‘An upright judge, a learned judge!’ (4.1.319)
-- Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* --

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*The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare’s most controversial plays, described as ‘a battleground of critical debate’ (Smallwood 117). Among the contentious problems of the play, Shylock is the main focus of the critical controversies. In accordance with each critic’s view of Shylock, the play is considered as Shylock’s tragedy or as a romantic comedy. Recent commentaries especially show a tendency to view Shylock as the representative of the Jewish people, as an outsider and as society’s underdog. Historical criticism, Marxist criticism, and New Historicism focus on Shylock as a Jewish moneylender considering the historical and economic context in Venice and England (Cohen 765-89). As Stanley Wells points out, the play’s other name *The Jew of Venice* suggests that from the beginning ‘Shylock was regarded as the play’s central character’ (158), and his problem appears as the mainly dominant subject of the play, in spite of the fact that he appears in no more than five scenes.

However, Portia is no less important than Shylock both in plot and in theme. While Shylock is a prominent figure in Venice, Portia is the controlling figure in Belmont. She is the main reason for the flesh-bond in the sense that Bassanio borrows money from Antonio to win Portia. It is Portia who defeats Shylock and rescues Antonio from this bond. Her marriage is the main part of the play in the context of a romantic comedy. Any kind of reading which centres on Portia shows
that, as Belsey observes, the play 'presents a sexual politics which is beginning to be the focus of feminist criticism and the cultural history of gender'(42). Several feminist studies have revealed a number of interesting elements in the play, proving that Shakespeare deals with all the topical issues concerned with women of his age. From a feminist point of view, Belsey shows an interest in the issue of sexual disruption. Jardine views Portia as a learned woman in the field of law and compares her with Helen in All's Well That Ends Well. Leventen is interested in 'the relationship between women and money' and 'the ways in which the play both problematises and mystifies that relationship'(59), and focuses her discussion on Portia's status as an heiress. According to her, 'the play responds to and participates in contemporary anxieties about women, money and power'(59) in both Portia's and Jessica's cases.

Sharing other feminist critics' concerns, this paper will focus on Portia as the main interest. A comparison of the play with its sources, especially with Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's Il Pecorone (Bullough 449), reveals Shakespeare's important transformation of the heroine from a widow to a daughter, indeed an heiress. This invites speculation about Renaissance England's view of the subordinate relationship of a daughter to her father as well as concerns about inheritance. Shakespeare's additional invention of the Jew's daughter, Jessica, who efficiently functions as a foil to Portia, further throws the relationship of father and daughter into relief in a problematical way.

Attention must be given to the meaning of Portia's speech in the court as a lawyer, which was an exclusively male field in Shakespeare's time as well as in the play: the problematic fact is that Portia's voice works as an authority to which men must defer. The significance of this is further emphasized especially when one considers that in Renaissance England women were expected to stay silent; female speech was either regarded as an attempt at subversion or frequently related to sexual openness. The interesting thing is Shakespeare's subtle treatment of this matter. Before her appearance in the court as a Doctor of Law, Shakespeare deliberately portrays Portia as an obedient daughter and a virtuous wife. He