

“IT IS MUCH THAT THE MOOR SHOULD BE MORE THAN REASON”: PORTIA, RACE, AND NATION IN ADAPTATION

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Abstract

The Merchant of Venice includes two characters of color: one in the list of roles—the Prince of Morocco—and one unseen and mentioned only in passing during the action—the Moorish woman made pregnant by Lancelot. Of all the adaptations of *Merchant* in fiction and drama, Morocco appears in only two. Likewise, the pregnant Moor. Furthermore, Portia is seldom a significant character in these adaptations, even though she is the largest role in the play. This paper explores Portia’s portrayal in adaptation in relation to race and nation. It considers Grace Tiffany’s novel, *The Turquoise Ring* (2005), as a rare example of how Portia’s problematic relationship with race has been interrogated in fiction and argues that a lack of desire to confront Portia’s racism is a major contributory factor to her apparent “unadaptability.”



Introduction

“We really want Portia not to be racist, but she is.” This unusually frank admission was made by one of the speakers at the British Shakespeare Association (BSA) 2019 conference during the question and answer session of a panel entitled, “Nationhood and *The Merchant of Venice*”.¹ It is a view that contrasts sharply with some past opinions, such as, Bassanio’s Portia of “wondrous virtues” (1.1.162)² from the Shakespeare text, Anna Jameson’s (1832, 77) Victorian Portia of “the noblest and most loveable qualities . . . in woman,” and even Deborah Findlay’s (1993, 64) “incorruptible” Portia from the 1980s. It is, however, a sign that a more honest discussion of the relationship between race and Shakespeare’s works is now in progress and

1 Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, “Nationhood and *The Merchant of Venice*” (panel, BSA Conference 2019). Tudeau-Clayton 2020 discusses how *Merchant*, in her opinion, undermines exclusionary essentialist ideas of national identity.

2 All citations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from Shakespeare 2016.

has been since the 1990s. While it is true that Shylock and the attitude of *Merchant’s* text towards Jews and Jewishness attracts more attention, critical work examining Portia’s interaction with the topics of race and nation is certainly not lacking. That discourse has been led by scholars of color based in the United States, the vitality of which can be seen on the #RaceB4Race and #ShakeRace Twitter feeds, and in the symposia conducted by the lead academic contributors to these groups.

This article selects three specific examples from *Merchant* where race is an issue—Portia’s remarks concerning the color of Morocco’s skin, the Moorish servant woman at Belmont made pregnant by Lancelet, and Bassanio’s reference to “the beauteous scarf / Veiling an Indian beauty” (3.2.98–9)—and examines how these have impacted Portia’s portrayal in adaptation. All three of these instances were either cut or changed to remove any racial overtone in the most recent production of *Merchant* for the Royal Shakespeare Company—directed by Polly Findlay in 2015—thereby exemplifying the denial that is implicit in the opening remark of this paper. Bruce R. Smith comments that there may now be “an addiction to cutting” but admits that whether “cuts be regarded as constitutive of or subversive of meaning seems, at our own moment in time, a critic’s choice” (144; 4). As Smith observes, Shakespeare’s plays have probably always been cut but this does not make the practice any less “contentious” with “many scholars” regarding them as “acts of vandalism” almost “as if the ‘cuts’ were bodily wounds” (5). With regard to Findlay’s production, the cuts made eliminate much of Portia’s complexity and illustrate the type of defensive action recognized by Ian Smith as “whitewashing and protection” (106), which thus precludes “scrutiny of racialized whiteness” (107).³ In this case, it serves to heighten the level of spectator empathy for Portia—an audience which, at Stratford-upon-Avon, is predominantly white.⁴ It also disassociates her character from much of the important critical work produced in reference to the play in the last thirty years, particularly in the Critical Race discourse.

Nowhere has the critical debate been extended to consider how the concepts of race and nation have influenced, and been portrayed in, literature-based adaptations (i.e., novelizations and drama) of *Merchant*. This paper aims to fill that gap. Table 1 shows that characters representing both Morocco and the pregnant Moor each appear in just two such adaptations. It is also clear that Portia, the largest part in *Merchant* and the fourth largest female role in the Shakespeare canon, seldom features as a significant character. This neglect of Portia has no single cause. Changing views of her character in relation to gender studies and women’s rights can be seen as one reason,⁵ but this paper argues that her association with racist attitudes, combined with her role as a representative of England and Englishness, cause a lack of desire to confront these traits and are also major contributors to Portia’s subsequent “unadaptability.” The

3 Ian Smith 2016 discusses how such “whitewashing” is evident in the critical legacy of the character of Hamlet in contrast to that of Othello.

4 The Arts Council England 2018–19 reports on the breakdown of audience ethnicity for the ACE National Portfolio, which includes the RSC. For the UK as a whole, audiences were reported as 84 percent white. For the Midlands region, which includes the RSC Stratford-upon-Avon theatres, the figure was 80 percent white (RSC 2020).

5 For more on this topic see Lewis 2020.

near-total exclusion of Morocco and the pregnant Moor is evidence of this. However, there are exceptions, and this paper explores those adaptations of *Merchant*, both dated and modern, that address issues of race and nation. Its main focus is *The Turquoise Ring* (2005) by Grace Tiffany, a novel that, while historical in genre, is relevant to the modern day in theme. Tiffany employs the device of polyphonic narrative voices, to both retain the complexity of character of Shakespeare’s Portia while, at the same time, opening her up to contrasting viewpoints. In this way, Tiffany’s novel demonstrates how a creative work can also operate on another level as criticism, something that reflects Tiffany’s career as both a Shakespeare scholar and a successful author of fiction, although her critical work on *Merchant* is not focused on race.

Table 1: Adaptations of *Merchant* in Fiction and Drama

Year	Author	Title	Portia ⁶	Morocco	Pregnant Moor
Fiction					
1850	Cowden Clarke, Mary	<i>The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines</i>	X	X	
1944	Baum, Vicki	<i>Hotel Berlin ’43</i>			
1984	Peters, Elizabeth	<i>Die for Love</i>			
1987	Isler, Alan	“The Monster” in <i>The Bacon Fancier</i>			
1987	Jong, Erica	<i>Serenissima</i>			
1995	Rushdie, Salman	<i>The Moor’s Last Sigh</i>			
1997	Phillips, Caryl	<i>The Nature of Blood</i>			X
1999	Pressler, Mirjam	<i>Shylock’s Daughter</i>			
2002	Kellerman, Faye	<i>The Quality of Mercy</i>			
2003	Hawke, Simon	<i>The Merchant of Vengeance</i>			
2004	Cohen, Paula Marantz	<i>Much Ado about Jessica Kaplan</i>			
2005	Tiffany, Grace	<i>The Turquoise Ring</i>	X	X	X
2014	Moore, Christopher	<i>The Serpent of Venice</i>			
2015	Jacobson, Howard	<i>Shylock is my Name</i>	X		
Drama					
1701	Granville, George	<i>The Jew of Venice</i>	X		
1802	Valpy, Richard	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	X		
1924	Ervine, Saint John Greer	<i>The Lady of Belmont</i>	X		
1931	Lewisohn, Ludwig	<i>The Last Days of Shylock</i>			
1976	Wesker, Arnold	<i>The Merchant</i>	X		
1977	Marowitz, Charles	<i>Variations on The Merchant of Venice</i>			

⁶ Indicates if a character called, or based on, Portia plays a significant role in the adaptation.

Year	Author	Title	Portia ⁶	Morocco	Pregnant Moor
1996	Leiren-Young, Mark	<i>Shylock</i>			
1996	Carr, Marina	<i>Portia Coughlan</i>	X		
1996	Gurney, A.R.	<i>Overtime: A Modern Sequel to The Merchant of Venice</i>	X		
1999	Armstrong, Gareth	<i>Shylock</i>			
1999	Goldenberg, Daniel	<i>Le Grand Role</i>			
2001	Stewart, Patrick	<i>Shylock: Shakespeare’s Alien</i>			
2008	Pascal, Julia	<i>The Shylock Play</i>			
2019	Mantell, Sarah, B.	<i>Everything That Never Happened: A Provocative Escape</i>			

“Enter . . . Morocco, a tawny Moor” (2.1.0.1)

The stage direction above, announcing the Prince of Morocco, is the only one in the play to contain a reference to skin color. While Shylock is demarcated by his religion when introduced as “the Jew,” Morocco is differentiated by both his “Moor(ish)” religion and his “tawny” skin color (see stage directions for 1.3; 2.1). The other (white) characters are exempted from this racialized denotation. The importance of Morocco’s pigmentation to how Shakespeare intends him to be received is further emphasized by his opening remarks: “Mislike me not for my complexion / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun” (2.1.1–2), and this has already been preceded by Portia’s, “If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me” (1.2.96–8), on hearing of Morocco’s impending arrival. The third use of the word “complexion” in reference to Morocco is Portia’s dismissive remark following his failure in the “caskets test”: “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.79). “Complexion” is a word that, in Shakespeare’s time, also had an extended meaning relating to the “constitution . . . of mind, disposition, [or] temperament” (OED 2020), but it seems clear that the uses of “complexion” in regard to Morocco, not only refer to skin color but, as Kyle Grady asserts, also indicate “a salient prejudice concerning dark skin” in the play (70, n11).⁷

Of the two adaptations of *Merchant* in which Morocco appears, such a “prejudice” is clearly evidenced by one of the characters in the first: Mary Cowden Clarke’s “Portia; The Heiress of Belmont,” one of the novellas that forms *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1850). Cowden Clarke’s depiction of the young Portia as a girl who yearns for learning might have drawn the disapproval of some male Victorian commentators but, this apart, she is the epitome of idealized Victorian womanhood. Her charitable nature

⁷ Some editors, such as John Russell Brown in the 1964 Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ed., have sought to use this alternative meaning of “complexion” as “temperament” to deflect from the racist nature of Portia’s remark, thereby exemplifying the type of aversion to engagement with Portia’s true nature discussed in this paper (see Drakakis 2010, 268n).

is eulogized, and she is courteous and submissive, as expected in a woman of Cowden Clarke’s era. It is important to note, given what is to come, that books such as *Girlhood* were considered as much conduct manuals for girls as they were educational, and according to Richard Altick, Cowden Clarke took the view that “from the example of Shakespeare’s women . . . the Victorian girl may learn all she need know about how to behave and be virtuous” (232). Set against such a statement, a scene in the story becomes even more sinister and exposes the level of racism that was considered acceptable at the time, although it should be stated that it cannot be assumed to represent Cowden Clarke’s personal view on these matters. Portia is enjoying a gondola ride, accompanied by an older noblewoman who is acting as her chaperone. Cowden Clarke uses this passage for the occasion where Portia first sees and makes eye contact with Bassanio. Morocco’s ship is close by, and Portia sits mutely as her companion casts racist slurs at him:

Yonder is the galley of his highness the prince of Morocco . . .
 who, I understand, is so courteous and pleasant-spoken, that
 you forget he is black. But for my part, I can’t fancy a black
 man could be so agreeable as a white man; I own I have
 prejudices, and that’s one of mine,—I hate people of colour. (Clarke 1906, 74)

This is the only appearance of Morocco in the novella and it is difficult now to gauge Cowden Clarke’s intentions. It could be intended as an example of how bad influences cause racism to form in the minds of young people. In Cowden Clarke’s defense, there are no such racist comments about Othello in her prequel to Desdemona’s story in *Girlhood*. Or, taking a less conciliatory view, the passage might simply be indicative of the ingrained colonialism and inherent racism in imperialist Britain, something that Portia assimilates in Cowden Clarke’s novella and is supported by Shakespeare’s play written some 250 years earlier. The problem is that the novella contains no response to the statement, no balancing viewpoint to this type of racism that was undoubtedly present in Victorian society. With the cultural resonance that “Shakespeare” embodies, and the nostalgic esteem with which the Victorian era is viewed, such attitudes help to form a bedrock for the racism still prevalent in Britain today and prove difficult to dislodge when so ensconced in the cultural heritage of a society.

While Portia’s opening and closing remarks on Morocco are overtly racist, there is more to examine in the tensions at play between the two. Bassanio describes Portia as “fair and, fairer than that word” (1.1.161), whose “sunny locks / Hang on her temples like a golden fleece” 1.1.168–9). R. W. Desai asserts that by giving Portia “traits of the northerners in contradiction to her actual southern origin,” Shakespeare aligns her with such racialized concepts as those expounded by Jean Bodin (1530–1596), who enumerated the “superiority” of inhabitants of northern Europe, and opens Portia to accusations of falseness (308). Travelers’ accounts of the time, such as Fynes Moryson’s *An Itinerary* (1617), disapprove of the artifice of Venetian women and their “affecting to have yellow hair, white skins, and cherry cheeks, all by art” (quoted in Halio 2000, 458–59). Bassanio is unable to hide his anxiety that Portia’s “golden mesh” (3.2.122) of

hair might also turn out to be “those crisped, snaky, golden locks” (3.2.92) that are “the dowry of a second head” (3.2.95). Citing as evidence other “darker” Shakespeare heroines, such as Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*, with support from Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*—“beauty herself is black” (sonnet 132)—Desai claims that Portia’s characterization and attitude to dark skin contradicts Shakespeare’s own.⁸ Indeed, Kim Hall (1995) comments on similar notions expounded by other sonneteers, such as Philip Sidney, asserting that they also “proclaim black beautiful in the face of contemporary standards” (111). The idea of Portia’s falseness is reinforced by the astonishing contradiction in her words to Morocco during his casket scene. Having likened him to “a devil” before his arrival, she tells Morocco:

But if my father had not scanted me
 . . .
 Yourself, renowned prince, then stood as fair
 As any comer I have looked on yet
 For my affection (2.1.17–22)

There is some form of insincerity involved here whichever way this is viewed: whether Portia means this in earnest or, as some may suspect given her previous disdain for any of her suitors, with fallacious intent.

Tiffany brings all these elements—falseness, racism, and Black beauty—into play in her characters in *The Turquoise Ring* and uses them to create a balance of positive and negative traits through which she retains the inconsistent and complex nature of Shakespeare’s Portia. *Turquoise* is a historical novel structured into five separate storylines, each recounted in a third-person female voice. The first four narrators are Leah (Shylock’s wife), Jessica, Nerissa, and Portia, with the final section assigned to Xanthe, a servant of Portia’s, and Tiffany’s incarnation of the Moorish woman made pregnant by Lancelot in the play. This polyphonic device enables the author to present multiple and conflicting viewpoints of the same character: thus, Morocco is seen through the eyes of Portia, Nerissa, and Xanthe.

Tiffany’s Portia, like Shakespeare’s, is a product of privilege and the distorted sense of entitlement that brings with it:

For her, Incan labourers dug gold from their mountain mines; bent-backed
 East Indian women culled pods from their plants and pounded them into
 Saffron . . .
 With awe Nerissa watched barrels of grain roll into kitchens . . .
 fruit of the work of peasants like her father. . . She marveled at Portia’s
 serene acceptance . . . [Portia] thought herself arbiter of some natural order (205–6)

8 It should be noted that, in other sonnets, “black” is used in a negative manner, such as, in Sonnet 147, with its closing line, “Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.”

As in *Merchant*, this is Portia as Elizabeth I. Shakespeare’s Portia has many similarities to the early modern queen. Leah Marcus notes how Portia is one of the cross-dressing heroines who represent “dazzling, idealized images of Elizabeth’s sexual multivalence” (qtd. in Andrews 2014, 391). Other parallels include the unsuitability of Portia’s suitors, her learning in foreign languages, such as, Latin and French, her “fair” beauty, and her skill in rhetoric, so unusual for a woman at that time, and discussed in detail by Allison Heisch⁹ and Marcus (see Heisch 1975; Marcus 1988; Van Pelt 2009, 16–38; Schama 2000, 330–95). Tiffany retains all these traits but makes particular use of one further resemblance related to Elizabeth’s prowess in oratory, where she repeatedly referred to herself in male terms, such as “prince” (Marcus 1988, 152). Simon Schama asserts that in subjecting “her body natural to her body politic,” Elizabeth invented “something new in the history of the monarchy: the androgynous prince” (333). In *Merchant*, Portia emulates this in the trial scene. In Tiffany’s *Turquoise* (2005), Portia likewise “baffle[s] gender” and, to Nerissa, seems “neither male nor female, but both things at once” (195). This Portia has a “real androgyny” through which she subverts patriarchal control by subjecting her body to her mind, that is expert in law, in particular. Here, Tiffany transforms Portia’s “falseness” into something affirmative. Her androgyny, accompanied as it is with the necessary male disguises (and, hence, the “false” element), allows Portia access into areas from which she would be otherwise barred as a woman, such as Church councils, where law is debated. Set in a time before feminism, Tiffany’s Portia subverts convention. Her education and intelligence desert her, however, in her views on people of other races or religions, where she succumbs to hearsay and myth. Her opinions on Blackness also mirror those of Elizabeth and Elizabethan society.

When Morocco first appears in *Turquoise*, the reader could be forgiven for missing him. His visit is described briefly, in retrospect, by Nerissa who is angry with Portia’s behavior. Nerissa does not name Morocco nor, significantly, does she mention the color of his skin. She relates only that the suitor had “come very far,” that he was “cruelly mocked” by Portia because “his face had displeased her” while “pronouncing herself well rid of him” (216). Nerissa tells Portia that she saw her “maidservant wince when you laughed at his face,” but Portia replies, “The Moor? She does not matter” (216). It is only later, when Portia is the narrator, that the identity of this suitor is confirmed, describing him as “the Moroccan one you liked so well” to Nerissa, and it is still further on in the novel that a very different view of Morocco is shared by Xanthe: she saw “an enormously tall black man with rings in his earlobes and a shaven head. He had the handsomest face she had ever seen” (252; 331). But Xanthe also casts light on how Morocco would have seemed alien to Portia, recounting how his hand “gripped a curved sword” with which he claimed he “slew the enemies of Allá” (331). “Do you mean Christian soldiers?” was Portia’s reply (331).

As Gustav Ungerer explains, trade between England and Morocco was well established in the 1590s and Elizabeth had received a delegation from Morocco in 1589, with another rumored in 1595, around the time *Merchant* was written, in order to pursue a pact between the two countries, to the detriment of Spain

9 See Heisch 1975 for an account of Elizabeth’s care in constructing her speeches, her manipulation of them depending on audience, and her realization of rhetoric as propaganda.

(102–3). That such an agreement was never reached is both evocative of Morocco’s failure in the casket test and, as Ungerer asserts, acknowledgement of the irreconcilable differences between the two cultures involved. Ungerer contends that Portia’s attitude to her Islamic suitor is heavily influenced by “[t]he body of comment by Christian authors on the aggressive sexuality and cruelty of Muslim rulers” (112). Furthermore, Morocco embodies fears of miscegenation which, as Hall (1992) asserts, “responds to growing concerns over English national identity and culture” as foreign trade develops (88). In both Portia’s, and the original audience’s, eyes she is confronted with a future that might see her ensconced in a harem and subject to forced conversion and rape. As Ungerer suggests, Morocco’s “stage portrait . . . conforms . . . to the transgressive Moor” and the claim that his conquests include “[t]he best regarded virgins of our clime” would only serve to increase unease about his character (112; 2.1.10).

With these thoughts in mind, Portia’s peremptory dismissal of Morocco in the play is more understandable, no matter how blatantly racist it may now appear. It was also the response expected by the early modern audience from the white “English” heroine of the play. Ungerer notes that Morocco is foregrounded in comparison with the other suitors, including Arragon, who “is accorded just one reception” in contrast with Morocco’s two (104). Perhaps more significantly, he is also the only one to be formally dismissed by Portia with her “A gentle riddance” (2.7.78) sending him on his way, a rejection embellished by Tiffany to, “Good riddance to his black devil’s face” (332). It is a command that emulates contemporary events in Elizabethan England outside of the theatre. Elizabeth issued an open letter to the Lord Mayor of London in 1596 complaining of “divers blackmoors brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here too many” (Elizabeth I), thus pushing many of the native population “to great extremity” (Elizabeth I) for want of work, and stating that “[h]er majesty’s pleasure therefore is that those kind of people should be sent forth of the land” (Elizabeth I). Again, it appears that the Elizabethan era sets in motion a mistrust and antagonism towards immigrants, and particularly those of color, that remains present in England throughout the generations and up to the current day. Through her contrasting viewpoints of Morocco, Tiffany both preserves the Elizabethan sentiments present in the Shakespeare text while, through Xanthe and Nerissa, and provides a more balanced view of the racial tensions involved, one that is more applicable to a modern-day retelling, thus offering a way of handling Portia’s problematic relationship with race.

“the getting up of the negro’s belly” (3.5.29)

Research by Miranda Kaufmann (2008, 366–371) into Elizabeth’s “expulsion” warrants suggests that these were, in fact, only small-scale deals with trader merchants in exchange for the repatriation of English prisoners held by the Spanish, rather than mass evictions. Kaufmann’s work, however, confirms that many of the Elizabethan aristocracy owned Black servants/slaves. It also confirms that merchants were trading in Black people for profit. Furthermore, it is a practice to which Shylock refers in the trial scene in *Merchant* when, in addressing the court, he declares: “You have among you many a purchased slave” (4.1.89). The

evidence for this, it appears, is presented in the play itself, not in the homes of Antonio or Bassanio or their acquaintances, but in Portia’s own house of Belmont.

Hall (1992, 89) draws attention to the scene in 3.5, that takes place prior to Shylock’s allegation, where Lorenzo accuses Lancelet of “the getting up of the negro’s belly: the Moor is with child by you” (3.5.29–30), to which Lancelet begins his reply: “It is much that the Moor should be more than reason” (3.5.31–2).¹⁰ The woman referred to in this exchange is a member of Portia’s serving staff and, according to John Drakakis (2010, 327n), Lancelet’s riddle insinuates that the woman is “quantitatively bigger than she ought to be.” For Hall, however, this “pregnant, unheard, unnamed, and unseen. . .black woman. . .exposes. . .[a] nexus of anxieties over gender, race, religion, and economics. . .which surrounds the various possibilities of miscegenation” in the play (89). Just as her body is “quantitatively bigger” then, her appearance signifies something much greater than her fleeting mention in the text. In making the woman Black/Moorish, Shakespeare also endorses Hall’s insight that “[b]lack people were brought to England not only as slaves with the objectification of that state but also as curiosities,” a point emphasized by Yi-Fu Tuan who notes that the visibility of such slaves “served luxury needs and prestige” (212; qtd. in Hall, 1995, 212). Following these arguments, it appears the most reasonable explanation for this woman to be part of the workforce at Belmont is that Portia is a slave owner (see also Loomba 2002, 138). Not only that, but considering Lancelet’s riposte to Lorenzo, which is both derisory and lacking in respect for the woman — “if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for” (3.5.32–3) — there seems a distinct possibility that Portia (or, at the very least, the Belmont household under her charge) has turned a blind eye to an act of rape. While the Shakespeare text leaves the audience to construct such events for themselves, if indeed they register at all, adaptations of the play can engage more freely with such peripheral characters and incidents, and *Turquoise* does just that.

In naming her Moorish woman Xanthe, Tiffany links her to a tradition of Moorish women serving white mistresses in early modern theatre, where characters such as Zanthia from John Marston’s *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606), Zanche from John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1611), and Zanthia/Abdella from *The Knight of Malta* (1618) by John Fletcher, Nathan Field, and Philip Massinger, precede her (see Dadabhoy 2019a, 243–44).¹¹ The immediate effect of Tiffany’s strategy to use Xanthe as one of her narrators is to bring to life a character dehumanized by Shakespeare: she becomes a flesh-and-blood individual with a name and a voice, someone through whom the intersectional experience of being Black, female, and serving class can be expressed. Despite her “visibility,” as Hall mentions, through the color of her skin, and as an object of desire as a woman, and as a servant constantly performing menial tasks around the household,

10 In a study of representations of “the Moor” on the early-modern stage in the late Elizabethan period, Emily Bartels (2009, 5) argues that “Moors occupy and define [several] kinds of cultural intersections,” thereby suggesting that the meaning of the term “Moor” is not a stable one in early modern theatre. It is surprising, however, that Bartels fails to consider this single, but important, line from *Merchant* in which the terms “negro” and “Moor” are clearly used interchangeably, despite arguments to the contrary in some quarters over the early modern usage of these words.

11 I am indebted to Ambereen Dadabhoy for drawing my attention to this connection.

Xanthe is invisible to Portia’s eyes (92). When Portia says to Nerissa, “The Moor? She does not matter,” it is the first reference to Xanthe in the novel (Tiffany 2005, 216). Combined with her remarks about Morocco—“his black devil’s face” (332)—Tiffany’s Portia exemplifies Elizabeth’s cultivation of whiteness and the cult that grew out of it, a whiteness defined against the alien Other that, as Arthur Little claims, “works arduously to prove black bodies to be of no matter and white ones to be *race-free*” (95). What Xanthe discovers is that, at Belmont, not only is she of “no matter” but she does not even have the right to decide what happens to her own Black, female body. When Portia watches Bassanio’s party arriving at Belmont, she sees Xanthe help Lancelet with a clothing trunk and notes that he “spared her the leer he generally cast over the maidservants’ bodies” (Tiffany 2005, 245). Portia’s presumption that Lancelet “had no interest in Moorish women” is, however, wide of the mark. Xanthe initially resists his attempts to tempt her to his bed and thinks “him a clown” but, when he finds her alone in the kitchen one night, and Xanthe again refuses his advances, he overpowers and rapes her, reminding her, as he does so, to “[r]emember that you are a slave” (Tiffany 2005, 325; 328).

Slavery, racism, and xenophobia are all commonplace in Tiffany’s Venice. To Nerissa, a woman who has been a servant, a prostitute, and a courtesan, who has survived and improved her lot through luck and her (white) beauty, these elements are visible. At the docks, she notices how “the slaves carried trunks and rolled barrels, the sweat on their dark backs shining in the last rays of the sun,” she recognizes Graziano as “a mean-spirited fool” who rants “in the foulest terms about the aliens in Venice” (Tiffany 2005, 306; 245). To Portia, who has three Moorish women at Belmont, yet “confuse[s] them all,” thinking them “either all one woman or twenty,” all of this is unseen (Tiffany 2005, 321). Before the rape, Nerissa, not forgetting her own past, befriends Xanthe and empathizes with her over Portia’s poor treatment of her Moorish servants. Following the rape, through which attack Xanthe has become pregnant, Nerissa attempts to console Xanthe by promising to help find her “a fine husband” or, failing this, suggesting she knew women who “had ways to rid themselves of the seed” through an herbal potion (Tiffany 2005, 256; 335). Xanthe, however, rejects the help of the well-meaning (white-privileged) Nerissa. It seems the two women can connect through the intersectional prejudices of class and gender but are unable to bridge the third inequality of race.

Xanthe’s pregnancy is a problem. It is a problem for Belmont and, by extension, for the state. As Hall (1992) asserts, “the offspring of Lancelet and the Moor presents a triple threat [in that] it would produce a half-black, half-Christian child from the already starving lower classes who threatens to upset the desired balance of consumption” (92). In the early modern period, and in *Merchant*, the fertility of the Black woman is perceived as a threat. Indeed, Sydnee Wagner argues that this extends to other “non-white women . . . including Romani women, [and that] this vilification of hyper- and non-normative reproductivity is also paired with imagery of hyper-sexualization by white Europeans” (Wagner and Andrzejewski 2019). In Tiffany’s novel, Nerissa’s suggestion for aborting Xanthe’s child, which Nerissa describes as “[d]angerous, a little,” also carries worrying overtones when considered alongside Wagner’s observation—leaning on the work of Deirdre Cooper Owens—that gynecological practices, such as abortion, were founded at the

expense of enslaved black women, who were used as test subjects by the “Father of Gynaecology, J. Marion Sims” (335; Wagner and Andrzejewski 2019).

In *Turquoise*, Xanthe resolves to deal with her own problems—by leaving Belmont. Tiffany’s Moorish woman is not a slave, as Lancelet believes, but arrived at Belmont under her own volition, fleeing persecution in Spain. It is a path that was already taken by Shiloh (Shylock) in this tale, and Xanthe knew of Shiloh when she was a child in Toledo. In the words of her father, Xanthe is “crossed . . . [h]alf Jew from your mother, half Moor from me” (Tiffany 2005, 311). She seeks out Shiloh with whom she departs Venice for Amsterdam in the final scene of the novel. This might be read as Xanthe and Shiloh taking the control of their lives away from (white) Portia and Venice or it might reflect the expulsions of “blackamoors” requested by Elizabeth I. The interpretation is left to the reader, but it is difficult to imagine that the problems faced by Xanthe in Venice would not be repeated in Amsterdam, where she would once again come up against the prejudices found at the intersection not only of race and gender but also of class.¹²

According to Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin, “race is often privileged above other factors of self-identification such as class,” contending that through the construction of “whiteness”, working-class whites “are manipulated into deriving a sense of superiority and psychological satisfaction by placing their whiteness above their own socioeconomic inequality” (211). Drawing on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and David Roediger, Orkin and Joubin pinpoint the late nineteenth century Reconstruction Era, the period following the American Civil War, as the time when this prioritization of race over class started to emerge amongst the white working class in the United States. In England, the placing of race above class was already present in Elizabethan times, as is evident in the expulsion requests of the queen, both in the 1596 letter, and again in the 1601 warrant that begins, “WHEREAS the Queen’s majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth” (National Archives 2020). For such words to be used on behalf of the queen, it seems certain that her court was aware of rumblings coming from the lower classes about “the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm” (National Archives 2020). Indeed, Imtiaz Habib lists some of the vocations black people undertook in Elizabethan England: “trumpeter, diver, royal page, entertainer, laundress, servant, and maid” as well as professional soldier, needlemaker, metal worker, and goldsmith (4).

In *Merchant*, the idea of white superiority, the importance of race above class, is portrayed at both the upper-class level through Portia’s dismissal of Morocco (after all, Morocco is a prince while Portia is only a wealthy landowner), and at the lower-class level in Lancelet’s behavior. Lancelet, a servant first of Shylock and then Bassanio, considers himself superior both to Jessica on racial/religious grounds (despite her conversion to Christianity), and to the Moor who is carrying his child, whom he disdains and who will be left, it appears, to raise the child on her own with the impact that has on her status at Belmont left unknown

12 Amsterdam gained a reputation for tolerance to Jews in the late sixteenth century that allowed them freedom to practice their religion (Rijksmuseum 2000).

(something that may, in fact, confirm she is a slave in the play). In *Turquoise*, Tiffany zooms in on the white superiority personified by Lancelet, showing his sense of entitlement in his appropriation of Xanthe’s body in the detailed account of her rape. Because of his race, his whiteness, Lancelet acts like a slave owner when, in fact, his status has more in common with the enslaved than with the masters.

Shakespeare’s “unheard, unnamed, and unseen” black woman is certainly not the last of her kind (Hall 1992, 89). Echoes of her, and the privileging of race over class, can also be found in Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a novel that adapts elements of both *Merchant* and *Othello*, using multiple storylines, one strand of which depicts the founding of Israel following the Second World War. The novel’s final scene portrays the experience of Malka, a young African Jewish woman, who is plucked from her own, unnamed country to begin a new life in this “Promised Land.” “*We, the people of the House of Israel, we were going home*” she thinks, but, once there, living in a culture that is totally alien to her, Malka finds only discrimination due to the color of her skin (Phillips 1997, 203). She is trained as a nurse but is unable to find work, meaning that she is reduced to earning money as a “hostess” in a club for men. Her people have been rejected in the new state and Malka sums up their despair: “*This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did*” (Phillips 1997, 209).

Merchant’s Moorish woman persists into other twentieth-century fiction too, such as, Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* (*The Outsider*) (1942), where just such a woman is the catalyst for the central incident of the novel, and where she is still referred to as a “Moor” (or *Mauresque*, in the French original). She even endures in Algerian writer Kamel Daoud’s adaptation of Camus’ classic, *The Meursault Investigation* (2015), where she remains voiceless and, in order to receive a name, is downgraded from sister to whore. But, two final points on Xanthe: first, it is to be lauded that she is given a name and a voice in Tiffany’s novel, but it is unfortunate that she is also endowed with a strange, psychic power—she sees visions when danger threatens. As the only Black woman in the story, it seems unnecessary to add this exotic twist to her characterization, and it serves to reintroduce an “otherness” that her personification does much to otherwise remove. Second, Xanthe is the victim of overt prejudice in the novel, but racism often works in far more subtle ways, and this is something that Tiffany fails to explore in *Turquoise*.

“Veiling an Indian beauty” (3.2.99)

There is another racist remark in *Merchant*, often overlooked, that lies almost hidden in Bassanio’s “casket” speech:

Thus ornament is but the guilèd shore
 To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf
 Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
 The seeming truth which cunning times put on. (3.2.97–100)

Having expressed his fears over “golden locks” (3.2.92) and “supposed fairness” (3.2.94), Bassanio moves without pause from white or “fair” beauty to dark “Indian beauty.” If he is anxious about being deceived by fair-skinned women, he has a positive dread of those with a darker beauty, whom he views as “dangerous” and “cunning.” It is another speech that encapsulates the fears of miscegenation present in *Merchant*, with the “threatening possibility that English identity will be subsumed under foreign difference” (Hall 1992, 88). Ania Loomba observes how this passage of Bassanio’s plays a prominent role in the way Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1996), appropriates the themes and content of *Merchant* (as well as *Othello*) within its text—a very different form of adaptation to Tiffany’s reimagining of the play and its prehistory in *Turquoise* (2005).

Rushdie’s novel is a meandering fable, replete with fantastical characters and events, that combines magical realism, family saga, and Indian history to probe the intersections of race, religion, gender, and class in a story of “strife and love in a multi-religious, multiracial land” (Loomba 2002, 135). The narrator (Moraes Zogoiby) is nicknamed “Moor” (or “mór”, which in Hindi means “peacock”) because of his dark skin (Loomba 2002, 135). He is the only son of a mixed marriage. His mother, Aurora da Gama, is the beautiful and rich heiress of a Roman Catholic Indian family who descend from Portuguese spice traders. His father, meanwhile, is Abraham Zogoiby, originally a lowly duty manager in Aurora’s family business, not only poor but also from an Indian Jewish family.

Zogoiby, however, descends from a bastard line, and is, like Tiffany’s Xanthe, part-Jewish and part-Moor. Aurora allows him to take over the running of the business but, like Antonio in *Merchant*, all his ventures flounder on the high seas (in this case, intercepted by German U-boats). To revive his flagging commercial interests, and without Aurora’s knowledge, Zogoiby makes a pact with his mother to hand over his firstborn male child to be raised in the Jewish faith and “for these promised pounds of unborn flesh she delivered Abraham her wealth”—the inference to Shylock’s bond is clear and it is at this point that Rushdie turns to metafiction, interrupting the flow of his novel to discuss the prejudice ensconced in the text of *Merchant* and to contrast his Aurora with Shakespeare’s Portia (Rushdie 1996, 112).

“[W]hen I say our tale’s Aurora was no Portia, I do not mean it wholly as a criticism” states the story’s narrator (Moor), but sounding suspiciously like Rushdie’s own voice, and continues on to compare the attributes of the two women (Rushdie 1996, 115). Both Portia and Aurora are young, rich, and intelligent but, unlike Portia, Aurora “chose her own husband” and he is Jewish, “as Portia’s could never have been” (Rushdie 1996, 115). There is, however, a contradiction in this statement. Having already commented, somewhat sardonically, that Bassanio chose the right casket by “happy chance,” either the contest was rigged (and, therefore, Portia also chose her husband) or there was nothing to stop a Jewish suitor from winning Portia (Rushdie 1996, 114). More consistently, both women are considered beautiful, but Aurora’s attraction — “at seventeen, near the height of her very Indian beauty” — is “most unlike” that of Portia — or, in other words, Aurora’s beauty is “dark” whereas Portia’s is “fair” (Rushdie 1996, 115). Having already

noted that Portia, through her dismissal of Morocco is “[n]o lover then, of Moors!” and citing Bassanio’s speech, Rushdie/Moor asks the reader to consider, “this paragon’s explanation of his [casket] choice” for whom “Indian beauty is like a ‘dangerous sea’; or analogous to ‘cunning times’! Thus Moors, Indians, and of course ‘the Jew’ . . . are waved away” (Rushdie 1996, 114–15). The irony is clear when he goes on to describe Portia and Bassanio as, “a fair-minded couple indeed; a pair of Daniels come to judgment” (Rushdie 1996, 115). As an Indian author, it seems both pertinent and correct that Rushdie should highlight this particular passage—but, he is the only writer who has.

Conclusion

This paper opened with a quotation from the BSA 2019 conference on “Shakespeare, Race and Nation.” In the same panel from which that was taken, Cathy Baldwin—a schoolteacher and PhD research student with the Open University—presented the results of a survey she carried out with her teenage students concerning *Merchant*. In the survey, the students—from an all-girls school in London where 90 percent have English as an additional language—were asked: “Is there anything you have noticed in the Shakespeare plays you have studied that you can relate to your own life or to the life of someone you know? If so, what?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, many students related the treatment of Shylock and the Jews in *Merchant* to the everyday racism they saw, or were victims of, in modern-day London. Perhaps more surprisingly, none of them mentioned Portia’s racism in their responses.¹³ When questioned about this, Baldwin suggested it could be due to the way the play is taught, but those students who had mentioned Portia saw her as “someone to be emulated, a feminist icon, for saving Antonio when the men could not.”

This reaction to Portia, from a group of young people who might be subject to the same type of racism that she represents, is similar to that seen in Victorian times, and suggests that Portia is still seen as a positive character, as she was in the nineteenth century, and that her prejudice is skimmed past and overlooked. This appears to be an example of the opinion expounded by scholars such as Hall and Smith, who argue that the construction of whiteness, which can be traced back to Elizabeth I and her era, has led to “white” being seen as the default position—even by such a diverse group as those partaking in Baldwin’s survey. Portia, representative of Elizabeth I, representative of England, can be seen as the default white/right view in the play. As Ambereen Dadabhoy claims, “through the . . . logic of whiteness”, white people are considered “to be neutral and objective” and this “‘assumption’ that white people are just people, the only ones imbued with the universality that accompanies such a designation goes hand-in-glove with the construction of Shakespeare as the spokesman of humanity, the speaker for mankind, and the prophet of the human condition” (Dadabhoy 2019b, 2). More than any other character in *Merchant*, Portia is Shakespeare’s

13 This finding is set against a background of rapidly rising hate crime in England and Wales according to statistics released by the House of Commons Library. These show that police recorded hate crime figures for crimes related to race increased by 120 percent between 2011/12 and 2018/19, while crimes related to religion increased by 429 percent over the same period (House of Commons Library 2019).

mouthpiece for these “universal” themes. Her dealings with her suitors and her handling of the trial make her so, and thereby, her faults and wrongdoings which, by extension, are also the failings of the nation, are obscured and dismissed.

The body of critical work examining Shakespeare in relation to race and nation has flourished only in the last thirty years. This possibly explains why there are so few responses to this area in fiction and drama. Many of *Merchant*'s afterlives respond to its anti-Semitism but only Tiffany's *Turquoise* (2005) engages fully with the other areas of race touched upon in Shakespeare's text. A. R. Gurney's play *Overtime: A Modern Sequel to “The Merchant of Venice”* (1996) and, very fleetingly, Erica Jong's *Serenissima* (1987), both portray Portia as a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), thereby associating her with the establishment elite of American society, but neither of these adaptations adds anything to the debate on race. Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997), while it touches on the character of the pregnant Moor as mentioned, concentrates its main investigation of race through a reimagining of *Othello*. Tiffany's novel, on the other hand, creates a new character from one minor exchange in the Shakespeare text and through the very visible Xanthe, she explores the racial tensions that are present, but, at times, simmer below the surface, in *Merchant*. Xanthe touches on the intersectional factors of race and religion, gender, and class. She personifies Loomba's assertion that *Merchant* “demonstrates . . . race was never solely attached to skin color, but also that skin color was never too far from any articulation of race” (160).

Hall (1995) poses the question: How “do we stop regarding only people of color as racial subjects?” (268). Tiffany attempts to achieve this through her multiple (female) narrative voices—two of Jewish origin, two white (superficially Italian but effectively English/American), and one Black (of mixed racial heritage)—and this does offer a possible answer to Hall's query. It is important though, while acknowledging the difference in each point of view, not to reinforce any voice as “Other.” Although the novel ends with Xanthe's voice and her possible escape from oppression, Tiffany falls into this trap by characterizing her as a mystic.

English opinions on race and racism, and hence related views of Portia, have changed over time. In Shakespeare's own time, for Portia to find a Black man attractive would most likely have been considered perverse by his contemporary audience. *Merchant* plays to these expectations in Portia's treatment of Morocco, and Tiffany's modern adaptation examines the impact of those beliefs in *Turquoise*. By the Victorian era, racism was considered a positive by many, as suggested by Cowden Clarke's portrayal of the young Portia in her novella. In the twenty-first century, the Victorian position can still be found in the espousals of white supremacists but, in general, racism is considered a negative, something that Tiffany's novel addresses through her characterization of Xanthe, and Rushdie tackles when appropriating *Merchant* in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, by comparing his Indian heroine, Aurora, with Shakespeare's Portia.

On one hand, Portia’s link to racism can be put forward as a reason for the lack of perceptive literary adaptations of her character in the last fifty years. On the other, as someone who represents the formation of national identity in relation to the “Other,” Portia should be more relevant than ever in current times. At the end of a decade that saw hate crime more than double in the UK, while immigration control formed a major pillar of the Leave campaign in the 2016 EU Referendum and the victorious Conservative party strategy in the 2019 UK election, it seems clear that many English/British people continue to hold this view of national identity—something that has been passed down since Elizabethan times (House of Commons Library 2019). Perhaps it is the intersectional associations with gender and class that have made British authors (in particular) shy away from Portia’s portrayal. Or, if Portia represents England, perhaps it is that, as this chapter opened, “we really want Portia not to be racist” but there is no escaping the fact that she is.

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