

Struggle of Women in Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice is one of William Shakespeare's most famous comedies, written between 1596 and 1598. Set in the bustling, cosmopolitan city of Venice, the play explores themes of love, mercy, justice, prejudice, and the complexities of human relationships. It combines elements of romance, drama, and humor, while also addressing deeper societal and moral questions.

Characteristics of Women in Shakespeare's Plays:

Strength and Independence

Many of Shakespeare's women are strong-willed and independent. Characters like Lady Macbeth (in *Macbeth*) are ambitious and manipulative, influencing major events in the plot. Similarly, Rosalind (in *As You Like It*) demonstrates wit, intelligence, and autonomy by disguising herself and taking control of her situation.

Love and Devotion

Shakespeare's female characters are often portrayed as deeply loving and devoted. Juliet (in *Romeo and Juliet*) is a prime example of a woman willing to defy societal and familial expectations for love.

Gender Roles and Disguise

Shakespeare frequently explores themes of gender by having women disguise themselves as men. Viola (in *Twelfth Night*) and Portia (in *The Merchant of Venice*) use their disguises to gain agency, highlighting the limitations placed on women in their society.

Victims of Patriarchy

Some women in Shakespeare's plays are victims of male-dominated societies. Desdemona (in *Othello*) suffers because of Othello's jealousy and Iago's manipulation. Similarly, Ophelia (in *Hamlet*) is a tragic figure, caught between her loyalty to her father and her love for Hamlet.

Comic and Assertive Roles

In his comedies, Shakespeare often gives women roles that challenge traditional gender norms. Beatrice (in *Much Ado About Nothing*) is witty and outspoken, while Katherine (in *The Taming of the Shrew*) grapples with societal expectations in ways that raise questions about marriage and submission.

Portia as a role model and other minor characters

Portia, one of the central characters in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, is a compelling figure to examine through a feminist lens. While her actions and intelligence suggest independence

and strength, her agency is constrained by the patriarchal norms of the Elizabethan era. Analyzing Portia's character reveals both her resistance to and complicity in these structures.

Portia's Independence ensures her Intellectual Prowess in which Portia exhibits remarkable intelligence and wit, most notably in the trial scene where she disguises herself as a male lawyer to save Antonio. Her legal acumen and ability to manipulate the Venetian law outshine the male characters, highlighting her intellectual independence.

This act of cross-dressing can be interpreted as a feminist rebellion against the limitations imposed on her gender, allowing her to operate in a male-dominated sphere.

In Choosing a Husband, she is bound by her father's will, which dictates the casket test for her suitors, Portia exerts subtle control. For instance, she hints to Bassanio about the correct choice, demonstrating her ability to navigate patriarchal constraints to achieve her desires.

In Act I, Scene 2: Portia criticizes her lack of agency due to her father's will:

- "O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike."

In Economic Power, she acts as a wealthy heiress. Portia holds considerable financial power, which she uses strategically, such as when she funds Antonio's debt settlement. Her wealth positions her as an independent figure, contrasting the traditional depiction of women as financially dependent on men.

Constraints of Patriarchy limited for Women

Patriarchy is a significant theme in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. The play reflects the gender roles, power dynamics, and societal expectations of Elizabethan England, a time when men predominantly held authority over women, both socially and legally.

The Objectification of Women

Women are often treated as objects of exchange and symbols of wealth and status: Bassanio seeks to marry Portia partly for her wealth, which he views as a means to resolve his financial troubles. While he expresses love for Portia, his initial motivation raises questions about his sincerity.

Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo also highlights how women could be perceived as possessions. Shylock's lamentation about his "ducats" and "daughter" intertwines his grief over his wealth with the loss of his daughter, suggesting an objectified view of her.

Subjugation to Male Authority:

Portia's life is controlled by her deceased father, whose will dictates her marital future. This limitation reflects the lack of autonomy granted to women during the time. Even her intelligence and actions in the trial are possible only because she disguises herself as a man, underscoring the societal restrictions on women's roles.

Like Portia, Nerissa also disguises herself as a man, assisting in the courtroom scheme. This act of cross-dressing symbolizes a temporary inversion of the patriarchal structure, where women step into roles of power.

Act III, Scene 4: Portia and Nerissa discuss their plan to disguise themselves as men:

- “We’ll see our husbands / Before they think of us.”

Marriage as a Central Goal:

Despite her independence, Portia’s character arc is heavily centered around marriage, aligning with the Elizabethan ideal of women’s roles. Her ultimate submission to Bassanio, symbolized by giving him the ring, reinforces traditional gender dynamics.

But in Act V, Scene 1: Portia critiques the idea of men controlling women through symbolic ownership, as seen in the ring subplot. When Bassanio gives away her ring, it becomes a humorous yet pointed critique of loyalty and trust between genders:

- “If you had known the virtue of the ring, / Or half her worthiness that gave the ring, / Or your own honor to contain the ring, / You would not then have parted with the ring.”

Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo is an act of rebellion but also reflects her dependency on a male figure to escape her father’s control.

The Venetian legal system depicted in the play is also inherently patriarchal. While Portia momentarily upends the system by disguising herself as a man, her actions ultimately serve to restore the male-dominated order rather than dismantle it.

Complicity in Gender Norms:

While Portia challenges certain norms, she also perpetuates them. For example, her behavior after the trial reflects her role as a loyal and dutiful wife, reinforcing the expected subservience of women. By focusing on Jessica’s defiance, Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, rebels against her father’s authority by eloping with Lorenzo. Her act of defiance, stealing her father’s wealth and converting to Christianity demonstrates her rejection of the patriarchal constraints imposed by Shylock. In Act II, Scene 3: Jessica expresses her dissatisfaction with her father’s control and her desire for freedom:

- “Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father’s child!”

Feminist Interpretation

Modern feminist critics might view *The Merchant of Venice* as both progressive and regressive. While it provides space for female characters to exhibit strength and intelligence, their autonomy is often curtailed by the play’s conclusion, where traditional social hierarchies are restored. The feminist reading of the play encourages discussions about how women navigate and challenge patriarchal constraints, both in Shakespeare’s time and in contemporary interpretations.

Feminist Themes

Agency vs. Constraint: Portia and Jessica navigate societal constraints to assert their will, showcasing women's resourcefulness within a patriarchal framework.

Intellectual Equality: Portia's success in the courtroom demonstrates the intellectual potential of women when given opportunities equal to men.

Gender as Performance: Portia and Nerissa's disguises emphasize the constructed nature of gender roles, a theme that resonates with feminist ideas about gender fluidity.

Solidarity Among Women: The camaraderie between Portia and Nerissa reflects feminist values of mutual support.

Through a feminist lens, Portia is both a product of and a challenge to her time. Her intelligence, resourcefulness, and command over situations make her a proto-feminist figure. However, her ultimate conformity to patriarchal expectations highlights the limitations placed on women's independence. In Act IV, Scene 1: Portia, disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, outsmarts Shylock and the men in court, saving Antonio. Her eloquent speech on mercy and her legal reasoning highlight her intellectual superiority:

➤ “The quality of mercy is not strained; / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.”

Despite these empowering moments, the play does not fully escape the gender norms of its time. For instance, Portia's role as a wife ultimately aligns her with traditional domestic expectations, and her agency is limited by societal structures. Jessica's story is a form of rebellion, also raises questions about her agency, as she transitions from her father's control to her husband's.

Portia's character is emblematic of the tensions between individual agency and societal constraints, making her a nuanced and complex figure for feminist analysis.

Conclusion

Shakespeare presents patriarchy both as a force of oppression and as a system that can be cleverly navigated or subverted by women like Portia and Jessica. Through their actions, the play critiques the limitations imposed on women while showcasing their ability to assert agency within a patriarchal framework. However, the resolution of the play where the women return to their roles as wives reaffirms the societal norms of the time, suggesting the complexity and persistence of patriarchy.

The Merchant of Venice contains moments of feminist potential through its portrayal of strong, resourceful female characters, but it also reflects the gender norms of its Elizabethan context. This duality invites rich feminist analysis and reinterpretation.

Primary Source

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