“Can no prayers pierce thee?”:
Re-imagining Marian Intercession in
*The Merchant of Venice*

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Although critics of Portia have recognized the threat she poses to the gender hierarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*, they often find her efficacy undermined by the play's masculine superstructure. Anne Parten, for example, sees Portia as "self-sufficient in both the feminine and masculine roles," but she determines that "the future the comedy points to is in no way threatened by Portia's superhuman and superfeminine gifts" (153). Similarly, Carol Leventen suggests that the cultural anxieties "intensified by Portia's formidable intelligence and spirit" are also "neutralised by her deference to and internalisation of patriarchal norms and values" (62). Portia's subversive nature, it seems, does little to alter the masculine world of Venice. Perhaps Karen Newman in seeking to find in Portia's "unruly" womanhood an ability to "pervert authorized systems of gender and power" (33) best recognizes Portia's vital disruption of the gender hierarchy. Yet, even Newman admits that Portia's "verbal quibble" in the courtroom resembles Launcelot Gobbo's quibble elsewhere in the play so that "woman and servant" are linked as "marginal groups that are oppressed under the Elizabethan class/gender system" (30).1 Although Portia's persuasive capacity is showcased, she remains a marginal figure in a masculine world.

As opposed to readings that see Portia as an object reinforcing masculinity, this essay locates in Portia a power to destabilize the system of masculine dominance through her intercessory influence—a feminine influence evocative of the emotional and religious strength of the Virgin Mary of Roman Catholic tradition. By deploying Marian potency Shakespeare not only invests the figure of Portia with affective and rhetorical strength, but he also draws attention to England's cultural ambivalence about the value of Marian intercession amid post-Reformation views that saw Marian strength as a threat to masculinity. Indeed, Portia's intercession in the courtroom renders the Christian males in the play reliant on her power of persuasion while simultaneously underscoring the ineffectuality of male intercession. Similarly, early modern Protestant polemicists often argued that the Virgin Mary's inter-

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cessory strength rendered Christ impuissant. Within the post-Reformation parallel discourses of drama and religion the female intercessor is incredibly important, but she also undermines masculinity and is consequently presumed to be promiscuous because of her influential strength. But by underpinning Portia’s dramatic function with the residual symbolic power of the Virgin Mary, Shakespeare re-imagines the potency of female intercession and presents that strength as sui generis.

Shakespeare’s religious inheritance has undergone considerable scrutiny, and while the general current sentiment is that he was raised Catholic, his religious inclination as an adult playwright is much more difficult, if not impossible, to discern. The intention here is not to unearth Shakespeare’s proclivity for the Protestant or Catholic cause but instead to interrogate his attention to Marian themes in The Merchant of Venice to show how he negotiates both religious and gendered identity in a play rife with religious and gendered anxiety. Given the religious incoherence of Shakespeare’s England, intonations of positive Marian influence within the play speak to the post-Reformation ambivalence about the Virgin Mary’s feminine strength. Although masculine dominance is showcased in the play, the correlation between the rhetorical function and ethical valence of Portia and the Virgin Mary magnifies the efficacy of, and promise behind, feminine intercession.

Although the Virgin Mary’s virginal, maternal, spousal, and iconic significance in early modern thought has been critically analyzed, and although the connection between her cult and the cult of Queen Elizabeth I has been examined, Mary’s loss of intercessory power in post-Reformation England has remained comparatively unexplored. Such an examination of early modern cultural and literary responses to the erasure of the Virgin Mary's intercessory power, including the polemical backlash against Mariolatry, reveals a lingering anxiety not only about the enduring popularity of Marian intercession in post-Reformation England but also about the threat Mary poses to a masculine culture. This contextualization of post-Reformation cultural attitudes enables us to address the way Shakespeare’s play employs and reinvents Roman Catholic Marian strength as it imagines that power through the figure of Portia.

Intercessory Promiscuity: The Virgin Mary in Post-Reformation England

In Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536) John Calvin notes that Scripture is “perfectly silent” regarding the intercessory power of Mary