

# The Evolution of Sir John Everett Millais's *Portia*

LUCY OAKLEY

*Research Assistant, Department of European Paintings,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS'S *Portia* (Figure 1), now exhibited in the André Meyer Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, shows a life-size, three-quarter-length female figure with reddish blond hair piled up on her head, wearing a scarlet silk dress under a darker red velvet robe lined to match, and standing before a warm brown and green background with shadowy forms of pots and leaves, perhaps a tapestry. At her right is a monumental gray column. She holds her cap in her right hand and a legal document in her left. The finely detailed rendering of her head contrasts with the more summary treatment of costume and background. Hidden beneath the picture's surface lie clues to *Portia*'s genesis. Discovered only recently, they shed new light on the aesthetic aims and working methods of a great Victorian artist.

Signed with Millais's distinctive monogram and dated 1886, *Portia* is a typical example of his later art. At the beginning of his career, in the early 1850s, he made elaborate preliminary drawings for most of his compositions and painted many of their background landscapes out of doors, in natural light.<sup>1</sup> These pictures were executed in a linear, finely detailed, brilliantly colored Pre-Raphaelite style. The 1860s were for him a period of experiment and transition. Toward the end of the decade Millais finally settled on the technique which Mary Bennett has described as "characterized by fluent handling of paint, rich impasto, and fully worked out portrait heads combined with almost impressionistic detail."<sup>2</sup> For stylistic and thematic inspiration he turned to such painterly old masters as Titian, Velázquez, Van Dyck, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough.

The immense popularity of Millais's later style made him the wealthiest and best-known painter of the Victorian era. His income in 1886, the year of *Portia*'s completion, was £30,000.<sup>3</sup> He was showered with honors. In 1885 he became the first artist ever created a baronet, and in 1896, the year of his death, he was elected president of the Royal Academy. Early in the twentieth century, however, his reputation suffered an eclipse. Roger Fry, writing in the *Athenaeum* in 1905, called *Portia* "lamentable proof of the destructive effects of popularity."<sup>4</sup> With the recent revival of interest in Victorian art, Millais's pictures have again been acclaimed and exhibited.

1. See Malcolm Warner, *The Drawings of John Everett Millais*, exh. cat. (Bolton, Lancashire: Museum and Art Gallery, 1979); and Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (Oxford, 1973) pp. 45–57.

2. [Mary Bennett], *PRB Millais PRA: An Exhibition Organized by the Walker Art Gallery Liverpool and the Royal Academy of Arts London*, exh. cat. (London, 1967) p. 11.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 12. See also Malcolm Warner, *Sir John Everett Millais Bart., P.R.A.*, exh. cat. (St. Helier, Jersey: Barreau Art Gallery, 1979) n.p.

4. [Roger Fry], "The Grafton Gallery" [review of exhibition of the Staats Forbès collection], *Athenaeum*, May 27, 1905, p. 664. This unsigned article is marked with Fry's name in the *Athenaeum*'s files at the New Statesman and Nation Publishing Company; see Donald A. Laing, *Roger Fry: An Annotated Bibliography of the Published Writings* (New York, 1979) p. 133, no. C396. Ironically, Fry was the Metropolitan Museum's buying agent in Europe at the time *Portia* was acquired. He arrived in New York to begin work as the Museum's Curator of Paintings on Feb. 8, 1906, and *Portia* was shipped from Liverpool on Feb. 24 (according to documents in MMA Archives; see also Frances Spaulding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* [Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1980] p. 88).



1. Sir John Everett Millais (1829–1896), *Portia*, signed and dated (lower right): JEM [monogram]/1886. Oil on canvas, 49¼ × 33 in. (125.1 × 83.8 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wolfe Fund, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, 06.1328

*Portia* represents the heroine of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* when, in the fourth act, she appears in the courtroom disguised as a doctor of law from Padua. Subjects drawn from Shakespeare had been popular in British art since the seventeenth century, and many Victorian painters depicted scenes from his plays.<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare ranked second only to Jesus Christ in the Pre-Raphaelites' list of Immortals.<sup>6</sup> Millais drew themes from Shakespeare throughout most of his career.<sup>7</sup> *Ophelia* (1852; Tate Gallery, London), one of his most ambitious early works, represents an offstage scene from *Hamlet*. His last known Shakespearean painting, dated 1888, depicts Shylock's daughter, Jessica, in a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>8</sup>

Millais's interest in the theatre extended into his social life; in 1855 he became a member of the Garrick Club, and, according to his son, he "was very fond of going out in the evening, either to the Garrick or to a theatre, with some of his particular friends."<sup>9</sup> Among such friends were Sir Henry Irving (1838–1905), the principal Shakespearean actor-manager of his time, whose portrait Millais painted in 1883 (Garrick Club, London),<sup>10</sup> and Dame Ellen Terry (1847–1928), Irving's leading lady and best-known star. Terry played Portia to Irving's Shylock in his enormously successful production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which premiered at the Lyceum Theatre in London on November 1, 1879, enjoyed an unprecedented run of 250 performances, and was revived nearly every season for twenty-four years.<sup>11</sup> Portia became one of Terry's most popular roles; by her own estimate she played it more than a thousand times.<sup>12</sup>

For many years after the Metropolitan Museum acquired *Portia* in 1906, it was mistakenly exhibited as a portrait of Ellen Terry even though there is ample visual and literary evidence to refute this identification.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Millais dated March 30, 1886 (Figure 2), preserved in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the actress agreed to lend him a dress, almost certainly the one shown in this picture:

33 Longridge Road  
Earls Court. Tuesday.

Dear Sir John Millais

Of course I will lend you the dress (here it is.) or anything in the world that I possess, that could be of the very smallest service to you.

The dress was away in Scotland being cleaned for storing, or I should have sent it to you before—

Yours sincerely  
Ellen Terry

March 30. 86.

Comparison of *Portia* with a portrait of Terry in her red robes by G.W. Baldry dated 1885 (Figure 3) shows that the actress herself did not pose for Millais but that he did dress his model in her costume.

Contemporary productions of opera and historical drama provided useful visual resources for nineteenth-century artists' reconstructions of scenes from the past,

5. See W. Moelwyn Merchant, *Shakespeare and the Artist* (London, 1959), and Geoffrey Ashton, *Shakespeare and British Art*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1981).

6. William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London, 1905) I, pp. 158–160.

7. See Christine Poulson, "A Checklist of Pre-Raphaelite Illustrations of Shakespeare's Plays," *Burlington Magazine* 122 (Apr. 1980) pp. 244–250.

8. Sale, Sotheby's Belgravia, Oct. 1, 1979, no. 30, color ill. in catalogue.

9. John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (New York, 1899) I, p. 296.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 422. Millais presented the portrait to the Garrick Club in 1886. See *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Garrick Club* (London, 1936) p. 114, no. 382, ill. (engraving). Irving was one of the pallbearers at Millais's funeral.

11. For descriptive reconstructions of Irving's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, see Alan Hughes, "Henry Irving's Tragedy of Shylock," *Educational Theatre Journal* 24 (1972) pp. 248–268; *idem*, *Henry Irving, Shakespearean* (Cambridge, 1981) pp. 224–241; and George Rowell, "A Lyceum Sketchbook," *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research* 6 (1978) pp. 1–23.

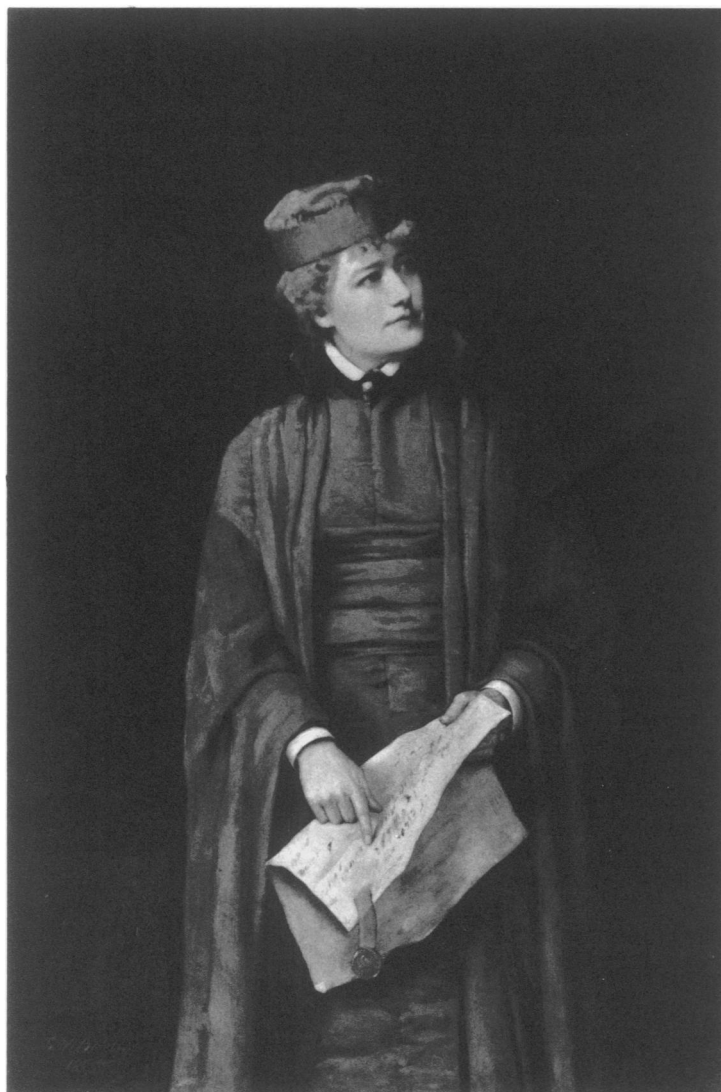
12. *Ellen Terry's Memoirs*, with preface, notes, and additional biographical chapters by Edith Craig and Christopher St. John (London, 1933) p. 191. (The memoirs were first published in Terry's lifetime; see Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* [London, 1908].)

13. *Portia* is identified as a portrait of Ellen Terry in an article entitled "What Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke Says of This Picture" (clipping in the Robinson Locke Collection of Dramatic Scrapbooks, vol. 454 [Ellen Terry, vol. 1] pp. 82–83 [Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center]; the clipping is inscribed as taken from the *World* [New York], Mar. 18, 1906, but it does not appear on microfilms of the newspaper for that date at the Columbia University Library or at the New York Public Library). I am grateful to Della Sperling for calling my attention to this reference. An excerpt from

33 Longridge Road  
Earls Court Tuesday  
Dear Sir John Millais  
Of course I will lend  
you the dress (here it is) or  
anything in the world that  
I possess, that could be of the  
very smallest service to you.  
The dress was away  
in Scotland being cleaned  
for storing or I should <sup>have</sup> sent  
it to you before -  
Yours sincerely  
Ellen Terry  
March 30. 86

2. Ellen Terry, autograph letter signed, to Sir John Everett Millais, March 30, 1886. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Millais Papers, MA 1475 K713 (photo: Pierpont Morgan Library)

particularly since original period clothing was often prohibitively expensive or nonexistent. Theatre costumes were sometimes far from historically accurate, and the taste of stage designers did not always correspond with that of artists, but adapting stage dress for pictures was less costly than having garments custom made and more satisfying than trying to extrapolate from two-dimensional images in books of historical costumes, as Stella Mary Newton has noted.<sup>14</sup> Millais prepared for painting *A Huguenot, on St. Bartholomew's Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge* (1852; private collection, England) by accompanying Holman Hunt



3. G. W. Baldry, *Ellen Terry as Portia*, signed and dated (lower left): G. W. Baldry/1885. Oil on canvas, 38 × 28 in. (96.5 × 71.1 cm.). London, Garrick Club (photo: ET Archive, Ltd.)

Ellen Terry's memoirs appeared under the title "My First Appearance in America," *McClure's Magazine* 31 (1908) pp. 121–132, accompanied by a reproduction of *Portia* (p. 128) identified as a portrait of Terry. The illustrations to this article differ from those in the book and must have been chosen by the editors of the magazine. The error was repeated by Bryson Burroughs in the Metropolitan Museum's *Catalogue of Paintings* (New York, 1914) p. 183, no. M61–1. On Apr. 24, 1916, Augustin Rischgitz wrote the Museum to communicate Ellen Terry's statement that *Portia* was not a portrait of her (present whereabouts of letter unknown, but see H. W. Kent's reply of May 8, in MMA Archives). *Portia* was still exhibited as a portrait of Ellen Terry in 1927, when Mabel Terry Lewis wrote to protest that "the portrait is not of her and was never intended to be her. Sir John Millais was an intimate friend of my Aunt Ellen and asked her if she would lend him the dress she wore in *The Merchant of Venice* as he wanted to paint a picture of Portia" (letter to Edward Robinson, dated Jan. 16, 1926 [sic for 1927], in MMA Archives). *Portia's* title was finally corrected in the 9th edition of the Metropolitan Museum's *Catalogue of Paintings* (New York, 1931) pp. 245–246, no. M61–1. Yet as late as 1944 the picture was exhibited as a portrait of Ellen Terry (*Stars of Yesterday and Today*, exh. cat. [New York: Wildenstein Galleries, 1944] no. 89).

14. Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art & Reason: Dress Reformers of the 19th Century* (London, 1974) pp. 27–28.



4. *Ellen Terry as Portia*. Postcard, from a photograph by Window & Grove taken ca. 1879. Tenterden, Kent, The National Trust, Ellen Terry Memorial Museum

to see Meyerbeer's opera *The Huguenots* "to study the pose[s] and costumes of the figures," according to Millais's son.<sup>15</sup>

Ellen Terry's legal robes not only served as an appropriate period costume for *Portia*; they also evoked a connection in the nineteenth-century viewer's mind between Millais's picture and the popular actress in one of her best-known roles. Terry's costumes for *The Merchant of Venice* evolved through several versions during the decades she played Portia. She made her debut in the role on April 17, 1875, in the Bancrofts' exquisitely mounted but short-lived "Aesthetic" production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Prince of Wales's Theatre in London, with sets and costumes

based partly on archaeological research by Terry's intimate companion, the architect Edward W. Godwin.<sup>16</sup> According to Alice Comyns Carr, a close friend of Terry's who later designed many of her costumes, the actress's legal robes in the Bancrofts' production were not red, but black.<sup>17</sup> Terry's original costume for Irving's production of 1879 was also black, with a brocaded robe (Figure 4),<sup>18</sup> but by 1883 she was wearing the version she lent Millais, "an undergarment of pomegranate-colored silk made like a dressing-robe, and girdled above the waist with a broad band of the same; her dainty cap was of the same hue and texture; and an over-dress, made like a doublet, of rich crimson plush, with deep sleeves lined with the lighter color."<sup>19</sup> In Millais's picture,

15. Millais, *Life and Letters of Millais*, I, p. 141. Quoted in Newton, *Health, Art & Reason*, p. 28.

16. Godwin published his suggestions in "The Architecture and Costume of Shakespere's Plays: The Merchant of Venice," *The Architect* 13 (1875) pp. 182–183 (architecture) and 196–197 (costume); reprinted in *The Mask* 1 (1908) pp. 75–80 and 91–95; and excerpted in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: VII. The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia, 1888; reprint, New York, 1964) pp. 386–394. For discussions of Godwin's contribution to the production, see William E. Kleb, "Shakespeare in Tottenham-Street: An 'Aesthetic' Merchant of Venice," *Theatre Survey* 16 (1975) pp. 97–121; idem, "E. W. Godwin and the Bancrofts," *Theatre Notebook* 30 (1976) pp. 122–132; and Edward Craig, "E. W. Godwin and the Theatre," *Theatre Notebook* 31 (1977) pp. 30–33. I am grateful to Mr. Craig for additional information on the subject.

17. *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*, ed. Eve Adam, 2nd ed. (London, [1926]) p. 31. Alice Comyns Carr once "borrowed Ellen Terry's doctor's robes and masqueraded as Portia" at a masked ball given by the Alma-Tademas (*ibid.*).

18. According to Hughes, "Irving's Tragedy of Shylock," p. 261. A color lithograph caricature showing Terry and Irving in the trial scene, published in *The Sketch*, July 31, 1880, shows Terry wearing a black brocaded robe (example in the Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York).

19. *Herald* (Boston), Dec. 13, 1883, quoted in Hughes, "Irving's Tragedy of Shylock," p. 261. According to Molly Thomas, curator of the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Tenterden, Kent, Terry had a "fair number" of Portia costumes, "since it was a role much played." Two robes of red corded silk, one dress of red uncorded silk, one red cap, and a pair of silver acorns are preserved at the Terry Museum. The precise reason for changing the costume from black to red is not known. According to Godwin, the black brocaded robe was archaeologically correct; however, the red version must have made a more striking effect on the stage. It also strongly resembled the full academic dress of the Doctor of Civil Laws of Oxford and Cambridge: a scarlet robe with bell-shaped sleeves, lined in a lighter shade of red.

6. X-ray radiograph of a detail of *Portia*

a brilliant and rich exercise in deep rose colour, contrasting with the carnations of a handsome, fair-haired damsel and a dark, warm background. It is named 'Portia.' A life-size figure is standing fronting us, and seems to be waiting an opportunity to speak. In one hand is a scroll, in the other her red cap. The costume is that of an Italian advocate.<sup>20</sup>

This unsigned column was in all probability written by Frederick George Stephens (1828–1907), a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who had given up painting to write about art. From 1860 until his retirement in 1900 he was the chief art critic for the *Athenaeum*, a weekly journal.<sup>21</sup> Stephens must have been in close contact with Millais in 1886, for he organized the special exhibition of the artist's work at the Grosvenor Gallery that year.

On August 2, Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower reported seeing "a 'Portia' in Ellen Terry's red dress in that part, but not a portrait of that actress" in Millais's studio.<sup>22</sup> However we can now establish that Millais began this painting before he borrowed Terry's costume. John Guille Millais, in his biography of his father, illustrated a sketch that he called *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* (Figure 5). It shows the same model in the same pose as *Portia* but wearing a classical tunic instead of lawyer's robes. X-ray radiographs (Figure 6) and pentimenti, which reveal the crossed straps of the Greek dress below *Portia's* surface, clearly show that *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* is not a separate painting but the Metropolitan Museum's canvas in an earlier state.<sup>23</sup> A photograph of Millais in his studio at Palace Gate (Figure 7), probably taken late in 1885 or early in 1886, shows *Bubbles* (1886; A. & F. Pears Ltd., London) and *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* on easels; the scale of the latter corresponds to that of

20. [Frederick George Stephens], "Fine-Art Gossip," *Athenaeum*, July 24, 1886, p. 122.

21. See William Michael Rossetti, "F. G. Stephens," *Athenaeum*, Mar. 16, 1907, p. 329, and Staley, *Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, pp. 12, 173.

22. Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, *Old Diaries, 1881–1901* (New York, 1902) p. 48.

23. I am grateful to the conservator Alain Goldrach, formerly of the Metropolitan Museum and now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for making the X-ray radiographs and discussing them and the pentimenti with me.



5. Millais, *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress*. Photograph by Rupert Potter, December 6, 1885 (photo: after Millais, *Life and Letters of Millais*)

Terry's white collar and cuffs and the two silver acorns she wore at her neck are missing (since these parts of the costume were detachable, he may never have received them), the underdress is left open at the neck, its sash is narrower, and the model holds the cap in her hand rather than wearing it on her head. As a result, Millais's *Portia* is even softer and less masculine than Terry's.

The picture was nearly complete by July 24, 1886, when it was mentioned in the *Athenaeum's* "Fine-Art Gossip" column as one of several unfinished works by the artist "which are probably destined for next year's Academy." The writer called it:





7. Photograph of Millais in his studio at Palace Gate, with *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* and *Bubbles* on the easels, ca. 1885–86. Collection of Sir Ralph Millais, Bart.

*Portia*.<sup>24</sup> A print of Figure 5 in the collection of Sir Ralph Millais, Bart., is inscribed on the reverse of its mount, “R.P. Dec 6 1885.” According to Malcolm Warner, the initials R.P. refer to Rupert Potter (father of Beatrix Potter), an amateur photographer who often shot objects and models for Millais’s use, and also recorded his canvases in various states.<sup>25</sup> Millais apparently changed his mind about the picture’s subject sometime between December 6, 1885, the date on the photograph, and the following March 30, when Terry sent her costume.

If not Ellen Terry, who did pose for *Portia*? In 1886 a critic writing in the *Athenaeum*, again most likely F. G.

Stephens, described the figure as “mainly studied from” the young American actress Mary Anderson (1859–1940).<sup>26</sup> She had made her debut on the London stage in 1883 and enjoyed several successful seasons there before her early retirement in 1889. It seems particularly unlikely that Stephens was mistaken in identifying Anderson as *Portia*’s model because he had recently pointed out that she did *not* pose for Frederic, Lord Leighton’s “*Serenely Wandering in a*

24. This photograph was first published in Geoffroy Millais, *Sir John Everett Millais* (London, 1979) p. 20.

25. See also Bennett, *Millais*, pp. 11–12. For accounts of Rupert Potter’s photographing for Millais, see *The Journal of Beatrix Potter from 1881 to 1897*, transcribed from her code writing by Leslie Linder (London, 1966), passim.

26. [Frederick George Stephens], “Minor Exhibitions,” *Athenaeum*, Nov. 6, 1886, p. 606. The passage is quoted in full below; see note 44.



*Trance of Sober Thought*,” as a journalist had erroneously assumed.<sup>27</sup>

A celebrated actress in her day, Mary Anderson was often painted and photographed.<sup>28</sup> For example, she appears as the allegorical figure of the Middle Ages, along with Ellen Terry as England, in Edwin H. Blashfield’s mural *The Progress of Civilization* (1896), in the collar of the dome of the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.<sup>29</sup> Anderson’s statuesque figure and her classic features were legendary; the leading historian of New York theatre called her “the most beautiful woman I ever saw on the stage, or, for that matter, off the stage.”<sup>30</sup> An undated photograph by Elliott & Fry (Figure 8) shows her striking good looks. With her tall figure, long straight nose, prominent cheekbones, and light auburn hair, she does bear some resemblance to the model in the Metropolitan Museum’s painting.

She and Millais must have been acquainted, for both were prominent in the London art world of the 1880s. The actress heroine of Mrs. Humphry Ward’s first published novel, *Miss Bretherton* (1884), a thinly veiled portrait of Mary Anderson, spends much of her spare time in the company of Royal Academicians who clamor to paint her. In G. Grenville Manton’s watercolor of 1891, *The Royal Academy Conversazione* (National Portrait Gallery, London), Anderson appears among a host of artists and theatre personalities, including Millais, Ellen Terry, and Henry Irving.<sup>31</sup>

Had Millais intended *Portia* as a portrait of Mary Anderson, however, he would surely have identified it as such. Curiously, Anderson did not mention Millais in either of her two autobiographies, although she discussed her friendships with Edwin Austin Abbey,

27. Idem, “Fine-Art Gossip,” *Athenaeum*, May 23, 1885, p. 670. Stephens was surely the author; see Leonée and Richard Ormond, *Lord Leighton* (New Haven/London, 1975) p. 135.

28. For several representations of Anderson, see Richard Kenin, *Return to Albion: Americans in England, 1760–1940* (New York, 1979) p. 122. Contrary to Kenin’s assertion, she does not appear in E. A. Abbey’s watercolor of 1885, *An Old Song* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven); according to E. V. Lucas, *Edwin Austin Abbey, Royal Academician: The Record of His Life and Work* (New York, 1921) I, pp. 133, 145, Anderson posed for the original singer in the picture, but Abbey later wiped her out and repainted the figure from a professional model.

29. Herbert Small, comp., *Handbook of the New Library of Congress in Washington* (Boston, 1897) p. 76, identifies Anderson and Terry as models; for color illustrations of the entire mural and of the detail of England, see Charles A. Goodrum, *Treasures of*



8. Elliott & Fry, *Mary Anderson*. Cabinet portrait photograph, 6½ × 4½ in. (16.5 × 10.5 cm.). New York, Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (photo: Columbia University)

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, George H. Boughton, Frank D. Millet, John Singer Sargent, and other artists who gathered in the rural village of Broadway, Worcestershire, where she frequently visited and eventually settled.<sup>32</sup> She also devoted several pages to

*the Library of Congress* (New York, 1980) pp. 11, 32; for the detail of the Middle Ages, see *The Works of Edwin Howland Blashfield*, intro. by Royal Cortissoz (New York, 1937) pl. 25.

30. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, X (New York, 1938) p. 372.

31. K. K. Yung, comp., *National Portrait Gallery: Complete Illustrated Catalogue, 1856–1979* (New York, 1981) pp. 659–660, no. 2820, ill.

32. Mary Anderson de Navarro, *A Few Memories* (New York, 1896); idem, *A Few More Memories* (London, 1936). For further information, see the biographies by Winter and Farrar cited below; Raymond Connell Sawyer, “The Shakespearean Acting of Mary Anderson: 1884–1889,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1975); and Russell Jackson, “The Lyceum in Irving’s Absence: G. E. Terry’s Letters to Bram Stoker,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research* 6 (1978) pp. 25–33.



9. Napoleon Sarony, *Miss Anderson as Parthenia*, 1883. Cabinet portrait photograph,  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{8}$  in. (16.5 × 10.5 cm.). New York, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations (photo: New York Public Library)

George Frederick Watts, who painted her portrait around 1885–87.<sup>33</sup> Since she was on tour in America from September 1885 until June 1886,<sup>34</sup> she was not available to pose for Millais during most of the year the picture was in his studio. Besides, Mary Anderson as Portia is an anomaly; perhaps because she found Ellen Terry's performance in the role "dazzling,"<sup>35</sup> she never tried it herself, and it seems highly unlikely that Millais would ask an actress of her reputation to pose in another star's costume.

Anderson did, however, play several parts in classical dress, including Parthenia in Maria Lovell's *Ingomar* (Figure 9), and Galatea in W. S. Gilbert's *Pyg-*

*malion and Galatea*. In 1887, she doubled the roles of Hermione and Perdita in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. She wears a diaphanous Greek tunic in her portrait by Watts. In her memoirs she tells how she abandoned the velvet gowns, heels, wigs, and stays commonly worn in classical roles, and adopted simple, flowing draperies instead.<sup>36</sup> In her quest for archaeological exactitude and artistic effect she consulted F. D. Millet and Alma-Tadema, both painters of classicizing subjects, and E. A. Abbey, who collected period clothing and books on costume history.<sup>37</sup> Contemporary theatre critics raved about her appearance in Greek dress. In 1883, following her London debut as Parthenia, this encomium appeared in the *Morning Post*: "Miss Anderson's beauty is of Grecian type, with a head of classic contour, finely-chiselled features, and a tall statuesque figure, whose Hellenic expression a graceful costume of antique design sets off to the best advantage. You fancy that you have seen her before, and so perhaps you have upon the canvas of Angelica Kauffman."<sup>38</sup>

The type of Greek costume Mary Anderson wore on stage served as one of the prototypes for Liberty & Co.'s "Aesthetic" dresses. Late Victorian dress reformers considered loose, flowing gowns more healthful than traditional women's fashions, and encouraged the adaptation of such "hygienic" garments for everyday wear in the English climate. In 1891, an article entitled "Fashion's Slaves" appeared in the *Arena* (Boston), calling for the liberation of women from the hoops, corsets, bustles, and trains of contemporary dress, and reproducing the photograph of Anderson shown in Figure 9, asking whether "from artistic, hygienic, economical, and ethical points of view, to say nothing of common sense and comfort, is not the simple and beautiful costume of Parthenia incomparably superior to that which marked the second decade of the past generation?"<sup>39</sup>

33. Sale, Sotheby's Belgravia, Oct. 6, 1980, no. 47, color ill. in catalogue.

34. William Winter, *The Stage Life of Mary Anderson* (New York, 1886) pp. [153–154].

35. De Navarro, *A Few Memories*, p. 134.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–119.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 148; Lucas, *Abbey*, I, pp. 132–133.

38. *Morning Post*, Sept. 3, 1883, quoted in J. M. Farrar, *Mary Anderson: The Story of Her Life and Professional Career* (London, 1884) p. 62.

39. B. O. Flower, "Fashion's Slaves," *Arena* (Boston) 4 (1891) p. 423, ill. p. 422.

So perhaps Anderson was instrumental in inspiring Millais to tackle an antique subject; such themes are extremely rare in his work. *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* suggests that Millais was looking to various classicizing tendencies in late Victorian painting, to the work of Alma-Tadema, Leighton, Albert Moore, Sir Edward Poynter, and G. F. Watts. For some unknown reason, perhaps Anderson's absence from England, Millais abandoned his Greek study, and ultimately painted over it.

As he transformed *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* into *Portia*, Millais may have worked from another model. His son relates the following incident, placing it at the end of 1885:

My father was on the look-out for a model for one of Shakespeare's heroines that he intended to paint, and while we were sitting at lunch the butler announced that a lady had called to see him on the subject. Being engaged in an interesting conversation with Matthew Arnold, my father said to me, "Here, Johnnie, run down and see if she will do." I accordingly went downstairs, and found myself in the presence of one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. "Well, do you think I shall do?" she said, after some preliminary conversation. "Oh, certainly," I replied. "Come at ten o'clock on Monday morning."

About five minutes later in came the butler again. "Another lady downstairs, please, Sir John." "Oh, go along and see her too, Johnnie," said my father impatiently. I went, and, behold! another lovely creature, whose charms almost rivalled those of the first applicant. After a short interview, she said, "When may I come?" "Ten o'clock on Monday morning," I replied, and went back to the dining-room. By this time, however, my father had flown, and not until next day could I tell him of the success of my mission. Then, in glowing terms, I painted to him the charms of the two models I had engaged; but, to my surprise, he did not seem at all pleased. Forgetting for the moment his instructions to me, he had himself engaged two other models for ten o'clock on Monday morning, and all I got as he walked off to his studio was, "Ah! that's the worst of sending young fellows like you to interview pretty girls. You'd engage every blessed hour that stepped inside the place, if you got the chance!"

When Monday came all the four ladies turned up; but, following the example of the "wise child who goes out of the room to laugh when the old man has hit his thumb with a hammer," I refrained from entering the studio that morning. Enough for me to learn, as I did a little later on, that one of *my* ladies—Miss Dolan, a favourite model of Lord Leighton's—had been selected.<sup>40</sup>

Since *Portia* is Millais's only known Shakespearean subject from 1885–86, the passage surely refers to this picture. Moreover, illustrated in the pages immediately following the account of Dolan's selection are *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* and a picture identified as *Head of Portia* (Figure 10), probably a detail from a photograph of *Portia* in an earlier state. A photograph in an album belonging to Sir Ralph Millais, Bart., showing *Portia* unfinished and inscribed "Miss Dolan" also links this passage with *Portia*.<sup>41</sup> The same model may be represented in a drawing by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (Figure 11), signed and dated 1890, and said to be a portrait of Kate Dolan.<sup>42</sup>

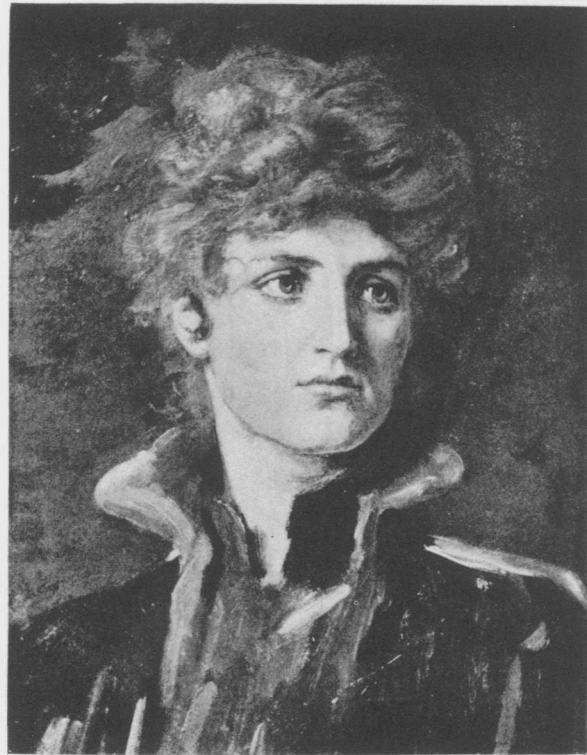
Millais's *Portia* is therefore not a portrait of Ellen Terry, of Mary Anderson, or of Miss Dolan, though all seem to have contributed to the picture. The evidence suggests that Anderson served as the artist's initial inspiration, that Terry's costume and her interpretation of the role informed Millais's alteration of the canvas, and that Dolan stood in as model while he completed *Portia*.

The picture was first exhibited in a group show that opened to the public on November 1, 1886, at Thomas McLean's Gallery in the Haymarket, accompanied in

40. Millais, *Life and Letters of Millais*, II, p. 192. Richard Ormond informs me that he has never come across Miss Dolan in his research on Leighton. A model named Miss Dolan is mentioned in a letter from G. F. Watts to Briton Riviere, dated Sept. 21, 1893 (my thanks to Barbara Coffey for this reference). *Personality* magazine (New York) reproduced *Portia* in color on the cover of its Dec. 1927 issue, offering a prize to the first reader to identify the model. Since the Metropolitan Museum's catalogue still incorrectly called *Portia* a portrait of Ellen Terry and the Museum's files contained conflicting opinions about the model's name, the magazine queried J. G. Millais through Heinemann's in London. According to their reply, the model was a Miss Donovan—easily a slip for Dolan, made 42 years after *Portia* was painted (see correspondence between Ralph H. Graves, editor of *Personality*, Henry W. Kent, Metropolitan Museum Secretary, and Winifred Howe, the Museum's Editor of Publications, Nov. 25, 26, 28, 29, and Dec. 6 and 7, 1927, in MMA Archives). Not surprisingly, no one won the contest (*Personality* 1, no. 4 [Feb. 1928] p. 110).

41. I am grateful to Malcolm Warner for information about photographs in this album. For a summary list of its contents, see Mary Bennett, "Footnotes to the Millais Exhibition," *Liverpool Bulletin* 12 (1967) appendix III, pp. 58–59.

42. See *Drawings, Studies & Paintings by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, 1833–1898*, exh. cat. (London: Piccadilly Gallery and Hartnoll & Eyre, 1971) nos. 31, 36, ill.; Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York, 1973) p. 166, ill.; sale, Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, June 3, 1981, no. 209, color ill. in catalogue.



HEAD OF "PORTIA." 1886

By permission of Thomas McLean and Son

10. Millais, *Head of Portia*, ca. 1886 (photo: after Millais, *Life and Letters of Millais*)

the catalogue by a quotation from Shylock's lines in act 4, scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*: "A Daniel come to judgment! Yea, a Daniel!"<sup>43</sup> In a review entitled "Minor Exhibitions" in the *Athenaeum*, the writer gave *Portia* qualified praise:

At Mr. McLean's the most attractive picture is Sir John Millais's *Portia* (29), the nearly whole-length, life-size figure in a doctor's gown, which we have already briefly described. The figure is more animated than the spectator at first thinks warranted; in like manner, the impression that the picture lacks finish is modified, but not dispelled, by continued study of the admirably handled flesh and the rich, brilliant, and soft rose-coloured gown, which are its telling elements. The figure is mainly studied from Miss Mary Anderson. Bareheaded, with a scroll in one hand and her cap in the other, this *Portia* stands as if she waited her turn to speak, and is so far an excellent representation of the character. On the other hand, she does not look in the least like a Daniel come to judgment.<sup>44</sup>

The *Magazine of Art's* critic praised the execution, singling out "the firm modelling of the head, the life gleaming from the eyes, the rich broken tints of the red robes;" but he objected to the characterization of the figure, complaining that:

the effect of the whole is, alas! strangely commonplace, not to say vulgar; the picture is, as it were, a kind of glorification of all that is most prosaic, most soulless, and least distinctive in the beauty of English womanhood. It adds another to the long list of "pot-boilers," which will do nothing to enhance the reputation of our ablest master of the brush, from whom seems to have departed all ambition to rise above the dead level of a certain superficial and mitigated imitation of the outside realities of human nature.<sup>45</sup>

The art critic for the *Saturday Review* took the opposite point of view, finding *Portia* "well conceived but somewhat coarsely painted."<sup>46</sup>

Two of these writers criticized Millais for emphasizing *Portia's* physical beauty rather than her moral strength. *Portia's* ravishing appearance may be attributed in part to Millais's tendency in his later pictures to appeal to popular taste, but his vision of the character also corresponds to Ellen Terry's. Several theatre critics complained that her performance in the trial scene was too refined and ladylike. "That a pretty woman cannot be induced to disguise herself, is said to be an article of faith with managers, but it ought

43. *The Annual Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Artists of the British and Foreign Schools* (London: T. McLean's Gallery, Haymarket, 1886) no. 29. According to Alfred Lys Baldry, *Millais, Masterpieces in Colour* (London/New York, 1908) pp. 64–65, during the 1880s Millais produced more than he could exhibit at the Royal Academy, "so he sent many important works to the Grosvenor Gallery, and most of his subject pictures to the galleries of the dealers by whom they were commissioned." By 1888, when *Portia* was shown in the Fine Art Loan Exhibition, St. Jude's School House, Whitechapel, London (no. 23), it belonged to the wealthy railroad executive James Staats Forbes (1823–1904), who also owned Millais's *Orphans* (1885; sale, Property of the executors of the 2nd earl of Iveagh, Christie's, London, July 16, 1976, no. 37, ill. in catalogue) and *Clarissa: A Recollection of Gainsborough* (1887; sale, Property of Major Philip Gribble, Christie's, London, July 7, 1967, no. 114); see Millais, *Life and Letters of Millais*, II, pp. 483–484. Thomas Agnew and Sons acquired *Portia* from the Staats Forbes Estate, and sold it to the Metropolitan Museum in 1906.

44. The writer was almost certainly F. G. Stephens; see note 26 above.

45. "Chronicle of Art," *Magazine of Art*, Dec. 1886, p. ix.

46. *Saturday Review* (London), Nov. 6, 1886, p. 617.

not to hold good, or bad, in the case of such an actress as [Terry] is," declared the *Spectator's* critic, reproving her for "refusing to adopt the slightest precaution to prevent [her] recognition . . . by all the people in the court. . . . To say nothing of the absurdity of a quantity of curling hair under the berretta of a lawyer in a piece costumed with such elaborate accuracy in other respects, the absence of all pretence at incognito. . . ."47 In a lecture on Shakespeare's "Triumphant Women," Terry herself, although she found "something independent, almost masculine" in Portia's character, repudiated the German tradition of playing the part as a "low comedy . . . in an eighteenth-century wig, horn spectacles, a barrister's cravat, and a fierce moustache," declaring that "no interpretation entailing a sacrifice of beauty, whether to mirth or to realism, can ever be satisfactory. Portia is the fruit of the Renaissance, the child of a period of beautiful clothes, beautiful cities, beautiful houses, beautiful ideas. She speaks the beautiful language of inspired poetry. Wreck that poetry, and the part goes to pieces."48 Like Terry's, Millais's Portia could never be mistaken for a man.

Instead, she is an alluring, vulnerable, late Victorian maiden who lacks the aggressive stance, the outward display of moral resolve traditionally associated with Shakespeare's heroine. Such passivity is, however, common in Aesthetic representations of Grecian women, notably those by Moore and Leighton.<sup>49</sup> Comparison of *Portia* with photographs of the canvas in its earlier incarnation as *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress* shows that it was revised but not entirely transformed in the course of its evolution. *Portia's* curious lack of courtroom drama probably derives more from the picture's hybrid nature than from any deliberate attempt on Millais's part to reinterpret Shakespeare's character.

Millais's characterization of a strikingly beautiful female and his exploration of tonal effects within a limited range of color also link *Portia* with Aesthetic concerns. *Portia's* individualized personality and her physical attributes—thick, wavy, reddish blond hair, prominent nose, full, sensuous mouth, strong cheek and jaw bones, and statuesque figure—are reminiscent of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "stunners" and their Aesthetic successors. Ellen Terry's red costume, like the tunic of *Study of a Girl in Greek Dress*, answers the Aesthetic dress reformers' call for practical, comfortable garments based on historical precedents.<sup>50</sup> Thus,



11. Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *Kate Dolan*, signed and dated (lower left): EBJ/1890. Colored chalks on rust-colored wove paper, 11 × 10½ in. (28.1 × 26.9 cm.). Collection of Mrs. Harold Wernick (photo: Sotheby Parke Bernet)

in his conception of *Portia* Millais was evidently attempting to keep in step with the more progressive trends in British art of the 1880s.

That Millais could transform the *Girl in Greek Dress* into *Portia* merely by changing her clothes underlines his fundamental lack of interest in the narrative possibilities of the subjects. In its emblematic approach, *Portia* differs from Millais's earlier essays on Shakespearean themes, such as *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1849–50; private collection, England) and *Ophelia*. With her standard three-quarter-length pose and the column, appropriate for a courtroom setting but also a stock portrait prop, *Portia* belongs instead among the compositions "balanced between subject and portraiture, a balance which becomes a staple formula for

47. *Spectator* (London), Nov. 8, 1879, p. 1409, quoted in part in Hughes, "Irving's Tragedy of Shylock," p. 261.

48. Ellen Terry, *Four Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Christopher St. John (London, 1932) pp. 116–117.

49. See Allen Staley, "The Condition of Music," *Art News Annual* 33 (1967) pp. 81–87.

50. I am grateful to Della Sperling for pointing this out to me.

many of [Millais's] later pictures such as *Sweetest Eyes* and *Cherry Ripe*," in the words of Mary Bennett. As she points out, these "fancy" pictures are clearly indebted to eighteenth-century British art, especially Reynolds.<sup>51</sup>

Millais's characterization of *Portia* as a full-blown, late Victorian beauty derives in part, then, from the picture's curious evolution, but it also corresponds with the artist's other depictions of women in the period. For, in the final analysis, *Portia* has less in common with Shakespeare's activist heroine than with the orphans, widows, and touching female subjects in many of Millais's other late "fancy" pictures.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Malcolm Warner, who is preparing a catalogue raisonné of Millais's work, for cheerfully answering all my questions and generously sharing unpublished information; to my teacher, Professor Allen Staley of Columbia University, for his comments on the manuscript; to my fellow students Barbara Coffey, for help with research in London, and Della Sperling, for our discussions about *Portia*; to Geoffroy Millais, for lending a photograph from his family's collection; and at the Metropolitan Museum, to Patricia Pellegrini, Archivist, for aid in navigating through the Museum's older files, and to Katharine Baetjer and the late Mary Ann Wurth Harris, both of the Department of European Paintings, for their advice, support, and encouragement.

51. Bennett, *Millais*, pp. 11–12.