that his marriage needed to be declared null and void. He petitioned the Pope to invalidate his marriage, which would free him to marry again (Plowden 50). The Pope refused Henry's request and, in anger, Henry declared England a Protestant nation and therefore beyond the control of the Catholic Church.

Of course, not all English citizens instantly converted and many chaotic years followed as the transformation was completed. However, Henry VIII died in 1547 and, following a brief reign by his young son Edward VI, who died while king, his daughter Mary took over the throne. Mary returned the country to a practicing Catholic nation

(Plowden 114). As with the initial conversion from Catholicism, there was bloodshed and disorder, this time directed toward those who refused to acknowledge the Catholic faith that Queen Mary espoused. The tide turned once again after Mary's relatively early death when Elizabeth I took power in 1558 (Greenblatt 91).

Elizabeth's England would be Protestant. Therefore, with her coronation the Protestant church's laws became the ultimate laws of Britain. When gauging the beliefs of Elizabethan people, it is impossible to separate the secular from the religious: the distinction between the two did not apply. As A. H. Dodd succinctly puts it:

Of all those interlaced communities that made up Tudor society, none, hardly even the family, was more pervasive than the church. From time immemorial its local unit, the parish, had been the centre of a vigorous communal life radiating from the parish church, and impressing itself at every stage of the parishioner's journey from cradle to grave. (72)

The church was often the geographical center of every village, town and city and the emotional center of Elizabethan life. Of course, the religious pendulum swinging back from Catholicism to Protestantism led to private feelings of division in the country. Regardless, when Elizabeth became queen, Protestant religious teachings were the law of the land. Therefore, while there is no doubt some of the contemporary documents used in this study could very well have been written by closeted Catholics, the important point to note is that all contemporary documents will have a Protestant bent to them and their agenda.

The Protestant church's point of view was made clear during weekly sermons and through the installation of church figures in each and every community of any size. Furthermore, attendance at church was mandatory, as was tithing to the church. Throughout the Renaissance, "In many thousands of sermons over decades nuptial propaganda was included, and in some cases these sermons became a form of theatre – a dramatic monologue delivered from the pulpit. Preaching undoubtedly influenced dramatists, just as Renaissance dramatists influenced preachers" (Haynes 6). From this reciprocal, if suspicious, relationship preachers commented on the role of theatre in the lives of the people. Through theatre, the playwrights, perhaps in a more veiled way, commented upon the subjects of interest to the clergy. One of the areas of critical interest was that of the proper role of marriage and the women confined within its strictures.

Elizabethan audiences would have been very clear in their understanding that the laws of England and the words of their pastors were the only way for them to get into heaven following their death. The people were reliant on authorities of both the church and the state to help them on their way to eternal salvation. The aims of the church were clear: "Besides coherence and ritual, the Church supplied ordinary Englishmen with a quite tangible set of moral restrictions, aimed at improving their chances at a comfortable heavenly home but also regulating their social environment in the world below" (McMurty 56). The idea of the "Great Chain of Being" helped to teach everyone that each man and woman had a place and that it was their God-given responsibility to humbly live in their place (Valades 138). Keeping this premise in mind when discussing

Shakespeare's plays allows for an understanding of the frequency with which religion was encountered in society.

While it would be impossible to know how many people actually believed wholeheartedly in private in the religion they were forced to practice in public, writings from the time do indicate that most believed in either Catholicism or Protestantism. Understanding the values of Elizabethans becomes difficult when you take into consideration the differences in religious backgrounds. Though Catholicism had been outlawed, many still practiced its teachings behind closed doors, protected priests illegally in the country and held communion ceremonies whenever possible (Greenblatt 99). Some evidence suggests that Shakespeare's father might have been such a closeted Catholic, though we will probably never know for certain (Greenblatt 101).

Therefore, when dealing with texts that discuss social responsibilities, we must be aware that social and religious implications were one and the same in Shakespeare's time. Because of this lack of separation of church and state it is impossible to truly know what every member of society would have thought. Due to the necessary silence of those who were not members of the "acceptable" religion, some people's views are silent as they lacked the freedom to put their feelings down on paper for fear for their lives. While some Catholic writings still exist and certainly we have many stories about Catholic people of the day, the proliferation of Protestantism-based works outweighs the other number substantially as the Protestant works were condoned by the state.

In respect to this study, the Protestant Church's authority and sway over the minds of the public is the most important aspect. While the church was certainly responsible for

affecting and prescribing public opinion on any number of subjects, the church seems to have taken particular time to emphasize the role of the family in various texts.

Regardless of an individual's actual leanings, those people who published material for public consumption – the types of documents with which this study is concerned – had to adhere to the Protestant teachings of the day. The Protestant religious focus was firmly rooted in the Bible, regardless of the fact that most of the public had no access to a Bible written in their language until the King James' version published in 1611, after the official end of the Elizabethan era. This Biblical obsession is well catalogued in the manuals and behavioral guides, as most of the ordering of the household is centered on the idea of making a home function in its proper Godly order.

A Common Enemy

Perhaps the only thing that all the factions that survived openly under Elizabeth's reign had in common was a mistrust of one common enemy – the theatre. While different religious institutions had different levels of animosity toward the theatre, none could be said to be particularly supportive, at least of the commercial theatre of which Shakespeare was a participant. The commercial theatre in London was in its infancy, being born from the religious festival plays of earlier times and it still had its very vocal detractors. As the medieval cycle plays went out of fashion (as it was seen to be a remnant of the old Catholic ways of the country), professional theatres and professional actors began to appear (Ranald xiv).

At first, there were no permanent spaces in England dedicated solely to the purpose of performing plays. Murray Roston notes that “In the 1550s, at least two inns in London, the Saracen’s Head ... and the Boar’s Head ... began to be used for regular theatrical performances by professional groups” (94). Troupes of actors continued to travel the countryside and performed in makeshift spaces; however there were beginning to be other, more permanent options. These options were proving popular in an already busy city as some people objected to “these jostling crowds besieging the inns, provoking all manner of disorders, increasing the danger of plague, and inciting the workmen and apprentices to idleness (for all performances were matinees)” (Dodd 121).

However, by the time that Shakespeare was proving himself an adept playwright, London had several permanent theatres, including The Rose, The Swan and The Theatre. Though the theatres were located outside of the official boundaries of the city, they were a popular destination for many looking for an afternoon’s entertainment. While the various churches and ecclesiastical men had different ultimate opinions about the theatres, they all shared a common mistrust of any institution that lured Christian folks away from sermons on Sundays. In a 1578 sermon entitled Sermon Preached at Paules Cross John Stockwood complained that

Will not a filthy play, with the blast of a trumpet, sooner call thither a thousand, than an hour’s tolling of a bell bring to the sermon a hundred? Nay even here in the city, without it be at this place and some other certain ordinary audience, where shall you find a reasonable company? Whereas if you resort to the Theater, the Curtain, and other places of plays in the

city, you shall on the Lord's day have those places, with many other that I cannot reckon, so full as possible they can throng, besides a great number of other lets to pull from the hearing of the word of which I will speak hereafter. (qtd. in Thomson 179)

It seems that a competition for audiences fueled much of the church's distaste for the public theatres.

One of the largest areas of contention between churches and the theatre was church's repeated objection for "moral reasons" the roles "written for . . . boys who played the idea of 'woman'" (Gay 3). Also, there was always concern that the theatre crowds could be "a potential source of riot, or even rebellion" (Williams 27). Large groups of people whose passions were being ignited by plays were not warmly received by public and religious authorities. While some wanted nothing short of the out-and-out banning of all events theatrical, others would have been satisfied with merely the banning of performances on holy days and Sundays. However, no church organizations were pleased with most secular plays as they believed they were a bad influence on the audiences of the day. While the contents of plays were strictly controlled by the Master of Revels, still seditious instructions or all manner of unchristian issues might arise in any given play.

In theory, if the Master of Revels was doing his job thoroughly, no problematic issues, including challenges to the position of women in society, should have been allowed to appear on the Elizabethan stage. Edmund Tilney, "from perhaps as early as February 1577/8 until his death in 1610[,] . . . assumed the duties of Master of the Revels

to the queen” and is the most influential Englishman to hold the post (Wayne 10).

Tilney’s power over dramatists was immense because, beginning in 1581, he had the power as W.R. Streitberger says, “‘to examine, alter, and allow or suppress every play written for public performance’ in England” (qtd. in Wayne 10). Rules existed not only to govern the content of all theatre but also all the specifics about its business. Rules enacted upon theatrical professionals were many, including that:

Performances could take place only by official licence. Utterly forbidden were topics of religion and government, the strict preserve of “menne of authoritie, learning and wisdom” (regarded as a single group). Under “An Acte for the punishment of Vocabondes” (29 June 1572), players could function only when formed into companies under the protection of one of those men of authority, learning and wisdom, who would be answerable for their good behaviour. (Williams 27)

Elizabethan dramatists did not have it easy as the authorities had figured out that “If the theatre was to be an ideas channel, then one organized on a professional basis would be easier to control. So in addition to satisfying his public, the dramatist had to be sure to satisfy the censor” (Williams 26). Perhaps, if my reading of Shakespeare’s play The Merchant of Venice is correct, the religious leaders of the day had a valid point; Shakespeare’s female characters could have very easily given Elizabethan women the idea that they deserved more freedom and equality than they were currently being told they should have through propaganda of the day.

The role of women viewing the theatre of the day is an incredibly important facet of my argument that Shakespeare puts forward strong female role models. Indeed, if there were no women in the theatre, for whom would he have been putting these role models forward? Jean E. Howard notes in another of her extensive essays dealing with public performance in the Renaissance, “Women as Spectators, Spectacles and Paying Customers,” that “we now know that women were in the public theater in significant numbers and that the women who attended the theater were neither simply courtesans nor aristocratic ladies; many seem to have been citizens’ wives, part of that emergent group, ‘the middling sort’ . . .” (83). Research indicates that Shakespeare had a large number of women for whom his plays were performed and on whom his ideas might have exerted influence.

If we take this logic a step further and determine that these same middle class women were the ones most likely to be literate (aside from the aristocracy), it can be determined that they are also the same women for whom many of the guide books of the day were being published (see the later section entitled “*The Written Word on Women: Marriage Manuals, Sermons and More*”). Fiona McNeill notes in her in-depth study, *Poor Women in Shakespeare*, that “With such a large female presence in the playhouse . . . a company of players could not risk misrepresenting women too grossly” (4). Perhaps the truth is a little less straightforward. Instead, maybe we should think that with such a large number of women in the playhouse, a certain playwright could afford to stretch the boundaries of acceptable behavior for females. Perhaps with so many present,

at least some would be pushed to think beyond the boundaries they were being taught by behavioral manuals.

In addition to Shakespeare's work, it is clearly evident from other drama from the period that playwrights of the day figured out that there is more than just the direct way to challenge conventional authority. In Elizabethan England, a blatant attack on the status quo would quickly result in imprisonment or even death. However, more subtle criticism could perhaps sneak by without notice, so long as the playwright was careful. As Peter Thomson notes in his chapter entitled "English Renaissance and Restoration Theatre" in The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre, "The officiousness of the dramatic censors impelled playwrights towards metaphor, and the metaphoric mode fed the Renaissance impulse towards explanation" (187).

The evidence seems to indicate that many playwrights worked to challenge traditional thought during the era, often using metaphors to cushion their blows. While this study is not meant to go in depth into Renaissance authors other than Shakespeare, it has been noted that "Authors such as Thomas Nash, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, John Donne, Thomas Kidd, Edmund Spenser, and many others were flourishing under the new liberal thinking and increasing freedom of creativity" of the age (Wright 2). By "liberal thinking" and "increasing freedom," the author reflects the dramatists' ability to write plays at all which had been much stricter Catholicism under Mary Tudor.

Furthermore, it seems unlikely that The Merchant of Venice is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to challenge the normal perception of women. Many of Shakespeare's other "comedic" plays have been interpreted by critics and containing a

feminist stance on women's issues. The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing and others have been successfully argued by scholars to have strong female characters who defy social norms (see As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women by Penny Gay for thorough deconstructions of these characters). Certainly there are female characters in both the tragedies and histories as well that can be perceived as ahead of their time. Whether or not Shakespeare himself was actively attempting to change the societal perception of women might be up for debate; however the fact that the female characters in many of his plays are extraordinary women for their day is without question.

The Italy of England

Despite the fact that the play technically takes place in Venice and nearby Belmont, the world of Elizabethan England that I have hitherto described is where we must set our minds when dealing with the customs and traditions found in The Merchant of Venice. Scholars have argued convincingly that Shakespeare was fond of setting plays in foreign locations, on many occasions Italy, while he was really writing about England. In her essay, "The fictional world of Romeo and Juliet: cultural connotations of an Italian setting," Angela Locatelli convincingly puts forward the parallel between the two locations and makes a strong argument for Italy serving as a "mirroring" location for England (69). She further states that "Shakespeare's London, [is] the city which is turned into Venice, as well as several other glorious ancient places, through a series of well

chosen attributes and through the many analogies, both implicit and explicit, that the dramatist creates between London and Venice, Verona or Milan” (71). Her argument finishes with the idea that “Shakespeare often monitors home customs and behaviour, but pretends to be talking about the remotest realities in time and space” (72). The overriding idea of her well-argued thesis is that when a play dealt with issues that could be viewed as questioning the status quo as espoused by the government, Shakespeare chose to have the action take place in a foreign location, often Italy.

Other scholars have agreed with Locatelli’s view of England as Italy’s double. Augusto Lombardo in his “The Veneto, Metatheatre and Shakespeare” gives further credence to this notion with his statement, “His [Shakespeare’s] Italy is the product of the written and oral traditions, and of the imagination, and is itself a mask behind which are hidden the features and problems of London and England” (Lombardo 144-45). Furthermore, Harry Levin notes in his article “Shakespeare’s Italians” that “Nine of the Shakespeare’s comedies, including three we now classify as romances, are located or at least have scenes – in greater Italy” (21). He goes on to point out that “Out of the thirty-eight plays in the Shakespearean canon, then, these eleven constitute a significant proportion” (21).

Certainly eleven plays set in Italy is not a small percentage, given that the playwright had most likely never set foot anywhere in the country. In fact most English men and women had their view of Italy shaped by stories from travelers and the works of literature that made their way into English translations. Jack D’Amico in his study entitled Shakespeare and Italy: The City and the Stage posits that “The analogous

structures of everyday life in and around London played an important role in his conception and its representation on the stage, for his Italy was not a place to which one escaped from the everyday, but rather a place where familiar structures were subtly reconfigured” (1). It seems that Elizabethan audiences viewed plays set in Italy with the understanding that, though the locations were supposedly exotic, the messages and meanings were very local. Michele Marrapodi suggests that conflicts in Shakespeare’s plays “disclos[e] unsettled social tensions and ideological conflicts that are a metaphor for the structural transformation of Elizabethan England” (Italian 13).

The Two “Representations” of Women and Historical Context

It is easy, however inaccurate, to mistakenly view the Elizabethan populace as a faceless, autonomous mass, all of whom shared the same beliefs, values and customs. The reality of the situation is much more complex, and therein lies the difficulty in undertaking any social study of an era long since passed. Just as our society today is filled with huge discrepancies in point of view toward specific social issues, it would have been exceptionally challenging to find an Elizabethan man or woman who had exactly the same point of view as his or her neighbor on various social issues. As Margaret Loftus Ranald explains, “No reasonable person would presume a single, monolithic American public opinion on almost any subject, and surely the same was true for ‘the Elizabethans,’ whether the topic be Copernican astronomy or the rule of Queen Elizabeth” (xii).

Therefore, it is impossible and dangerous to attempt to designate “Renaissance England’s” attitudes toward women. Renaissance England’s attitudes about women and what their role should be both within the household and within society as a whole were diverse. As Summers and Pebworth comment, “attitudes toward gender and gender roles...were complex and multivalent and resistant to reductive generalities” (1). We can gauge the range of attitudes by surviving texts, but deciphering exactly how many people thought which way would be impossible.

The documents that survive, and particularly the ones that are of use for this study, share just that fact in common, they all have been passed down for posterity regarding the study of the Elizabethan era. These documents are a valuable resource regarding the era and regarding gaining people’s opinions of the day. Plays such as The Merchant of Venice, along with other documents give us insight into the thought processes of people in Elizabethan England. Through them we can learn which virtues and vices were being celebrated and condemned by those with the access to create printed materials.

Regardless, only through inference can we truly deduce what people believed or did not believe. Obviously, it would have been a fool-hearted Elizabethan subject who was willing to put into writing any beliefs that were not socially acceptable. In a period where conformity, public perception and not challenging the status quo were considered important characteristics in a subject of the crown, public dissertations regarding the disbelief in the current system of ordering society were brave at best, foolish if one wished to keep their head on their shoulders. However, the life stories of a specific

Renaissance woman and a fictional Renaissance woman give insight into some Elizabethan beliefs about women.

Queen Elizabeth I: Supreme Ruler in Spite of Herself

To evaluate Shakespeare and feminism in regards to Elizabethan England, the most logical place to begin is with Queen Elizabeth herself. Queen Elizabeth I of England was one of the most powerful human beings in the world when she came to the throne in 1558 at the age of twenty-five (Haynes 14). Anne Bolyne, Elizabeth's mother and a logical female influence in her early life, was beheaded on the order of her husband and Elizabeth's father in 1536, not even three full years after Elizabeth's 1533 birth. Whether or not this early foray into the difficulties of being a woman living under the rules and rigors of a domineering and ultimately homicidal husband had a direct impact on Elizabeth's psyche and later political policy is difficult to state with complete certainty. She was a very young child at the time her mother was executed. However, it does not seem like a coincidence that the small girl whose mother was executed at the whim of a roaming husband grew into a woman who chose never to marry or put herself under the control of any individual man. Or, we can take Elizabeth at her word and accept that she truly did feel "married . . . to her people" (McMurty 31).

Under Elizabeth's reign, Britain grew exponentially and eventually became a worldwide superpower of the day. The interesting dichotomy was that women in the late sixteenth century had for a role model the most powerful woman in the world, a woman

who even today would be immensely impressive in her accomplishments and leadership ability. However, their lives were still rigorously controlled by legal and social strictures. Despite her great learning and power, “Elizabeth, perhaps regrettably, showed no interest whatever in the liberation of women” (Plowden 169).

While a woman in Elizabeth’s position had more control over determining her own fate, women in lesser positions did not generally have as much power over their lives. As Travitsky notes, “That a society in which both life and art suppressed women so severely was ruled by a woman for close to fifty years is highly ironic” (15). Even the convent, the sphere that had once promised some degree of independence and education had been closed off to Elizabethan English women. Elizabeth seemed to have not had a strong regard for women in religion

as wives of Protestant ministers in England experienced great distress because their status was equivocal at a time when the English church switched back and forth from the ministry of celibate priests to that of married men. Even under the undoubtedly Anglican rule of Elizabeth, the status of these women was unenviable because the queen did not approve of married clergy and refused to acknowledge the existence of her ministers’ wives. (Travitsky 22)

Under the laws of the day, the women who lived under Elizabeth as their queen were unable do many of the things she did as a matter of course. Simple tasks for a monarch such as addressing a crowd or writing a public declaration were teemed with complexities as Elizabeth was a woman. As Helen Wilcox points out in her essay, “My

Soule in Silence?: Devotional Representations of Renaissance Englishwomen,” despite Elizabeth’s rule, this was “a time when a woman’s speaking in public, and writing for readers other than her own children, were severe transgressions of the feminine norm” (10). As Trivitsky further notes, all women were subject to limitations “inside and outside the confines of the home and the family – in the dairy, the poultry, the home pharmacy, the kitchen; at the spindle; in the universities, the law courts, the professions, the streets, the theaters, the taverns, the shops, the court” (12). Trivitsky’s list is extensive as were the limitations put upon the female subjects of Queen Elizabeth.

She was a female monarch and history records that she was attended by female servants who, possibly, may have served as unofficial advisor to the crown, though as we have seen she does not seem to have felt warmth toward many women. All of her direct counselors were, of course, council*men* and not council*women*. Interestingly, Elizabeth seemed to consider women to be somewhat expendable. It was a well-known fact of the day that she surrounded herself with beautiful young woman to serve her. These women would often be picked off one by one by eligible men of the court to either be lovers or wives of the strong men in Elizabeth’s court. While there is no way to prove for certain that Elizabeth surrounded herself with these women purposefully to avoid her own marriage, it is certainly a possibility that she “sacrificed” her attendants to marriage to keep herself free. As these young women were wooed by members of her court, Elizabeth herself never fell victim to the same fate (Haynes 50). What a fascinating contradiction that the woman who made the rules for her kingdom’s women purposely

and with vigor chose never to have the same experiences as the majority of early modern women – that of a wife.

Perhaps even more telling is the fact that Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, took every opportunity to stress that she was powerful and had been deemed supreme ruler *in spite* of being a woman. When she addressed the troops poised to go to battle with the Spanish Armada, she spoke with conviction about how the traditional limitations of being a woman did not apply to her. Elizabethan informed her troops: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king...[R]ather than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field” (qtd. in Benson 233). Carole Levin notes that,

On a number of occasions, both formally as well as conversationally, Elizabeth denigrated her female aspect and expressed a desire to be male. In 1565 the queen told [Spanish Ambassador Diego Guzman] de Silva, when she heard of Turks defeating Christians that “she was very sorry, and said she wished she was a man to be there in person.” (138)

Elizabeth’s apologetic nature for her “female weakness” and her quickness to denigrate her sex helped to create the idea in men’s heads that she was an anomaly, not a traditional woman, but somehow distinct due to her status and king-like behavior. As Benson remarks, “Because of this spirit within her she will not engender the typical female offspring – dishonor” (233).

Griselda: The Ideal Englishwoman

Even before England had reached its Renaissance there existed a tale of a woman who most men could agree should be held up as the model of the ideal wife – the story of Patient Griselda. By the sixteenth century, her story was often repeated in “chapbook, ballad, and play” throughout the country (Reay 20). Even as late as 1682, well past the dates concerning this study, a chapbook containing her story informed the reader that her story illuminated “how Wives by their Patience and Obedience, may gain much Glory” (Reay 21). Whether or not early modern women took the lessons to heart is harder to say. While Griselda is “an extreme example of the obedient, uncomplaining wife” held up for mimicry by men, as with the existence of so many guide books on proper behavior being continually reprinted, one wonders why the story would need such frequent recitation and repetition if women were actually conforming to the ideals put forward in the tale (Hull 49).

The exact particulars of the stories differ from teller to teller as well as from year to year and genre to genre. However, the basic history of the tale seems to have, as William A. Ringer explains, “first been given literary form by Boccaccio in the Decameron (X.x),” before it was “redacted into Latin by Petrarch, and from Petrarch’s Latin and a French translation paraphrased by Chaucer in his Clerk’s Tale,” thus making its way into Renaissance English lore (Ringer Jr. 3). In most versions of the story, Griselda is the wife of a man of much higher social status than she; usually the man is

designated a marquis. Griselda is beautiful and mild and the marquis chooses her to be his bride.

However, for various reasons given he deems it necessary to test Griselda's vow to always be faithful and obedient to him under any circumstances. In most versions, Griselda is tested by her husband because of a class difference between the two. Often, the story conveys the idea that Griselda is considered untrustworthy by people other than her husband, but he must test her in order to prove her worth to them. Why this test is considered the least bit valid and why she should then forgive him all the years of torture is a little beyond the comprehension of most modern readers but such were the ideals of the day.

The testing apparently does not happen immediately because Griselda and her husband have had children by the time the testing happens. As Wiltenburg summarizes the story, Griselda vows to always be obedient so that

Even when her husband tests this resolve by taking away her children and leading her to believe they will be killed, she makes no complaint and shows no displeasure. Not satisfied with this, the nobleman casts her out, then summons her to assist at his wedding to a new bride; this too she bears patiently, and he finally recognizes her worth and reunites her with her children. Griselda . . . attains ultimate honor and vindication through passivity, taking no action whatever in her own defense, but submitting wholly to the power of her husband . . . (93)

Griselda is the perfect male ideal of the Renaissance wife because no matter what miseries her husband puts her through, she remains constant and steadfast in her devotion to him. She is the manifestation of every conduct book's ideal wife.

In play form, the story reached many viewers as there were several incarnations of the tale written by different playwrights. Thomas Dekker's wrote The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill in 1603. In this dramatization of the story, Griselda's husband explains the necessity of testing Griselda (in this version named Grisell) when he says:

I tride my Grissils patience when twas greene,
 Like a young Osier, and I moulded it
 Like ware to all impressions: married men
 That long to tame their wives must curbe them in,
 Before they need a bridle, then they'll proove
 All grissils full of patience, full of love,
 Yet that olde tryall must be tempered so,
 Least seeking to tame them they master you (Dekker n.pag.)

As the story ends happily with the reunion of the marquis and Griselda into what we can only assume will be a peaceful marriage, the audience has no choice but to assume that playwright is advocating for the marquis's point of view. The message of the play seems to be that all women need trials of the sort that Griselda faced in order to become a faithful wife.

The story of Patient Griselda can be challenging from a contemporary point of view. Today, the story may seem almost like a ridiculous sketch comedy act. Griselda's

devotion to her husband to the point of standing aside and not questioning what she assumes will be the death of her children would hardly be held up as the ideal mother in our contemporary world. Indeed, today we would consider her partially responsible for whatever harm the children came to by her not standing up for them and she would almost certainly be tried for neglect. However it is important to remember that the ideals put forward in the story were taken very seriously by contemporary men and women. There is evidence throughout marriage manuals, pamphlets and various other documents of men putting forward Griselda as the ideal to which all women should aspire (see the subheading of Giovanni Boccaccio's The pleasant and sweet History of patient Grissell which states the story contains "a patterne for all Vertuous Women" (3)). Despite the obvious misogyny evident in the tale, both men and women often held up Griselda's story to women as the correct and ordered position of the wife in society.

Determining the effect this story had on the lives of individual Renaissance men and women is difficult, if not impossible. Even if one had been alive in the day to take a poll of people's responses to the story, it would be likely that every individual would have a different reaction to this moralistic tale. However, we can safely say that it had some impact on many people growing up at the time. With the widespread net the story cast over the Elizabethan people, it would have been almost impossible for almost any Elizabethan to make it completely through life without ever having heard the story. The tale of Patient Griselda is what Ranald refers to as "osmotic knowledge," i.e. knowledge that the common Englishman or Englishwoman of the day would have had just by growing up at the time (xi). Indeed, if we compare the situation to today, you would be

hard pressed to find adults who spent their entire lives growing up in America who could not understand the reference when you called someone a “Cinderella.” Patient Griselda would have been equally well known in early modern England.

The Written Word on Women: Marriage Manuals, Sermons and More

If the Elizabethan female lacked for adequate medical care, financial freedom and personal property, she certainly did not lack for one thing – instruction on how to be a good wife and daughter. However, before these documents can be validated as having been influential during the early modern period, some history regarding their publication and uses is required. Despite a high illiteracy rate among all Elizabethans and particularly women, Suzanne W. Hull puts the Elizabethan market for female-directed texts in perspective:

. . . the large number of publications specifically for women indicate that many knew how to read. Between 1475 and 1640 approximately 170 different books in some 500 editions were specifically addressed to females or dealt with subjects of direct concern to women, such as midwifery, household recipes, and how-to-live guides. If each of the 500 editions had a run of 1,000 copies – normal at that time – then 500,000 books for women came onto the market in that 165-year period. (24)

Of these texts, almost all were male-authored works forcing a male perspective of women onto the females who would read them.

Certain texts seemed to have garnered a reasonable amount of fame and were incredibly popular, including Master of Revels Edmund Tilney's 1568 treatise A brief and pleasant discourse of duties of mariage, called the flower of friendshippe. In fact

Only three other Renaissance texts on marriage appeared in more English editions: Heinrich Bullinger's Christen State of Matrimonye of 1541 ... John Dod and Richard Cleaver's Godlie Forme of Householde Government of 1598, and Erasmus's Encomium matrimonii in its English translations . . . (Wayne 5)

I intend to use all four of these incredibly popular texts in my study, as they clearly had influence over the Elizabethan public. While the authors of these works were decidedly male, the intended readers were not only “the woman who could read” but, “through her, the people she supervised in her home” (Hull 20).

Of course, at the time these works were viewed as not offensive and belittling writings, at least by the majority of men and perhaps a good deal of women as well, but rather as instructive guides. As Suzanne W. Hull points out,

Once a woman was married, her behavior was spelled out in a vast number of books. There were eulogies and biographies praising good women: ballads and jest books belittled the bad. Sermons and marriage manuals set forth the “proper” roles for each sex. The appropriate position for a woman, regardless of her class, was as a dependent under the tutelage and control of her husband. The law and the church so prescribed. (32)

There is no question that these manuals affected a good deal of women's lives in early modern England. There is evidence of "well-worn guidebooks" possessed by women who evidently spent a good deal of time learning the instructions contained therein (Hull 18). Apparently many women took these books and their contents seriously.

All of these types of documents certainly lean toward the more conservative Elizabethan values of the time and it would be unwise to view the extremist viewpoint as indicative of all Elizabethans. However, it would be equally naïve to dismiss the sheer number of works available from the period as the rantings of the overly religious or women-hating men. The popularity of the various publications among the average people of the day indicate that the views expressed within them could not have been repugnant to a huge percentage of the population. Along with guide books and ballads, Clark notes, "cheap pamphlets [were] available in increasing quantities in this period to a wide audience in streets, markets and public places (x).

While it is impossible to know for certain that Hull's estimate of 500,000 copies over a 165-year period is absolutely correct as the era has very imprecise records, "there is evidence that pamphlet texts, like other kinds of popular print such as jestbooks, were shared communally, or read aloud by a literate member of a group to others" (Clark x). Therefore, while it is impossible to determined exactly how many people would have had access to any individual text, it can be noted that they were widely circulated and easily available to both the literate and illiterate Englishman and Englishwoman of the day. Furthermore, as many of women's pursuits tended to be more domestic (such as needlework, cooking, preserving, cleaning, washing, etc.) there may well have been more

opportunity for women to hear texts read aloud than for men (who were more likely to be engaged in public activity).

No discussion of manuals of the day would be complete without at least the mention of Baldassarre Castiglione (1478-1529) and his treatise Il libro del cortegiano (The Book of the Courtier). While many of the guide books of the day were meant to be read by whatever Christian women wanted to learn more about being a better wife, The Book of the Courtier was different. The instructions found in this book were specifically geared toward making clear the manners and behaviors that were expected of those who passed time at court. However, that is not to say that there might not have been those ambitious literate members of the lower class who wished to emulate courtier-like behavior and thus familiarized themselves with Castiglione's work as well. The reach and breadth of the influence of the work is staggering, particularly when one takes into account that it was translated into multiple European languages soon after its initial Italian publication where it was "enthusiastically received in every court" (Finucci 4).

The structure of the guide book centers on the discussion of what makes a perfect court. The treatise "popularised an entirely novel type of courtly behaviour in recommending a 'new word', negligent spontaneity or sprezzatura, 'which conceals art and presents what is done and said as if it was done without effort and virtually without thought'" (Brown 88). While no one will argue that the majority of the instruction is geared toward male courtiers, Castiglione does have much to say about the proper methods and behaviors of the "donna di palazzo" and "practical council on how better to fulfill her role" (Finucci 29). Some of his instructions include:

principally in her fashions, manners, words, gestures, and conversation (me think) the woman ought to be much unlike the man . . . that in going, in standing, and speaking whatever she lusteth, may always make her appear a woman without any likeness of man . . . For many virtues of the mind I reckon be as necessary for a woman as for a man. Likewise, nobleness of birth, avoiding affectation or curiosity, to have good grace of nature in all her doings, to be of good conditions, witty, foreseeing, not haughty, not envious not ill tongued, not light, not contentious, not untowardly . . . (qtd. in Aughterson 232)

Castiglione's requirements of the things women should not do was certainly long, but it should be noted that his recognition of the intelligence of women is important. While many of the English guide books of the day centered mainly on the reasons women were inferior to men, Castiglione's treatise includes much praise of women, though it falls short of being an actual defense of women.

When The Book of the Courtier was translated into English in 1561, it was immensely popular and influential (Hull 136). As Valeria Finucci asserts, "Castiglione's rhetorically self-created courtier became the aesthetic, cultural, political, moral, and even religious model for any would-be courtier in Europe" (29). The model he put forth was persuasive and men and women of the British upper classes worked hard to attempt to hold themselves to the standards set forth in the book. After all, the book laid out what everyone should be looking for in an ideal courtly mate. When marriage and ideal mates were discussed among the upper class, there was more at stake than just love or small bits

of property. Lineage and family honor were of the utmost importance. If a young man or woman followed the advice put forth in Castiglione's groundbreaking book, they would not be guaranteed a husband or wife, but they would guarantee to be socially acceptable at any given situation. Certainly knowledge of the proper behavior for any situation could not hurt one's chances of making a good marriage.

Along with the guide books and manuals, including Castiglione's and the native British writings, the printed sermons of the day give a specific and unyielding impression of how a wife should behave. However, how can we be certain that wives of the times actually paid any attention to these views? R. Valerie Lucas raises the important questions, "How influential was preaching in shaping public opinion? (2) Why were sermons the best means?" (226). These are vital questions in validating the use of clergy written documents as a barometer for the feelings of those living in Renaissance England. How much were people actually indoctrinated with the ideas being put forward in sermons? Lucas answers her own questions:

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Anglican church monopolized the areas of thought-control and opinion-forming ... for most people in pre-Civil War England, sermons were the *main source of political opinion and moral guidance* [emphasis added]. Moreover, sermons were the most efficient means of presenting new ideas to a wide audience: since the Act of 1593 required everyone over the age of sixteen to attend Sunday church service "or in default be hanged or banished"

Wilson 44-45), it seems that preachers had a captive audience from all social classes. (Lucas 226)

It could be argued that though the state-sponsored religion was “officially practiced” by all English men and women that many did not believe anything that was preached. Perhaps attendance at church was just that – physical attendance completely devoid of mental cognition. However, evidence does not seem to support that conclusion as “Contemporary practices suggest that the faithful regarded sermons very seriously: they took notes or transcribed them by shorthand” (Lucas 226). Indeed, it seems like the “faithful” were a significant number as the fact that “so many [sermons] were published attest[s] to a considerable number of readers willing to buy copies for home study” (Lucas 226-27). Therefore, just as with marriage manuals it is impossible to get an exact estimate of the number of Elizabethans affected by sermons first spoken and then published, it does not seem an unreasonable estimate to assume that all but the most blatantly rebellious Elizabethans would have been privy to the ideas expressed therein. Whether sitting in a church pew or reading or listening to them read aloud in the home, Elizabethans heard the words their religious leaders had to say about women, and evidence seems to bear out that they took those words and at least some of the prejudicial lessons they contained, to heart.

However, it is almost certainly true as Greaves states that “The extent to which wives heeded these exhortations is difficult to ascertain. There are indications that women were less subservient than their religious leaders wished” (257). Indeed, as modern authors continually point out, why would these lessons need to be repeated over

and over and reinforced daily in women's minds if women were all actually adhering to the strictures put forth in the guide books, sermons and pamphlets of the day? Sara Jayne Steen hypothesizes in her chapter on "Fashioning an Acceptable Self: Arbella Stuart" that, "If women always had fulfilled the ideal or even attempted to, there would have been little need for conduct books or cautionary negative stereotypes" (137).

Indeed, it seems like the sheer number of these guide books clearly indicates to modern scholars that there were many women living in Britain during the early modern period who refused to conform completely to the ideal vision of wife or daughter put forward in texts of the day. Despite continued and constant exhortations to Renaissance women to serve and follow Renaissance's men's directives, apparently some women went about decisions in their own fashion. As Susan Dwyer Amussen wryly notes in An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England, "Those who clung too firmly to the image of sermons, household manuals and social theory had nothing but disappointment awaiting them" (qtd. in Haynes 1).

If it is difficult to know how much women completely followed the advice in general, an even more difficult question arises when the issue of public versus private behavior is raised. Could it be that the men who wrote these conduct books believed that the behavior they extolled was more important to be publicly shown than privately practiced? Jürgen Habermas explained in his highly influential The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, that it was not until after the Renaissance that "for the first time private and public spheres became separate in a specifically modern sense" (11). Therefore, Renaissance men and women did not have the same distinction as

modern people regarding private and public action as so distinct. Furthermore, all the evidence from the numerous behavioral manuals I have consulted while writing this study supports the idea that a good Christian would behave identically in her home as she would behave on the street. Indeed, if God is watching at all times, how could she justify wearing one face for the world at large and another at home? Therefore, while one could argue that people during the Renaissance might have been less strict in some households than others, the general consensus in conduct books was for wives and daughters to **always** behave in a way that would guarantee entrance into Heaven. For women, this belief meant submission to the men in their lives.

Defenses of Women

While some of the texts discussed above contain elements that could be labeled “defenses” of women, this unique genre deserves special consideration apart from the guide books and manuals so ever present in Renaissance society. Due to the fact that many of these books respond directly to overly ridiculous charges toward all women of their inherent evil nature and the fact that “The more popular, multiedition [sic] books . . . were the more antifemale,” I will not tarry long in presenting the historical context for these works (Hull 46.) However, despite their being the less popular of the books existent during the Renaissance, I would be remiss not to at least acknowledge their existence and discuss the cultural impact they had on early modern England.

As with the guide books, pamphlets and most other literature of the day, defenses were written by males to “defend” the role of women in society. The authors focused on defending women’s right to education, oftentimes along with putting forward the idea that women were capable of more than they were often given credit. They were never purporting to acknowledge women’s equality to men in public arenas. Benson explains that, as is common with English defenses of women, one particular author

does not examine the historical causes of women’s inferior social status, nor does he argue in favor of leveling social distinctions between the sexes. He does not use his reconstruction of woman’s character as a platform for change in anything but attitude toward women. He is trying to change *what is said* [emphasis added]. (208)

It is important to note that the author is advocating for a change in the language being used about women and not the repressive social structure present for women. Strictly speaking, of all of the defenses from the sixteenth century, only one, *Dyalogue Defensyve*, actually called for any sort of action on the part of women to achieve social change through “women . . . us[ing] their skill at writing to benefit themselves as a group” (Benson 209).

Prior to English defenses, the tradition of writing such treatises had originated elsewhere on the continent, with well-articulated defenses available in both Italian and German before they were translated into English. As David Bevington states,

At the start of this period, Italian influence in England, by no means an entirely new thing, still shows the delights of newness and discovery;

although resistance is discernible, more sophisticated members of the English cultural scene are able to enjoy the show of newness, the unsettling challenge implicitly offered to English customs and mores, the enlargement of perspective attainable through *a view of another culture* [emphasis added] designed and executed on a high level of artistic creativity. (25)

Part of the challenge offered to English customs in these foreign documents was the more humanist forward-thinking notion that there might be some level of equality between the sexes. However, it is important to note that many of the ideas in these humanist defenses of women were being presented as written by a foreign author about foreign women and subsequently translated into English. Therefore, English men could read and enjoy them, but perhaps they took the beliefs found within the foreign treatises with a grain of salt.

English defenses took various forms, some dealing with the defense of the entire sex and others more specifically dealing with the right of women to rule. Though Queen Elizabeth was a popular queen, she was by no means without her detractors. There were those who believed that a woman in power was an abomination, regardless of her level of intelligence or her bloodlines. One such example is when “John Knox challenged the Queen’s right to the throne and her capacity for authority in his First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous regiment of women” (though the author does go on to note that this attack was done “unwittingly, of course, as his object was to discredit Mary Tudor”) (Benson 231). Writers then responded to such challenges with defenses of Elizabeth’s right to rule. Obviously, these defenses must be taken in their context as it is unknown if

the writers' praises would have been quite so adamant in support of a female ruler were there not already one in power.

The fact that defenses proved necessary at all gives a vital insight into the world of Elizabethan England. Women were being attacked and maligned in print routinely and were left with little recourse. As writing and printing were considered inappropriate feminine pastimes, they were left to have men answer the accusations for them. This stricture was no doubt difficult for many women at the time, and an argument has been ongoing among scholars for some time about the effectiveness of men serving as women's voice in the debate. Different scholars have had different opinions as is evidenced by the fact that "Malcolmson, Clareke, Trbowitz, and Romack argue that the debate was not supportive of the interests of women, while Clark, O'Malley, Phillippy, and Suzuki argue that pro-woman defenses advanced the position of women, whether these arguments were written by women or men, in manuscript or print" (Malcolmson and Suzuki 3).

Finally, many so-called defenses are anything but, actually containing veiled or unveiled attacks on women under the title "Defense." Benson describes one such "defense" entitled The Defence of Women by Edward More that

concludes that she [Eve and thus all women] has no responsibility for her own actions. She is Adam's natural subject because she is weak. She entirely lacks autonomy and independence. If a reader should accept More's assertion and cease blaming Eve, he would in the process be relieved of any belief he might have had in her intelligence. (Benson 218)

As there were no requirements for a treatise to be described as a defense, sometimes men couched their attacks on women in these terms, such as Edward Gosynhyll's Heer beginnith the Schole house of women wherein euery man may read a goodly praise of the conditions of women from 1572, in which he proclaims,

And say plainly that in the woman
 Is little thing of praise worthy
 Letted or unlearned whether they be
 They say of all creatures women are the best
Cuius contrarium verum est. (n.pag.)

Roughly translated from Latin, the last line of the cited text means “of whom the opposite is true.” Therefore, just because something purports to praise or defend women, it does not mean it does.

As the English defenses of women were not nearly as political as their Italian counterparts (and often the translations of the Italian defenses), they are valuable documents, but when compared with Shakespeare's play, they fall decidedly short. Shakespeare's female characters challenge far more the societal norms that were being put forward in manuals, guide books, and even the defenses of women. Though defenses from the day could be less severe than behavioral manuals, and while “some men wrote in defense of the female sex or promoted further education for their sisters or wives,” the salient point is “They rarely, however, questioned the hierarchy of male over female of the premise that women's roles were primary domestic” (Hull 24). I will argue that Shakespeare's play questions both of these premises as well as many others.

CHAPTER III: THE WOMEN AS WIVES

Now that we have a contextual background for The Merchant of Venice, we can place the female characters within this environment, evaluating their roles as wives throughout the play. My thesis contends that Shakespeare's female characters in The Merchant of Venice do not comply with the roles prescribed for women in more conservative Renaissance literature, particularly with regards to proper behavior for a wife. Furthermore, I would even go so far as to say that the characters Shakespeare has given us in the play directly contradict all that the manuals, guide books, and folk stories recommend and instead celebrate an independent-spirited female role model. Shakespeare illuminates three unique women, all of whom rebel in their own ways against the status of women as second-class citizens.

As we begin, it is relevant to note that in almost all the period texts I encountered, the description of the relationship between men and women in marriage is described in terms of two people yoked for a lifetime and reliant on one another for happiness. Often, phrases are used that evoke the idea of an equal partnership with "identical obligations for each" (Anderson and Zinsser 441). However, within this structure, unlike in more modern notions of partnerships, the early modern idea of partners was not at odds with the notion that the husband was in charge of every aspect of his wife's life. Wayne asserts, "Many writers from Augustine through Tilney and Milton interpreted Adam and Eve's relation in paradise as a marriage that could provide companionship but was nonetheless hierarchical" (14). One text even went so far as to call the husband "the

King, Priest, and Prophet in his house” allowed to render verdicts on every issue in his family (B., Ste. 64).

Furthermore, the role of the church was stressed in the previous chapter, because it illuminates an important aspect of the marriage manuals and guide books of the day. The notions put forth in early modern manuals are Biblically centered and thus eternal salvation could be dependent on how well one’s role as wife or husband was performed. Also, perhaps tellingly, sometimes theories about marriage are taken from exact Bible quotations, but often theories arise from inferences made by early modern authors from verses or writings from a much earlier period. Phrases such as Thomas Gataker’s “as the Apostle implieth when he said . . .” in his Marriage Dvties Briefely Covched Together from 1620 are very common in the period (n.pag.). Most of these guide books reference Ephesians 5:21-25: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife” (Holy Bible). Many texts also cite the creation story and woman being made from man’s rib and often remind women that:

She being the cause of all his miserie, if she beare only miserie by means of his indiscretion, she must look vnto the originall thereof, which first sprang in her selfe; whereas for a man to transgresse that hath the pregogatiue, and is, as it were, the king and chiefe gouernour of the families, for him to say . . . (B., Ste. 72)

These reminders to women that their place is meant to be beneath their husbands and is deserved because of the role Eve played in the fall of man was a common tactic to help explain why women were “by ‘nature, custom, as well as in law’ . . . placed below men,

‘by whose opinions their conduct and actions [were] bound to be governed’ (Anderson and Zinsser 441).

Another important fact when contextualizing the marriage treatises of the day is that someone Shakespeare would probably have had first-hand experience with at least one of the authors. Edmund Tilney, as mentioned previously, famously known to theatre practitioners as England’s Master of the Revels under Queen Elizabeth, wrote a treatise entitled A brief and pleasant discourse of duties of mariage, called the flower of friendshippe dealing with the subject of marriage. Perhaps there is a specific challenge to Tilney’s views being put forth in this play, as Shakespeare’s female characters so often do not follow the advice of Tilney, who proclaimed:

The office of the husbände is to bring in necessaries, of the wife, well to keepe them. The office of the husbände is, to go abroad in matters of profite, of the wife, to tarrye at home, and see all be well there. The office of the husbände is, to provide money, of the wife, not wastfully to spende it. The office of the husbände is, to deale, and bargaine with all men, of the wife, to make or meddle with no man. The office of the husbände is, to give, of his wife, to keepe. To office of the husbände is, to apparell him as he can, as the wife, to go as shee ought. The office of the husband is, to bee Lorde of all, of the wife, to give account of all, and finally I saye, that the office of the husbände is to maintayne well hys livelyhoode, and the office of the woman is, to governe well the houshold. (Tilney n.pag.)

Like so many of the conservative writers of the day, Tilney proposes that women have a very specific place in the hierarchy of society, and that all is well if men and women know their place and stay in it. As The Merchant of Venice is thought to have been written around 1600, Shakespeare would have been aware that Tilney would be responsible for determining if the play contained objectionable content. Shakespeare's presentations of the wives in the play suggest that perhaps he took specific delight in making these women expressly the opposite of everything that Tilney indicates that women should be – obedient and governable.

From what I have detailed to this point, it is evident that Patrick Hannay's 1619 essay entitled A Happy Husband or, Directions for a Maide to choose her Mate. As also, A Wives Behaviour towards her Husband after Marriage is similar to many others of the time period in what made up "A good Wives description." The description included a repetition of the exact same ideas as Tilney's including instructions to wives that

Obedience first thy will to his must fit,
 (He is the Pylot that must gouerne it)
 If man condemnes of inability,
 When women rule, that is born to obey:
 Nor is it Honor to Her, but a shame. (n.pag.)

To summarize the historical perspective on this period, while many of the existing manuals differ slightly in which aspects of the wife's role they stress, they all focus on the idea "of female dependency and male domination" (Kelly-Gadol 140).

Within this context we can begin to evaluate The Merchant of Venice, a historical document from the same period of time, which seems to promote very different values. The female characters in Shakespeare's play come nowhere near fitting into the neat mold of the obedient, submissive and passive wife idealized in so much of early modern literature. Within this historical perspective, many aspects of the way in which the female characters in The Merchant of Venice behave become very telling. When the audience first meets Portia and Nerissa, within her first three lines Portia begins to undermine the social order of Renaissance England. During her very first conversation with Nerissa she claims,

It is a good divine that follows his own instructions; I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree – such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. (I.ii.14-21)

Portia appears to be making fun of those who tell people what to do, which certainly applies to the authors of the conduct books to which I have been referring. Furthermore, as most of the people giving advice on how females should behave were men, the sentence becomes even more interesting. Well-known Renaissance theorist Juan Luis Vives declared that the way women should behave “cannot be declared in few bokes, but in many and longe, how they shall handle them selfe in so many and divers thynes” (qtd. in Benson 173). Portia acknowledges that it is easy for church men to give instructions on how to behave, but wonders how many are actually able to follow their own advice.

She sets herself up in direct contradiction to the messages being espoused by the church. While these messages certainly pertained to all aspects of life, the proper road to marriage and the roles defined therein were of particular interest. Immediately, we view Portia as in opposition to the dominant forces that surround her.

Directly following this initial impression of Portia, the audience hears her and Nerissa begin discussing her suitors in great detail. Nerissa lists out all of her potential husbands while Portia gives her reasons for not being interested in any of them. While the fact that she has no control over her selection of husband is a topic for the next chapter on her role as a daughter, the fact that she mocks ceaselessly all of her potential husbands is a critical point to note. In theory, while the men are not yet her lord and master (and indeed, none of these men will ever be as she marries Bassanio) the fact that we see Portia have such a strong opinion of the men's faults that surround her defines her as a strong-willed female. At this point in the play, we have to assume that any of these men could be her future husband, and Portia shows no sign of being the wife detailed in pamphlets in regards to ignoring the faults of a husband. Women were instructed in behavior manuals of the day to ignore their husbands' faults or to live with them the best they could. In Of Domesticall Duties, William Gouge advises:

Wives ought in regard of their husbands to surmise no evil whereof they have not sure proof and evidence, but rather interpret everything in better part and follow the rule of love which beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. If they note any defects of nature and deformity of body or any enormous and notorious vices in their

husband, then ought they to turn their eyes and thoughts from his person to his place and from his vicious qualities to his honorable office (which is to be an husband), and this will abate that vile esteem which otherwise might be occasioned from the fore-named means. (qtd. in Hull 45)

However, Portia shows no intention of heeding this advice or ever being a submissive wife to any of the men who might be her husband, including Bassanio as we shall soon see. While it can be argued that the play is a comedy and Portia's jokes would have been taken in light-hearted jest by the audience of Shakespeare's day, it seems that a deeper issue is at hand. Despite Portia's society-prescribed role of serving as a quiet and attentive spouse to whichever man ends up being her husband by her father's decree, her skewering of their faults does not bode well for her subservience to any male in marriage.

In the same vein, Nerissa's participation in this conversation proves her to be a more assertive woman than is encouraged in the guide books and manuals governing marriage. By being a party to Portia's descriptions of her suitors, she is helping Portia to deny male superiority over both of them. Furthermore, as soon as Portia, at Nerissa's continual urging, has made her way through all of the descriptions of the suitors, only then does Nerissa reveal that "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" (I.ii.100-05). The fact that Nerissa has known all throughout her conversation with Portia that the men have given up the hope of being Portia's husband is an important point to note for the entire play: at

times Nerissa has more knowledge than even Portia. When thinking about Nerissa in the hierarchy of the play, this point seems to be vital. Portia often appears the cleverest person in the entire world of the play, but Nerissa is really her equal in many ways. This idea is further cemented when Nerissa brings up Bassanio immediately after the conversations regarding the suitors takes place. It is not Portia who first names the man that will become her lord, but Nerissa, who shows incredible insight combined with an astute knowledge of human behavior.

From their initial introduction in the play, Portia and Nerissa appear as characters who should not to be crossed; they are purposeful and definite about their feelings on subjects that deal with the opposite sex. In a similar vein, the introduction of Jessica is brief, followed by a scene in which we see Launcelot delivering her message to her intended husband, Lorenzo. Interestingly, the words that Lorenzo employs to describe the missive are: “She hath directed / How I shall take her from her father’s house, / What gold and jewels she is furnish’d with” (II.iv.29-31). While social custom of the day dictated that the man should be the one doing the decision making, it is clear that Jessica is readying the plans for her escape, not Lorenzo. For Elizabethan England, where the writers chastised women that God had “taken[en] from her all power and authority, to speak, to reason, [and] to interpret,” this is a forward-thinking presentation of a young woman preparing to elope (Pitt 24). Furthermore, even in today’s fairy-tale saturated culture, a woman procuring her own means of escape and not sitting back and waiting for her knight in shining armor to burst in and carry her away is relatively feminist. The implications in Shakespeare’s day are even more so.

This idea of Jessica as being the dominant member of the partnership is continued through the scene of her escape from her father's house in Act II, scene vi. After the couple has procured the first of the treasures with which Jessica is escaping, Lorenzo informs her that she should "come at once, / For the close night doth play the runaway, / And we are stay'd for at Bassanio's feast" (II.vi.46-48). This is tantamount to a direct order and, according to guide books on marriage and behavior towards one's husband, Jessica should acquiesce to the order immediately regardless of her own thoughts on the subject. For instance, Travitsky notes "the frequently reprinted Vives on the duty of obedience: 'a woman ought to abstene from yll, but in al good thyneges, to obey none other wyse, than though she had ben bought in to the house as a bonde and hande mayde'" (18-19).

However, instead Jessica replies, "I will make fast the doors, and gild myself / With some moe ducats, and be with you straight" (II.vi.49-50). Jessica uses her own decision-making skills to determine that procuring more money from her father's stash before leaving is the appropriate decision, and she does not ask for Lorenzo's pardon or explain the situation. One could argue that Lorenzo is not Jessica's husband at this point in the play, and indeed, that is true. However, Elizabethans believed very strongly in the concept of marriages being somewhat official once the couple had gone through a "espousal *de praesenti*," which was a union that pre-dated the actual marriage in the form of the couple agreeing to be each others' spouse, even though it did not take the form of an official church ceremony (though church and state did recognize such unions). As Williams Perkins in Christian Oeconomie stated in 1609, these types of marriages were

valid “though not in regard of fact, yet in regard of right and interest” (qtd. in Haynes 7). It seems highly possible at this point that this union could have been already undertaken by Lorenzo and Jessica. Therefore, Jessica would already owe him the allegiance of a wife in many Elizabethan’s eyes and therefore should consent to his will.

The issue of Jessica’s dominance becomes even more interesting when we acknowledge that because of her background and upbringing, she would have been looked down upon by many members of Shakespeare’s audience (Holmer 109). Because she is a Jew, she is set apart from all of the other wives in the play, as being particularly needing of schooling by her husband, the supposed Christian. Despite Jessica’s supposed “inferiority” due to her questionable Jewish background, she is certainly the more in-charge personality during the elopement. She gives orders and her husband follows them without question. The fact that Jessica, the inferior to Nerissa and Portia in terms of her social status and birth because of her Jewish ancestry, appears as superior to her husband not only gives us an additional wife who appears to be in control of her marriage, but it also further raises Nerissa and Portia’s status over their husbands. If a woman born of an unacceptable religion can lay better plans than her husband, imagine the appearance to Shakespeare’s audience of the two women who are apparently good Christians and also appear to be wiser than their husbands?

By the first time that Portia and Bassanio (and Nerissa and Gratiano for that matter) lay eyes on each other since his initial visit referenced in the first act, it has been well established that Portia is the only and undisputed leader of Belmont. From the period in general, this arrangement was not the encouraged state of affairs; though Queen

Elizabeth ruled the country, the idea of a woman being in charge in general was looked down upon. Belmont is a private location and therefore should be under the control of a male. Many documents, including Tilney's popular treatise, determined, "Within doores shee must tend her charge / Is that at home; his that at large" (qtd. in Hannay n.pag.). However, despite what sounds like women being told to exert control over the house, exactly what it is the wife is allowed to be in charge of seems up for debate. In A Godly Forme of Houshold Gouenement: for the ordering of priuate Families, according to the direction of Gods word, Robert Cleaver states that a man "must order his house for the service of God" (35). The general consensus of the time seems to be that the wife is in control of the house only in title as housewife, but really she is only enforcing rules her husband has already created. Certainly each individual household during England's early modern period would have been structured in slightly different ways, but generally it seems the wife did not have much more important decision-making power in the home than at large without her husband's expressly stated consent.

In regards to the idea of household leadership, very early in the play, Bassanio makes a comment that makes it clear that part of his interest in Portia is financially motivated. He tells Antonio that he has "disabled mine estate" before mentioning a "lady richly left" in Belmont (I.i.123, 161). Immediately, in this inciting scene of the play, the invitation to compare Bassanio and Portia's estates and the management of them is invited. Bassanio, through his own lack of self-control, has no financial stability as he is not good with household and financial planning (seen to be within the role of the husband to oversee in Elizabethan times). Therefore, when we arrive in Belmont and have the

opportunity over the course of several scenes to learn something of Portia's character, the differences between the two shine brightly. Portia seems to be very much in control of all of her estate.

Regardless of the fact that she has inherited her money from a dead father, the reference indicates a financially stable place at which a woman is head of the house. As Anne Barton says in her Introduction to The Merchant of Venice, "Belmont is really the better self of Venice: a world of clarity, order, and materialism transfigured, presided over by a lady in whom the virtues characteristic of the Christians in the comedy manifest themselves in their most complete and realized form" (286). Other than the unsuitable group of men vying for Portia's hand, there is no dominant male presence at Belmont preceding the arrival of Bassanio and Gratiano. The important aspect of this fact is that under Portia's control Belmont is an idyllic setting, completely capably managed in her hands. Shakespeare seems to be questioning the belief that a husband is necessary to order a house successfully.

As was noted, some citizens in Elizabethan England clearly embraced a strong female role model, and obvious comparisons exist between the role of Portia in Belmont and the role of Queen Elizabeth in Britain during Shakespeare's lifetime. Angela Pitt describes Portia as "exemplifying some of the virtues of Queen Elizabeth herself" (93). Despite the fact that Portia rules her individual house and Queen Elizabeth an entire country, certain similarities present themselves. Without question, Portia is in absolute charge in Belmont, answering officially to no one in the same way that Queen Elizabeth ruled England, answering somewhat to Parliament but always maintaining ultimate

power. In the same way, parallels between Queen Elizabeth and Portia's portrayal of themselves as masculine arise. Portia has a masculine energy often throughout the play, often detailed through her intellectual qualities, which many Elizabethans considered within the realm of men. As the intellectual sphere was considered to be more in line with the male sex, when Portia defends Antonio in court, she automatically appears masculine (the appearance certainly isn't harmed by the breeches she wears).

When Bassanio finally reaches Belmont and the casket test for Portia's hand, whether or not Portia would actually sit back and allow him to fail is highly debatable (for just two scholars' opinions on Portia's hints to Bassanio see Abate and Randal). Portia's passivity as a wife seems impossible even in the initial "courting" phase as she seems to be determined to have Bassanio regardless of the outcome of the casket test. Once the test is complete the speeches that Portia and Bassanio give back-to-back are very telling. Despite countless Elizabethan texts' directive for women to be silent as much as possible, Portia has a complete 26 lines of poetry to "give" herself over to Bassanio, including her announcement that ". . . now, / This house, these servants, and this same myself / Are yours — my lord's!" (III.ii.169-71).

Portia's speech is detailed, precise, and, ultimately inaccurate because she is only willing to give up so much power in her household (as will be discussed in more detail later). However, the interesting note is that Bassanio's response to her highly articulate wife begins with "Madam, you have bereft me of all words" (III.ii.175). He then speaks all of eleven lines to seal his marriage contract with Portia. Followed by Portia's lengthy speech, his seems short and much less in-depth, completely undermining the idea found

in Hermann von Wied's 1551 "A brefe and playne declaration of the dewty of married folks" that women should be "true tonged and of fewe wordes" (n.pag.). Portia calls both of these ideas into question in the course of this speech. Portia and Bassanio's speeches right after one another completely contradicts the "Traditional thought [that] relegates woman to silence in marriage on the grounds that her speech is naturally bad," and Portia's much more articulate response to her husband devalues the idea that her speaking "indicates her foolishness and her rebellion against her husband's rightful authority whereas her silence indicates her sensible acquiescence to her husband's superior judgment" (Benson 159).

When Lorenzo and Jessica suddenly appear, Bassanio is the first to greet their entourage announcing,

Lorenzo and Salerio, welcome hither,
 If that the youth of my new int'rest here
 Have power to bid you welcome. By your leave,
 I bid my very friends and countrymen,
 Sweet Portia, welcome. (III.ii.220-24)

After initially undertaking the role that early English texts would prescribe is now his, Bassanio realizes that he might have overstepped his bounds and bows to Portia as still being mistress of Belmont. He seems to catch himself being too assertive when it is really Portia's duty to welcome these newcomers. This idea is in complete contradiction to everything found in conduct books of the day for husband and wifely behavior. Regardless of her superior social position or the fact that she was formerly the head of

Belmont, with the presence of a ruling male, he should take over the formalities and duties because it is the husband's place to "bere theyr [wives'] wekenes" and be in control always (Wied n.pag.). However, Bassanio asks for Portia's leave to welcome the visitors, and it is not until Portia has spoken her greeting "So do I, my lord, / They are entirely welcome" that everyone seems to go about their business (III.ii.224-25).

Furthermore, as Anderson and Zinsser claim, the ideal early modern woman who was revered in popular thought was a wife who "acknowledged that happiness and safety came with acceptance of the proper relationship to men" (444). The proper relationship of men to women did not include husbands asking their wives permission for things or being instructed by their wives, however that is precisely what is found in The Merchant of Venice. An interesting interaction is presented when Portia says to Bassanio:

First go with me to church and call me wife,
 And then away to Venice to your friend;
 For never shall you lie by Portia's side
 With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold
 To pay the petty debt twenty times over. (III.ii.303-07)

Portia directly informs Bassanio of what his course of action will be, even saying she would "never" allow him to come to bed with her with "an unquiet soul." This statement of Portia's sounds far more like a typical husband of the period giving permission and an allowance to his wife than it does a husband being told exactly what to do by his fiancée. Regardless of whether or not Portia means this sentence in a generous or helpful way, she is certainly the one making the decisions and telling Bassanio what he is to do next.

Furthermore, Portia says, “Lorenzo, I commit into your hand / The husbandry and manage of my house / Until my lord’s return” after she and Bassanio’s marriage has taken place (III.iv.24-26). One could assume Bassanio is now master of Belmont in name and spirit and was merely in such a haste to get back to Venice to attend to Antonio that he did not have time to give a decree as to what should happen to the estate (which Portia has given over to him a short time before). However, one could also argue that this is irrelevant because it is Portia whom the audience sees handing over the governance of her estate. Though she has married and is awaiting the return of her “lord,” it is still Portia who holds the power in this place. Jonathan Dollimore claims that many of these instances in which the wife usurps the husband’s authority “materialize contemporary . . . cultural fears about ‘the double spectre of a woman asserting control of property and of herself’” (qtd. in Marzola 298).

Jessica returns to give voice to female power in Act III, scene v, though she has been quiet for some time on the subject. During her conversation with Lorenzo regarding her opinion of Portia, Jessica proclaims that,

It is very meet

The Lord Bassanio live an upright life,
 For having such a blessing in his lady,
 He finds the joys of heaven here on earth,
 And if on earth he do not [merit] it,
 In reason he should never come to heaven! (III.v.73-78)

Jessica's logic implies that Bassanio must now live a good and honest life in order to deserve and earn the prize that he has found in Portia. This idea runs contrary to all we read in manuals, as the consensus seems to be that a husband must do nothing once in a marriage to continue earning the wife he has acquired; it is the duty of the wife to make the marriage a happy and contented one. As this is the only lengthy instance we have of Jessica speaking on the responsibilities in marriage, we can only assume that, though she is speaking about Portia and Bassanio's relationship, she believes this truth to be applicable to men and women as a whole, and therefore to her own marriage as well. It is a very freeing thought for her that a man would need to deserve a marriage once he had entered into it.

Furthermore Jessica's indication that Bassanio should earn Portia on earth or never go to Heaven seems a rather judgmental statement from a woman of the period about any male. Indeed, even the thought that men and women might be equal in Heaven was only granted by a few. As Suzanne Hull contends,

There was no question of equality between the sexes on earth, though Francis Meres, an ordained priest and scholar, holding out a carrot, said: "Therefore love your husbands here, and if they reward it not, it shall be rewarded in Heaven. Be obedient to them here, and ye shall be made equal with them in Heaven. Be humble and lowly here, and ye shall be exalted in Heaven. Be clothed with modesty here, and ye shall be clothed with honor in Heaven." (Hull 38)

The very idea that men and women might attain a level of equality in Heaven was relatively open-minded at the time. Jessica's statement that if Bassanio does not earn her on earth, he should not even get to go to heaven takes this thought to the extreme. Though we are given precious little information directly from Jessica regarding her thoughts on the equality of the sexes, these few lines are quite bold when contextualized.

Robert Cleaver argues that "wisdom will teach a man, to measure out correction" (47) and Gataker claims that between a man and his wife "he is or ought to be the wiser, and the woman held to be the weaker" (7). Among period texts there seems to be an agreement that husbands should be assumed to be smarter than their wives. It is therefore interesting that Shakespeare chooses to make incredibly clear that, of all the characters in The Merchant of Venice, Portia is intellectually superior to everyone else, including her husband Bassanio. This idea is made clear repeatedly throughout the play, but nowhere is it clearer than in the trial scene in Act IV. When Portia arrives in the court dressed as Balthazar, she enters with a wealth of legal knowledge that is never explained. It is clear that Portia met with Bellario, and it could be argued that it was Bellario himself and not Portia who figured out the legal loopholes that allow Antonio to escape his grisly fate. However, the fact that the audience views Portia as the one to deliver this information is telling. Also, regardless of if Portia, Bellario, or even Nerissa figured out the logistics, Portia is the one who must stand before the entire court and eloquently, legally and intellectually argue for the life of a man who it seems certain will die. Bassanio, Gratiano and even the Duke are powerless to utter a single word that

actually helps Antonio win his freedom. As Barton says, “It is only Portia, in her disguise as the young lawyer, who can rescue Venice from its dilemma” (286).

In addition, it is Portia herself and not her husband who decides that it will be she, and not a male, that will appear in court to help decide the fate of her husband’s best friend. If men and even most women, as Anderson and Zinsser indicate, “believed that [women] must function as willing subordinates within the traditional framework of the family and a male-dominated society,” it is a large venture for Portia to believe herself capable as a woman (though disguised as a man) to determine this case between and before men (444). With this much self-assertion, it seems entirely impossible that Portia is well suited to be the passive wife of the period. Certainly, standing in front of many people, with all eyes on her extolling the laws of Venice, Portia is far from her socially accepted realm in the home. She is given no lines of self-doubt or fear to let the audience know that as a mere woman she is somehow out of her element or in over her head.

Furthermore, while we will return to the ending of the play as a whole shortly, it seems relevant to note here the reactions of Bassanio and Gratiano when they learn the entire story that Portia and Nerissa have kept from them. Following Portia and Nerissa’s revelations to their husbands of their actions in court, there is no indication that Bassanio or Gratiano are angry with their wives for having deceived them, presented themselves before the Duke dressed as men, or undertaken a journey without their husbands’ presence. All Bassanio says is, “Were you the doctor, and I knew you not?” (V.i.28). The amazement in Bassanio’s line can easily be interpreted as a very deep appreciation

on the part of the husbands for the worldly, not domestic, skills of the wives, even those skills practiced without husbands' knowledge or consent.

Immediately following the trial, one of the most interesting scenes of the play unfolds in comparison to contemporary Elizabethan stories. After Portia and Nerissa successfully save Antonio from his ghastly fate, they encounter, still disguised of course, their husbands. When pressed to accept a token of gratitude for their work, the two women quickly devise a plan that is the exact opposite of the famous Elizabethan story of Patient Griselda. The two women ask for the rings they gave their husbands, and despite initial protests, procure the rings that both men had sworn would never leave their hands. The fascinating aspect of this episode in the play is that it parallels, but contradicts, the story of Patient Griselda. As discussed earlier, in the legend, Griselda is the one whose faithfulness is tested by her husband. In The Merchant of Venice, it is Bassanio and Gratiano who are tested by their wives and, unlike Patient Griselda, they fail the test.

As the play begins its final act, the audience is presented with a garden "love" scene between Jessica and Lorenzo. But it is not a traditional love scene in which the lovers spend the entire scene professing their love for each other, but instead they compare themselves to lovers whose relationships have ended disastrously. As Berry notes, it is Jessica who references the Medea and Jason allusion which brings with it the remembrance "that Medea betrayed her father for her lover, and so did I for you" (60). It is Jessica who raises the seriousness of the conversation from a more playful bantering, albeit involving lovers who end up dead, to the level to include a woman who ultimately destroys everything that her unfaithful husband holds dear. I do not mean to suggest that

Jessica is overtly threatening Lorenzo with murdering potential children they might have, but only that she is exerting her equality and a non-traditional role as an early modern life with even this implied threat. Jessica, arguably the most passive of the wives in the play, still does not seem like the “fravell vessel” whom Lorenzo must “beare her wekenes” as the traditional identity of an early modern wife recommends (Order n.pag.).

In Act V, following the trial scene and the Lorenzo and Jessica off-kilter romantic scene, one wonders if perhaps the time has come to return society to its normal state of male dominance. However, instead the audience is presented with Portia and Nerissa’s threats of cuckoldry, a cuckoldry they did not commit, but which Gratiano infers could be deserved at some point when he says, “What, are we cuckolds ere we have deserv’d it?” (V.i.265). This indication runs contrary to contemporary textual evidence that insists that regardless of the fault of the husband, nothing he can ever do should be taken as a good enough reason for the wife to no longer be submissive. As Ste. B extols: “I denie not...the husband to be in cause of ten times, of disunitie and contention . . . yet still . . . the contentions are the wives, and the fault of contending will light on her vnanswerable because she is subjected vnto a tributary estate, being made for the man, and hee her head” (71-72).

Though Parten interprets this final scene as Shakespeare “introducing the threat of cuckoldry and then eliminating it,” so that “he is able to exorcise the prospect of permanent female rule from this comedy of temporary female ascendancy,” I disagree (150). I feel that Portia and Nerissa’s threat is tempered not by the sudden reappearance of societal order of male dominance, but by the powerful figure of Portia forcing Antonio

and Bassanio to agree to the terms that she feels are necessary for the marriage. When she says “Give him this, / And bid him keep it better than the other” she infers that they are re-sealing their vows, this time clarifying that Bassanio will never again put Antonio above her, as he did when he offered his wife’s life as less important than Antonio’s during the trial scene. It is Bassanio who must sacrifice in order to be worthy of Portia, not vice-versa.

Though Parten sees the ending as a return to traditional values of the husband as the head of the family, I find it difficult to view Bassanio as in any way suited to exert control over Portia – the woman who has chastised him with,

If you had known the virtue of the ring,

Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,

Or your own honor to contain the ring,

You would not then have parted with the ring. (V.i.199-202)

The ways in which Portia and Nerissa forcefully question their husbands, become angry at them for giving away the rings, and even create a false cuckoldry makes it challenging to reconcile the notion of them as wives likely to be subjugated to their husbands.

Markham directs English women to

shunne all violence of rage, passion and humour, coueting lesse to direct

then to bee directed, appearing euer vnto him pleasant, amiable and

delightfull; and though occasion, mishaps,or the misgouernement of his

will may induce her to contrarie thoughts, yet virtuously to suppressse

them, and with a milde sufferance rather to call him home from his error,

then with the strength of anger to abate the least sparke of his euill, calling in her minde that euill and vncomely language is deformed though vttered euen to seruants, but most monstrous and vgly when it appears before the presence of a husband . . . (3)

Certainly it is easily argued that Portia and Nerissa do not endure their husbands' separation from their tokens of love with "milde sufferance" in any way.

Also, to return to the legend of Patient Griselda, another contrasting behavior to the story's ideal woman is found once everyone has returned to Belmont. Portia and Nerissa behave nothing like Patient Griselda when they discover their husbands' inability to keep true to a promise. In contrast with Patient Griselda's obedient silence in the face of her husband taking her children away, supposedly to their deaths, throwing her out, planning to wed another, etc., Nerissa and Portia's react angrily. They are very upset about their husbands' behavior, and the women verbally spar with the men before finally revealing that they were the doctor and clerk who bested Shylock and who talked the two men into giving up the valuable tokens of love. The behavior of both Portia and Nerissa does not seem to go with Grissel's statement in a dramatic adaptation of her story from the sixteenth century; Grissel proclaims, "Ile run to serue my Lord, / Or if I wanted legs, vpon my knees; / Ile creepe to Court so I may see him pleas'd" (qtd. in Keyishian 257). Instead, the women stand up to their husbands and call them out on their unacceptable behavior. I doubt that Patient Griselda would ever say to the marquis, "You were to blame, I must be plain with you, / To part so slightly with your wive's first gift," as Portia

derides Bassanio (V.i.166-67). Shakespeare directly contrasts the wives in his play with the legend and lessons evident in the story of Patient Griselda.

Portia and Nerissa also challenge the accepted sexual role of women in the early modern period. Women needed to acquiesce to their husbands' desires; primarily this was a practical issue as manuals deemed that it was important for good Christians to "brynge forth profitable frute unto men" (Bullinger n.pag.). When Portia states, "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring!," and Nerissa agrees with "Nor I in yours / Till I again see mine!," there is an underlying empowerment that goes with these statements (V.i.190-92). Both women take control over their sexual futures through explicitly denying their husbands access to their bodies. Regardless of Renaissance legalities that a man actually owned the person of his wife along with all her property, these two women assert control over their sexual future. Furthermore, they explicitly ignore the invocations of marriage manuals that informed women that

the wyfe ought to obey hyr husbände in all poyntes as the congregation to Christe which loueth Christe onelye, and aboue all thynges, she is glad and willyng to suffer for Christes sake, she doth all for the loue of hym Christe onelye is hyr comforte ioye an all togethers, upon Christe is hyr thought day and nyghte, she longeth onelye after Christe, for Christes sake (yf it maye serue to hys glorye) she is hartelye wel contented to dye yee she geueth ouer hyr selfe hole thereto for Christes loue, knowynge assuredlye that hyr soule hyr honoure, bodye, lyfe, and all that she hath is Christes owne. Thus also muste euerye oneste wife submit her selfe, to playse hyr

husbande with all hyr power and geue hry selfe frelye and wyllynge to
 loue hym and obeye hym, and neuer too forsake hm tyll the houre of
 deathe. (Wied n.pag.)

Obviously the two women are also thinking of themselves during this whole encounter; they purposefully are testing their husbands, something the Elizabethan author cited above would most certainly find apprehensible.

Finally, the much quoted and noted sexual pun that ends the play falls to Gratiano: “Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (V.i.306-07). While it could be argued that Shakespeare is merely ending the play with a somewhat tasteless joke and therefore he assigns it to a somewhat vulgar character, I believe more can be read into this statement. While Portia is certainly the central female character, Nerissa is crucially important as well. While Jessica is also a bold woman, in Nerissa Shakespeare gives us a second female to complement Portia who is also equal (if not superior) to her husband in wit, intellect and honesty. While it would be easy for an audience to dismiss a single Portia as being an anomaly, the rare woman who is her husband’s equal or better in most things, by having Nerissa as Portia’s constant companion, Shakespeare creates a second precedent for an enlightened and independent woman. While one woman like Portia would be easy to dismiss, adding Nerissa makes it more difficult. Therefore, I believe the last line of the play purposely calls attention to Nerissa and the promise that Gratiano has made her to be a good husband. The fact that it is Nerissa’s name that appears in the last line of the play leaves

the audiences with the impression that she is of great value and a central character in this struggle between the sexes.

It is also valuable to note that throughout the play there is a very simple way in which Shakespeare undermines even the most basic surmises of society. In Elizabethan England gender roles were very rigid, particularly in regard to physical appearance and dressing, and Shakespeare subverts the idea that men and women should be visually physically distinct. This idea is stated in Ste. B's Counsell to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction from 1608: "And that, if the man may not weare womans apparell, nor the woman mans, how much lesse may the one usurpe the others dignitie, or the other (to wit the husband) resigne or give over his soveraigntie unto his wife? but each must keepe their place, their order, and heavenly politie, wherto God hath called them" (42). The author clearly equates women dressing in the clothing of the opposite gender as reflective of trying to take authority away from men.

While perhaps sexually exhilarating for Elizabethan male audiences to see a woman dressed in a "breeches role," the fact that all three of the female characters in The Merchant of Venice are at some point dressed as men is a fact that requires attention for more than sexually stimulating reasons. I disagree with the common argument the female characters' portrayal by young men negates any social criticism found in the plays because the audience knew that men were playing the female characters. Howard convincingly argues that the portrayal of these characters by a boy, who could "so successfully personate the voice, gait and manner of a woman" that audiences questioned "how stable . . . those boundaries" were "separating one sexual kind from another"

(Howard, “Cross-Dressing” 49). The practice of having men play the female characters could have actually intensified the argument for the female characters challenging traditional thought processes regarding the socially accepted role of women as the women onstage are seen to be almost equal to men, i.e. as they are actually played by a male.

Each woman who appears dressed as a man in the course of the play is deceiving an important male in her life at the moment she is viewed as masculine. When escaping her father’s house to elope, Jessica visually appears male and announces that she has been “transformed to a boy” (II.vi.39). Both Portia and Nerissa dress as men and present themselves falsely before their husbands and the court of Venice. This concealment both in dress and in motive directly breaks Henrich Bullinger’s 1563 appeal in his The Christen state of Matrymonye that, in marriage, “the one hydeth no secretes . . . from the other” (66). Or as Haynes describes the issue in contemporary terms, “A woman in man’s clothes offends God-given distinctions of gender,” and, quoting a period text he declares, ‘To switch coats is to undo the work of heaven’ (116). The period idea that there should be distinct physical differences between men and women is not maintained as the female characters appear physically identical to men. Perhaps Shakespeare means for the audience to equate from the physical appearance of the women a modicum of equality between the husband and wife in other ways as well.

While Shakespeare certainly employed the convention of cross-dressing in many other plays, The Merchant of Venice stands out as unique in that every female character in the play appears dressed as a man at some point. While this tradition was often used by other dramatists with the end goal of “containing threats to the traditional sex-gender

system,” Shakespeare’s play seems to be doing something altogether different (Howard, “Cross-Dressing” 48). In The Merchant of Venice the audience finds three women, all incredibly powerful, none of whom tempers the rebellious female image with the iconic “good girl” image so often found in Shakespeare’s work. The presentation of Katherine, the rebellious shrew in The Taming of the Shrew, is tempered by the inclusion of Bianca, her docile sister. Beatrice has her counterpart in Hero in Much Ado About Nothing. But I can think of no other Shakespearean comedy that has three female characters of incredible strength who are able to stand up to the men in their lives. Even As You Like It, with its two very strong female characters Rosalind and Celia, does not have three female characters, all of whom cross-dress, and all of whom are able to secure their position as equal to the men in their lives.

Within Shakespeare’s canon, the play is unique in the number of strong female characters as well as the assertive behavior of all three of them. This fact cannot be taken lightly as so many women of will and intelligence, while not unheard of in Renaissance drama, are not the norm. Other examples noted by Alison Findley in her review of Plays on Women in which female characters challenge traditional boundaries are The Roaring Girl, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Arden of Faversham, and A Woman Killed With Kindness (313). Howard notes that only Middleton and Dekker’s The Roaring Girl directly “protest[s] the injustices caused by the sex-gender system” (“Cross-Dressing” 50). While I would not be so exclusionary regarding other plays challenging the gender system, as I would assert that The Merchant of Venice does as well, Howard’s argument

makes clear that the majority of Renaissance drama does not have women's issues as its focus.

Parten claims that "Portia . . . represents Shakespeare's first effort to create a comic heroine capable of controlling and directing the action that develops around her, and it is arguable that – at least from the Elizabethan point of view – he over played his hand, producing a figure too powerful to be credible as a future wife" (147). Perhaps she is correct in her belief and perhaps, for the general Elizabethan public, Portia caused "a certain queasiness in at least the original audience" (Berry 62). Parten does not even acknowledge Jessica and Nerissa, both of whom might have done their fair share to make the men in the audience uncomfortable as well. When the play's wives are analyzed within their social context, it becomes clear that the female characters Shakespeare created are not undesirable women and therefore acceptably assertive because they will doubtless become spinsters. Instead, they become loving, intelligent, independent wives who are able to make decisions for themselves and, often, for their husbands as well. Perhaps there were more unbelievers in the traditional ways than the early documents would lead one to expect, for through the females he so carefully crafted, it is evident that at least one person was doubtful of what qualities society said made a good wife.

CHAPTER IV: THE WOMEN AS DAUGHTERS

Elizabethan society viewed a woman as always being under the control of a man – first as a daughter under the command of her father and later as a wife under the control of her husband. As with the previous chapter’s discussion of the female characters as unconventional wives, this chapter explores the notion of the women as independent-spirited daughters. This discussion is crucial to the characters’ identities as Elizabethan women because Portia, Nerissa and Jessica are all daughters in the play before they become wives. All three of the women in the play are evidently the daughter of a father at some point, as all women must be, though some of what we know about them as daughters we must surmise from the circumstances Shakespeare provides. While we see the effects of the father/daughter relationship left over after death between Portia and her father, we are not privy to any knowledge about Nerissa’s familial situation. However, Nerissa often makes her feelings about father/daughter relationships very clear through her discussions with Portia, therefore we can infer some of her feelings on the subject from this material. Jessica is the only female in the play who we actually see interacting with her father, though only for a very brief scene in the play.

Just as was the case of the behavioral manuals for wives, strict Elizabethan viewpoints on the father/daughter relationship consisted of rules based on Biblical principles which governed the interactions and relationship between any man and his daughter. Robert Cleaver, when addressing the ordering of a Christian household in his

work, A Godly Form of Hovseholde Gouvernement from 1598, listed four requirements that a parent owed to their child:

First, that fathers & mothers, do instruct and bring vp their children euen from the cradle, in the feare and nouture of the Lord.

2. Secondly, that they bring them vp in shamefastnesse, hatred of vice, and loue of all virtue.

3. Thirdly, that they bee vnto their children, examples of all godlinesse, and vertuousnesse.

4. Fourthly, that they keep thē [sic] from idlenesse, the mother of all mischiefes, and bring them vp either in learning, or in some good Art, or occupation, whereby they may get their liuing with honestie and trueth, when they shall comem to age, and yeares of discretion. (243)

Most texts surmise that the primary responsibility of a parent is to provide their child with a solid education in Biblical principal and a strong Christian faith. Everything a child learned should be rooted in making him or her a better Christian and more of a servant to God. Parental responsibility is summed up by Thomas Becon, a religious writer during Queen Elizabeth's time, as:

So soon as the children be able to speak plainly, let them even from their cradles be taught to utter not vain, foolish, and wanton, but grave, sober, and godly words; as, God, Jesus Christ, faith, love, hope, patience, goodness, peace, etc. And when they be able to pronounce whole sentences, let the parents teach their children such sentences as may kindle

in them a love toward virtue, and an hatred against vice and sin; as for an ensample: God alone saveth me. Christ by his death hath redeemed me. The Holy Ghost sanctifieth me. There is one God . . . (qtd. in Hull, 133-34)

While parents' obligations to children were certainly discussed in manuals, the emphasis of many of the guide books was often on what children owed to their parents. Parents were responsible for administering proper religious instruction and for discipline; in contrast, children owed their parents their very lives. Lu Emily Hess Pearson states that, "girls would always 'give place' to their parents and reply with a gentle and reverent gesture when father or mother addressed them. The debt of gratitude each child owed its parents for the gift of life and care should be requited by a *like* loving care that could be expressed only in 'perfect' obedience" (225). Just as with the Elizabethan belief that the "Great Chain of Being" existed and that man was naturally above women, it was an accepted part of strict religious-based society that children were meant to forever be under their parents' rules. As Pearson explains, "Miles Coverdale's translation of Henry Bullinger's The Christian State of Matrimony in 1546 was one of the early books giving Protestant parents advice about the management of their households. Such advice became almost as binding as biblical law" (77). The opposite effect was true as well for such texts that the advice given to Protestant children was also "binding as biblical law." Even into adulthood, respect and obedience to one's parents was an accepted aspect of life. Manuals stressed obedience to parents for both sexes of child, and the

commandment calling for both sons and daughters to “Honor your father and your mother . . .” from Exodus 20:12 was taken very seriously (Holy Bible).

Within the plethora of manuals and guide books that discussed the proper ordering and behavior of each family member, there was a clear-cut distinction between the rules for sons and the rules for daughters. Elizabethan behavior manuals for daughters were much more extensive and much more common than those for sons. Sons’ behavior seemed to be thought to require less instruction, whereas daughters were easier lured from the straight and narrow path into potential debauchery. In The Court of good Counsell, a seventeenth-century behavioral manual, the author titles one of his chapters, “Of the diversity of the care that parents ought to take of their daughters in bringing up of them more than they take for the bringing up of their sons” (qtd. in Hull 135).

Because of the importance Renaissance culture placed on chastity in women, daughters’ strictures were more austere, particularly when a woman of wealth and standing was at issue. It was the parents’ responsibility to make sure that their daughter arrived on her wedding day a virgin, or, worst case scenario, having only had sex with her betrothed (Haynes 7). Particularly in the case of upper-class weddings this issue was of the highest importance – bloodlines were of critical importance to Elizabethan noblemen and no one wanted to risk a bride who was already pregnant with another man’s child. Because of the biological fact that women would be the one to carry and deliver an illegitimate child, parents, and particularly fathers, were responsible for keeping their daughters safe and whole until they were safely bestowed in marriage.

The father was the head of the household, and therefore part of his responsibility was to be in charge of his daughter and many aspects of her fate. In fact, one of the primary, if not *the* primary social responsibility of the father to his children, both male and female, in Elizabethan society was to help them along to a good match. While much was written and discussed about the need for some level of affection between a couple who were to be married, there were generally two sides to the debate regarding children's fates. The first group concluded that children were not to be trusted with their own marriages and that a good child would accept the person of his or her parents' choosing, understanding that their parents only wanted what was best for them. The other side of the argument was that a marriage could not truly be a marriage without some level of affection present, and therefore children must have a say in the life partner with whom their homes would be made. Opinions on this subject must have ranged anywhere and everywhere in between depending on the class, age and situation of the Elizabethan. While many aristocratic parents and children had very specific financial reasons for marriages, members of the lower class had a higher level of freedom in children selecting their mates as there was not a large amount, at least fiscally. Lawrence Stone writes that he "may be correct in asserting that many were more concerned to find 'an efficient economic assistant rather than affectionate companion'" (qtd. in Greaves 139-40).

While Shakespeare has left us nothing regarding his personal thoughts on the father/daughter relationship, all we really know about his actual experience with becoming a father to a daughter for the first time is that his fiancée was almost certainly pregnant with their first child, Susanna, when they were married in 1582 (Greenblatt

120). We can ascertain from Shakespeare's treatment of the relationship between father and daughter in The Merchant of Venice that he was not a traditionalist in many senses. From the first interaction between Portia and Nerissa in the play, Portia's father's decision to leave her fate up to the casket test is called into question. When she asks about the wisdom of her father's choice in leaving her fate to be decided by what equates to a riddle or game, she challenges the authority of the man who, according to conventional wisdom, is unquestionable. She questions Nerissa about the logic of allowing such an important issue to be decided in this manner when she says, "O me, the word choose! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" (I.ii.22-25). Portia's statement challenge the strictures put into place by her father, in direct contrast to the Elizabethan idea that children

must *honour the persons of the aged*. Old men are Fathers, and old age is a blessing in it self; therefore it should be revered, by rising up before them, by being silent before them as *Elihu*, and by submitting to them with a *submission of reverence*. Thus is Gods timber framed, and made fit for Gods building in a Family. (Abbott 25)

Portia's questioning nature also immediately puts her in contrast the Elizabethan ideal woman – Patient Griselda. In the Thomas Dekker play The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissell printed in 1603, in response to the Marquis asking if she wants to marry him, Grissill proclaims,

This doth she say,

As her olde Father yeeldes to your dread will,

So she her fathers pleasure must fulfill.

If olde Ianicola make Grissill yours,

Grissil must not deny, yet had she rather,

Be the poore Daughter still of her poore Father. (Dekker n.pag.)

The Elizabethan ideal of the dutiful and obedient daughter manifests itself exactly in Grissill's response: it should be irrelevant if she wants to marry the Marquis, more important is whether her father wants her to marry the Marquis. At this point, her primary obligation is to her father, until Grissill marries the Marquis and her complete obedience to him is assured. Portia shows no sign of this blind allegiance to her father's wishes – would the Prince of Morocco or one of her other disagreeable suitors win her hand through her father's casket test, one finds it difficult to imagine Portia making such a speech.

Interestingly, Nerissa immediately speaks up, aligning herself in the audience's eyes as the traditional Elizabethan dutiful daughter, clearly stating to Portia that her father was wise and only had her best interests at heart. She indicates that the riddle must yield her a good husband because of her father's wisdom. Nerissa states, "Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspiration; therefore the lott'ry that he hath devis'd in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love" (I.ii.27-33). Immediately, it appears that Nerissa believes wholeheartedly in a daughter acquiescing to her father's will. However, it is interesting to note that

Shakespeare never makes clear whether or not Nerissa really believes what she is saying or if she is only trying to assuage a friend, confidante, and superior's fears. Shakespeare is vague in his description of the potential consequences if Portia decides to forego her father's order and determine her own husband. It is assumed that Portia would be unable to keep her palace at Belmont and all the grandeur and comfort that her life accords. Perhaps Nerissa's statements are not so much true to her heart and her emotions, but true to her friend, whose well-being is more important to her than a little white lie regarding parental wisdom about marriage.

Regardless of Nerissa's attitude and rationale for guiding Portia toward making the "acceptable" social choice of adhering to her father's guidelines for her selection of a husband, the question of whether "Portia humbles herself before the law of her father," as Olson words Portia's demeanor, seems to me to be highly debatable (304). Throughout the play she repeatedly says she will abide by her father's decree, but before she ever pledges to make good on the promise she announces to her friend and closest confidant Nerissa that "I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge" (I.ii.98-99). This sentence gives credence to scholars' arguments (which will be discussed in greater detail later) that Portia does not only not sit back quietly and allow for her father's wishes to play out how they may, but takes matters into her own hands. After all, if Portia announces early in the play that she is willing to "do anything" before she marries one of the suitors with whom she has no interest, the likelihood of her being willing to ignore her father's decree increases.

When Jessica is first introduced in her interaction with her father, Shylock, it appears that she might well have heeded Becon's admonishment that young women should "be not full of tongue, and of much babbling, nor use many words, but as few as they may . . . For there is nothing that doth so much commend, advance, set forth, adorn, deck, trim, and garnish a maid, as silence" (qtd. in Hull 135). Jessica's response to her father's repeated calls for her when she finally arrives is merely "Call you? what is your will?" (II.v.10). This response bodes well for Jessica to be the contrasting character to Portia and Nerissa's more liberated view on the role of daughters. Jessica then listens patiently for all of her father's instructions about how she should "Lock up [his] doors" and his orders for her to stay inside despite the levity she may hear passing in the street. The second (and only other) line we hear Jessica say to her father is in response to his question about Launcelot's parting words to her. She replies, "His words were 'Farewell, mistress!' – nothing else." (II.v.45). Obviously, this statement is a lie and thus a turning point in our view of Jessica as an obedient daughter. As Sharon Hamilton reasons, Jessica "says almost nothing to her father during this scene, except to ask 'What is your will?' and, later, to lie about what Launcelot has whispered to her – not 'farewell' but details about the elopement" (46). However, it quickly becomes clear that Jessica's evasions are purposeful as she is not the restrained and quiet daughter that her first line of the play would have us believe.

As soon as Shylock exits his house, Jessica speaks after him saying, "Farewell, and if my fortune be not cross'd, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost" (II.v.56-57). This blatant statement of rebellion suddenly shifts the focus of the scene from a seemingly

rule-abiding daughter to a daughter whose obedience to her father is highly questionable.

In a strict Elizabethan society it was taught in treatises that

Children haue always to remember, that whatseuer they do to their fathers and mothers (bee it good or euill) they do it to God: when they please them, they please God: and when they disobey them, they disobey God: when their parents are iustly angrie with thē, [sic] God is angrie with them: neither can it bee, that they may come to haue the fauor of God againe : (no although all the Saints in heauen should intreat for them) vntil they have submitted themselves to their father and mother. (Cleaver 352)

In Elizabethan terms, by disobeying and blatantly rebelling against Shylock, Jessica is disobeying God. Though she is perhaps gaining the potential of heaven in one way, strict Elizabethan principles dictated that she could be losing the potential of God's favor by disobeying her father, her earthly lord.

Furthermore, this very first decision in the audience's view on Jessica's part sets her in direct contrast to the stories and tales of Patient Griselda. Judith Bronfman explains that "Children's obedience to their parents is heavily stressed early in the play as Griselda shows her devotion to her father before her marriage . . ." (qtd. in Haselkorn and Travitsky 212). Indeed, in an early exchange between Grissill and her father she says,

Father, me thinkes it doth not fit a maide,
By sitting thus in view, to draw mens eyes
To stare vpon her : might it please your age,
I could be more content to worke within. (Dekker n.pag.)

This notion is in direct contradiction to Jessica's choice. When Shylock tells her she must stay inside and away from the merriment and men who are right outside the door, Jessica pretends to acquiesce, and then instantly runs away with a man outside. Grissill not only adheres to her father's rules, but even presupposes them and asks to be allowed to follow the proper path before her father makes any indication of what he would expect of her. Jessica immediately sets herself as the opposite type of daughter of Patient Griselda.

Obviously, it is important to acknowledge that Shakespeare's audience's view of Jessica's interactions with her father would be skewed by the fact that Jessica's father is a Jew and therefore a problematic figure. According to ideals of the day, Shylock is certainly a less than perfect example of what Elizabethan society valued in the ideal father, namely a deep and unwavering belief in Christ. Shylock is unable to provide his daughter with the education in Christianity that would save her soul. For Elizabethans, this "defect" would have made it impossible for Shylock to be viewed as caring properly for his daughter, as his main concern in life should be to ensure that she would be able to get into heaven following her death.

Though no Elizabethan document of which I am aware references directly a response to Jessica and Shylock's relationship, perhaps a later treatise on the subject speaks to what a strict, conservative Elizabethan audience would have felt about Jessica's dominant spirit in the face of her father's rules. In an 1878 evaluation of the character of Jessica, Henry Giles, in his Human Life in Shakespeare, wrote,

One exception there is, —which, not even Shakespeare can make me like, —and that is the pert, disobedient hussy, Jessica. Her conduct I regard as in a high degree reprehensible; and those who have the care of families must, I think, feel as I do. She was a worthless minx, and I have no good word to say of her. If the fellow who ran away with her had, like old Pepys, left a diary behind him, I am quite sure that we should learn that his wife turned out an intolerable vixen. She selfishly forgot the duty of a daughter when she should have most remembered it. Why should she, a maiden of Israel, leave her poor father, Shylock, alone in the midst of his Christian enemies? What if he was wrong? Even then, even in the madness of defeated vengeance, in the misery of humbled pride, when regarded as most guilty, when there was nothing in the world for him but contempt without pity, the child of his home—his only child, should have had in her woman’s heart a shelter for her scorned father (qtd. in Shintri 7).

Another Shakespearean scholar, Dover Wilson wrote that “Jessica is bad and disloyal, unfilial [sic] and a thief, frivolous, greedy, without any more conscience than a cat and without even a cat’s redeeming love of home. Quite without heart, pilfering to be carnal, she betrays her father to be a light-of-lucre, carefully weighted with her sire’s ducats” (qtd. in Cook 51).

Each audience member watching the play in Shakespeare’s day must have had a different reaction to Jessica and her choices; however, none could argue that she was not

a free and independent spirited young woman. Whether Shakespeare created a likable young woman may have been debatable (and may still be debatable), the fact that he created a self-motivating and efficient daughter for Shylock is beyond debate. As Judith Cook points out, “One feels that Shakespeare probably did feel ‘kindly’ towards her, for he gives her and Lorenzo the most beautiful, lyrical lines in the play,” referring to the “garden” scene in which Lorenzo and Jessica discuss their future (51).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Jessica does not merely run away from her father’s home to begin her new life with her Christian husband, Lorenzo. She pauses before leaving and makes the decision to steal her father’s possessions, including both ducats and jewelry. Jessica blatantly disregards one of the Ten Commandments (which apply to both Jews and Christians alike), ignoring “You shall not steal” of Exodus 20:15 in exchange for her own happiness (Holy Bible). Lorenzo does not order her to undertake this theft, but rather Jessica is both the instigator and the perpetrator of the crime. The difficulty in evaluating this scene arises from the fact that, again, the man she is robbing is a Jew in addition to being her father. However, despite Shylock’s Jewishness, Pearson notes, “Today’s readers . . . are likely to forget [the] father’s actual position in these plays and to let their emotions interest them chiefly in the fair daughters, but no Elizabethan would have reacted in this manner. To them a child’s first duty to its parents was loving obedience, not mere compliance or passive duteness” (225). Jessica manifests herself as neither a compliant or passive daughter, instead preferring to actively steal from her father, despite his specific instruction for her to close up the house to avoid thievery.

However, while Elizabethans may have acknowledged, if still being somewhat uneasy about, Jessica's choice in fleeing her father's home in order to secure her conversion and thus her place in Heaven, her methods during her escape seem highly rebellious. One specific item that she takes from her father's stash still further reinforces Jessica's independence as a daughter: the turquoise ring that has great personal value to Shylock. Whether or not Jessica is aware of the sentimental value of this piece of jewelry can be debated, however the fact that Shakespeare has her take this item shows his emphasis on a daughter who is in charge of her own destiny, even if it means taking that which her father most values in order to assure her success. Shylock proclaims, "Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turkis, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (III.i.120-23). As many scholars have pointed out, this statement is one of the only times the audience hears Shylock speak of someone with reverence and love, thus the moment is heightened. This specific item highlights the daughter's open defiance of her father's will, and though we can feel for Shylock, Jessica's happiness is also of crucial importance as instinctively we wish to see the young lovers' happiness secured (Hamilton 46).

Furthermore, Jessica's independence in spite of her father's will is manifested in the very fact that she has planned to elope with Lorenzo, despite a complete lack of parental consent for her choice. The issue of arranged marriages versus marriages of free choice was an ongoing debate in much of the literature of the day, with some like, Charles Gibbons, a contemporary writer, believing that "If a man may giue his goods to whome hee will, hee may as well bestow his Children where hee thinketh best, for

Children are the goods of the Parents” (qtd. in Greaves 155). However, even the more liberal-minded individuals who believed a parent should not be allowed to pick their child’s spouse generally agreed with the principle that they should approve of the child’s choice.

Pearson summarizes William Perkins’s view on a daughter’s duty in regards to marriage, put forth in his Christian Oeconomie: Or, a Short Survey of the Right Manner of erecting and ordering a Familie, according to the Scriptures from 1609, as “In marriage she should acknowledge her parents as ‘principal agent and disposer.’ Neither son nor daughters should be compelled by parents to marry their choice, ‘yet the reverent and dutiful respect’ of a child would be sufficient inducement to obedience except in cases of ‘some great and weighty cause’” (226). As Shylock later exclaims at the trial, “I have a daughter— / Would any of the stock of Barrabas / Had been her husband rather than a Christian!,” obviously he is not pleased with his daughter’s choice of husband and has not given his consent (IV.i.295-97). While an Elizabethan audience would, in my opinion, have always thought of Shylock as a Jew first before identifying him as a father, it would have been impossible for them to completely remove that label from him in their minds. Regardless of his Jewishness, Shylock is still a father being defied by his daughter.

The idea that Jessica has rebelled against her father’s will is further cemented in Jessica’s comment that,

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me

To be ashamed to be my father’s child!

But though I am a daughter to his blood,

I am not to his manners. (II.iii.16-19)

As Plowden explains, “In a society based on the family unit ruled by the benevolent despotism of husband and father, filial obedience was an essential ingredient of peace and stability. It was, therefore, a virtue highly prized by parents, who were generally considered within their right to enforce it, where necessary, however brutally” (81). Jessica acknowledges her breaking of conventional values, and therefore, indirectly, Shakespeare acknowledges that perhaps his Elizabethan audience would perceive her as possessing a too independent-minded nature. In strict Elizabethan terms, Jessica deserves punishment for disobeying her father and robbing him of his treasures.

However, it is important to note that Shakespeare gives us no concrete indication of a subsequent downfall for Jessica, as can be clearly found in plays like Othello or Romeo and Juliet with Desdemona or Juliet. Both of these women knowingly deceive their fathers and elope with someone “unsuitable” and suffer early and violent deaths. Elizabethan ideology was very specific on what happened to children who disobeyed their parents. As Bacon states in his treatise on the family, “He that forsaketh his father shall come to shame, and he that despiseth his mother shall be cursed of God” (qtd. in Pearson 225). While some argue that the end of the play and the discussion between Jessica and Lorenzo in which they list out lovers whose relationships end badly gives the impression that their lives together will be unhappy, it is far from clear if this reading is accurate. And while it has become a choice for directors, as in the 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play, to leave Jessica onstage at the end “alone

with her father's enemy" as "he dangle[s] a crucifix over her and she drop[s] to her knees, stricken," this choice is just one of many that can be inferred from the text (Hamilton 51). Shakespeare cleverly challenges his audience with a female daughter who rebels against her father, despite all indications that regardless of a father's faults, it is a daughter's duty to obey and honor him. In Erasmus Desiderius's A ryght frutefull Epystle / deuysed by the moste excellent clerke Erasmns [sic] in laude and prayse of matrimony (an English translation of the Latin-titled Encomium matrimonij referenced in Chapter II), he notes, "What thyng is more holy than the natural loue of the child to his father?" (n.pag.). Jessica violates the Biblical principal of the holiness of "natural" an unconditional love for her father. As Perkins explains his beliefs, "the father should be honored because he bears the image of God's paternity" (qtd. in Greaves 275). Jessica defies this logic and is dealt no direct punishment in the text for her actions.

We now return to the other daughter in the play whom we see put under her father's thumb – Portia. When Bassanio and his entourage arrive in Belmont and it is his turn to stand before the caskets and make his choice, Portia tells him,

I could teach you

How to choose right, but then I am forsworn.

So will I never be, so may you miss me,

But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin,

That I had been forsworn. Beshrow your eyes,

They have o'erlook'd me and divided me:

One half of me is yours, the other half yours—

Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,

And so all yours. O these naughty times

Put bars between the owners and their rights! (III.ii.10-19)

While Portia states that she would like to cheat her father's test and tell Bassanio how to choose correctly, but she will fail in her duty as a daughter, many critics have not been convinced by Portia's declaration. As in the case of Olson's earlier statement that Portia holds fast to her father's will, this idea leaves out the much-recognized notion that Portia can be argued to attempt to sway Bassanio's choice through the song that is played throughout the scene in which he must make his choice.

Though Portia claims in the initial chapter that "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will," her behavior in Act III, scene ii casts serious doubts on her statement (I.ii.106-08). As has been exhaustingly detailed by various scholars, Portia's choices within the scene seem to be very specific. Joan Ozark Holmer, who is quoted in Abate's essay "Nerissa Teaches Me What to Believe," asks if Portia "perhaps, drop[s] hints that Bassanio could possibly pick up?" Hamilton notes, as many other scholars have, that:

while he [Bassanio] contemplates his choice, she [Portia] also gives the directive "Let music sound." The music is vocal, and the song contains several hints about the right answer. The first three lines are a triplet whose final word – "bred," "head," and "nourished" – rhymes with "lead," the metal of the winning casket. More important, the subject of the song is a warning against "fancy" – infatuation – which comes from "the eyes,"

rather than “the heart,” and quickly ends. The chorus sounds “fancy’s knell” – the death toll of superficial and transient physical attraction.

Bassanio’s reaction indicates that he has listened well. (130).

Abate goes on to highlight in her “footnote 13” the work of many scholars who believe that Portia might assist Bassanio in his choice, such as “Bruce Erlich, S.F. Johnson, Michael Zuckert, Samuel Ajzenstat, and Ming-Kae Wang” (299).

Is this a way in which Portia is struggling with her role as daughter and breaking out of the traditional female daughter subservient to her father’s wishes? As Abate has it, “If Portia is guilty of cheating, then she breaks her father’s will . . .” (289). While ever proving conclusively that Portia intentionally cheats would be impossible, Shakespeare was anything but a careless writer, and it seems unlikely that he unintentionally and unnoticed put so many indicators in a song being sung during the scene. The fact that Portia puts forth clues to Bassanio is a good argument that she is not being the docile and accommodating creature that Renaissance literature would like us to perceive as the ideal daughter. Despite continuous admonitions that children must “*honour the persons of the aged*” by “being silent before them as *Elihu*, and by submitting to them with a *submission of reverence*” because “Thus is Gods timber framed, and made fit for Gods building in a family,” Portia refuses to be forced into leaving her marriage to chance (Abbott 25). Regardless of her forward-minded, independent thinking, Portia is certainly held up by Shakespeare as someone to be admired, even though she is a disobedient daughter who might just have broken the rules of her father’s game in order to ensure her own happiness. As Juliet Dusinberre so elegantly puts it, ““submission is a garment she

[Portia] wears as gracefully as her disguise” while not really being submissive to her father’s will (85).

Another instance in which Shakespeare circumvents an important parental practice of the day for all three of the daughters is through the lack of acknowledgement of the reading of the banns. It was the responsibility of the parents in Elizabethan England to ensure that “The marriage banns were . . . read in church each of three Sundays prior to the marriage” (Wright 2). This practice allowed for anyone with objections to voice them before the wedding date. However, the couples are all allowed to marry without this practice even being mentioned. While one could argue that because the play is taking place in Italy and not in England, Shakespeare chose to follow the Italian custom. However, as there has never been conclusive evidence that Shakespeare actually knew that much about day-to-day Italian life, it seems unlikely that he is basing the conditions of marriage agreements on the way these issues were handled in Italy. Far more likely seems the idea that he is using dramatic license to speed along the courtships of the couples.

However, in doing so, he could not have ignored the fact that he was challenging a traditional necessity by conservative Elizabethan standards, particularly in regards to the parents of the bride and groom. At the time “it was . . . taken for granted that parents had absolute control of their offspring” (McMurty 111). Without this section of the ceremony being completed, the parents have none of the traditional input about their children’s selection of spouse. Indeed, as we have no indication that Nerissa’s parents are not still living, she could be leaving them out of the discussion of her choice of

spouse and therefore defying convention altogether. None of the couples in The Merchant of Venice actually complete this traditional requirement, all instead marrying seemingly on a whim with no formal declaration necessary and with only Portia receiving implicit parental consent because of Bassanio's success completing the casket test. Through these actions a challenge is made to the idea of that daughters must please their parents in their match.

It is interesting to note that Shakespeare does not focus much on the social distinctions between Portia and Jessica when fashioning their rebellious nature in his play. As Portia is a member of the upper class, some avenues of independent expression would have been more open to her, whereas others would have been more restrained. Her lack of choice in spouse is the only stricture we hear about in Portia's life; aside from a lack of freedom regarding marriage, she seems to be free to order her life as she so pleases. Jessica, however, has the exact opposite life. She is unable to make any decisions on her own, referring to the home she shares with Shylock as "hell" (II.iii.2). Whereas the conduct books of the day, as well as history in general, teach us that the higher the class of which a particular woman was a member, the more rules and strictures to which she must adhere, particularly in regards to proper behavior.

However, Shakespeare paints women of the opposite temperament, despite their high class. Portia and Nerissa are able to escape their bonds, travel to Venice to save Antonio, return and play the hero. Perhaps he presents these women as independent because their father figures are absent and thus they are free to pursue their own wants and desires. Indeed, if Portia's father were still alive, it seems unlikely that she would be

able to slip off unnoticed and save Antonio through her impressive legal skill. While she has quickly married and thus now has a new head of her household, it still seems unlikely that she would be able to disappear from her father's house without telling him where she is going, were her father alive. Honesty with one's father regardless of marital status was paramount in behavioral manuals.

According to social order of the day, I would argue that she would be required to tell her father of her mission, who almost certainly would dissuade his well-born daughter from such an undertaking. Scholars have argued convincingly that only Portia has the capacity to save Antonio, so if she were not allowed to go due to a father's meddling, the story would end in a very different way. While I am not arguing that Shakespeare celebrates the death of Portia's father as a good thing, I do believe he structures the play so that the absence of fatherly rule in Portia's home equates with a level of female independence that causes the ending of the play to be happy for the characters rather than tragic. Perhaps Shakespeare's creation of Portia allowed an Elizabethan audience to see what a daughter was capable of when she was not left to follow strict social rules.

A further interesting point has been illuminated by scholars regarding the role of Portia in the trial scene in which she secures punishment for Shylock and freedom for Antonio. As Abate says,

It has been suggested that Portia single-mindedly targets Shylock and does not relent until he has been left with nothing because she symbolizes a father figure whose destiny she can control. Perhaps Portia is enjoying the power she now owns to effect such a role reversal, which is why Portia's

methods throughout 4.1 are, as Robert Hapgood and others have described them, “highhanded” (295).

The theory is interesting particularly in regards to my hypothesis that the play allows female characters a level of control over the males in their lives that they should never have according to behavior manuals of the day. Portia consciously punishing Shylock directly in response to unresolved issues with her own father and the ridiculous casket test seems unlikely to me. However there is something to be said about considering Portia as a daughter in relationship to Jessica’s role as a daughter as they are the only two women in the play purposefully and extensively defined by their relationship to their father and his rules.

In this instance, though Portia is not actually Shylock’s daughter, she serves as a sort of stand-in for Jessica, punishing the father-figure for all he has done to his daughter throughout the years, and eventually providing Jessica “justice” through the acquisition of half of Shylock’s wealth at the end of his life. While Jessica herself is unable to play this role, Portia, the only other daughter in the play, temporarily takes over the role as rebellious daughter to Shylock from Jessica and assures that Shylock is punished for his attempts to make his daughter a virtual prisoner in her own home and deny her happiness with her spouse. Portia may have felt exactly Jessica’s anger with her father when she was a prisoner of her father’s casket test. While I do not want to dismiss the entire courtroom scene as Portia working through her anger with her father, it does seem interesting that this action allows both her and Jessica to confront father-related issues indirectly and challenge the strict notion that children should “preserve the good name

vpon their Parents, get them honour, and . . . [be] a Crowne of glory to them, euen after death” (Bernard 31). Perhaps there is something to be said about the Elizabethan fear of “the severest male commentators on female sexuality – that once unshackled it takes on a despotic imperative detrimental to patriarchal society” (Haynes 66).

At the end of the play Shylock is left a poor man as he is forced to hand over half of his wealth to the state and prepare to hand over the rest to Lorenzo and Jessica. Jessica is given no lines to indicate that she will do anything to assuage the condition in which Shylock finds himself; indeed she is completely silent on the subject. When Nerissa announces that “the rich Jew a special deed of gift / After his death, of all he dies possessed of” will be given to Lorenzo and Jessica, Lorenzo answers with “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (V.i.294-95). However, the audience gets no indication that Jessica has any daughterly feelings for her father (though, of course, individual productions can and have certainly added important reactions for Jessica). The salient point is that Jessica directly contrasts the appropriate behavior of a child. Robert Cleaver, in his A godly forme of housholde Gouvernment, lists the duties of children to their parents which “consisteth in five poynts” as:

- I. First, that they obey their Parents, and doo serue them, and also do feare, loue, honour, and reuerence them, not onely in word and deed, but in their hearts and minds also.
2. Secondly, that they followe their good precepts and examples of life.
3. Thirdly, that they patiently take correction at their hands.
4. Fourthly, that they make continual and heartie prayers to God for them.

5. And lastly, that they doo relieue, maintaine, and nourish their parents, in case they shall fall into pouertie or decay. (345)

Jessica probably violates each and every instruction that Cleaver gives, but of particular instance in this regard is the fifth duty, that children do not allow their parents to fall into “pouertie or decay.” Jessica not only allows her father to fall into dire straights, but in many ways is the direct reason he does so. Rather than being, as Thomas Becon referred to children in The Book of Matrimony and Catechisme from the early 1560s, Shylock’s ““chief job, felicity, and, next to God, their staff in old age”” (qtd. in Pearson 78), Jessica takes away all Shylock has left. In addition, her running away from home provides the impetus for Shylock to begin his obsession with securing his revenge on Antonio. As Sharon Hamilton notes, Shylock’s equates his unluckiness with his daughter with causing Antonio misfortune. When Tubal informs Shylock of Antonio’s ships’ destruction, Shylock immediately shifts from his obsession with his daughter’s betrayal to his obsession with enacting his revenge upon Antonio (48). In many ways, Jessica’s betrayal is the final straw for Shylock, and his bloodlust is let loose because of his daughter’s rebellious nature. In turn, this bloodlust secures his fate as attempted avenger against Antonio and thus seals his future poverty and forced conversion to Christianity. Jessica’s independence ultimately causes Shylock’s downfall, which, in the Elizabethan lens of the play, is ultimately important because it secures Antonio’s freedom from his bond.

The only two daughters, Portia and Jessica, whom we see interacting in the play with either their fathers or their father’s rules, harbor deep feelings of resentment and

rebelliousness towards their father's decree. Nerissa is a party to all of Portia's doings and, therefore, probably a party to Portia helping Bassanio along toward choosing the casket that will win her. It seems unlikely that Nerissa is not involved as well as she and Portia are inseparable throughout the play. Through this surmised assistance, Nerissa is also guilty of helping to break a fatherly decree. Therefore, all three of the women show signs of blatantly disregarding fatherly male authority in their lives. By Elizabethan thought processes this indeed does make this women subversive to the system put into place by God. As Pearson explains:

The conduct books, written for children . . . had much to say about filial love and duty. Bacon named honor and obedience as the chief filial obligations, explaining in his *catechisme* that by such means children were able to show "a fair and just reverence" for the wisdom and prudence of parents *given them by God, not by chance* [emphasis added] (225)

The important point to note is that when a child, particularly a daughter who by her role as a woman should be subservient to men, disobeyed her father, she was flouting the law of God. God made this man her protector and ruler and she should be thankful to have his rules to follow, regardless of his faults. According to strict Elizabethan thought, when a daughter was rebellious toward her father, she rebelled toward the ultimate Heavenly Father. Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica all show signs of refusing to conform to society's regimented role for daughters, and, perhaps most interestingly, do not come to any harm because of it. They achieve a level of independence from the men who ruled them and continue on to what we assume will be happy and successful lives.

Shakespeare is obviously painting a portrait of women who refuse to be kept down by the obligations that they should, according to society's rules, feel toward their fathers.

Instead, they worry about the obligations to themselves, for their beliefs and happiness in life.

CONCLUSION

William Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice "comment[s] on a society which would treat its women like chattel and expect total obedience while giving little respect or consideration" (Wright 9). Choices for women in Elizabethan England were intensely limited by today's standards, and regulations regarding women's behavior and demeanor were rigorously prescribed. Their socially-defined subservient roles to men as wives and daughters dictated that women should always be under the control of a man. Despite the fact that the country was led by a female monarch, women in early modern England faced numerous restrictions due to their gender. No doubt some women found these strictures difficult, however, as is often the case, many found the prospect of challenging societal norms overwhelming. As McMurty explains, "a manifest truth about harmonious social institutions . . . [is] knowing and keeping one's place is simply the only answer" (125).

As so many women were in such a restrictive environment, a male playwright who voiced opposition to the traditional societal norms must have been a great boon to women who were aware of his writings. Particularly through his treatment of his female characters in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare raised a voice for non-traditional women. Throughout the play, Shakespeare gives the audience three independent and spirited young women who all refuse to conform to society's rules for them. In almost every respect, Portia, Nerissa and Jessica all behave in polar opposition to the decrees put forward by behavioral manuals. In contrast to stories like that of Patient Griselda which

were repeated continually throughout the early modern period, Shakespeare presents alternative female role models to the diminutive and accommodating wife and daughter.

Throughout The Merchant of Venice Portia, Nerissa and Jessica appear as the dominant partner in their relationship with their husbands. These three female characters do not conform to the ideas put forward in Elizabethan pamphlets and guide books about the role of wives. The behavioral guides made very clear that wives were always to be subservient to their husbands, despite any superior knowledge or breeding the wives may possess. Despite all strictures that husbands should be the heads of the household because of the Biblical principle that God made man to rule over woman, Shakespeare's wives are clearly in control of their relationships with their husbands. Through Portia's attempts to free Antonio to Jessica's spearheading her elopement with Lorenzo, the play manifests female characters who make decisions for themselves with no regard to their husband's thoughts on the subject. These women would have been far from the Elizabethan ideal put forward in conduct books of the day, however they are held up by Shakespeare as respectable women, confident in their abilities and capable of deciding their own fate.

Similarly, Shakespeare's presentation of the women as daughters challenges the contemporary belief that "father knew best." According to traditional thought, the women should behave as their father prescribed, and yet not once do we see *any* of them conform to her father's decrees without question. Portia seems to mistrust her father's casket test from the beginning and perhaps even comes up with her own way to circumvent the test by helping Bassanio along to the correct choice. Jessica blatantly

ignores her father's wishes and elopes against his will with a Christian, stealing Shylock's money and valuables in the process. The women in the play all challenge the authority of their fathers through their rebellious nature toward rules made by men. Even Nerissa, whose father we never see, seems to aid Portia throughout the play in freeing herself from her father's strictures. None of these women present themselves as ideal daughters and yet, as is evidenced by their presentation by Shakespeare, they are unquestionably admirable women. Shakespeare's intention could have been nothing less than indicating that women's place is not always to blindly listen to her father (or her husband) but to think for herself.

Shakespeare himself still proves an elusive figure almost five hundred years after his death. It is only through his plays that we can ascertain his personal feelings about subjects such as the role of women in society. It is interesting to note that Shakespeare leaves us no direct written feelings about women, though as Dusinberre remarks, "He wrote no theses on the position of women – as did most of his contemporaries in one form or another, Marston, Dekker, Heywood, and even Middleton and Jonson" (308). She then goes on to clarify that

Virginia Woolf was deceived by the poet's own unobtrusiveness when she declared that 'it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women.' Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal. He did not divide human nature into the masculine and the feminine, but observed in the individual woman or man an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses. To talk about

Shakespeare's women is to talk about his men, because he refused to separate their worlds physically, intellectually, or spiritually. (308)

Indeed, Shakespeare wrote women who had to live within the stifling environment of Elizabethan England, but he did not write women whose independent natures and robust personalities would be thought of as admirable by everyone. In fact, many times the women he presents were in direct contrast to all that was written about the acceptable and appropriate personalities and behaviors of the female sex. It is as though Shakespeare is purposely putting forth a challenge in his plays to all those who wrote of the ways in which women *should* behave. His women explore the much more interesting and dynamic ways in which women *could* behave.

It is clear that the female characters in The Merchant of Venice are the impetus for everything turning out happily for everyone (save obviously Shylock) in the end. I disagree with Gay's comments that

Comedy . . . is profoundly conservative: it allows the topsy-turveydom of carnival – the transgressions of gender and sexuality involved, for instance, in the transvestism of some Shakespearean heroines, or even in their talkativeness – as a way of 'letting off steam'. The community or audience thus permitted to enjoy its fantasies of disruption will then, after the carnival event, settle back happily into the regulated social order of patriarchy – of which the institution of marriage is one of the most powerful symbols. (Gay 2)

While I concede the point that comedy can serve this function, I also believe this undermines important Shakespearean heroines such as Portia, Nerissa and Jessica. To indicate that their “talkativeness” and the disruption of “regulated social order of patriarch” is merely a way of “letting off steam” indicates that Shakespeare merely utilizes the female characters’ personalities to upend traditions with no end result in sight. I do not agree that the only goal Shakespeare had was the audience’s amusement before returning his characters to a traditionally ordered society. I believe Shakespeare purposely presented his audiences with these three female characters of wit, charm, intelligence as well as independence, to prove a point about the role of women in the world.

Shakespeare did not create these three unique women merely to amuse an audience but to challenge his audience’s perceptions about women’s capabilities. While the play ends in marriage, I believe you would find it difficult to find any scholar who would argue that the marriages the play presents at the end are supposed to return to patriarchal order. Anyone who attempts to argue that Portia, Nerissa and Jessica will suddenly shift to compliant, obedient wives has a huge task in front of them, a task that in my belief is all but impossible. Shakespeare’s three female characters seem completely unlikely to be tamed into the meek and manipulated wives or daughters admired in manuals and guide books of the day. The fact that they are so difficult to relegate to the sphere of traditional wives is why they are still so fascinating after so many years.

Dusinberre points out that dramatists’ challenging of strict social values was “consistent with their own status and their own need to repudiate conservative judgments

on their calling.” (11). Shakespeare must have very keenly felt the weight of the social attitudes toward his professional choice and his artistic expression. Perhaps that is why a male playwright keenly presents the issues of the oppressed females of the day. While Shakespeare would have never directly faced the strictures in place for women at the time in their roles as wives and daughters (as well as mothers, businesswoman and any other role they attempted to fill), perhaps he saw in his female characters kindred souls: people who were being forced by others to conform to their rules, much as he could very well have been forced to make concessions by the Master of the Revels.

Shakespeare’s creation of these three women who defy expectations and assumptions about women’s roles in the world indicates a man ahead of his time in his appreciation for women’s abilities. Portia, Nerissa and Jessica were envisioned by a man who pushed the envelope of what made “ideal wife” or an “ideal daughter.” Perhaps, on some level, Shakespeare even helped some of his audiences come to a better appreciation, or at least understanding, of the capabilities of women if the social rules of the day were less strict. As Wright so elegantly argues, “Shakespeare was a mirror of the struggles of the women of his times from Elizabeth I to the lowliest of peasant women as they struggled to gain more freedoms, rights, education, and respect” (11).

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