

Impertinent Matters: Lancelot Gobbo and the Fortunes of Performance Criticism

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I

Shakespeare criticism and performance has vacillated considerably in its approach to minor characters, ranging in its estimation of the significance of these characters from superfluous to essential.¹ A subset of these minor characters are those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, clowns and servants—a class of characters often viewed as primarily for entertainment, and hence as inessential to a sophisticated response to the plays. Guided by this criterion, many Restoration and early eighteenth-century (and some modern) productions eliminated the parts altogether.

Nineteenth-century productions, motivated by a belief in Shakespeare's genius, and a corresponding conviction that his writing produced nothing superfluous, attempted to bring production of the plays in conformity to text, thereby reclaiming these minor characters. In the last half-century, moreover, this process of reclamation has been taken even further by those productions and critics who emphasize the relation of theatre to festival. By redirecting attention to popular culture and by focusing on the inversionary forces inherent in festival, production has not only reinstated clowns and servants but has often marked them for special appreciation.²

Modern criticism on Lancelot Gobbo, the clown in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, replays this margin-to-center pattern through its shift in emphasis from text to performance. Initially, Lancelot's joking and monologues were seen to be detached from the plot, to be, in Frye's phrase, "curiously aloof" from the main thrust of the play.³ Consequently, Lancelot was viewed as thematically and theatrically superfluous. This position was countered, however, by those critics who argued that Lancelot's role was not superfluous but rather integral, reinforcing and legitimizing

themes and incidents central to the play. This argument commonly either focused on Lancelot's rejection of the Jew Shylock in preference to the Christian Bassanio, noting its parallel to Jessica's flight from and abandonment of her Jewish father,⁴ or analyzed the relationship of Lancelot and his father, Old Gobbo, in the context of the other parent/child relationships in the play.⁵

The third, and most recent, critical formulation circles back to the first, with a difference. Performance-oriented critics reject the integrationist reading of Lancelot's role, arguing that the role is indeed detached from the main flow of the play. But rather than viewing this detachment as a liability, these critics see it as a way to exploit the potential of the theatre, the special meaning of Lancelot's role deriving from his capacity to stand back from the narrative movement of the play and to obtain a metatheatrical position.⁶

I want to consider three critics—Walter Cohen, David Wiles, and James Bulman—who draw on performance-oriented strategies in order to comment on Lancelot's role and to distill its contribution to *The Merchant of Venice*. To be sure, the three critics vary considerably in the degree to which they foreground these strategies: for Wiles and Bulman, performance is more central, for Cohen less so. But I suggest that their remarks on Lancelot, and the critical strategies they deploy in making them, reveal contradictions both in their own critical practice and in the effort of literary criticism to revise its text-based orientation and vocabulary in favor of a performance-oriented one.⁷

I will argue that this is more problematically the case with Cohen and Wiles, each of whom attempt to give a reading of the play—and of Lancelot's role in it—guided by performance issues. Cohen invokes Lancelot to support his claims about Shakespeare's subversive theatre. But the focus on Lancelot both generates conservative critical strategies and enforces the play's devotion to a conservative social agenda. I therefore see Cohen's turn to performance—to that which is beyond or before the text—as leading him to embrace the very text he ostensibly wishes to circumvent. In the case of Wiles, theatre history seemingly enables a view of Lancelot-as-clown that is at its foundation performance-centered. But his attempt to give a reading of Lancelot's role in the play shows, I believe,

how resistant the text of the play is to Wiles' historical construction of the character.

I will claim, then, that Cohen and Wiles illuminate the gap between performance and text when they offer their own reading of the play. In contrast, Bulman does not venture a reading, but sees Lancelot as symptomatic of early modern theatrical issues in general. By bracketing a "reading" of the clown's role in the play, Bulman is more successful at sustaining a performance-oriented critique of Lancelot. But Bulman's stance, abrogating a reading of the play, still leaves the tension between performance and text intact. I therefore conclude by first indicating how Lancelot's role mirrors the fortunes of performance criticism, inviting us to see the status and issues of the one linked to those of the other. And second, I suggest that by paradoxically having Lancelot engage in an act of reading *himself* as a text, Shakespeare uses Lancelot's clowning role to arbitrate the uneasy relation between performance and text.

II

Walter Cohen's article, "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," has been influential on several fronts.⁸ For our purposes, Cohen gives substantial consideration to the "function" of Lancelot. Indeed, although Cohen's examination of Lancelot consists of approximately a page, it is the lengthiest review Cohen offers of any character in the play.⁹ His discussion of Lancelot, furthermore, contains his most extensive use of the strategy of close reading. I will try to account for why Lancelot warrants these special considerations.

The focus on Lancelot is initially provoked by Cohen's shift from sociological to performance critique as a means to get at the play's deep structure. Specifically, examining "matters of stage position and dramatic speech" promotes an understanding of the tensions that disrupt the play's neo-classical surface. These tensions, according to Cohen, are produced by two dimensions: on the one hand, the play's "popular heritage," and, on the other, the "contradiction between artisanal base and absolutist superstructure in public theatre." Cohen also implicates the Elizabethan

audience in the tensions that disrupt the surface, following those, particularly Weimann, who emphasize that the audience at the Elizabethan theatre celebrated a “festive occasion.”¹⁰

With regard to “stage position,” it is Lancelot who has the greatest “proximity to the audience,” proximity here understood as social and linguistic identity. Though Cohen does not spell out the significance of this identification of clown with audience, the association apparently justifies Lancelot’s importance in Cohen’s analysis. Because he most closely embodies the features of the audience, Lancelot serves as a conduit for the artisan-based subversive strategies the play clandestinely promotes. While Cohen does not make explicit his reasons for privileging a minor character, one can suggest that this tactic best dramatizes Cohen’s point because Lancelot’s histrionic marginality seems to pose little threat to the main workings of the plot and the play.

Cohen deploys close reading to show that Lancelot’s erratic language actually and purposefully demystifies the play’s dominant aristocratic discourse. Specifically, while from the standpoint of aristocratic discourse malapropism represents the inappropriate use of language, from the standpoint of popular discourse it signals a subversive “impertinence.” Cohen thus recuperates the very linguistic cues that seem to indicate Lancelot’s ineffectiveness.

As I mentioned above, Cohen’s recourse to close reading to examine Lancelot’s function is his most extensive use of this strategy. This is of interest on two fronts. First, he indicates early in his essay that his concern is with “innovative critical strategies [such] as symptomatic reading, metacommentary, and the elucidation of the ideology of form.”¹¹ Close reading thus stands out as a more conventional and conservative strategy in contrast to the more innovative ones of which Cohen speaks here and which generally inform the methodology of his essay. Second, close reading emphasizes the authority and stability of the text at the same time that Cohen wishes to feature elements associated with performance. Thus, in his expressed concern with “stage position and dramatic speech” as a framework for analysis of Lancelot, Cohen has silently yoked the two venues, theatre and text, which have been set at loggerheads in recent disputation over the appropriate mode of analysis for drama criticism.¹²

Cohen's turn to close reading may have been motivated by his foregrounding of Lancelot. Other critics argue that the Elizabethan rendition of Lancelot, probably first acted by Will Kemp, made the most of the clown's "stage position," which included generous opportunities for extemporization.¹³ Additionally, critics note that Lancelot's extemporizing suggests an unstable text.¹⁴ Invoking performance terminology ("stage position") and foregrounding a role (Lancelot) which embodies the possibilities and difficulties of performance criticism, Cohen, feeling vertigo, may have turned to close reading to try to stabilize an object of analysis growing ever more unstable.

The problem presented by this turn to close reading to analyze a performance role is further demonstrated by the questionable close reading that Cohen offers. Referring to Lancelot's attempt to leave his employ with Shylock and gain a new position with Bassanio, Cohen writes: "In seeking service with the understandably bewildered Bassanio, the socially mobile clown explains that 'the suit is impertinent to myself' (II.ii.130). Having *somehow* obtained the job, he revisits his old employer to invite him to dinner with his new one" (emphasis added). Cohen implies by this paraphrase that Lancelot's verbal and social incompetence ought to lead Bassanio to reject him for the position and therefore that Bassanio's acceptance of Lancelot can only be explained by a "somehow," explained, in other words, by something—chance, charm, fate—that cannot be explained. But Shakespeare provides a reason, articulated by Bassanio in this scene: "I know thee well, thou hast obtained thy suit. / Shylock thy master spoke with me this day, / And hath preferred [i.e. recommended] thee" (2.2.119-21); Shylock soon after corroborates the arrangement (2.5.47-49).¹⁵ Lancelot, then, enters Bassanio's service not by means of his own qualifications but rather on the basis of a prearranged agreement between his masters. The "somehow" that Cohen uses to describe the transaction does not square with the text. To be sure, the notion of chance implied by the "somehow" supports Cohen's emphasis on the subversive function of Lancelot, for chance functions here as an irrational force that eludes the pervasive control of those in power. In contradiction to Cohen's resort to chance, however, the text shows that even servants who take initiative are only carrying out what their superiors have foreordained.

Where Cohen argues that Lancelot manifests a subversive function that escapes and challenges the dominant aristocratic discourse of the play, the text here suggests that even the subversive and popular is guided and controlled by the aristocrats and their associates.¹⁶ Hence, the conservative critical strategy of close reading that Cohen invokes to try to recruit Lancelot to a subversive cause leads, inadvertently, to a conservative reading of Lancelot's place in the play.

III

Whereas Walter Cohen's appreciation of Lancelot's subversive role is brought to support a marxist appreciation of popular culture, David Wiles' consideration of Lancelot in *Shakespeare's Clown* is boldly performance-centered, examining Lancelot in the context of the roles that Shakespeare wrote for the Elizabethan clown Will Kemp.¹⁷ More generally, Wiles' extensive historical review of Will Kemp and the clown tradition in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre serves as a means by which to refocus drama criticism, privileging not "the unity of the text" but rather "the unity of theatrical experience."¹⁸ Thus Lancelot works to support this call for a major theoretical adjustment.¹⁹

Wiles argues that understanding the shift from text to theatrical experience depends upon understanding the significance of the jig as an element of Elizabethan theatre. The appreciation of the jig's significance comes both from material other than the plays (Kemp's autobiography) and from patterns existent in the plays themselves, particularly the role of the clown. Kemp's clowns, including Lancelot, do not obtain closure within the play but only after it, dancing the jig that followed the play proper. In order to gain the proper perspective on the clown's position, Wiles contrasts English with Italian theatre. Where in *commedia dell'arte* the marriage of the socially privileged is repeated by servants/clowns, in Elizabethan theatre the clown does not marry. Shakespeare, for example, deliberately does not allow Lancelot to be married off: "Three parallel weddings conclude the play [*Merchant*] . . . but, at the bottom of the social ladder, there is no resolution for Lancelot, and the pregnancy of the

moorress is forgotten."²⁰ Both marriage and jig, according to Wiles, are theatrical signs of physical satisfaction. Since the clown is conspicuous by his absence from the marriage which brings closure to comedy, his physical satisfaction must be located elsewhere, outside and after the play.

Wiles' formulation for Lancelot's special status in this context is that "sexuality is always suggested, never demonstrated."²¹ Lancelot's name has sexual connotations ("Lance," indicating a sharp instrument, has phallic associations),²² but because Shakespeare refuses to marry him off, the satisfaction is not forthcoming. More than that, Lancelot embodies an almost ascetic figure, one who is desexualized, Lenten, and anti-carnival. Strikingly, though Wiles appropriates and extends the assumptions of the critics who valorize festival, he also inverts these assumptions. While Cohen, for example, views Lancelot as the embodiment of the festive, working within the play to demystify and subvert, Wiles believes that such forces are curbed within the play itself, and are liberated only after the play is over and the dance begins.

There are two ways, however, that Wiles' foregrounding of Lancelot runs into trouble. First, the categories by which he interprets Lancelot's role stand in contradiction. We have seen that, according to Wiles, Lancelot embodies the "Lenten" clown. Yet Wiles also argues that Lancelot must be viewed in the tradition of the Vice, which means, among other things, that he is predisposed to gluttony and lechery.²³ Though Wiles invokes the association with the Vice mainly to reconsider the clown's relation to the audience, this association leads him to implicitly represent Lancelot as both lecherous and Lenten. The second problem is that the text resists the Lancelot that Wiles' performance-oriented criticism constructs. According to the text, Lancelot does not seem at all Lenten. Wiles himself refers to the most egregious counterexample, in which Lorenzo notes that Lancelot has made pregnant a "moorress." This example of promiscuity, among others, suggests that, in contrast to Wiles' claim, Lancelot demonstrates an unusual degree of sexual [i.e. physical] satisfaction, perhaps more than any other character in the play. It is indeed this transgressive promiscuity that Lorenzo seizes on to shame Lancelot while defending his own illicit marriage to Jessica.

It is indeed possible that Wiles applies aristocratic standards of pleasure to a character for whom they simply are not warranted; it is not within but outside the conventions of marriage that the lower-class Lancelot might well be presumed to satisfy his wants.²⁴ In any event, Wiles' attempt to resituate his clowns, drawing on the specificity of performance material to gauge their full contribution, runs aground on a reading that wishes to remain in touch with (if not anchored to) the text.

IV

My third example again uses Lancelot to foreground performance issues. In *Shakespeare in Performance: The Merchant of Venice*, James Bulman comments on Lancelot within the context of a characterization of the special "multi-consciousness" of Elizabethan theatre, a multi-consciousness that, in contrast to the bifurcated production of *Merchant* in modern theatre, allows for an appreciation of the play's complex integrated structure.²⁵ Bulman's assumption is that what gave the Elizabethans the capacity to interpret *Merchant* rightly is no longer readily (or perhaps at all) accessible to modern theatre. Nevertheless, as an anthropologist describing a hot culture to a cold one, Bulman attempts to retrieve and present the essential nature of Elizabethan theatre to a (post)modern world. To this end he distills the essence of Elizabethan theatre as the interaction between bare stage and imagining audience, the minimalist stage encouraging and benefiting from the impressive (and seemingly lost) resources of the Shakespearean audience.

As with Cohen and Wiles, Lancelot here receives only brief consideration. Nevertheless, Bulman views Lancelot's role as paradigmatic in this excavation of Elizabethan theatre. Bulman's point of departure is the dissonance Lancelot's role evokes in modern, naturalistic theatre, for his monologue creates a "stumbling block" to production. Of any role in the play, Lancelot's is the one most profoundly lodged in its historical milieu, and thus also most profoundly resists being translated effortlessly into the superficially similar but fundamentally different language of modern stage production. Various exotic features of Lancelot's role, then, serve as a basis for the reconstruction of the Elizabethan theatre experience;

furthermore, Bulman implies that the unassimilable nature of Lancelot's role enables what Weimann refers to as a way to negotiate the divide between past and present.²⁶

It is striking that, unlike Cohen and Wiles, Bulman does not, at some point in his performance critique of Lancelot, recruit the text or the plot of the play. In contrast, he emphasizes those features of Lancelot that indicate how the role functioned outside of and unconstrained by the text or even the play. By championing Lancelot's "flexibility" to move in and out of character, and by underscoring his extemporization, Bulman questions and limits the authority of the text or plot as a basis from which to judge theatrical experience. What Bulman loses, of course, by steering clear of text or narrative is the possibility of offering a reading of the play enriched by the consideration of Lancelot; Bulman himself makes no gesture toward such a reading. What he gains, on the other hand, is a consistent performance critique which is not compromised by the often unconvincing effort to integrate textually or thematically based interpretations.

Bulman shares with Cohen and Wiles an appreciation for the interpretive lever provided by Lancelot's lower class status. Bulman justifies his foregrounding of Lancelot because Lancelot's lower class status allows a clear revelation of crucial theatrical elements, elements shared in more muted fashion by other characters or roles. Significantly, however, Bulman does not refer to Lancelot's lower class in order to place him in a different category from these other characters; the difference between Lancelot's role and that of others is to be measured not in kind but degree. For Bulman, the minor character becomes symptomatic of what every character in performance had to offer.

V

Though different in their performance-oriented approaches, Cohen, Wiles and Bulman transform this minor character into a major one, or at least one with major significance. Yet there is a way in which Lancelot must actually remain minor in order to generate this major significance. Since his role seems marginal to the play, it falls to the critic to present a

framework which contravenes this impression. In order to reverse the initial assumption of marginality, critical practice simultaneously insists on its importance; the fact that Lancelot is lower class, is a servant, is a clown, constitutes the very basis on which his importance rests. This kind of critical practice, to be sure, seems to share features with the kind of ironic reading engaged in by Richard Levin's close readers, correcting a surface reading in favor of a deeper one.²⁷ But the critical process I am describing differs in that it parallels and recapitulates what it analyses: just as Lancelot subverts what is status quo, showing the marginal to be central, so do critics engage in an equally subversive endeavor.

Furthermore, Lancelot's ascendancy to a position of some critical significance has taken place over the same period of time that performance criticism has come to the fore. Hence, the attraction that Lancelot holds for performance critics may be because his own fate resembles theirs. Prior to coming into critical vogue, performance criticism was viewed as instantiating an almost vulgar side of literary study. Similarly, Lancelot's rustic features previously suggested that he was not worthy of serious attention; but these same features, framed within a theory of festival, have been used to establish for him an alternative kind of cultural legitimacy. Tellingly, the prestige accorded the notion of festival and the festive in Renaissance studies has enabled an elevation in status common to Lancelot and performance criticism.

In addition, there may be other ways in which performance criticism sees its own concerns reflected in Lancelot. Often in the role of playing roles, and frequently being flippant with—and thus interrogating the status of—words, Lancelot is also regularly associated with texts. As with many servants in Elizabethan drama, he acts as a courier for letters of the nobility. But he seems especially scrupulous to make sure he does not open letters, even when it would seem he had the authorization to do so (2.4.9-11). Hence the letters he carries are read only by the nobles to whom he delivers them.²⁸

Significantly, the only text that Lancelot himself reads in the play is his hand.²⁹ After being accepted by Bassanio, Lancelot goes to take leave of his "old master," and on the way attempts to decipher the lines of his palm. His readerly gaze paradoxically focuses on the hand, turning attention toward the equipment of the actor's body. But his appreciation for the

quality of the text he discovers links body to book: "Well, / if any man in Italy have a fairer table which doth offer / to swear upon a book, I shall have good fortune (2.2.132-33)." The metaphorical situation Lancelot imagines is the taking of an oath, requiring his hand ("table") laid upon a bible ("book"). One text is next to another, establishing a kind of solemn interplay between hand and bible, actor and script, theatre and text. Both texts are meant to be read; both here unite to produce a third text, the oath. It is a striking image of creative interdependence between, in a slight rephrasing of Terry Eagleton's formulation, the two "distinct formations" of text and performance.³⁰

As Lancelot's reverie continues, however, his meditation again drives a wedge between text and performance:

Go to, here's a simple line of life, here's a

small trifle of wives: alas, fifteen wives is nothing, eleven widows and nine maids is a simple coming-in for one man. And then to 'scape drowning thrice, and to be in peril of my life with the edge of a feather-bed: here are simple 'scapes. (2.2.134-38)

What Lancelot (mis)reads in the lines of his palm is a kind of performance, a set of fantasized sexual adventures that seems greater than any single person could enact and that, moreover, constantly place him in life-death situations. As he does in other places, the clown seems to project himself into a theatrical world of his own conjuring. The difference in this scenario is the carnal text (the palm) that gives rise to, or legitimates, his imagined performance. The layering of the text/performance connection is worth spelling out: Shakespeare's text (*The Merchant*) occasions the performance of the play, which in turn highlights as a text the actor's body (Lancelot's hand), which occasions the fantasy of a performance (the many wives) which, we assume, could never be performed. To have a text that scripts an unrealizable drama questions the authority of Lancelot's carnal text. Hence, the notion of a text-driven drama—the notion, as W. B. Worthen has recently put it, that dramatic performance is dependent on and receives its impetus from a prescriptive text—is here placed in considerable doubt.³¹ Lancelot cannot possibly fulfill what the text has predetermined.

Moreover, what “drives” Lancelot’s erotic fantasy of unrealizable performance is only ostensibly the lines of his palm that spell out his fortune. The more likely prod that shapes Lancelot’s desire is the love affairs of the nobles. Mahood suggests that the adventures that Lancelot contemplates parody Bassanio’s own romantic adventures—a fitting identification, one may add, as Lancelot transfers his allegiance to Bassanio.³² But one might also see here a parody of Portia’s surplus of suitors and the risky contest that they agree to take part in, a contest which, if not ending in “peril of [one’s] life,” most often concludes for the suitor in a shameful silence and irrevocable celibacy. And if Lancelot’s own “simple” surplus parodies that of the nobles, so their values and actions set the standard for his own. Indeed, Lancelot’s prospect of a “small trifle” of fifteen wives lets him casually, if excessively, take part in the performance—marriage—that within the terms of the play and of Shakespearean comedy, helps to distinguish the noble characters from the common ones. In any case, the mix of comedic parody and class-driven fantasy demystifies Lancelot’s text, exposing its derivative nature.

My own strategy, then, has been to look intensively at what happens when Lancelot represents himself as a text. It may be that by invoking the actor’s body or reading closely Lancelot’s fantasy (if not his libidinal palm) or seizing on a single moment, I commit sins similar to those with which I charge Wiles, Cohen and Bulman respectively. Yet I have attempted to show how Shakespeare, using a character particularly suited to evoking the sticking point between performance and text, sets forth a more complex model of the relation between them, a model on the one hand sympathetic to the kind of revisionary practices performance criticism wants to install, while on the other hand alert to how texts infiltrate, if not prescribe, performance. Indeed, even with this character who most epitomizes performance, the text is insistently (perhaps impertinently) present. To be sure, for the clown to read himself as a text parodies the text he reads, emphasizing its instability. But texts are there nonetheless, indeed a plurality of texts, claiming a place for themselves, as it were, in Shakespeare’s theatre.

NOTES

¹From a different set of concerns than mine, M. M. Mahood deftly surveys the significance of minor characters in *Playing Bit Parts in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²My focus here is not on production history but on critical response in performance studies. Nonetheless, production and criticism seem consonant in many respects. A sketch of the production history of *The Merchant of Venice* indicates that Lancelot's fortunes seem to follow those of minor characters generally. The earliest adaptation on record, Granville's in 1701, cut the role entirely: "Granville also eliminated many secondary characters as either superfluous to the action or too lowly comic to be appropriate for it. The Gobbos were first to go . . ." (Bulman 23). The Gobbos were restored in Macklin's 1741 production, but several of Lancelot's key scenes were again cut in Irving's famous staging of *Merchant* in 1879. The apotheosis of Lancelot took place in Komisarjevsky's 1930s production: Lancelot is the first and last figure on the stage, the Gobbos appear not in less but rather more scenes than the script indicates, and the events of the play are meant to be viewed as Lancelot's dream. Most productions of the last half-century appear to include Lancelot; those productions that emphasize the festival dimension of the play also highlight his role. Strikingly, Bulman's critical survey of production of *The Merchant* implies that the more that is made of Lancelot, the more the antisemitic aspects of the play come into view. See James Bulman, *Shakespeare in Performance: The Merchant of Venice* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991) and the bibliography therein. Compare Jay Halio, introduction, *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare (New York: OUP, 1993).

³Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956) 93. See also H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Comedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) 128.

⁴Frye 97.

⁵See, for example, Rene Fortin, "Lancelot and the Uses of Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SEL* 14 (1974): 259-70, and, more recently, Judith Rosenheim, "Allegorical Commentary in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Studies* 24 (1996): 156-210.

⁶John Russell Brown, "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare," *Critical Quarterly* 5 (1963): 251-65.

⁷The issues are set out in Richard Levin, "Performance Critics vs. Close Readers in the Study of English Renaissance Drama," *MLR* 81 (1986): 545-59; contested in Harry Berger, Jr., *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) and "Text against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth*," *The Power of Forms*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1982) 49-81; summarized in Anthony Dawson, "The Impasse over the Stage," *ELR* 21 (1991): 309-27; and framed more broadly in W. B. Worthen, "Drama, Performativity, and Performance," *PMLA* 113 (1998): 1093-1107.

⁸"*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH* 49 (1982): 765-89. The article has most frequently been catalogued and responded to as an important contribution to Marxist and/or political approaches to Shakespeare. See, for example, Michael Ferber's assessment in "The Ideology of *The Merchant of Venice*," *ELR* 20 (1990): 431-464.

⁹Cohen 779-80.

¹⁰Cohen 779.

¹¹Cohen 765.

¹²Again, see Levin, Berger, Dawson and Worthen.

¹³David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987); on Elizabethan extemporization more generally, see David Mann, *The Elizabethan Player: Contemporary Stage Representation* (London and NY: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁴Bulman, 7; E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (London: Arnold, 1965); Jonathan Goldberg, "Textual Properties," *SQ* 37 (1986): 213-17.

¹⁵All quotations from the play follow *The Merchant of Venice*, ed., M. M. Mahood (Cambridge: CUP, 1987).

¹⁶Shylock does articulate what might be viewed as a subversive agenda for letting Lancelot go into Bassanio's service:

The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder,
Snail slow in profit, and he sleeps by day
More than the wild-cat. Drones hive not with me,
Therefore I part with him; and part with him
To one that I would have him help to waste
His borrowed purse. (2.5.44-49)

But in this case, I see Shylock on par with the aristocrats in the play, acting as one of the masters who determines the fate of the servant in his employ.

¹⁷Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown*.

¹⁸Wiles 56.

¹⁹In general Wiles, of course, considers various roles played by Kemp, including Lancelot. To a certain degree, then, I am supplying the focus on Lancelot. Yet it is also the case that Wiles singles Lancelot out for special consideration. See, for example, 7-10.

²⁰Wiles 53-54.

²¹Wiles 111.

²²Wiles 8.

²³Wiles 8.

²⁴I am indebted to Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky for this observation.

²⁵Bulman 6-7.

²⁶Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) xiv.

²⁷Levin 546.

²⁸Lancelot may of course be illiterate. According to Mark Thornton Burnett, however, at least some male domestic servants were able to read. See *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience* (London: Macmillan, 1997) 96.

²⁹Performance criticism, among other critical strategies, often foregrounds the significance of the actor's body. For a witty recent example see Anthony Dawson,

"Performance and Participation: Desdemona, Foucault, and the Actor's Body," *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, ed. James Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996) 29-45. For an analysis of acts of reading that address issues similar to those I take up here, see *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare*, ed. David Bergeron (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1996).

³⁰Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1978) 66. I have modified Eagleton's "text and production" to text and performance. And, of course, the substance of my conclusion points in a direction different than that of Eagleton's remarks on these terms.

³¹"Both disciplines [performance studies and literary studies] view drama as a species of performance driven by texts; as a result, drama appears to be an increasingly residual mode of performance." Worthen, "Drama, Performativity, and Performance," 1093-94. Through a critique of speech-act theory, ethnography, and Luhmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, Worthen's essay tries to rethink this relation.

³²See her comments on "wives" 2.2.135.