



## Female heroism in merchant of venice by William Shakespeare

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### Abstract

The article interprets and analyzes Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa, the three new bourgeois female characters created in Shakespeare's famous work *The Merchant of Venice*, and illustrate their complexity that though they have had preliminary feminist spirit and subject consciousness, they are not willing to submit to and be bound by the male hegemony. Since Shakespeare does not provide any practical solutions, the work merely reflects the important role of women in the patriarchal society at that time.

**Keywords:** Female heroism, Shakespeare's famous work

### Introduction

William Shakespeare, the great poet dramatist is undoubtedly among the greatest litterateur of the world. He was born on April 26, 1564 at Warwickshire in a well to do merchant family. He was third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. As a child Shakespeare studied grammar and arithmetic, but he never went to any university to pursue academic degree Shakespeare work comprises of 37 plays, two non-dramatic verse and 54 sonnets. He wrote plays in all genres that includes comedies, historic plays, tragedies and romances. Many of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, became so famous that it affects the course of western literature and culture. Some of his his great comedies includes, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado about nothing*, *Twelfth Night* etc.al. Beside comedies some historical plays written by Shakespeare are *Richard III*, *Henry IV Part I and II*, *Henry V* and *Henry VIII*.

The prefatory letter written by John Hemminge and Henry Condell states that Shakespeare is "Who, as he was a happy imitator of nature, was a most gentle expresser of it, His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easiness. (Knight 328)

### Role and importance of strong female characters.

I would like to put forward the role and importance of strong female characters in the novel *Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare put forward strong female role model in the novel. The role of women viewing the theatre of the day is absolutely important facet. It is very difficult to put these role models forwards, if there were no women in the theatre. In this context Jean E. Howard states that; "Women as Spectators, Spectacles and Paying Customers," that "we now know that women were in the public theater in significant numbers and that the women who attended the theater were neither simply courtesans nor aristocratic ladies; many seem to have been citizens' wives, part of that emergent group, 'the middling sort' . . ." (83)

It is evident that Shakespeare Plays challenges the traditional thought and highlights new liberal thinking. In *Merchant of Venice*, we find that Shakespeare embody

female heroism which challenges the traditions of male virtue. The novel shows the power of female characters through the actions and thoughts of female characters. In *Merchant of Venice* Portia epitomizes women of knowledge and wisdom in a new era. Portia uses her eloquence and wisdom successfully and saved a candid merchant from a Jew.

Portia brilliance and bravery can be seen from the scenario, when asked for help, she immediately made her decision to help Antonio. She didn't worry about potential risk of her disguise being found out and being punished. She carries out her plan of disguise with Nerissa:

I'll hold thee any wager, When we are both accoutered like young men, I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two, And wear my dagger with the braver grace, And speak between the change of man and boy With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps Into a manly stride, and speak of frays Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies, How honorable ladies sought my love, Which I denying, they fell sick and died; I could not do withal; then I'll repent, And wish for all that, that I had not killed them; And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell, That men shall swear I have discontinued school Above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks, Which I will practice. (51)

In the courtroom scene, Portia is not only equal to male characters but even more but even more brilliant as she knows the laws of Venice very well. She carefully selects appropriate words and misleads Shylock. "Portia trespasses the traditionally male ground making the courtroom scene one of the first scene of its kind" (Hankey 1). Portia brilliance can be told from the trick she utilizes to save Antonio. When Portia first meets Shylock, she tries to persuade him to give up the contract in a delicate language: The quality of mercy is not strain'd, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest; It blesseth him that gives and him that takes: 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes The throned monarch better than his crown; His sceptre shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty, (59)

However, this trick didn't work on Shylock and Portia is mocked by him "A Daniel come to judgement! Yea, a Denial! O wise young judge, how I do honor thee!" (60).

After analyzing how stubborn Shylock is Portia shifts her plan of persuasion to a bigger trick by guiding him his own requirement. She demands Shylock to take pound of flesh without any drop of blood.:

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.  
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."  
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,  
But in the cutting it if thou dost shed  
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods  
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate  
Unto the state of Venice. (63)

Portia demonstrates one of the strong female characters of Shakespeare and a perfect demo of female free from male's influences and restrictions. Portia after her father's death had to perform the role of man and manage a wealthy estate that her father left for her. Nevertheless, her father has been able to exercise power over her through his will. Portia states in this context:

The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree. Such a hare is madness, the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel, the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word "choose"! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none? (7)

Besides Portia in the novel Jessica and Nerissa also defy traditional societal norms of gender. Jessica goes against the gender role of women, because she is making her own decision about her life. Jessica decides to live her life the way she wants to live. She shows the strength when she decides to abandon her father for her lover Lorenzo. She does not seek her father's permission for this, she does it on her own. This behavior goes against prescribed gender roles for women in Shakespeare's time period. Jessica bluntly shows her hatred towards her father and her religion. She wills to convert to Christianity in order to be respected by people. She utters the following words in front of Launcelot: Alack, what heinous sin is it in me To be ashamed to be my father's child! But though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife, Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (22)

Moreover, Jessica cross-dressed to elope with Lorenzo and run away from home without her father's wishes. Jessica disguise as a man so that she may escape from her father's grasp:

Here, catches this casket; it is worth the pains. I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me, for I am much ashamed of my exchange; But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit, For, if they could, Cupid himself would blush to see me thus transformed to a boy (27).

Jessica marriage portrays independent women, who make her own decisions. She is dependently taking her life into her own hands after she has left her Jewish home.

In the similar way Nerissa is also a significant character from the novel. She also depicts characteristics of bravery, independence, and intelligence. Jessica joins Portia in dressing up as man to save Antonio's life, playing vital role of a law clerk to assist Shylock proceedings. When Portia

and Nerissa cross-dress, they have the following opinion regarding this:

When we are both accoutred like young men,  
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,  
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,  
And speak between the change of man and boy  
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps  
Into a manly stride, and speak of frays  
Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,  
How honorable ladies sought my love,  
Which I denying, they fell sick and died— (51)

Nerissa possesses a strong sense of humour and capable of consoling Portia. She soothes trouble mind of Portia by saying that the lottery, which her late father devised is sound method through she will be able to get a suitable life partner. Nerissa states that:

Your father was an ever virtuous: and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore, the lottery, that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver and lead, - whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, - will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love. (7)

Nerissa is a clever, confident women who has caught something of his mistress elegance.

### Conclusion

On the basis of above discussion about women characters in the novel *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare challenge the normal perception of women. The role that many female characters plays highlight their perseverance, strength and intelligence. This indicates the intention of playwright to highlight the fact that women should be equal as men. The novel highlights powerful, independent women settling back into society with her husband. In the novel we find that leading ladies achieve their own goals without any support of man. Portia, Nerissa and Jessica's disguise as man to move unnoticed between Belmont and Venice highlights a glimpse into the world of feministic ideals. The female characters involved in cross dressing to achieve different aims in male dominated society. The novel portrays all the leading ladies with strong quality, they use trickery to get what they want. In the end we conclude that all of them succeeds in protecting their power, wealth and status in the novel successfully.

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