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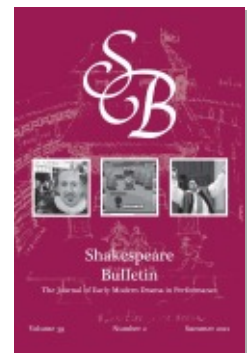
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The Spectral Returns of *The Merchant of Venice* in Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan*: "Only his shadow?"

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What makes a contemporary play a Shakespearean adaptation? Post-fidelity adaptation studies have long demonstrated how transformative, indirect, and "spectrally intertextual" the relations between any new play and a Shakespearean source can be, as they belong to "a web of meaning waiting to be made out of convergences and unthought relations that continue to be created and identified across multiple spaces and times" (Fischlin 25).[1] Building on Linda Hutcheon's and Margaret Jane Kidnie's foundational works, Douglas Lanier has proposed the influential idea of the Shakespearean rhizome, which understands each Shakespeare play as an "aggregated Shakespearean field" ("Shakespearean Rhizomatics" 31), a network without a clear center or hierarchy, that consists of Shakespeare's sources, his text (or multiple text versions), what we know about its first performances, and all later literary, theatrical, filmic, artistic, academic, journalistic, and political responses to a given play. This article looks at one contribution to the network of *The Merchant of Venice* that has rarely been discussed in this respect: Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan*, now itself one of the classics of contemporary Irish drama.[2] The play premiered at Dublin's Abbey Theatre on the Peacock stage in 1996, directed by Garry Hynes, won multiple awards, and was transferred to the main stage of London's Royal Court Theatre (Carr, "Afterword" 310–11, and "Interview" 147). Since then, it has been produced internationally and was revived at the Abbey in 2004 and at the Old Red Lion in London in 2015. While, quite obviously, the first name of Carr's protagonist—Portia—and the setting—the Belmont Valley—derive directly from *The Merchant*, other intertextual relations to Shakespeare are more difficult to discern, as the plot and the

topics of *Portia Coughlan* radically depart from Shakespeare's. The play chronicles the final days of its eponymous protagonist, an affluent inhabitant of the Belmont Valley, about to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. She is presented as an unfaithful wife and reluctant mother, who suffers severely, as the play gradually reveals, from grief over the death of her twin brother Gabriel, who drowned in the Belmont River fifteen years before the play starts. His ghost haunts Portia throughout the play, and she finally follows her twin into the river, committing suicide. "Coughlan," the surname which Carr has chosen for her Shakespeare revenant, is derived from Gaelic "cochal," meaning cape or hood (MacLysaght 61). It signals the enigmatic, emotionally withdrawn psychological state of the protagonist, which audiences are invited to investigate, but the notion of a "concealed Portia" is also instructive for understanding Carr's rather oblique way of relating to *The Merchant*. Carr herself has commented on the eclectic inspiration for *Portia Coughlan*, which in addition to Shakespeare draws on the story of a childhood friend, and was influenced by the landscape and folk memory of the Midlands, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Greek tragedy in general and *Antigone*'s sister-brother rapport in particular, the Gothic atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights*, Ibsen's interest in domestic entrapment and soul-swapping, and Tennessee Williams's preoccupations with secrets of the past.[3] Among these strands in the adaptational network of *Portia Coughlan*, this article sheds light on the as yet underexplored link to *The Merchant* and makes the case for its relevance far beyond the name of the eponymous protagonist and the setting.

As I will argue, *Portia Coughlan* places Shakespeare's female protagonist center stage in a historically updated sequel to *The Merchant* which focuses on the disturbing aspects of Shakespeare's romance plot. In Carr's play, which is itself concerned with ghostly returns, aspects of the long and rich adaptation history of *The Merchant* spectrally return; it can productively be read alongside specific twentieth-century theatrical productions of *The Merchant* as well as in relation to Shakespeare's own sources. Carr's contribution to the *Merchant* network is particularly significant since it works against a relative lack of interest in Portia in the more recent adaptation history. As Peter Lewis has recently argued in his examination of "Portia's shift from favour to neglect" since the Victorian age, the figure has had a remarkably weak afterlife in creative adaptations across genres and media even though Portia is the fourth biggest female part in Shakespeare's oeuvre (301). Lewis's survey of *Merchant* adaptations claims that dramatic adaptations between 1990 and 2017, the period that coincides with third-wave feminism, have focused, "without exception, on Shylock"

(307). Carr's *Portia Coughlan* offers an important counterexample to the relative unadaptability of Portia, as it concentrates on Portia and has neither a direct equivalent to Shylock nor to the eponymous merchant. At the same time, it speaks to the neglect of Portia that Shakespearean adaptation criticism so far has paid little attention to Carr's play, despite the fact that Carr has repeatedly commented on the Shakespearean legacy in *Portia Coughlan* and has by now written several plays for the Royal Shakespeare company, among them a *King Lear* adaptation called *The Cordelia Dream* (2008). As I will argue, Carr's third-wave feminist adaptation turns *The Merchant*'s negotiation of social differentiation pivoting around racialized religion into a drama of differentiation that focuses on intersectionally inflected aspects of sex and gender.[4] *Portia Coughlan* creates a Portia figure who transcends heteronormative patriarchal gender binarism in favor of a queer notion of sex and gender.[5]

As Marina Carr recounts in her afterword to *Portia Coughlan*, the play was inspired by the first lines of Shakespeare that she learned by heart when she was twelve years old ("Afterword" 311). They are Bassanio's description of Portia, which evokes a romantic, mythic counter-world to mercantile Venice:

> In Belmont is a lady richly left,
> And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
> Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
> I did receive fair speechless messages.
> Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
> To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.
> Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
> For the four winds blow in from every coast
> Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
> Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
> Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchis' strand,
> And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.161–72)

Carr's rewriting of *The Merchant* from Portia's perspective counters this idealized notion of a fair Portia, distilled from romance and myth, by introducing Portia Coughlan drunk on the morning of her thirtieth birthday, when she can hardly appreciate her husband's expensive gift—a diamond bracelet—and instead expresses feelings of domestic suffocation, boredom, anger, and romantic disillusionment. Carr's sequel starts the action years after the sexual anticipation of the wedding night that underpins Shakespeare's comedic ending. Around the time when Carr was writing *Portia Coughlan*, a number of critics, directors, and actors inter-

preted Shakespeare's ending in a manner similar to Carr's exposition: as a disillusioned, forced reunion of spouses rather than as a romantic, playful reconciliation, as in Jude Kelly's 1994 production at the West Yorkshire Playhouse or Trevor Nunn's 1999 staging at the National Theatre, which was later filmed (Gay 448–52). Even though Carr's Portia has taken the sexual license which Portia and Nerissa jokingly claim for themselves at the end of Shakespeare's play, when Portia says, "I will become as liberal as you" (5.1.226), her extramarital affairs have not provided a liberating escape from her desperate state.

Shifting Shakespeare's balance of tragicomedy decidedly towards the tragic while maintaining a dark, often sarcastic humor (Wallace, "Crossroads," and Doyle), Carr's play draws on the gloomy aspects of *The Merchant*, many of which Shakespeare inherited from his own sources. At a closer look, Bassanio's romanticized description of Portia as a promise of materialistic and erotic fulfilment, the starting point for Carr's reimagination of *The Merchant*, also contains a violent undercurrent of tragedy. "Brutus' Portia" and Medea, the two tragic heroines invoked by Bassanio, are mainly known for their (self-)destructive violence.[6] Carr expands on this subliminal tragic trajectory. Not only does Carr's Portia commit suicide like her namesake, Cato's daughter, but she also bears resemblance to Medea: she suffers from fantasies of killing her children, the eldest of whom is called "Jason," and, as the play gradually reveals, Portia might have been responsible for the drowning of her brother, whom she sacrificed for her lover—an oblique reference to Medea's murder of her brother Absyrtus, whom she killed, dismembered, and threw into the sea to facilitate her escape with Jason.[7]

In addition to the protagonist's name, the setting constitutes the most obvious Shakespearean reference. As in *The Merchant*, where Belmont "holds out the prospect of an imaginary fulfilment," blending the erotic and the deadly in its casket scenes (Drakakis 60), Carr's Belmont River is introduced as a dreamlike counter-world characterized by both a longing for and fear of the dead brother. In the opening scene, before Portia's husband enters, audiences witness Portia in her living room listening to her brother's ghost singing on the banks of the Belmont River. As the stage directions specify, "*They mirror one another's posture and movements in an odd way; unconsciously. Portia stands there, drinking, lost-looking, listening to Gabriel's voice*" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 193). Gabriel's apparitions oscillate between an angelic promise of redemption and a menacing, vengeful specter luring Portia into death. The original production of *Portia Coughlan* employed a transparent backcloth to superimpose the domestic setting

upon the river landscape, and the 2004 production projected a shaky image of Gabriel's face behind Portia (Hill 193), which allowed Portia (and audiences) to inhabit the real world and the ghost world simultaneously. By contrast, the other characters are unaware of Gabriel's spectral presence and try to explain and correct Portia's inexplicably "[q]ueer mood" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 200). Carr's introduction of a mysterious title character who invites attentive speculation about the reasons for her desperation is modelled, I would argue, on Shakespeare's opening to *The Merchant*, in which Antonio expansively declares his deep-seated melancholy and professes to be ignorant of its causes, "In sooth I know not why I am so sad. / [. . .] I have much ado to know myself" (1.1.1, 6). The subsequent discussion of potential reasons for Antonio's sadness offers competing explanations, among them merchant capitalist disquiet and unrequited homoerotic love for Bassanio, all of which Antonio rejects, but about which audiences can keep speculating (see Daniel 216).

When Shakespeare's Portia first enters the stage herself in the subsequent scene, she echoes Antonio's melancholic exposition: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world" (1.2.1–2). She is thus introduced as Antonio's dramaturgical shadow, as a second mysteriously melancholic character, who will act as a foil for Antonio throughout the play (and vice versa). As Marjorie Garber has argued, "[t]hey construct each other; each is the other's Other, the other's fantasy and nightmare, both self and anti-self" (151). Belittling herself and expressing her weariness in just one line, Portia's condition is given less weight than Antonio's in the exposition. However, this substance-shadow relationship between Antonio and Portia will later be inverted, when in a sophisticated figure of argument Portia calls Antonio "the semblance of my soul" (3.4.20), takes control of his fate, and makes him a marginalized figure in the play's finale, rendered almost speechless by her revelations: "I am dumb!" (5.1.279). Portia's opening line "my little body is aweary of this great world" can be delivered lightheartedly, but some productions have taken it as a cue to emphasize a desperation that is akin to what Carr's Portia feels. For example, Jude Kelly's 1994 production at the West Yorkshire Playhouse interpreted *The Merchant* as dealing with "the tragedy of Portia" (Schafer 122). Accordingly, it introduced Portia in Scene 1.2 as a "deeply world-weary Hedda Gabler, playing Russian roulette with a pistol before shooting it at the portrait of her father [. . .] which dominated the stage" (Gay 448). As this comparison of Shakespeare's Portia to Ibsen's Hedda Gabler highlights, any Shakespeare adaptation in the twentieth century is characterized by a performance tradition shaped by later playwrights

and theatrical styles—in this case Ibsen's stage realism and its interest in the domestic suffocation of women, which fed into *Portia Coughlan*'s revision of *The Merchant*. By the fifth act of Kelly's production, Portia, in Kelly's view, was "in a state of grieving for what she has experienced" (449), chiefly the betrayals by Bassanio and her own complicity in the cruelty to Shylock.

Turning Portia into the enigmatic protagonist and offering no equivalent to Antonio, Carr's play develops its own version of a rueful, grieving, desolate Portia who takes center stage and absorbs aspects of Antonio: while his melancholic mind is "tossing on the ocean" (1.1.7), fearing the loss of his ships, Portia Coughlan's thoughts flow with the river, the place of an irretrievable personal loss for her. Antonio's love for Bassanio that dare not speak its name, which many critics and theater productions as well as adaptations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have suggested as the reason for Antonio's professedly inexplicable melancholy, is transformed into another taboo, non-normative desire in *Portia Coughlan*: the play gradually reveals that Portia's yearning for her lost twin brother is infused with memories, or maybe with fantasies, of an incestuous union.

Carr's reimagining of Portia situates the psychodrama of her protagonist in a specific social context that transfers Shakespeare's early modern concern with growing mercantilism and social mobility to the globalized capitalism of the late twentieth century. By transplanting Shakespeare's depiction of the patriarchal control of women to the rural Irish Midlands, Carr chooses a socio-political setting with comparable religiously inflected, patriarchally organized in-group behavior. Just like Shakespeare's heroine, Carr's Portia has entered into a marriage that meets her father's expectations, and like the dead father in *The Merchant*, Portia's father tries to monitor his daughter's behavior. Carr's Belmont Valley is a space in which social relations, including marriages, are fundamentally shaped by financial concerns. According to her lover, Damus, Portia married Raphael, one of the richest men in the country, because of the "pound signs lewin' in his eyes" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 203), and Portia's father claims that Raphael married Portia because of her father's land and money (214). Carr's play thus makes Shakespeare's metaphoric ambivalence unequivocal when it comes to Portia's moral, romantic, and financial "worth" (1.1.167). Depicting the characters' extravagant spending, which cannot make up for the lack of meaning in their lives, and their inability to develop genuine emotional relations, Carr's Belmont prefigures the hyper-consumerism of the Celtic Tiger phase that was to shape the Republic of Ireland from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s (Bracken 44). Shakespeare's central motif

of the physical embodiment of financial worth, the pound of flesh that equals three thousand ducats, is taken up in an equally straightforward manner: Raphael's wealth largely stems from financial compensation for a workplace accident in which he lost half his foot. Several characters suggest that Raphael deliberately inflicted this injury on himself in order to gain the lucrative financial reward (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 202, 228). Laying bare the equation of human body parts with a particular financial worth, Carr strips away semantic layers from Antonio's potential physical mutilation, offering neither a religious sublimation as sacrificial lamb nor a homoerotic subtext of passion as desire and suffering. It is noteworthy that Carr's inquiry into the social and psychological impact of capitalism offers no direct equivalent to Shakespeare's Shylock character. Rather than staging a religiously inflected version of the greedy usurer turned destructive avenger in the scapegoat logic of *The Merchant*, the play instead depicts the ready conformity—to the point of self-mutilation—of those eager to rise economically. Shylock is thus merely a shadowy presence in the play, as his legacy is turned into a critique of late capitalism.

Moving Shakespeare's play doubly forward as a sequel and a transhistoric update, *Portia Coughlan* simultaneously reaches back by recovering aspects of Shakespeare's mythic, literary, and folktale sources. This descent into the intertextual underworld of *The Merchant* excavates layers of meaning that in turn provide an interesting perspective on *The Merchant* itself. Shakespeare's Portia plot combines two main literary sources, the medieval Latin compilation *Gesta Romanorum* (published in English translations in 1577 and 1595) and Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1558), an Italian collection of stories with no known Elizabethan translation. In both, Portia's equivalent is much more active than in Shakespeare's version: it is she who chooses caskets or suitors, just like Carr's Portia aggressively tests men before choosing her lovers. Shakespeare's narrative sources present Portia as either a lethal threat to others or at risk of dying herself. In *The Merchant*, these threats are still present, albeit in a mitigated form that is in accordance with the tone of romantic comedy. It is Portia's association with death which Sigmund Freud found most intriguing in his 1913 article on *The Merchant*, in which he explores the play's death metaphors with references to mythic and fairy tale sources. In his reading of the casket scenes, Freud notes the contradiction that it is the lead casket, usually representing death, that leads to winning the beautiful Portia, who offers love and wealth. Freud explains this contrast as a "reaction formation," as a psychological substitution of opposites that is an unconscious strategy of wish fulfilment ("Three Caskets" 66). Ac-

cording to Freud, man's knowledge that he must die is here turned into its opposite, into a fantasy of erotic and material overabundance: the mythological goddess of death is transformed into "fair" Portia. However, as Freud points out, "The fairest and the best, she who has stepped into the place of the Death-goddess, has kept certain characteristics that border on the uncanny, so that from them we might guess at what lay beneath" (68). Kent Cartwright has discussed these uncanny aspects in an article that considers Portia as a revenant: standing for sacrifice in the casket scene, the "living dead" is then vivified by Bassanio's correct choice (172). In a close reading of the play's metaphors, Cartwright argues that *The Merchant* follows the logic of "zero-sum symbolic economy," in which debts must be paid, often by a substitute (175): the reanimation of Portia demands the actual or social death of a different person, and the action transfers this debt from Portia to Bassanio to Antonio and ultimately to Shylock.[8]

In this context, the three caskets can be seen as coffins—with Portia as an ambivalent character between life and death, "locked in one of them," as she says herself (3.2.40).[9] Similarly, Morocco envisions Portia shrouded "in the obscure grave" of the lead casket (2.7.51). Some productions have taken up the imagery of coffin-like caskets. A production by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1971, directed by Terry Hands with Judi Dench as Portia, presented three life-sized caskets, all dauntingly funereal. The gold casket, fashioned like a medieval table tomb with a recumbent figure lying upon it, opened to show a complete human skeleton. The silver, urn-shaped casket contained inside it another urn that opened like a jack-in-the-box to show a fool's head. The lead casket was shaped into a full-sized statue, a hooded figure, face obscured. When Bassanio chose it, the statue opened to display a made-to-measure life-sized effigy of Portia, dressed in silks and gay colors, ready for her wedding (Gay 441; see Fig. 1).[10] The simulacrum thus visually endorsed Bassanio's comments about the lifelikeness of Portia's counterfeit, which in his perception begins to move and breathe (3.2.115–8). The production here also played on an effect that Marvin Carlson, quite fittingly in this context, has named "ghosting": the echoes of an actor's former parts that inform a particular performance (52–95). By making a statue almost come alive, Hands's production invoked the spectral presence of Hermione, a part that Dench had played two years earlier in Trevor Nunn's RSC production (in which she doubled Hermione and Perdita, taking further the notion of posthumous afterlives at stake in this intertextual/adaptational field). While the effigy ultimately was not animated, Portia is, like Hermione, given a new life by Bassanio's correct choice (Cartwright 174). However, as the opened statue formed menacing angel's wings behind the effigy (Fig. 2),

Fig. 1. Portia next to the three caskets in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1971 staging of *The Merchant of Venice*, dir. Terry Hands. Photograph by Tom Holte, by kind permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Fig. 2. Portia's effigy in front of the opened leaden casket in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1971 staging of *The Merchant of Venice*, dir. Terry Hands. Photograph by Tom Holte, by kind permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

the stage image visualized a complex notion of Portia, suggesting the idea of vivification from a death-like state and at the same time presenting Portia as an angel of death.

The intertextual traces of Portia as revenant that inform Shakespeare's comedy are turned into the central conflict of Carr's play, where Portia at the outset describes her own state as domestically entrapped, psychologically petrified, and closer to death than to life: in her view, she and her husband "might as well be dead," "the house creakin' like a coffin [. . .] . Sometimes I can't breathe any more" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 207). As I have argued elsewhere, Carr's Portia is presented as a deeply melancholic figure not only in the broad Renaissance sense, but also according to Freud's psychoanalytic concept of melancholia as unresolved mourning (Wald 184–97). Freud argues that melancholia entails a disavowal of loss and a psychic preservation of the lost person. By making Portia the only character who can see the ghostly apparitions of Gabriel, the play visualizes her clinging to the lost brother. According to Freud, this psychic preservation requires an introjection of the lost object into the ego, a process that he calls melancholic incorporation ("Mourning"). The above-quoted opening of Carr's play, when Portia in her living room and Gabriel's ghost singing at the banks of the Belmont River "*mirror one another's posture and movements in an odd way; unconsciously*" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 193), signals that Portia's melancholic identification with the lost object has a physical component, that it has to do with a process of embodying the other. The play further develops this notion when Portia conjures up a psychic symbiosis that she perceives to be reflected in the twins' physical similarity:

> Portia [S]ometimes I think only half of me is left, the worst half. [. . .] We were so alike, weren't we, Mother?
> Marianne The spit; couldn't tell yees apart in the cradle.
> Portia Came out of the womb holding hands—When God was handin' out souls he must've got mine and Gabriel's mixed up, aither that or he gave us just the one between us and it went into the Belmont River with him [. . .]. (210–11)

Portia's claim alludes to the discourse of the mutual incorporation of lovers via an exchange of their hearts or souls that also infused the early modern imagination, including the romance between Portia and Bassanio. In the casket scene, Portia ponders her own precarious agency in a rhetorically sophisticated elaboration on the traditional topos:[11]

One half of me is yours, the other half yours.
Mine own, I would say: but if mine, then yours,
And so, all yours. O, these naughty times
Puts bars between the owners and their rights:
And so, though yours, not yours. (3.2.16–20)

In her next lines, Shakespeare's Portia envisions death by drowning for Bassanio should he choose the wrong casket: she imagines that "he makes a swan-like end, / Fading in music" (3.2.44–5), with her tears producing the "stream / And watr'y death-bed for him" (3.2.46–7). This scenario of a drowning Bassanio who dies singing highlights the parallels to the ghostly apparition of Gabriel whose singing both haunts and comforts Portia. In Carr's play, the romantic topos of mutual incorporation is transformed into the melancholic incorporation of the lost twin, whose soul Portia Coughlan carries within her, while her soul drowned in the river with him; or, as she reasons with her alternative explanation of her not-quite-alive state, their shared soul drowned with Gabriel, making hers a body without a soul, a breathing corpse.

Portia Coughlan's memories of symbiosis surpass the border of what can be remembered, and instead establish a myth-like fantasy of original intertwining which concerns not only the psyche but also the twins' bodies and sexuality. When in the final scene Portia reveals that the physical and emotional closeness of the twins also entailed sexual intercourse, she mythicizes their relationship by claiming that their incestuous union began in their mother's womb in a wishful, biologically impossible scenario:

> me and Gabriel made love all the time down be the Belmont River among the swale, from the age of five—That's as far back as I can remember anyways—But I think we were doin' it before we were born. Times I close me eyes and I feel a rush of water around me and above we hear the thumpin' of me mother's heart, and we're a twined, his foot on my head, mine on his foetal arm, and we don't know which of us is the other and don't want to, and the water swells around our ears, and all the world is Portia and Gabriel packed forever in a tight hot womb, where there's no breathin', no thinkin', no seein', only darkness and heart drums and touch [. . .] (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 253–4)

Portia's rhythm of speech imitates the swelling of water and represents the liquid world in which no boundaries between the siblings existed, which was even enhanced in the original version of the monologue, written in the Irish Midlands dialect that draws words together and thus conveys the speech's concern with flowing and melting (Sihra, "Renegotiating Land-

scapes" 27–8). Portia's visions of psychic, physical, and sexual symbiosis, according to which Portia and Gabriel "don't know which of [them] is the other and don't want to," suspend the boundary between masculinity and femininity, thus creating an androgynous anatomy of melancholia, which some productions have visualized powerfully. For example, the poster for a 2013 production by Munich's Metropoltheater features a person of indeterminate sex floating in water. Next to their face, the reflection of a second, equally indeterminate face is barely visible, thus depicting the spectral interfusing of souls and bodies.

According to Portia, this original incestuous (con)fusion continued in their later lives, as the twins kept entangling and substituting their identities until their environment, at least provisionally, separated them: "Everythin's swapped and mixed up and you're aither two persons or you're no one. He used call me Gabriel and I used call him Portia. Times we got so confused we couldn't tell who was who and we'd wait for someone else to identify us und put us back into ourselves" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 241). The environment's intervention in this androgynous melancholic anatomy elucidates how sex and gender are categories of difference that are socially constructed and enforced. Focusing on this drama of differentiation, *Portia Coughlan* shares a cultural concern of *The Merchant*, yet with decisive historical differences. As René Girard's influential reading of *The Merchant* has argued, the logic of scapegoating in the play may, like the golden casket, "entrap the wisest" readers, since Shylock eventually becomes as evil as his Christian, anti-Semitic opponents have claimed all along (100–19). The play also makes clear, however, how similar Shylock and Antonio, the Jew and the Christian, are. It is a play about the crisis of non-differentiation as crystallized in Balthazar/Portia's question, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.170). As Lynn Enterline has put it, "the punishment of Shylock in the courtroom is the violent cultural production of difference from a lack of differentiation" (231). This "violent cultural production of difference" entails a feminization of Shylock, who is rhetorically figured as a dam, the female parent of an animal, and who through this pun "finds himself 'damn'd' (condemned and feminized) by mercantile Venice" (237). Both *The Merchant* and Carr's response are concerned with the drama of differentiation in their respective socio-political moments. In Carr's play, Shakespeare's intersection of early modern religious, ethnic, gender, and class differences returns as a drama of gender/sex differentiation required by regionally or even nationally inflected kinship structures, a pressing theatrical, political, and theoretical concern of the 1990s.[12]

In the same decade in which Carr's theater envisioned an anatomy of melancholia, Judith Butler theorized sex and gender in general as a melancholic process in a heteronormative social framework. Through a critique of Freud's notion of the incest taboo at work in the Oedipus complex, Butler argues that "[g]ender itself might be understood in part as the 'acting out' of unresolved grief" for the loss of the same-sex parent as an object of desire (*Psychic Life of Power* 146). For Butler, melancholic incorporation thus becomes an explanatory pattern for how bodies are constituted by the interaction between social processes (the prohibition of homosexuality) and psychic ones (the experience of loss) in ongoing, repetitive, performative activities. In offering test cases of what happens when melancholic incorporations trouble normative performances of sex, gender, and sexuality, plays such as *Portia Coughlan* and Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) developed theatrical counter-fantasies to discreetly sexed bodies that adhere remarkably close to Butler's influential theory (see Wald 161–214).

In both Carr's theater and Butler's theory, the suspension of a clear dividing line between masculinity and femininity goes hand in hand with a suspension of the line between materiality and immateriality, between physical, living bodies and ephemeral, ghostly presences. The third act of *Portia Coughlan* employs analepsis to reinforce this effect. After audiences have witnessed Portia's body being winched out of the river in the second act, Portia returns at the beginning of the third act to relive her last day alive, in the domestic setting of her living room. Structurally, the play thus makes Portia a revenant, a theatrically reanimated corpse who is destined to die again (Pankratz 87). The play thus foreshadows not only in a temporal sense, but also by casting a shadow of ethereality on Portia's presence in the last act. The twins' identities and bodies oscillate between substance and shadow, between materiality and immateriality, as well as between normatively sexed bodies and an unruly anatomy of melancholia—bodies that do not matter in Butler's sense, because they do not materialize in line with social norms and are hence excluded from intelligibility.

As it turns out, Portia's analeptic return to life in the third act structurally mirrors an earlier return to life from intended death. Portia confesses to her mother that she had planned a joint suicide with her twin to restore their unity in the watery womb-tomb. However, Portia stopped wading into the Belmont River, while her drowning brother realized too late that his sister had not accompanied him. In hindsight, Portia argues that she had to defend herself in a merciless fight for dominance and survival,

thus countering her earlier claims of symbiotic, harmonious love between the siblings (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 251). Portia's mother presents this struggle as the fight for the position of the substance whom the shadow has to follow, claiming that Portia was "only his shadow, trailin' after him like a slavish pup" (249). Again, the categories of substance and shadow are shifting, as during the execution of their suicide plan Portia literally stopped following her brother like his shadow. After his death, however, she has found her life overshadowed by his melancholic presence, because, as Freud would put it, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 249). The third act thus offers a new perspective on the relation between the twins, which subverts, or at least complements, the idealized notion of unity. The ambivalence between sibling love and rivalry constitutes another return to Shakespeare's potential sources, namely fairy tales in circulation in England at the time, variants of which were later written down by the Grimm brothers as *The Twelve Brothers* and *The Six Swans*. Freud discusses these tales to demonstrate that the muteness of the lead casket and the muteness that Portia is condemned to are symbolic equivalents of death. Both tales revolve around topics that constitute the central conflicts of *Portia Coughlan*: sex/gender as a matter of (literal or metaphorical) life and death, mutual sacrifice for each other's sake, and a vision of an exclusive bond between brother and sister verging on incest.[13]

While the ending of Carr's tragedy of failed mourning and failed marriage clearly departs from the romantic denouement of Shakespeare's (albeit severely troubled) "happy" ending, again there is a structural similarity. Just as audiences of *Portia Coughlan* read Portia's return to life through her previously witnessed death, audiences of *The Merchant* view Portia's return to Belmont through her performance in Venice as a sophisticated male lawyer. As in Carr's ending, Shakespeare's fifth act is infused with dramatic irony, and it derives comic entertainment as much as underlying tension from Portia's status in between genders/sexes. The specter of Portia's male alter ego, Balthazar, haunts the play's ending as an allegedly absent figure who is, however, for audiences and knowing characters, physically present.[14] Carr's reimagination provides a new perspective on this shadowy manifestation of Balthazar, as it involves the fantasy of lovemaking between Portia and the specter of her twin. Portia provokes Bassanio by claiming, "the doctor lay with me" (5.1.259), and Bassanio, once he has been let into the secret, addresses Portia as Balthazar: "Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow. / When I am absent, then lie with my wife!" (5.1.284–5). Akin to Carr's imaginary scenario, Bassanio here

envisions Portia's sexualized symbiosis with her ghostly male twin—or rather, Balthazar's sexualized symbiosis with his insubstantial female twin, since Bassanio here jokingly addresses Balthazar instead of Portia, and thus also, in a metatheatrical turn, the male actor playing Portia. As Janet Adelman has put it, Portia's "disguise makes her femaleness an illusion suspended between the boy actor who plays her and the boy lawyer whom she plays" (133). Again, the assignment of materiality and immateriality, of substance and shadow, and of masculinity and femininity become transitory and ambivalent. Shakespeare's ending, like Carr's, activates the split awareness of the audience to ask how bodies matter on and beyond the stage. As part of this questioning, both plays share an interest in models of kinship relations that go beyond heterosexual marriage. Shakespeare's ending evokes a triangle not only between Balthazar, Portia, and Bassanio but also, as critics have argued, between Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio, as symbolized by the wandering wedding ring. For example, Edward J. Geisweidt maintains that "Antonio and Portia are not antipathetic rivals but indispensable elements of each other's affective and erotic claims to Bassanio" (338), and that the play therefore "prompts us to rethink the politics of marriage in such a way that a queered kinship becomes imaginable" (339).[15] *Portia Coughlan* is likewise concerned with exploring queered kinship structures, but the suicidal, incestuous merging with her twin is a decidedly darker response to the drama of differentiation, which does not (or not yet) allow for livable alternatives.[16]

Portia Coughlan, as a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice* involving a transhistoric update and a return to the concerns of Shakespeare's sources with a particular focus on substance-shadow dynamics, can itself be described as a "shadow" of Shakespeare's drama. However, as I have shown, Carr's free twentieth-century reimagining radically departs from Shakespeare's script and is therefore clearly more than "only his shadow, trailin' after him like a slavish pup" (Carr, *Portia Coughlan* 249). As post-fidelity adaptation studies have shown, all sources, stagings, filmings, rewritings, and allusions together create the networked *Merchant* of the twenty-first century, in which Shakespeare's text(s) and its adaptations have a mutually transformative relation and the notion of a stable origin needs to be abandoned. Carr's drama of sex/gender differentiation offers a particular approach to the retroactive projection called "original," one that emphasizes the mysterious, menacing, and melancholic aspects of Shakespeare's Portia figure and that elaborates the tragic dimensions of sex/gender differentiation. Carr's focus on the shifting supremacies of substance and shadow also self-reflexively comments on the postcolonial, cross-cultural

quality of this adaptation, in which the most prominent contemporary Irish female playwright engaging with the most canonical English male author contributes to the entanglement of two national literatures that have been characterized by mutual projections, distortions, and attempts to overshadow each other.[17] Quite appropriately, both Shakespeare's and Carr's plays end by asking once more, again self-reflectively, which is the substance here and which the shadow.[18]

Notes

[1]For a renewed interest in the question of fidelity for adaptation studies, see Desmet; Lanier, "Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare;" Leitch; and Johnson. For a discussion of adaptation in the light of Jacques Derrida's notions of spectrality, see Calbi.

[2]For a brief comparison of *The Merchant* and *Portia Coughlan* that focuses on the act of choosing, see Wallace, "Crossroads between Worlds" 87, and Cousin 43. A number of critics regard the references to Shakespeare as superficial and a source of irony; for example, Victor Merriman argues that "References to Shakespeare in *Portia Coughlan* go no further than attempting to ironize in an unsubtle way the white trash world of Portia against that of the gentle lady of *The Merchant of Venice*" (153).

[3]See e.g. "Interview" in *Rage and Reason*, her "Afterword," and her printed talk "Dealing with the Dead." For comments on literary influences, see Sihra, *Marina Carr* 99–100 and 135; Wallace, "Tragic Destiny" 437; Hill 189; Bracken 44.

[4]For a discussion of how Jewishness was constructed as a race in early modern England and how it is negotiated in *The Merchant*, see Adelman 1–37 and 66–98.

[5]Focusing on a gender-fluid Portia, Carr's play anticipates the queer sex/gender representation of Grace Tiffany's 2005 historical novel *The Turquoise Ring*, which Lewis discusses as an example of a third-wave feminist adaptation (308).

[6]See Hirota, who argues that Bassanio presents Portia both as the golden fleece and as Medea who will help him to win the fleece (111).

[7]Carr's play *By the Bog of Cats*, which premiered two years after *Portia Coughlan* and develops many of its topics further, rewrites *Medea* more straightforwardly.

[8]See also Janet Adelman's discussion of the "memory traces" of the source texts that give Portia a menacing quality (130).

[9]Shakespeare replaces "vessel" from the Elizabethan translation of *Gesta Romanorum* with "casket." While "casket" primarily indicated a jewel box to Elizabethans, Shakespeare used the term as a container for the dead in other plays (Cartwright 171).

[10]I am grateful to Terry Hands for describing the caskets to me (Hands, Personal Communication).

[11]For influential discussions of Portia's agency in the casket scenes, see Newman 24–6; Berger 10–11; Hillman 5–6.

[12]Portia's refusal of the mother role has particular relevance in the Irish context, because the romanticized mother in Irish theater has traditionally been viewed as a personification of the nation (Sihra, "Cautionary Tale" 260). See Leeney for a discussion of Portia's violations of traditional Irish femininity ("Feminist Meanings" 95).

[13]In *The Twelve Brothers*, a king decides to have his twelve sons killed if his thirteenth child is a girl. With the aid of their mother, the brothers flee to a wood, vow to kill every girl they meet, but eventually welcome their sister, who had begun to search for her brothers and who bonds with the youngest of them. The sister herself is willing to die for the sake of her brothers and they keep living together until she picks twelve lilies from their garden to give to her brothers, who are transformed into ravens and only return to the human world after their sister has remained mute for seven years and encountered life-threatening dangers. *The Six Swans* is a similar fable, with a stepmother who transforms the brothers into swans and the sister who redeems them through her silence. As part of the sister's trial, she is accused of having killed her own three children (who were in fact taken away by her mother-in-law). The fairy tale contains the specter of the murderous mother introduced by Shakespeare's Medea reference and taken up in *Portia Coughlan*, too.

[14]As Catherine Belsey has pointed out, "The equivocations and doubles entendres of Act 5 celebrate a sexual indeterminacy, which is not in-difference but multiplicity" (48).

[15]See also Alice Benston's early reading of how "the *three* are united in a bond of love" (373) via the ring exchange. In contrast to queer readings of the love triangle, she proposes to see Antonio as a father surrogate for Bassanio "caught in a loving parent's dilemma" (385).

[16]In contrast to my reading, several critics have proposed to read Portia Coughlan's suicide as an act of liberation and transcendence. Cathy Leeney argues that the twisted chronology "frees both Portia and the audience from the tyranny of closure in death" and that while her reappearance "deepens the tragic pain," it also allows her to "transcend" death (*Ireland's* 160). Anna McMullan acknowledges that the trauma of dislocation envisioned by Portia's "corporeal unhomeliness" "may become a site whose very indeterminacy fuels the production of alternative identities" (189–90). Claire Bracken sees Portia's death as "a rebirth of possibility" that turns her into an embodiment of "change and escape" (47), and Shonagh Hill locates the potential of "self-invention" in Portia (198) and reads her suicide as a "defiant strategy" (209). Others, like Geraldine Cousin, have emphasized her self-destructiveness (44).

[17]See Merriman for a reading that radically differs from mine. Rather than seeing the play as a critique of the neocolonial hyperconsumerism of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, Merriman argues that the Shakespearean references in *Portia Coughlan* are representative of the play's "fatal refusal of the difficult, postponed, project of Irish decolonization" (159).

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