The Problematic Gaze in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Introduction

By surveying Shakespeare's comedies that employ disguise as a plot device, it is clear that *Merchant* has an abundance of visual language. There are over one hundred references to eyes, seeing, looking, and gazing in this play. The only disguise-comedy with more than this is *As You Like It*. In these comedies, the visual language draws upon contemporary notions of visual culture in order to problematize the veracity of visual perception. The inability to perceive truth by looking is brought to the foreground in connection with the romantic plots. The power of the masculine gaze to perceive and/or control is questioned, as the male characters cannot perceive the true identity of the female characters with whom they are in love. This failure of perception takes different forms in each of the plays in this sub-genre. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare draws attention to the disguise plot with his emphasis on visual language, which establishes thematic tropes throughout the opening acts of the play and engages with several ideas from the visual cultures

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of his time. *Merchant* employs visual rhetoric in relation to the main romantic plot (Bassanio-Portia), in comedic scenes (Lancelot Gobbo and his father), in a secondary romantic plot (Lorenzo-Jessica), and in the dramatic climax of the trial. In all of these cases, Shakespeare emphasizes the various ways in which seeing is related to knowing, especially in relation to identity.

Perception in Early Modern Visual Culture

There is a growing body of historical scholarship that seeks to elucidate prevailing early modern attitudes toward visual art, and for my purposes, the relationship between visual art, visual perception, and the early modern stage. At the center of this work is the notion "that the eyes provided the most direct knowledge of things, based on the most distinctions and the widest range; in functional terms, they were the organs of power, liveliness, speed, and accuracy."[1] While this thinking may still have been prevalent in late-sixteenth century England, it had certainly become less dominant as a result of both prevailing aesthetic developments in perspective art (such as multiple-vanishing point perspective landscapes and anamorphic paintings), and the iconoclasm of the post-Reformation Protestant church. Important to my argument is that Shakespeare's work engages with early modern visual culture in two ways: first via the Classical notion of *ut pictura poesis*—as is painting so is poetry—and second through the visual nature of theatrical production, which itself becomes the object of iconoclastic ire during Shakespeare's time.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the dominance of visual perception is questioned, especially as a means for perceiving the truth. As recently as forty years ago, Huston Diehl argued, "In the Renaissance, then, man knows in part through his sense of sight."[2] More recent evidence suggests, rather, that "vision came to be characterized by uncertainty and unreliability, such that access to visual reality could no longer be normally guaranteed."[3] It is precisely this

uncertainty of visual perception that Shakespeare draws upon in *Merchant* and his other disguise comedies. The questioning of visual perception was, almost ironically, constructed by both the visual arts and the iconoclasm that sought to undermine the visual arts. "Perspective schemes in religious art at once heightened and questioned the human ability to see divinely," argues Mead, who continues, "Anamorphic designs and mannerist experiments played with the fragility of human visual sense."[4] Perspective art, developed in Renaissance Italy and first codified as a "science" by Leon Battista Alberti, used a vanishing point to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat canvas. But the original perspective paintings required a fixed perspective: the observer must assume the exact position of the painter in order to accurately perceive the three dimensions.[5] Over time, perspective paintings utilized multiple points, and were better understood as illusions rather than copies of reality, which Alberti first argued was the purpose of perspective art.[6] Thus, in concert with Clark and Mead, Thorne argues that by the early-seventeenth century "perspective had become synonymous with deceit in the English imagination."[7]

Theatre becomes implicated in the deceitfulness of visual perspective not only through its rhetorical ties to art (*ut pictura poesis*), but also as a result of the Puritanical attacks on early modern visual culture, which contributed to the notion of illusion as deceit. Post-Reformation iconoclasm sought to undermine the notion of visual art as a means to perceive divine truth, and as representative of nature.[8] Such attacks led to the destruction of countless religious icons, and the subversion of the eyes as a means to perceive. This Puritanical ideology extended beyond the visual arts to poetry and especially the dramatic poetry of the early modern playhouse. "Attacks on playhouses as centres of idolatrous activity," notes Chloe Porter, "are suggestive of the extent to which drama is a part of visual culture in the early modern period."[9] And so Shakespeare's plays, far from asserting the dominance of

visual perception, sought to further undermine any stable notion of perspective—first by utilizing similar perspectival techniques that became dominant in the visual arts of the time, and second by engaging with the iconoclasm of post-Reformation ideology (an engagement that is marked by great ambivalence).

The architecture of the early modern stage resisted singular perspectives. With observers taking up positions encompassing nearly 360-degrees around the stage, the visuality of early modern theatrical production had to privilege multiple perspectives. "The stage is in a sense a laboratory for commingling dramatic verse, moving statuary, hanging cloth, staged music, and the spectator's angle of sight," Mead claims.[10] In experimenting with perspective, especially in the comedies, Shakespeare comes to no clear conclusion regarding the power of the eye to ascertain truth. Rather, I argue, he utilizes the multiple perspectives co-present on and around the stage to subvert any notion of a singular perspective. Like a perspective portrait where the subject's eyes seem to follow the viewer, Shakespeare often reverses the gaze, and subverts audience expectations. As in anamorphic paintings, the centralized audience viewpoint looks like a jumble of shapes which only take on their true proportions when viewed from the margins. Shakespeare's plays "emphasize the relativistic and subjective qualities of perspective."[11] This is most often the case in the comedies, which according to Barbara Freedman "are notorious for games that reverse the look and entrap the audience . . . They no sooner tantalize us with a stable position of mastery than they mock this stance."[12] In the case of *Merchant*, the ability to perceive the truth visually is constantly mocked and subverted. By constructing a world that is so visually uncertain through his dramatic poetry and early modern stage conventions, Shakespeare connects his plays thematically with trends of thought that were developing in response to early modern visual cultures. In examining the play's dramatic structure,

I argue that Shakespeare thus privileges the perspectives of those who are seeing from the socio-cultural margins.

Visual Rhetoric in *The Merchant of Venice*

Despite the numerous articles and books dedicated to Shakespeare's visual rhetoric and his entanglement with early modern visual cultures, few offer more than a cursory mention of Merchant. Addressing this insufficiency, I provide a detailed reading of the play's visual rhetoric in what follows. I emphasize the ways in which Shakespeare subverts visual certainty, and how those subversions tend to privilege characters, specifically Portia and Shylock, outside the cultural hegemony of Christian Venice in the play.

In acts one and two, the visual rhetoric of the play is frequently used to establish the main romantic plot, and as a means to question identity. Portia, as the primary subject of the masculine gaze and the object of masculine desire in this play, is introduced by Bassanio as a means to an end: "to get clear of all the debts [he] owe[s]" (1.1.141). Several lines later, Bassanio again mentions her wealth before her beauty and wit. This establishes the homosociality of the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio.[13] When he does describe Portia, he focuses unsurprisingly on her eyes saying, "Sometimes from her eyes / I did receive fair speechless messages" (1.1.170-1). It may seem that Portia's gaze is being privileged here, imbued with power to deliver her truest desires to Bassanio via some telepathic connection. However, Bassanio's gaze is the more privileged, in that his eyes are the recipients of Portia's love message. Given that the Portia-Bassanio plot is the main driver of the play's action, it may also be that Shakespeare is tying Portia's gaze to tropes of the "lethal gaze" present in love poetry. Clark elucidates: "The dominant role of the eye in love imagery was also matched by the themes of 'possession of the eye' and voyeurism that flourished more darkly in contemporary misogyny."[14] This is especially plausible as Bassanio's language, already deeply misogynistic, later turns

even darker, equating love with torture. After Portia asks him to wait before making his choice, so that they can enjoy one another's company, he replies, "Let me choose, / For as I am, I live upon the rack" (3.2.25-26). It seems clear that Portia's gaze is only empowered to the point of being lethal to the man upon whom it falls.

Act two further serves to objectify Portia in men's eyes, and simultaneously commodifies Portia as Shakespeare introduces the audience to the casket test. As the Prince of Morocco attempts to flatter her, he exclaims that the whole world is traveling "to come view fair Portia" (2.7.49), a sentiment he reiterates just a few lines later saying that all want "to see fair Portia" (2.7.53). All the while, Portia has literally been reduced to an aesthetic work inside a commodity. The casket test serves to encapsulate her within a portrait, where she is literally the object of the artistic masculine gaze. Then, she is doubly encapsulated in a box of precious metal. The point here is, of course, that the men should not choose with their eyes, and realize that the least "beautiful" leaden box is the correct choice. The test ties into prevailing aesthetic ideas about the eyes and the gaze. The man who best recognizes that appearances are nothing more than artistic illusion, that the eyes mislead and fail to perceive the truth, will win the lady. Yet at the same time, the leaden casket contains the counterfeit of Portia, not she herself. This complicates the casket trial in that Portia is reduced to her portrait—note the homophonic links between her name and that word—and thus an aesthetic object which, as the prevailing iconoclastic ideology would have it, cannot be trusted. This is the lesson that Arragon learns in choosing the wrong casket: "the fool multitude that choose by show, / Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach, / Which pries not to th' interior" (2.9.28-30).

Acts one and two also begin the process of using sight and the gaze to problematize identity, setting up Portia's disguise plot which will affect the play's resolution. Despite his status

as the play's titular character, Antonio is noticeably absent throughout the play. Characters say very little about him other than that he is a good friend to Bassanio and a worthy gentleman. Thus he becomes something of a vanishing point: he must be there to create the three-dimensional world of the play, but he is nothing more than the imaginary point around which the play's perspectives are crafted. As such, it is interesting that Shylock is the only character whose opinion about Antonio is granted privilege in the early acts. As he and Bassanio negotiate the terms of the loan, Antonio enters and Shylock delivers an aside which begins, "How like a fawning publican he looks!" (1.3.41). The audience has already met Antonio, gazed upon him, and formed its opinion of him, but here Shylock is allowed a privileged moment with the audience to deliver his interpretation of Antonio's character. It is likely that Shakespeare's audience would have rejected Shylock's visual interpretation of Antonio's identity, but a modern audience is more sympathetic to the perspective of the erstwhile villain, which itself problematizes the very notion of perspective.

Issues of identity, and the ability to perceive identity by looking, continue throughout act two. Comically, Old Gobbo's blindness prevents him from perceiving his son Lancelot's true identity. Lancelot calls his practical joke "confusions" (2.2.36), seeming to connect the notion of appearance with artifice as was prevalent in early modern culture. Lancelot takes his joke to an extreme, claiming to his father that Lancelot had died. When the clown begins to reveal the truth, he says, "Indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that knows his own child" (2.2.73-75). Sight and wisdom become diametric opposites in this scene, revealing that even if the old man could see, his lack of wisdom would not allow him to perceive the truth through his eyes. In keeping with the tradition of allowing clowns to inadvertently reveal deeper truths, Shakespeare in this scene delivers one of his main

thematic statements: looking alone cannot reveal identity, it takes wisdom for that.

Act two also reveals the first disguise plot, setting the stage for Portia's disguise in act four. In order to escape from her father without being noticed, Jessica disguises herself as a boy and poses as her lover Lorenzo's torch-bearer. With her identity concealed, Jessica is ashamed of her appearance and does not want Lorenzo to gaze upon her. Lorenzo, to the contrary, seems to suggest that the artifice itself is aesthetically valuable, calling her disguise "the lovely garnish of a boy" (2.6.47). Of course, there are many implications in this line that could be addressed, but for my purposes Lorenzo seems to equate artifice and superficial beauty unproblematically. Jessica is evidently concerned with outward appearance, but Lorenzo sees through the deceptive illusion created by her disguise. As they prepare to elope, he says,

> For she is wise, if I can judge her,
> And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
> And true she is, as she hath proved herself.
> And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,
> Shall she be placed in my constant soul. (2.6.55-59)

Lorenzo is the only character capable of seeing without gazing, of knowing the truth without being deceived by his eyes. While many characters refer to Jessica as "fair" throughout the play, Lorenzo is the only one who first assesses her wisdom before her beauty, and values her for herself, not for the superficiality of her appearance.

Regarding the interconnectedness of the gaze and the body in early modern thought, Miran Bozovic claims, "In the body's encounter with the gaze, even such a basic notion as identity can become blurred and elusive."[15] Issues of identity and the gaze reach their apex in act three of *Merchant*. Early in act three, Shylock's most famous speech is predicated by a discussion of appearance. Shylock twice avers that Jessica is his "flesh and blood" (3.1.34, 37). Salarino responds, "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet

and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish" (3.1.38-39). Salarino emphasizes not the substance of the two, but the appearance. Throughout the play, Jessica is often described as "fair," which is also the most common adjective for Portia. This word has the double meaning of both "beautiful" and "pale," the latter of which seems to be Salarino's point in referring to Shylock as dark-skinned ("jet"). His second metaphor furthers his emphasis on outward appearance, using dark red wine as the stand-in for Shylock, and white Rhenish for Jessica. To Salarino and the other Venetians, it is the fact that Jessica looks less Jewish that makes her different from Shylock. The gaze of the Venetian insiders is privileged in that it is empowered to claim possession of Jessica, and to marginalize and categorize Shylock. This power is questioned, however, when Shylock launches into his famous rhetorical equivocation, which begins with, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.57-58). The eyes are the first characteristic that Shylock uses to equate Jews with Christians, and in so doing he draws attention to the problems of sight's veracity. The rhetorical use of eyes as the connection between Othered Jews and Venetian Christians in the play and the earlier privileging of Shylock's sight (1.3) together with the play's concern with obscuring visual truth suggest that even in the deeply anti-Semitic fiction of this piece there is room for a multiplicity of perspectives, both among and towards the characters.

This perhaps becomes clearer in act three, scene two, wherein Bassanio engages in the play's only instance of *ekphrasis*. The objectification of Portia in the casket test and the love-gaze trope established by Bassanio in act one come together in this scene. Portia says to Bassanio, as he prepares to make his choice, "Beshrew your eyes, / They have o'erlooked and divided me" (3.2.14-15). Bassanio has gazed upon Portia, and taken possession of her through that gaze's ability to anatomize ("divide") her into her attractive parts. When he correctly chooses the lead casket, we see the

literal portrait of Portia: she has been converted into a work of visual art. Karen Newman argues that "Portia objectifies herself and thereby suppresses her own agency in bestowing herself upon Bassanio."[16] Newman's reading, building off of Luce Irigaray's work, is difficult to counter. As I have already argued, Portia is reduced to an aesthetic commodity within a physical commodity in this scene. At the same time, we must recognize that within the dramatic context, Portia desires Bassanio. While Bassanio may be looking at her as a means to an end (her fortune), Portia for reasons many actors have struggled with, seems to want Bassanio for himself. And during his *ekphrasis*, the visual rhetoric problematizes the notion of which character truly has power over the other.

If Shakespeare's purpose in the casket test were simply to emphasize that appearances are deceiving, then Bassanio's choice is deeply problematic. After all, while he recognizes that the "precious" metals—silver and gold—are likely to be misleading, his choice of the leaden casket is also motivated by appearance. He says to the casket, "Thy paleness move me" (3.2.109). As I noted earlier, Portia is repeatedly described with the adjective "fair" and here the double meaning of that word again becomes apparent. Portia's paleness is tied visually to the lead casket's by Bassanio's rhetoric. He is still choosing with his eyes, claiming the power of visual perception. But then he discovers Portia's portrait within the box, and the visual dynamic shifts. His description of the painting marks it as a linear perspective portrait as he wonders at the eyes of the painting, "Move these eyes? / Or whether, riding on the balls of mine, / Seem they in motion?" (3.2.120-22). In his history of perspective painting in English visual culture, Mead notes that portraiture was much preferred over landscapes, limiting the influence of perspective to single-point paintings.

> The portraits of Elizabeth, many by Hilliard, use one-point perspective to create a vanishing point off center to empty space, the effect of which is to draw the viewer's eye out to this nothing, whence it will return

> to the subject in the foreground: the journey to the 'depth' actually causes the viewer to reject the 'back' of the painting in favor of the surface, to celebrate the idea over the image.[17]

As Bassanio looks at the rest of the portrait, he is brought back in similar fashion to the eyes: "But her eyes! / How could he see to do them? Having made one, / Methinks it should have power to steal both his / And leave itself unfurnished" (3.2.127-30).

However, Bassanio's *ekphrasis* is not the only perspective in this scene. Throughout his thirty-five line musing over the portrait, there is an onstage audience of one: Portia. While he obsesses over the illusion of the moving eyes, she herself is a physical presence on the stage. Despite the fact that he has clearly succeeded in the casket test, winning the Portia portrait, and Portia herself, confirmed by the inscription that comes with the portrait, Bassanio is still uncertain. He does not trust the appearance of success saying, "Stand I even so, / As doubtful whether what I see be true, / Until confirmed, signed, ratified by you" (3.2.150-52). He must have the confirmation of the real Portia, who herself must finalize the deal in the mercantile language of Venice which Bassanio returns to here. Thus, Portia's perspective becomes privileged. First, as the audience who gazes upon Bassanio as he examines the portrait, she becomes connected to the actual audience of the play. Her perspective and the audience's perspective become connected. Second, the lesson of visual uncertainty seems to have succeeded here, in that Bassanio will not trust his eyes, but only Portia's words. In her examination of *ekphrasis* in Shakespeare, Catherine Belsey asserts that "critics reiterate the belief that Shakespeare's invocation of the visual arts is designed to affirm the superiority of the writer."[18] Belsey is attempting to deconstruct this notion, but this moment in Merchant seems to further the sense that the visual arts are being made subordinate to the verbal. The emphasis on Portia's word makes her response to his request

for confirmation all the more interesting: "You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, / Such as I am" (3.2.153-54). She confirms Bassanio's sight as truthful, but only when he is looking upon Portia herself, and not her counterfeit from the casket. Portia is authorized to confirm Bassanio's sight, which he inherently mistrusts. The connections to early modern visual culture are clear, and the suturing of the audience into the scene via Portia's perspective imbues the character with an agency that is sometimes overlooked.

Portia's perspective becomes ever more valued in acts four and five, as she first dons her masculine disguise to effect the courtroom resolution, then lords her power over her hapless husband. The disguise trope in Shakespeare's comedies especially casts doubt upon the power of the masculine gaze to ascertain truth, instead granting agency to the women characters in disguise. After saving Antonio from Shylock's knife, Portia-in-disguise tells Bassanio, "I pray you know me when we meet again" (4.1.437). She subtly suggests here that seeing and knowing are not the same thing, which is imbued with irony in the next scene when Gratiano finds her to deliver Bassanio's ring and calls her "fair sir" (4.2.6), echoing the adjective that is so often used to describe Portia. The implication is that Bassanio did not heed the lesson of the casket test, and now trusts his eyes to discern the truth, which Portia's disguise makes impossible. In the final scene, the emphasis is again placed upon ocular truth. In revealing that he has given away his ring he says, "You see my finger / Hath not a ring upon it" (5.1.201-02). And just a few lines later both Portia and Nerissa vow that they will not sleep with their husbands until they "see" the rings again (5.1.205, 207). Because the women are in possession of the rings, the use of visual language here serves to further verify the play's efforts to undermine the ability of the eyes to perceive the truth. Finally, Bassanio attempts to return to the misogynistic language of the love-gaze that he used earlier: "I swear to thee, even by thine own fair eyes, / Wherein I

see myself–" (5.2.259-60). But Portia will allow neither the return to any notion of an ensnaring gaze, nor Bassanio to rely on her eyes for any sense of proof. She interrupts him saying, "In both my eyes he doubly sees himself, / In each eye one" (5.2.262-63). In this final use of visual language, Portia again draws attention to deceit, in essence calling her husband a liar. Far from asserting the dominance of the eyes as the tools of human perception, the play calls attention to the inability of the eyes to perceive the truth. This is especially true in relation to artistic illusion. While Puritanical iconoclasts were arguing that no truth could be perceived in art, artists were simultaneously experimenting with perspectives in ways that undermined their audience's ability to perceive any stable meaning from their artworks. Similarly on the stage, Shakespeare's dramatic language in *Merchant* implies that, as it was for painting during the time, so it is for poetry: the play constantly undermines the veracity of visual perception, going so far as to suggest that all aesthetic illusion, even the play that the audience has just witnessed, is untrustworthy.

Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*

As a medium, film is overtly concerned with visuality and perspective, and provides a modern analog for the questions relating to visual certitude that pervaded early modern visual culture. I am particularly interested in how this film utilizes its visual medium, especially the way the camera controls the gaze of the audience, in relation to the visual tropes that are present in Shakespeare's play. The film opens with a montage and text-scroll, informing the audience of the anti-Semitic culture in Venice, and demonstrating the hostility of Christians towards Jews. This attempt to fabricate the world of early modern Venice is visually rich, and ethically admirable. However, "The opening montage preempts the play," according to Drew Daniel, "with dramatizations of Jewish oppression."[19] Obviously, Radford was attempting

to adapt the play to fit the ethical and aesthetic taste of his audience, to recuperate Shylock and justify his villainy as the product of an oppressive society. The son of an Austrian-Jewish mother, Radford was clearly influenced by his own family history, and he re-contextualized his *Merchant* within a more historically accurate Venice than Shakespeare's play creates. The opening montage, however, does not just foreground Jewish oppression, it turns it into a spectacle. The opening scroll identifies "religious fanatics" who attack Jews openly. The Jews are visually marked as Others by the red hats they are required to wear. Unexplained by the pedantic titles are the dozens of bare-breasted women in the opening montage; apparently it is assumed that the audience will know the manner of dress that was associated with Venetian courtesans of the time. This attempt at historical realism is mired in its inability to depict the intellectual, literary, and political contributions of courtesans to early modern Venetian society. So the courtesans become just another class of oppressed people, tying them visually to the Jews of this cinematic world, just as Jewish usury and prostitution were tied together in early modern English polemics against them.[20] As such, the opening montage becomes a spectacle of sex and violence, framing the fanatical attacks on the Jews with sexualized images of women. The audience's gaze is directed to objectify this sex and violence because the characters are not humanized, indeed not a single courtesan is given a name, nor a line.

After joining the fanaticism and spitting on Al Pacino's Shylock, thus making Shylock's verbal accusation at 1.3.123 visually apparent, Antonio (Jeremy Irons) attends Mass presided over by the same zealot who was earlier seen railing against Jews. The Christian ceremony is given forty-two seconds of screen-time, and is intercut with scenes of Bassanio and Gratiano reveling on the canals. The two scenes come together as the revelers' gondola passes by the entrance to Antonio's church. Antonio's gaze becomes privileged: he

and Joseph Fiennes's Bassanio share a deep look, and name each other. By contrast, the Jewish Sabbath which Shylock and Jessica attend is placed second to Antonio's, and occupies only twenty-five seconds of screen time. Whereas Christian characters are named and their relationships established, the Jewish ceremony only serves to bring Jessica into physical proximity with Lorenzo. The complication of visual certitude with which Shakespeare frames the plot of his play is mooted. The characters and the audience see, and are encouraged to accept what they see at face value.

In the film's version of 1.1, Antonio and Bassanio negotiate their homosocial relationship within the confines of Antonio's bedroom and, for a time, his bed, which is of course adorned with symbolically red linens. Their intimacy is intense, and has overt ramifications for Radford's audience. Our sense of Antonio is now that he, like Shylock and the courtesans, is a victim of his own culture—a gay man whose religious beliefs forbid him from truly loving Bassanio. Far from being the vanishing point, the empty space around which the play's dimensions are crafted, Antonio becomes the maker of meaning, thus undermining the ethical point of Radford's adaptation. It is an attempt to create pathos for Antonio, who is the play's ultimate villain if Shylock is made to be its hero. As the scene continues, Radford constructs a rare reverse shot: a cinematic technique wherein the camera assumes the position of a speaker and the audience gazes upon the same object as that speaker. As Freedman notes, the effect of this shot encourages the audience "to identify with a point of view, and so inscribes us within the relay of looks through which the film narrative is constructed."[21] As he narrates his lines about Portia, the film adopts Bassanio's memories and privileges the character's perspective. During the descriptive voice-over, the objects of his gaze are first the estate of Belmont, and second Lynn Collins's Portia, confirming his desire for her inherited wealth as paramount. The shot of Portia begins through a doorway, framing her

like a portrait, while she stares back at the camera (and by extension at Bassanio and the audience). Portia is reduced to an artistic object, a Renaissance portrait, and this message is emphasized in the next scene where she is glimpsed (with back turned to the camera) gazing upon the portrait of her father that is hanging upon the wall.

Radford's cinematography throughout the film is highly influenced by stage conventions. Only very rarely, and usually privileging the gaze of Bassanio or Antonio, is a true reverse-shot utilized. When a character is speaking, the camera is regularly trained on that character's face, just as the audience's gaze is drawn to the speaking character on stage. Especially with Portia and Shylock, we nearly always view them directly as they talk. The audience is not encouraged to adopt the gaze of these characters, never sutured into the world of the film via the adoption of their perspective. Instead, we look directly at them, objectifying them within the context of the film's *mise-en-scène.*

Perhaps the clearest example of the camera's failure to graft the audience into the film is Shylock's famous speech in 3.1. The film's equivalent begins with Solanio and Salarino in a brothel, surrounded by courtesans. Three times in the establishing shots, women's breasts are shown in relative close-up as they are groped by men in a disturbing depiction of sexual objectification that borders on sexual violence. It is into this scene that the bereft Shylock enters, and Radford cuts all the lines about Jessica's physical appearance, taking away the audience's ability to perceive the inherent racism of the Venetian courtiers toward Shylock. During the speech, Shylock is nearly always shot face-on, center-frame, putting the emphasis on the character and Pacino's powerful rendition of this speech, but privileging the gaze of the Venetian Christians, as the audience is sutured into the scene by the camera taking up their position. The only reverse shots are during Pacino's pauses, with the camera briefly cutting to a shot of Salarino and Solanio before jumping

back to Shylock as he speaks. Just before Shylock asks if Jews have eyes, two courtesans enter, framed in the background between the heads of Salarino and Solanio. At first they are in soft-focus, but as Shylock finishes speaking and Salarino and Solanio exit, the camera briefly pauses and focalizes upon the courtesans, whose looks of concern and sympathy regarding Shylock's statements clearly link the oppression of women to the oppression of Jews in this Venice. At the same time, Shylock's famous speech becomes book-ended by shots objectifying women's bodies. It is the actualization of Laura Mulvey's most-condemned cinematic shot: "the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."[22]

Radford makes Portia's speech to Bassanio at the beginning of 3.2 into a soliloquy delivered in part while she gazes at her love, and in part to the audience. But her gaze is never privileged: we look at her looking at Bassanio, but never see through her eyes. The scene ends with the camera looking down at Portia as she gazes up. Here the camera looks down her dress, emphasizing her cleavage and visually connecting her with the sexually objectified Venetian courtesans. The dialogue of 3.2 is again shot mostly direct on the speaker, with the only reverse shots privileging Bassanio's perspective. The strangest moment of this comes when he narrates his thought process regarding the choice. As he speaks the lines, "Look on beauty, / And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight…" (3.2.90-91) the shot reverses to Portia, suturing the audience's gaze into the film from Bassanio's perspective, and emphasizing the objectification of her wealth and beauty. She is commodified by Bassanio's gaze. When Bassanio then chooses the lead casket because its "paleness moves" him, the audience is greeted by a double-Portia. In the background and out of focus is Lynn Collins's Portia, while the portrait which Bassanio holds up is center-frame and in focus with those characteristic moving eyes. It is Bassanio's gaze that again controls the audience's, as the focus shifts to Portia

herself while Bassanio narrates in voice-over. All this camera work serves to objectify and disempower Portia, preventing the audience from associating with her.

Radford's film continues these visual tropes, privileging the gaze of Antonio and Bassanio throughout the trial scene, objectifying the sorrow of Shylock and emphasizing and empowering the perspective of Venetian Christians. Drew Daniel concludes that the film fails because it does not take its ethical position far enough: if Shylock is to be the hero, he says, then Antonio and Portia and the rest are the villains.[23] I argue that this failure is also visual. The film is impeded by its theatrically influenced dialogue shots, and fails to privilege the perspective of the characters who are imbued with agency to question visual certitude in the play. Radford objectifies Portia and Shylock through the camera-work in sharp contrast to the usage of tropes of eyes and love, knowledge and vision, which Shakespeare employs in the source-play.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the varied readings of Shakespeare's works as engagements with early modern visual cultures, adding *Merchant* to the list of plays that have been previously studied: *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *As You Like It,* predominantly. Shakespeare's *Merchant* contributes to the undermining of visual certitude in concert with, ironically, the work of contemporary painters and Puritan iconoclasts. In part this aesthetic was inspired by Shakespeare's knowledge of the theatre, and use of lines of sight to craft visual meaning (or undermine it). The veracity of visual perception is a power claimed in the play by the cultural "insiders": Shakespeare's Venetian Christian characters. The undermining of that power serves, then, to privilege and empower the cultural "outsiders," namely Portia and Shylock. This play is in no way attempting to undo the misogyny and anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's time. Rather, as a lesson perhaps learned from perspective painting, the privileging of different perspectives simply serves for better drama.

It cannot be denied that despite its dramatic interest, *Merchant* is a deeply problematic play from a modern ethical perspective, which encourages application of the lessons learned from a historical analysis of the text to the play's only modern film adaptation. Radford's film attempts to simultaneously portray a historically accurate Venice and an ethically admirable view of Shakespeare's play. These antithetical efforts, however, result in "a film so at odds with the text it adapts that, far from establishing the endlessly renewable relevance of Shakespeare's work to our own historical moment, it seems instead to index the intractable gulf that separates us from contact with that work."[24] As this reading of Radford's shots and editing shows, the film's use of its visual medium is incongruous with the source-text's exploration of visual certainty, and further alienates its audience from contact with Shakespeare's work. It is in exploring the play's constructions of visual dilemmas, and problematizing the primacy of modern visual cultures, that a film could be most able to construct this play in a meaningful way for a twenty-first century audience. As Shakespeare utilized tropes that connected with early modern visual cultures, a modern film-maker could explore the way this play's visual language and themes speak to today's audiences. There is an argument to be made that the problematic ethics of *The Merchant of Venice*—namely its anti-Semitism and misogyny—are intractable, and that the play may not be recoverable except as a "museum piece." Radford's visuals seek to reconstruct Renaissance Venice, rather than engage a twenty-first century audience. In doing so, this film pushes the play further from its audience in temporality, and disengages from the visual themes that are inherent to the play which could evoke a connection between the modern audience and Shakespeare's play.

Notes

1. Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

2. Huston Diehl, "Horrid Image, Sorry Sight, Fatal Vision: The Visual Rhetoric of *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 192.

3. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye,* 2.

4. Stephen X. Mead, "Shakespeare's Play with Perspective: Sonnet 24, *Hamlet, Lear,*" *Studies in Philology* 109.3 (2012): 226.

5. Allison Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare: Looking Through Language* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin's, 2000), 35.

6. Ibid., 68.

7. Ibid., 80.

8. For more on the influence of Reformation iconoclasm on aesthetics, art, and theatre, see Tara Hamling and Richard L. Williams, eds., *Art Re-Formed: Re-Assessing the Impact of the Reformation on the Visual Arts* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007); Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Chloe Porter, "Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Agency: Visual Experience in Works by Lyly and Shakespeare," *Literature and History* 18.1 (2009): 1-15.

9. Chloe Porter, "Shakespeare and Early Modern Visual Culture," *Literature Compass* 8.8 (2011): 544.

10. Mead, "Shakespeare's Play with Perspective," 230.

11. Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric,* 56.

12. Barbara Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2.

13. Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.1 (1987): 21. Newman is building here on the foundations of Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which is Not One* (1979) and Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

14. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye,* 23.

15. Miran Bozovic, *An Utterly Dark Spot: Gaze and Body in Early Modern Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 1.

16. Newman, "Portia's Ring," 25.

17. Mead, "Shakespeare's Play with Perspective," 229.

18. Catherine Belsey, "Invocation of the Visual Image: Ekphrasis in Lucrece and Beyond," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.2 (2012): 188.

19. Drew Daniel, "William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,*" Film Quarterly 60.1 (2006): 52.

20. James Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 99.

21. Freedman, *Staging the Gaze,* 57.
22. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.1 (1975): 7.
23. Daniel, "William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,*" 56.
24. Ibid., 52.