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Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*

KAREN NEWMAN

THE MERCHANT OF SHAKESPEARE'S TITLE IS AMBIGUOUS; it applies literally to Antonio, but also characterizes Shylock, and indeed all the play's action, not only the "bond" plot, but the love plot as well. The exchange of goods, whether they be "rich lading wrack'd on the narrow seas" (III.i.3) or women, characterizes the play's action. Readers have often remarked the language of commerce that characterizes the Venetian world of the Rialto where even a church, "the holy edifice of stone," would remind Christian merchants "of dangerous rocks, / Which touching but my gentle vessel's side / Would scatter all her spices on the stream, / Enrobe the roaring waters with my skills" (I.i.30–34).[1] Here the feminine personification of merchant ship as woman wounded figures both the commodification of woman and her violation. Belmont seems at first to be presented quite differently—talk there is of love, sexuality, familial relationships seemingly free from Venetian economic motives and aims.[2] Portia's suitors are judged not on the basis of their wealth or goods, but in terms of personal and moral qualities, and it must be said, racial prejudice.[3]

But as many readers have noted, any simple binary opposition between Belmont and Venice is misleading, for the aristocratic country life of Belmont shares much with commercial Venice: the matter and mottoes of the caskets suggest commercial values, and Portia's father's will rules her choice of husbands. Though venturing at Belmont is admittedly idealized—Bassanio's quest of Portia is likened to Jason's voyage, thus endowing it with a mythical dimension,[4] and Portia's father's will, through the mottoes, criticizes rather than endorses commercial values—what is important is the *structure* of exchange itself which characterizes both the economic transactions of Venice and the love relationships forged at Belmont. Venice and Belmont are throughout the play compared and contrasted, but the syntax of exchange itself functions in both locales; indeed, it seems universal.

[1] *The Merchant of Venice*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. John Russell Brown (1955; rpt. London: Methuen, 1977). All future references are to the Arden edition.

[2] Lawrence Danson and other readers have noted "the play's unusually prominent series of binary relationships," *The Harmonies of* The Merchant of Venice (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), p. 10.

[3] I have chosen deliberately to leave Shylock out of my reading of *The Merchant of Venice* in order to disturb readings of the play that center their interpretive gestures on the Jew. I recognize the suggestive possibilities, however, of readings such as Marianne Novy's which link Shylock and Portia as outsiders by virtue respectively of their race and sex, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 64 ff.

[4] See Elizabeth Sklar's interesting comparison of Bassanio and Jason in "Bassanio's Golden Fleece," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18 (1976), 500–509.

Before considering structures of exchange in Shakespeare's play, I would like to look in some detail at the status of exchange in anthropology. In his *Essai sur le don*, Marcel Mauss describes and analyzes one of the most remarkable features of primitive societies: the extent to which exchange—giving, receiving, and reciprocating gifts—dominates social intercourse.[5] Gift-giving is significant according to Mauss because it establishes and expresses social bonds between the partners of an exchange. In the cultures that Mauss describes, "food, women, children, possessions, charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank" circulate in exchange.[6] By offering a gift, the giver solicits friendship, establishes a relationship, perhaps seeks a reward. Gift-giving can be competitive—its "underlying motives are competition, rivalry, show and a desire for greatness and wealth."[7] Acceptance of a gift creates a reciprocal relationship by implying a willingness to return a gift, so by giving a gift that cannot be reciprocated, either because of its kind or its excess, the giver can humiliate the receiver. Perhaps the most striking anthropological example of such gift-giving is the so-called Big Man of highland New Guinea who is assigned in adolescence a *buanyin* or exchange partner, and, apparently against indigenous norms of social behavior, is trained to an entire system of exchange and gift-giving in excess of what can be reciprocated. Such behavior results in prestige and power.

Claude Lévi-Strauss reworks Mauss's theory of the gift in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* by proposing that marriage is the most fundamental form of gift exchange, and women the most basic of gifts. In studying the function and origins of exogamy, Lévi-Strauss argues that incest taboos and other rules prohibiting sexual relations and marriage between family members insure alliances and relationships among men:

> The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift. . . .[8]

Gift-giving, then, for Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, establishes social bonds and is a strategy of power. For Lévi-Strauss, however, such bonds and strategies are gender specific: they are exercised by and forged between and among men by means of the exchange of women:

> The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman . . . but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners. . . . (p. 115)

> Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy which expresses it—has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together, and of superimposing upon the natural links of kinship the henceforth artificial links . . . of alliance

[5] I am indebted to Gayle Rubin's discussion of Mauss in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975). I also thank Lynda Boose whose careful reading of this paper and its anthropological frame steered me to the specific analogy between Portia and the Big Man which I develop here.

[6] *Essai sur le don*, trans. Ian Cunnison (rpt. New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 11–12.

[7] Mauss, p. 26.

[8] *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 481.

> governed by rule. . . . It provides the fundamental and immutable rule ensuring the existence of the group as a group.
>
> (pp. 480–81)

For Lévi-Strauss, the exchange of women is at the origin of social life. His androcentric analysis seeks to authorize the exchange of women and the male bonds it constitutes by claiming that culture depends upon such ties. Feminists have pointed out two related consequences of Lévi-Strauss's claims. On the one hand, the seeming centrality of the woman as desired object is a mystification: she is a pseudo-center, a prize the winning of which, instead of forging a male/female relation, serves rather to secure male bonds.[9] Others have looked not so much at the woman in this system of exchange, but at the male bonds it establishes. The French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray postulates that if, as Lévi-Strauss claims,

> the exchanges which organize patriarchal societies take place exclusively between men, . . . [and if] women, signs, goods, money, pass from man to man or risk . . . slipping into incestuous and endogamous relations which would paralyze all social and economic intercourse, . . . [then] the very possibility of the socio-cultural order would entail homosexuality. Homosexuality would be the law that regulates the socio-cultural economy.[10]

Irigaray's use of the French conditional, *exigerait* and *serait*, translated here as "would entail" and "would be," and her stipulation that homosexual relations *per se* are prohibited because they risk short-circuiting the very systems of exchange that produce male bonds, suggest her polemical purpose in positing homosexuality as "the law that regulates the socio-cultural economy." Irigaray eroticizes the ties between men Lévi-Strauss describes in order to suggest a continuum—which she expresses by her pun, "hom(m)o-sexualité"[11]—that encompasses an entire range of male relations from the homoerotic to the competitive to the commercial. Recently Eve Sedgwick has made the perspectives first conceptualized by Kristeva and Irigaray available to the Anglo-American reader by appropriating the term "homosocial" from the social sciences to describe "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitality, and economic exchange—within which the various forms of the traffic in women take place."[12]

The Merchant of Venice would seem to offer an exemplary case not only of Lévi-Strauss's exchange system but also of the French feminist critique of that system. The exchange of Portia from her father via the caskets to Bassanio is the *ur*-exchange upon which the "main" bond plot is based: it produces Bas-

[9] See Julia Kristeva, *Texte du roman* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 160, 60.

[10] *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1977), p. 189, my translation. Also available in English translation, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).

[11] Irigaray, p. 168. I am grateful to Jonathan Goldberg for reminding me of this orthographic play.

[12] "Sexualism and the Citizen of the World: Wycherley, Sterne and Male Homosocial Desire," *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1984), 227. For a more extended discussion, including a fine chapter on the sonnets, see her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985). See also Lars Engle, "'Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 20–37, for a discussion of Sedgwick's work in relation to the *Merchant*.

sanio's request for money from Antonio and in turn the bond between Antonio and Shylock. Though the disposition of Portia by her father's will, and the financial arrangements between Bassanio and Antonio that permit Bassanio's courtship, lead to heterosexual marriage, the traffic in women paradoxically promotes and secures homosocial relations between men. Read from within such a system, Portia's seeming centrality is a mystification, a pseudo-center, for woman in this series of transactions, to repeat Lévi-Strauss's phrase, "figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners." The feminist rereading of Lévi-Strauss also provides another angle from which to read the *Merchant*'s much-debated male relationship. Commentators have often remarked Shakespeare's introduction of the theme of friendship, a shift from the paternal/filial relationship of *Il Pecorone* usually recognized as the *Merchant*'s primary source. But the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio has been interpreted not only as a version of idealized Renaissance friendship, but also as homoerotic.[13] Certainly textual evidence suggests the difficulty in distinguishing between the erotic and the platonic in Antonio's relations with Bassanio. Instead of choosing one interpretation over another, idealized male friendship or homosexuality, Irigaray's reading of Lévi-Strauss allows us to recognize in Antonio's relationship with Bassanio a homosocial bond, a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails.

Some anthropologists have challenged not the phallocentrism of Lévi-Strauss's claim that exogamous marriage and the exchange of women is a necessary condition for the formation of social groups and ultimately of culture, but his theory of kinship itself. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, adduces instances of parallel cousin marriage from nomadic and gatherer groups which refute the structuralist interpretation of kinship as a rule-governed *system*, arguing instead that kin relationships are social *practices* that produce and reproduce historically specific social relations. In the cultures Bourdieu examines, for example, women often take part in the choice of a spouse for their children: how marriages are made and what they do "depend on the aims or collective strategies of the group involved" and are not constitutive *per se* of male bonds or of culture.[14] But Bourdieu's ungendered social science vocabulary ("the collective strategies of the group involved") glosses over the significant fact that these aims and strategies inevitably allot women secondary status, for it is always the bride, and never the groom, who is an object of exchange among family groups and the means whereby social relations are reproduced. However they may disagree about the reasons for and results of kinship "rules" or "practices," in both Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Bourdieu's functionalist analysis, women figure as capital, as objects of exchange among men.

But the "traffic in women" is neither a universal law on which culture de-

[13] Recent critics who explain Antonio's melancholy as a loss of friendship include Leonard Tennenhouse, "The Counterfeit Order of *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, eds. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 57–66, and Keith Geary, "The Nature of Portia's Victory: Turning to Men in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" *Shakespeare Survey*, 37 (1984), 55–68. Graham Midgley, "*The Merchant of Venice*: A Reconsideration," *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 119–33; W. H. Auden, "Brothers and Others," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962); Lawrence W. Hyman, "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ*, 21 (1970), 109–16; and W. Thomas MacCary, *Friends and Lovers: The Phenomenology of Desire in Shakespearean Comedy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), claim a homoerotic impulse in Antonio's attachment.

[14] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Studies in Social Anthropology, No. 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), p. 58.

pends, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, nor simply a means of producing and reproducing generalized "social relations," as Bourdieu claims: Kristeva's and Irigaray's analysis of exchange exposes it as a strategy for insuring hierarchical gender relations. The exchange of women produces and reproduces what Gayle Rubin has termed a "sex/gender system" in which the traffic in women is only part of an entire system of

> sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and *people*—men, women and children—in concrete systems of social relationships. . . . "Exchange of women" is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. (p. 177)

Such a sex/gender system functioned historically in early modern England where marriage, among the elite at least, was primarily a commercial transaction determined by questions of dowry, familial alliances, land ownership, and inheritance.[15] Daughters were pawns in the political and social maneuvers of their families, particularly their male kin.[16] Marriage contracts and settlements, familiar letters and wills, conduct books and sermons alike recognize in marriage an economic transaction based on the exchange of gifts—women, cash, annuities, rents, land.[17] Divines preached sermons with such titles as "A Good Wife Gods Gift"; women were explicitly commodified, as in John Wing's exemplary exhortation, in his treatise on marriage, that men seek wives not in the devil's place—playhouses, may games, dance matches—but in God's house, since

> [a]ll men love in merchandizing for any commodity, to goe as neere the *welhead* as they can, to such as *make the commodities themselves*, and from whose hands they *doe originally* come.[18]

The commercial language to describe love relationships common in Elizabethan love poetry and in *The Merchant of Venice* displays not only the economic determinants of marriage in Elizabethan society, but England's economic climate more generally—its developing capitalist economy characterized by the growth and expansion of urban centers, particularly London; the rise of banking and overseas trade; and industrial growth with its concomitant need for credit and large amounts of capital.[19] Such changes, as Walter Cohen has demon-

[15] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[16] See Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Brighton: Harvester Press; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1983), chap. 3.

[17] See E. T., *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights: or The Lawes Provision for Women* (London, 1632), also known as *The Woman's Lawyer*, which gathers together in one volume contemporary laws about women, property, and marriage. In Bk. II, chap. xxxii, there is an extended discussion specifically of the "condiments of love," that is, the gifts given at marriage. In his recent essay on exchange in the *Merchant*, Lars Engle (see note 12 above) claims Portia's name suggests the marriage portion, a common means of relieving debt in early modern England. Though it is conceivable that an audience might hear "Portia" as an aural pun on "portion," the name is not etymologically related to the Latin *portio*, *-onis*, a share, part, proportion, but the Latin *porcus*, pig, and the Roman clan, the Porcii, breeders of pigs.

[18] *The Crowne Conjugall or the Spouse Royal* (London, 1632), sig. K2^{r}.

[19] See R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1947); Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603–1714* (New York: Norton, 1982); Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), and Keith

strated, inevitably generated anxiety that readers of *The Merchant of Venice* have recognized in the tension Shakespeare created between trade and usury, and in the ultimate triumph of Antonio and his incorporation into Belmont's world of aristocratic, landed values.[20]

The exchange of gifts dominated not only kinship relations, but power relations as well. Gift-giving was a significant aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean social intercourse, as demonstrated by royal prestation and patronage, and by the New Year's gift roles, account books, and records of aristocratic families who vie with one another in their generosity to the monarch in quest of favor.[21] Not only the monarch and the aristocracy, but the gentry and the middling sort—all took part in these systems of exchange. Even the poorest families participated in such exchange systems: observers describe the custom in English villages of placing a basin in the church at weddings, into which guests placed gifts to help to establish the newly formed family in the community.[22] In the 1620s and 30s, gift-giving declined and signalled the alienation of the aristocracy, gentry, and urban elite from the court.[23]

In III.ii, of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia offers her love to Bassanio in a speech that epitomizes the Elizabethan sex/gender system:

> You see me Lord Bassanio where I stand,
> Such as I am; though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish
> To wish myself much better, yet for you,
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
> more rich,
> That only to stand high in your account,
> I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
> Exceed account: but the full sum of me
> Is sum of something: which to term in gross,
> Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised,
> Happy in this, she is not yet so old
> But she may learn: happier than this,
> She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
> Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.
> Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
> Is now converted. But now I was the lord
> Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
> Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,

Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 122–48.

[20] See Walter Cohen's admirable "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH*, 49 (1983), 765–89, which appears in part in his recent book, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).

[21] See particularly Wallace T. MacCaffrey, "Place and Patronage in Elizabethan Politics," *Elizabethan Government and Society*, eds. S. T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield, and C. H. Williams (London: Univ. of London, The Athlone Press, 1961), pp. 97–125. For a discussion of prestation and literary fictions in Elizabethan culture, see Louis Adrian Montrose, "Gifts and Reasons: The Contexts of Peele's *Araygnement of Paris*," *ELH*, 47 (1980), 433–61.

[22] See William Vaughn, *The Golden Grove* (London, 1600), sig. M8^{r}.

[23] For a more detailed account of Jacobean gift-giving, see Coppélia Kahn's "'Magic of bounty': *Timon of Athens*, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power," especially pp. 41 ff., in this issue.

> This house, these servants, and this same myself
> Are yours,—my lord's!—I give them with this ring. . . .
> (III.ii.149–71)

This speech begins with what we might term an affective paradox. Portia presents herself to Bassanio using the first person in an engagingly personal, if highly rhetorical, manner: "Such as I am." But her account of herself, as my own dead metaphor suggests, illustrates the exchange between the erotic and the economic that characterizes the play's representation of human relations. The rhetorical distance created by the mercantile metaphor shifts the speech from her personal commitment to a more formal bond marked by the giving of her ring, and that move is signaled by the shift to the third person ("an unlesson'd girl . . . she"). Portia objectifies herself and thereby suppresses her own agency in bestowing herself on Bassanio. The passives are striking—she casts herself grammatically in the role of object "to be directed"; she and all she owns "is converted" to Bassanio by an unstated agent. Perhaps the most marked stylistic feature of these lines is the repeated use of *now* which signals both temporal shifts and, more importantly, a moment of conversion. The rhetorical balance of line 166 is arrested by the caesura and the *now* of line 167 which insists on the present moment of commitment to Bassanio. The "but now" that follows refers back in time, emphasizing Portia's prior role as "lord" of Belmont, a role that she yields to Bassanio with her vow "I give them with this ring"; the moment of fealty is underscored by the repeated "even now, but now" in line 169.

The governing analogy in Portia's speech is the Renaissance political commonplace that figures marriage and the family as a kingdom in small, a microcosm ruled over by the husband.[24] Portia's speech figures woman as microcosm to man's macrocosm and as subject to his sovereignty. Portia ratifies this prenuptial contract with Bassanio by pledging her ring, which here represents the codified, hierarchical relation of men and women in the Elizabethan sex/gender system in which a woman's husband is "her lord, her governor, her king."[25] The ring is a visual sign of her vow of love and submission to Bassanio; it is a representation of Portia's acceptance of Elizabethan marriage which was characterized by women's subjection, their loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel. It signifies her place in a rigidly defined hierarchy of male power and privilege; and her declaration of love at first seems to exemplify her acquiescence to woman's place in such a system.

But Portia's declaration of love veers away in its final lines from the exchange system the preceding lines affirm. Having moved through past time to the pres-

[24] Kenneth Burke calls this figure the "'noblest synecdoche,' the perfect paradigm or prototype for all lesser usages, [which] is found in metaphysical doctrines proclaiming the identity of 'microcosm' and 'macrocosm.' In such doctrines, where the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa, we have the ideal synecdoche. . . ." *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1962), p. 508.

[25] For a contemporary discussion of the giving of rings, see Henry Swinburne, *Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts* (London, 1686), but written and published much earlier; see also Anne Parten, "Re-establishing sexual order: The Ring episode in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Selected Papers of the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association*, 6 (1976), 27–34. Parten also remarks this link between Portia's ring and her submission. Engle, cited above, claims that Portia's actions in the final acts represent "her triumphant manipulation of homosocial exchange" and her "absolute mastery" (p. 37). Not only the historical and cultural position of women in early modern England, but also the generic boundaries of comedy seem to me to preclude such optimism. We can, however, claim resistance, a dislocation of the structures of exchange.

ent of Portia's pledge and gift of her ring, the speech ends in the future, with a projected loss and its aftermath, with Portia's "vantage to exclaim on" Bassanio:

> I give them with this ring,
> Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love,
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
> (ll. 171–74)

Here Portia is the gift-giver, and it is worth remembering Mauss's description of gift-giving in the New Guinea highlands in which an aspiring "Big Man" gives more than can be reciprocated and in so doing wins prestige and power. Portia gives more than Bassanio can ever reciprocate, first to him, then to Antonio, and finally to Venice itself in her actions in the trial which allow the city to preserve both its law and its precious Christian citizen. In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio.[26]

Contemporary conduct books and advice about choosing a wife illustrate the dangers of marriage to a woman of higher social status or of greater wealth. Though by law such a marriage makes the husband master of his wife and her goods, in practice contemporary sources suggest unequal marriages often resulted in domination by the wife.[27] Some writers and Puritan divines even claimed that women purposely married younger men, men of lower rank or of less wealth, so as to rule them.[28] Marriage handbooks and sermons all exhort women to submit to their husbands, regardless of disparity in rank or fortune, as in this representative example from Daniel Tuvill's *St. Pauls Threefold Cord*:

> Yea, though there were never so great a disproportion betwixt them in state and condition; as say the wife were a Princesse, the husband but a pesant, she must be yet in conjugall respects as a hand-mayd unto him; he must not be as a servant unto her. . . . And this subjection is so necessary, that without it the world could not long subsist; yea nature herselfe would suddenly be dissolved. . . .[29]

The vehemence and fear of chaos and disorder Tuvill betrays are characteristic and imply a growing need in the Stuart period to shore up eroding class and gender hierarchies.

Bassanio's answer to Portia's pledge of love implicitly recognizes such a disparity and its effect by metaphorically making her the master:

> Madam, you have bereft me of all words,
> Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
> And there is such confusion in my powers,
> As after some oration fairly spoke
> By a beloved prince, there doth appear

[26] For a discussion of "negative usury" or "giving more than you get," see Harry Berger, Jr., "Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ* (1981), 155–62. Some readers have argued that Portia must redeem Antonio who "may make impossible the marriage union Portia seeks," Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Kenyon Review*, I (1979), 65–92; see also Engle, cited in note 12 above.

[27] Cf. Bartholomew Battus, *The Christian Mans Closet*, trans. William Lowth (London, 1581), Bk. II.

[28] William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1634), sig. T2[r].

[29] (London, 1635), sigs. B4[v]–B5[v].

> Among the buzzing pleased multitude,
> Where every something being blent together,
> Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy
> Express'd, and not express'd: but when this ring
> Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence,—
> O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!
> (III.ii.175–85)

Bassanio's heavily marked epic simile is anomalous in Shakespearean comedy. It echoes the first and perhaps most famous Virgilian simile of the *Aeneid*, when Neptune's effect in quelling the storm inspired by Juno is compared to that of "a man remarkable / for righteousness and service" for whom the people "are silent and stand attentively; and he controls their passion by his words and cools their spirits."[30] Shakespeare translates the Virgilian simile into his own romantic context in which the speaker's words, instead of having a quieting effect on heart and mind, create a Petrarchan paradox: blood that speaks, but a lover silenced. And in keeping with Petrarchan conventions, Bassanio's comparison figures Portia as dominating and distant—that is, as a prince. Renaissance rhetoricians such as Wilson and Puttenham define figurative language as *translation*, "an inuersion of sence by transport"[31]—a kind of figurative exchange which disturbs normal communication and makes unexpected connections.[32] Poets use tropes so that "the hearer is ledde by cogitation vppon rehearsall of a Metaphore, and thinketh more by remembraunce of a worde translated, then is there expressely spoken: or els because the whole matter seemeth by a similitude to be opened. . . ."[33] Bassanio's political simile with its Virgilian intertextual exchange "disguises" Portia as a man and prefigures her masculine role in the trial scene where she insures the Venetian republic by reconciling the principle of equity with the rigor of the law.

We should also remember that Portia, whom Bassanio earlier describes as "nothing undervalu'd / To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia" (I.i.165–66), is named after her classical ancestor who describes herself in *Julius Caesar* as "A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter. / Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded?" (II.i.295–97). *That* Portia was renowned in antiquity for sharing the political ideals of her father and husband, and Shakespeare represents her commitment to political action by her insistence, as Plutarch had recorded, on knowing of the plot to murder Caesar and by her taking part in the conference of Republicans at Antium. The *Merchant*'s Portia resembles her classical namesake and her figural persona ("beloved prince") by entering the male lists of law and politics. Far from simply exemplifying the Elizabethan sex/gender system of exchange, the *Merchant* short-circuits the

[30] Virgil knew the simile from the end of Hesiod's prologue to the *Theogony*, but Shakespeare would only have known it, of course, through Virgil.

[31] Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), in *English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (London: Peter Owen, 1967), p. 177.

[32] Compare Lévi-Strauss's discussion of language and the emergence of symbolic thought in the final pages of *Elementary Structures*: "But woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs. In the matrimonial dialogue of men, woman is never purely what is spoken about; for if women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined to a certain kind of communication, each woman preserves a particular value. . . . In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained at once a sign and a value" (p. 496).

[33] Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), in Hardison, p. 42.

exchange, mocking its authorized social structure and hierarchical gender relations.

For Portia's ring, we should remember, does not remain on Bassanio's finger, and *his* gift of the ring to Balthazar does indeed give Portia "vantage to exclaim." The gift of Portia's ring shifts the figurative ground of her speech from synecdoche to metonymy.[34] Her lines first figure the ring as a part of her which she gives as a sign of the whole to Bassanio; in the final lines, however, the prefigured loss of the ring signals not substitution, but contiguity, metonymic relations. By following the movements of her ring, we may discover something about how the play both enacts and interrogates Elizabethan structures of figural and sexual exchange. Objects, like words, change their meaning in different contexts; as things pass from hand to hand, they accumulate meanings from the process of exchange itself. Bassanio gives away his ring in payment for services rendered and in doing so transgresses his pledge to Portia. When it begins its metonymic travels from Bassanio to the young doctor, the ring picks up new meanings which contradict its status as a sign of male possession, fidelity, and values;[35] it moves from Bassanio to Balthazar to Portia to Antonio and back to Bassanio again and the very multiplicity of exchanges undermines its prior signification. The ring also makes a figural progress; in Renaissance rhetorical terms it is transmuted, "which is, when a word hath a proper signification of the [sic] owne, and being referred to an other thing, hath an other meaning."[36] Portia's ring becomes a sign of hierarchy subverted by establishing contiguities in which the constituent parts have shifting sexual and syntactic positions. By opening out the metonymic chain to include Balthazar, Bassanio opens his marriage to forces of disorder, to bisexuality, equality between the sexes, and linguistic equivalence in opposition to the decorous world of Renaissance marriage represented by the love pledges in III.ii. Bassanio gives his ring to an "unruly woman," that is, to a woman who steps outside her role and function as subservient, a woman who dresses like a man, who embarks upon behavior ill-suited to her "weaker" intellect, a woman who argues the law.[37]

In her fine essay, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," Natalie Zemon Davis details the ways in which women's disorderliness manifested itself in England and Europe during this period. Davis observes that anthropologists generally agree that forms of sexual inversion—switches in sex roles, topsy turvy, and images of the world turned upside down, "the topos of the woman on top"—

> like other rites and ceremonies of reversal, are ultimately sources of order and stability in hierarchical society. They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of, and safety valve for, conflicts within the system. They can correct and relieve the system when it has become authoritarian. But, so it is argued, they do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it.[38]

[34] See Burke's account of metonymy, the basic strategy of which is to convey an "incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible" (p. 506; see note 24 above).

[35] This is also the case with the play's other lost ring given as a prenuptial pledge, from Leah to Shylock, which Jessica gives to one of Antonio's creditors for a monkey.

[36] Wilson, in Hardison, p. 45.

[37] Lisa Jardine discusses the significance of Portia's "arguing the law," in "Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines: These are old paradoxes," in this issue, pp. 12 ff.

[38] *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1965; rpt. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975),

Many feminist critics have agreed with such judgments in their readings of Shakespeare's comedies of sexual inversion. They argue that such play, usually in the service of courtship, is ultimately conservative, leading to conventional gender roles and patriarchal marriage.[39] Portia, we are told, in giving up her disguise and returning Bassanio's ring, returns to "unthreatening 'femininity.'"[40] But Davis herself disputes the interpretation of sexual inversion as simply a safety mechanism. She points out first that historians of early modern Europe are likely to find inversion and reversals less in prescribed rites than in popular festivities and carnival. Cultural play with the concept of the unruly woman, she argues, was a multivalent image which "could undermine as well as reinforce traditional hierarchical formations." Davis adduces examples of comic and festive inversion that carried over into political action, that provided not only release, but also represented efforts or provided the means whereby the distribution of power in society was questioned and changed. And, I would add, inversion affects not only the distribution of power but also perhaps structures of exchange themselves that historically have insured male hegemony and patriarchal power. Sexual inversion and play with the *topos* of the woman on top offered an alternative mode of conceiving family structure and gender behavior within that structure.

When Bassanio leaves for Venice to aid his friend, Portia evokes the conventional ideal of a Renaissance lady: she promises "My maid Nerissa, and myself meantime / Will live as maids and widows" (III.ii.308–9); to Lorenzo she claims they will live in a monastery to fulfill a vow "to live in prayer and contemplation," behavior which conforms to the Renaissance ideal of womanhood: chaste, silent, and obedient. Shakespeare evokes here the accepted codes of feminine behavior in his culture, thereby distancing the action from the codes of dramatic comedy that permit masculine disguise, female dominance, and linguistic power. Portia evokes the ideal of a proper Renaissance lady and then transgresses it; she becomes an unruly woman.

The common remedies for the weaker sex's disorderliness were, even among the humanists such as Vives, Erasmus, and More, religious training to make her modest and humble, education of a restricted kind designed not to inflame her imagination but to acquaint her with her moral duty, and honest work of a sort appropriate to female capabilities. Transgression of the traditional expectations for women's behavior brought down wrath such as John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trvmpet Against the Monstrvovs Regiment of Women*:

> . . . the holie ghoste doth manifestlie expresse, saying: I suffer not that woman vsurpe authoritie aboue man: he sayth not, I will not, that woman vsurpe authoritie aboue her husband, but he nameth man in generall, taking frome her all power and

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p. 130. Davis refers to the work of several anthropologists including Gluckman, Turner, Bateson, Flügel, Delcourt, and Meslin.

[39] See, for example, Clara Claiborne Park, "As We Like It: How A Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, eds. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 100–116; Irene Dash, *Wooing, Wedding and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), and more recently, Peter Erickson's *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley and London: Univ. of California Press, 1985). Compare Richard Horwich who claims that the ring trick is "a device by which she may exercise her free will"; it restores "what from the start she complained of lacking—the power of choice," "Riddle and Dilemma in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Studies in English Literature*, 18 (1977), 199.

[40] Parten, "Re-establishing sexual order," p. 32.

> authoritie, to speake, to reason, to interprete, or to teache, but principallie to rule or to iudge in the assemblie of men. . . . [A] woman promoted to sit in the seate of God, that is, to teache, to iudge, or to reigne aboue man, is a monstre in nature, contumelie to God, and a thing most repugnãt to his will ãd ordinãce.[41]

It might be argued that the excess of Knox's attack, directed specifically against Mary Tudor, reflects his own rather than widely held views. But even humanist writers sympathetic to the cause of women's education assume the propriety of Knox's claims, if not his rhetoric. They exclude women from the public arena and assume the necessity of their silence.[42] Leonardo Bruni, for example, warns that "rhetoric in all its forms—public discussion, forensic argument, logical fence, and the like—lies absolutely outside the province of women."[43] When Portia takes off for Venice dressed as a man, she looses her tongue in public talk on subjects ill-suited to the ladylike conduct she posits as a model and does exactly those things Knox and others violently attacked. She engages, that is, in productive labor reserved for men, and not insignificantly, in linguistic labor, in a profession the successful practice of which depends on a knowledge of history and precedent, on logic and reasoning, and on rhetoric, all areas of education traditionally denied to women.

Portia's manner of winning her case, her "integrative solution" as it has been called, deserves consideration. Her defense depends on a verbal quibble,[44] a characteristic linguistic strategy of Shakespearean clowns which allows them to express ideologically subversive or contradictory attitudes or ideas. Indeed, in the *Merchant*, Launcelot Gobbo uses the quibble for just such purposes. His wordplay around the command to come to dinner at III.v.43, and his earlier play with Jessica on damnation (III.v.4–7), give a double perspective to serious issues in the play, issues of social and Christian hierarchy and the like.[45] Portia and Launcelot Gobbo, woman and servant, are linked by this shared verbal strategy which allows them seemingly at least to reconcile irreconcilable perspectives and to challenge the play's overall mimetic design. They represent the "other" in the play, those marginal groups that are oppressed under the Elizabethan class/gender system, but whose presence paradoxically is needed to insure its existence. Their playful, quibbling misuse of language veils their subversive linguistic power. Portia's wise quibble saves the Venetian republic by enabling the Duke to follow the letter of the law *and* to save Antonio, to satisfy the opposing viewpoints represented by the Old and New law, by Shy-

[41] (London, 1558), sigs. 16^{v}–17^{r}.

[42] On the position of the learned lady in the Renaissance, see Lisa Jardine, "'O decus Italiae virgo,' or the myth of the learned lady in the Renaissance," *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 799–819, as well as the opening pages of her essay in this issue of *SQ*.

[43] *De Studiis et litteris*, trans. William H. Woodward in *Vittorino de Feltre and Other Humanist Educators* (Cambridge, 1897), pp. 124, 126, quoted in Constance Jordan, "Feminism and The Humanists: The Case of Sir Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 36 (1983), 181–201. See also Vives's discussion of women and eloquence in Foster Watson, ed., *Vives and the Renascence Education of Women* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1912), pp. 48–56, and More's letters, quoted in Watson, esp. pp. 179 ff. Similar exhortations can be found in Protestant tracts.

[44] O. Hood Phillips observes that Portia's solution would never have succeeded in court in *Shakespeare and The Lawyers* (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 91–118. Bullough claims on the basis of Mosaic Law that "the separation of flesh and blood is less of a quibble than critics have thought," *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), 448.

[45] See Cohen, cited in note 20 above, pp. 779–81, and Robert Weimann's discussion of inversion and wordplay in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), esp. pp. 39–48, 120–50.

lock and Antonio. In another register, as Walter Cohen has pointed out, it unites the bourgeois values of self-interest with those of the traditional landed gentry, an imaginary literary solution to ideological conflicts manifest in late sixteenth-century England (pp. 776 ff.). But Portia's linguistic play here and in the final scene, like Launcelot Gobbo's, resists the social, sexual, and political system of which she is a part and provides a means for interrogating its distribution of power along gender lines.

The Merchant of Venice does not end with Portia's success in the courtroom; after her winning defense of Antonio, Portia asks Bassanio to return her ring, knowing, as her husband puts it, that "There's more depends on this than the value."[46] We know this ring symbolizes the bargain of faith in patriarchal marriage Portia and Bassanio have made in III.ii. By obeying Antonio's exhortation and giving his ring to Balthazar, Bassanio affirms homosocial bonds—the exchange of women, here represented by Portia's ring, sustains relations between men. But Balthazar is, of course, Portia in disguise (and Portia, we should not forget, was played by a boy, so that literally all the love relations in the play are homosocial). When Portia laughs at the thought of "old swearing / That they did give the rings away to men; / But we'll outface them and outswear them too" (IV.ii.15–17), she keeps her promise. In losing their rings and breaking their promises to Portia and Nerissa, Bassanio and Gratiano seem paradoxically to lose the male privileges the exchange of women and the rings insured. When in the final act Portia returns her ring to her husband via Antonio, its multiple metonymic travels have changed it. The ring no longer represents the traditional relationship it figured in III.ii. On its figural as well as literal progress, it accumulates other meanings and associations: cuckoldry and thus female unruliness, female genitalia, woman's changeable nature and so-called animal temperament, her deceptiveness and potential subversion of the rules of possession and fidelity that insure the male line.[47]

Natalie Zemon Davis observes that female disorderliness was grounded in nature rather than nurture, in cold and wet humours which "meant a changeable, deceptive and tricky temperament" (p. 125). Physiology accounted for unruly women: shrews, scolds, transvestites, women who transgressed the rules of womanly decorum, were believed to suffer from hysteria, or a fit of what the Renaissance called the "mother" or the "wandering womb." In the intervening time between their marriage and its putative consummation after the play's close, Portia has fallen victim to an imaginative fit of the "mother" and become an unruly woman. Her so-called "hysteria" leads her to act like a man, to bisexuality—she dresses up like a man and argues the law, imaginatively expressing her own sexuality by cuckolding her husband with Balthazar. As Portia says when she returns the ring, "I had it of him: pardon me Bassanio, / For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (V.i.258–59).[48] Instead of the subservient

[46] See Murray Biggs's "A Neurotic Portia," *ShS*, 25 (1977), 153–59, which recognizes from an opposite perspective the meaning of Portia's request: "she, perversely, asks for Bassanio's wedding ring. It is her one fall from heavenly grace." For a heavily psychoanalytic reading of Portia's behavior and her quest for mastery, see Vera Jiji, "Portia Revisited: The Influence of Unconscious Factors Upon Theme and Characterization in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Literature and Psychology*, 26 (1975), 5–15.

[47] Norman Holland presents a number of psychoanalytic accounts of the link between rings and female sexuality in *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); for folktale sources, see, for example, the Tudor jest book *Tales and Quick Answers* (1530) cited in Parten (see note 25 above).

[48] E.A.M. Colman argues in his *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1976) that Shakespeare's bawdy is associated with anarchic and dissident impulses.

woman of elaborate pledges at III.ii, Portia's speech at V.i.266 ff. is filled with imperatives—"Speak not so grossly . . . read it . . . Unseal this letter. . . ." Having expressly given over her house to Bassanio in III.ii, she says in V.i, "I have not yet / Enter'd my house" (ll. 272–73). She emphasizes her power and secret knowledge by giving Antonio the mysterious letter, but refusing to reveal how she came by it: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter."

It is often said that Act V of *The Merchant of Venice* is unusually harmonious even for Shakespearean comedy; certainly the world of usury, hatred, and aggression that characterizes Venice has receded.[49] But Act V is far from presenting the harmonious view of love and marriage many have claimed, for even the idyllic opening dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo is troubled by allusions to unhappy love and broken vows. Lorenzo mockingly calls Jessica a shrew and the play ends on an obscene pun on *ring* and a commonplace joke about female sexuality and cuckoldry, not on the idealized pledges of true love that characterize III.ii.[50] Portia's verbal skills, her quibbles and play with words, her duplicitous representation of herself as an unlessoned girl who vows "to live in prayer and contemplation," even as she rules her household and prepares to argue the law, bring together contradictory attitudes and views toward women and their role and place both in drama and society.[51] Bassanio accepts the oppositions that her play with language enacts: "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow," he says. But in an aside that scarcely requires a psychoanalytic gloss, Bassanio exclaims "Why I were best to cut my left hand off, / And swear I lost the ring defending it" (V.i.177–78). Portia's unruliness of language and behavior exposes the male homosocial bond the exchange of women insures, but it also multiplies the terms of sexual trafficking so as to disrupt those structures of exchange that insure hierarchical gender relations and the figural hegemony of the microcosm/macrocosm analogy in Elizabethan marriage. Instead of being "directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king," Portia resumes her role as lord of Belmont: "Let us go in," she commands. As Davis suggests, in the "little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization" (p. 150). The sexual symbolism of transvestism, the transgression of traditional gender roles and the figural transgression of heterosexual relations, the multivalence of linguistic meanings in women's and clowns' speech, all interrogate and reveal contradictions in the Elizabethan sex/gender system in which women were commodities whose exchange both produced and reproduced hierarchical gender relations.

Portia's masterly speech and gift-giving in the play's final scene return us once more to anthropology and to the powerful Big Man of the New Guinea highlands that Mauss describes. To read Portia's transgression as subversive risks the theoretical accusation that her power finally depends on a reversal, on occupying the position of the Big Man, thereby preserving the oppositions that ground gender hierarchy. Even the term for such a gift-giver—Big Man—

[49] C. L. Barber claims "No other comedy . . . ends with so full an expression of harmony. . . . And no other final scene is so completely without irony about the joys it celebrates," *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1957; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 187.

[50] In *Love's Argument* Novy claims "the threats of possessiveness and promiscuity are both dispelled," but does not explain how this should be so (p. 79).

[51] Lisa Jardine analyzes the link between learning in women and sexual "forwardness" in her essay in this issue.

is problematic and suggests the reinscription of binary notions of sexual difference, of male and female, binarisms that inevitably allot to one pole, usually the masculine, a positive value, to the other a negative.[52] From such a perspective, all resistance is always already contained, dissipated, recuperated finally to the *status quo*. But *Derrida's* deconstruction of such inversion, unlike many of its ahistorical and ultimately conservative applications, recognizes that particular strategies, languages, rhetorics, even behaviors, receive meaning only in sequences of differences,[53] and that those sequences of differences are produced within a particular discourse—philosophy or linguistics, for example—or within a particular historical instance. Behaviors and rhetorics signify within particular discourses, histories, and economies. I have therefore argued that the *Merchant* interrogates the Elizabethan sex/gender system and resists the "traffic in women," because in early modern England a woman occupying the position of a Big Man, or a lawyer in a Renaissance Venetian courtroom, or the lord of Belmont, is not the same as a man doing so. For a woman, such behavior is a form of simulation,[54] a confusion that elides the conventional poles of sexual difference by denaturalizing gender-coded behaviors; such simulation perverts authorized systems of gender and power. It is inversion with a difference.

[52] See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

[53] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 19, 33 ff.

[54] See Irigaray's discussion of "mimetisme" as self-conscious or reflexive imitation in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp. 134 ff.