

A Back Turn To The Masculine Shadow After A Temporal Win: The Illusion Of Women Empowerment In William Shakespeare’s “The Merchant Of Venice”

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Abstract

William Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice”, set in a Venetian patriarchal society, presents female struggles and limitations under the masculine shadow through the female characters such as; both Portia and Nerissa. While navigating in the male dominated world, the female characters challenge and subvert the concept of traditional gender roles (Russin, 2013). Disguising as a lawyer and clerk, both Portia and Nerissa outsmart the male characters in the court to save Antonio’s life from Shylock’s desire of a flesh bond. This win challenges the norms of a patriarchal society which ignore the capability of women. Though the play explores female empowerment related themes, it also confirms the patriarchal structures. The denouement, as marked by Graziano and Bassanio’s ring which symbolizes male authority and women characters’ willingness to go back to being household wives, shows the limitations of female autonomy in a male-dominated world despite the fact that they had temporally gained power and control. This paper aims to explore the illusion of women empowerment and the tension between the feminist elements of “The Merchant of Venice” and its conformation to social conventional gender norms, by providing a detailed perspective on Shakespeare’s critique on social power dynamics.

Keywords: *William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice; Masculine Shadow; Temporal Win; Women Empowerment*

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I. Introduction

“The Merchant of Venice” is one of William Shakespeare’s most complex works which explore the broad range of themes like justice, mercy, love, and importantly, gender dynamics. The play is set in Venice, the Italian city which is dominated by financial and social hierarchies, and employs the diversity of characters whose actions, and interaction reflect on the ways in which gender and power intersect in both contradictory and constrained way. Within those characters, Portia and Nerissa stand out to serve as an example of female figures whose actions and interaction in a male-dominated world, invite the readers to reflect on feminist themes, agency, and subjugation. Portia, the play’s main female character, represents the tension between patriarchal societal expectation for women and the female potential for intellect and emotional rebellion to those expectations. Even if she is a wealthy heiress of her father’s wealthy, her life is subjected to the wish of male authority. She is not only subjected to the wish of his deceased father who has dictated the terms of her marriage, but also to her husband, Bassanio, who, in the name of love, is an ultimate beneficiary of her wealth and status. According to Rozmovits (1995), the character of Portia is used by feminists to argue for women emancipation on the other hand, used as acquiescence to male control by anti-feminists. Her agency comes in to the forefront when she outwits everyone by disguising herself as a male lawyer in order to save his husband’s friend, Antonio, from Shylock’s bond. It is by this moment when the striking reversal of traditional gender roles is presented, regarding Portia as an intellectual legal authority who controls and commands the male-dominated world, courtroom. However, her authoritative power, while significant in this context, is still shaped within the restriction of patriarchy, underlining the female agency complexities in a limited women’s autonomy world.

Nerissa as Portia’s servant and confidante, represents another layer of female solidarity and subversion within the play. Despite the fact that she is less prominent than Portia, Nerissa’s significant participation in the disguise plan as a clerk shows women potential in asserting power through the collective work. Both Portia and Nerissa together, they managed to navigate the male-dominated world rebelling against the societal expectations through wit, disguise, and manipulation.

The end of the play that is centered by Graziano and Bassanio's rings, signals the coming back to traditional gender roles, showing the feminist subversion limitations within the Elizabethan period. Jajja (2013), states that despite the fact that Shakespeare appears to project feminism and liberal attitude towards women, he eventually ends up on the side of patriarchy.

This study seeks to investigate the illusion of women empowerment in "The Merchant of Venice" highlighting the ways in which Shakespeare challenges and at the same time, reaffirms the traditional gender societal norms by exploring the interaction of female agency and masculine authority, putting much emphasis on the role played by both Portia and Nerissa within the play's complex portrayal of power dynamics. By analyzing the key scenes, such as the trial and the casket test, this paper will offer an in-depth understanding of how Shakespeare uses these female characters to question the social structures of his time, through the presentation of subversive critiques and at the same time, reinforcing the patriarchal social norms that leads the women lives in that time.

II. A Male-Dominated World

Shakespeare created a world that is dominantly shaped by male power dynamics in "The Merchant of Venice", where patriarchal system rules both personal relationships and social interaction. The play's male characters like Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock represent the male values and social expectations of a Venetian patriarchal society of that time that positions men at the center of authority, wealth, and influence. Shakespeare, through their actions and interaction, shows how masculine dominance, mostly in the areas of honor, financial success, and social control, is supported and confronted within that world. The male identity is deep-rooted in economic success through the act of lending money which is closely associated with male power and in this case, the financial transaction is regarded as the mean through which men gain and exercise control over both their own and others' destinies. In other words, "The Merchant of Venice" criticize the nature of male transactional relationships where financial concerns often shadow the affection, bonds and loyalty.

Exploration of male power structures and expectations

Antonio, one of the prominent characters in the play, is a wealthy merchant whose relationship, with his friend Bassanio, has played a significant role in developing the play's conflict. His power, both financial and social, comes from his control over wealth, which reflects on the male-dominated economy of that time. His bond with Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, puts stress on the patriarchal nature of the world they live in which is made of financial transactions between men. His willingness to risk his life for his friend Bassanio, a decision that shows the deepness of their male friendship, also shows the emotional bond that is acceptable among men, yet not always acknowledged as equal to the same relationships that women were expected to have. It also shows him as a stoic natured who cannot accept to show his vulnerability in front of Shylock who wants him castrated, and this represents the ideal male emotional restraint according to the traditional gender norms. Not only Antonio's religious identity as a Christian but also his actions, lending money with no interest, and criticizing Shylock because of his identity and way of charging interest on the money lent, place him directly in an opposition to Shylock, whose power as a money lender challenges Antonio's perception of honor and morality, while also emphasizing the dependency among men economically in this society.

Bassanio, Antonio's friend, is also one of the central male figures in the play who represent another face of male identity which is the youthful ideal of broke masculine ambition. His nobility is spiritually rather than financially for his irresponsibility where he always relies on his friend's, Antonio, financial support for his own interest especially when he wanted to court the wealthy heiress Portia. His journey to win Portia through the casket test reflects on the expectations for men to achieve success and social mobility by using the romantic context, nonetheless it also demonstrates the way in which these accomplishments are regularly dependent upon the other men's resources and support. His dependence on Antonio, is regarded as a form of an emotional and economic patronage which reflects on the societal gender structures that encourage male interdependence.

Shylock masculinity is shaped by both his Jewish identity and his role as a usurer in a Christian-dominated society. His insistence on the bond with Antonio, a literal and figurative contract that binds him to a form of justice and vengeance, illustrates how masculinity is also linked to the pursuit of honor and retribution, vengeance. His rigid adherence to this bond contrasts with the more fluid, at times merciful, approach to justice that Portia later achieved in the court scene. However, Shylock's masculinity is complicated by his marginalized position in Venetian society as a Jewish, where he is both an outsider and an enforcer of his own strict moral code, resulting in his eventual downfall.

Portia was bound to his dead father's will who, in his absence, still shape the fate of her daughter that she has to marry the one who will win the casket test. When Portia says:

'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?’
(1.2.20-24)

It shows how women are treated like objects for male and they are there to satisfy the male’s desire. She has to get married according to his deceased father’s wish regardless her feelings and emotions or her active participation in defining her own destiny. This explains well the society of that period of time as a male dominated world.

III. Subverting Gender Roles In A Patriarchal Society

In Shakespeare’s most complex female characters, Portia is arguably to represent both the conformity and subversion of traditional gender roles in “The Merchant of Venice”. She played a significant role in the play through her disguise as the lawyer in the court scene, outwitting the male characters with her intellect and legal knowledge to save the life of his husband’s friend, Antonio. It is through her act of cross-dressing and pretending to execute a traditionally male role, lawyer, that the patriarchal structures were challenged (Dao-Zhi, 2010). In the court, disguising as a male lawyer, Portia delivered a convincing speech on “the quality of mercy” showing not only her persuasiveness but also her deep understanding of the concept of justice, the qualities that were not attributed to women in that period of time. Her speech on justice reflects on moral authorities that transcends gender expectation norms, placing her as both a moral and intellectual quite equal or even more than that of the men around her:

‘The quality of mercy is not strained.
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.’
(4.1.181-186)

Nerissa’s role in “The Merchant of Venice” cannot be overlooked despite the fact that she is Portia’s confident and maid. Her servant identity should not blind us to ignore her essential role in helping Portia’s subversion of traditional gender norms, even though her own actions are more subdued. With her mistress as a trusted ally, Nerissa is actively involved in the whole planning and execution of disguising in the courtroom, reflecting on the level of female solidarity and friendship that transcends mere loyalty. When Portia is in the courtroom during the trial, Nerissa shows her determination to support and help Portia by acting like a “clerk” assisting Portia, the judge:

And I his clerk, therefore be well advised
How you do leave me to mine own protection.
(5.1.233-234)

Portia, while explaining their disguise plan after the trial, says:
Speak not so grossly. You are all amazed.
confused Here is a letter. Read it at your leisure.
It comes from Padua, from Bellario.
There you shall find that Portia was the doctor,
Nerissa there her clerk.
(5.1.265-269)

Nerissa’s collaboration with Portia marks not only her willingness to help her mistress in subverting gender social norms but also the importance of female collaboration to empower themselves in a male-dominated world. Despite the fact that she is bound by her role as a servant, she and Portia managed to disguise themselves to gain power in the courtroom, a world dominated by males, and this on the other hand present a vivid picture of how women are restricted and marginalized in the play’s social context. However, their actions also demonstrate that these margins are not absolute and can be challenged through collaboration and subversive strategies and these offers a nuanced feminist reading of the play (Hui, 2003).

IV. A Back Turn To The Masculine Shadow

Even though the play provides moments of feminist subversion while challenging gender social norms through characters like Portia and Nerissa, these moments are ultimately constrained by the play’s return to traditional gender roles. Hui (2003) and Wang (2023) argue that the female characters in the play have preliminary feminist spirit and subject consciousness, but face limitations in their emancipation.

Despite their intelligence of disguising themselves as male lawyer and clerk, Portia and Nerissa’s actions hardly lead to lasting structural change within the play’s social order. Instead, the play presents an ambivalent feminism; one that allows female characters to challenge patriarchal societal norms only for a moment, but finally reinforces the male-dominated world they inhabit (Lewis, 2020). After the trial, both Portia and Nerissa’s role

then shifts into a wife, bound by all expectations of the society at the time and of a married life. This is felt in Portia's desire for Bassanio to give her the ring he "swore never to part with" as an evidence of his love (5.1.170) and also Nerissa's demand for the ring from her husband Graziano. This reinforces the view that Portia's power exists within the confines of marital fidelity and male dominance. Portia and Nerissa's temporal win and their willingness to submit themselves to their husbands in the end of the play, shows that women subvert their roles and do act as prescribed by society as household wives which marks the illusion of women empowerment in the play.

Their demands of the rings from their husbands, that they have given away, as the proof of their loyalty, emphasize their desire to go back to becoming household wives, according to the patriarchal societal gender norms, in the marriage contract made of patriarchal conventional gender norms (Li Ji et al., 2022). The ring is also regarded as a symbol of a marriage in which a woman is submissive conforming to the patriarchal societal norms, and this can be seen when Portia tells Bassanio:

But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
(5.1.167-174)

V. Conclusion

In "The Merchant of Venice", William Shakespeare elaborates on the complex interplay of gender, power, and social expectations which challenges and reinforces gender traditional norms of the time. Through the characters of Portia and Nerissa, the play provides a tantalizing investigation into female agency, the subversion of patriarchal structures, and the limitations imposed on women within a male-dominated society which mark the illusion of women empowerment in the play. Portia, the main female character, occupies the foreground of the play's confrontation with gender roles. Her intelligence, wit, and knowledge grounded in the law earn her a courtroom victory and a triumph over the male characters essentially saving Antonio's life. The very moment is an irrefutable assertion of feminine agency since Portia has a chance to exert power in a milieu that generally would not be permissive for females. Her disguise therefore becomes a means for her to surpass gender boundaries and step into the male sphere which is generally closed to women. In this sense, Portia's actions are interpreted as a moment of feminist subversion on the order of the patriarchal display of mind and skill in a space where female agency is expected to remain invisible. On the other hand, Portia's initiative is complicated by the social limitations that still define her identity even as she negotiates the courtroom. The casket plot, within which she is fated to be passive in defining her fate in marriage, shows about the concept that women are to stand as objects of desire to men, rather than active characters in defining their own fate. Even though she is intellectually and legally disguise herself as a male to be superior, it is only a temporal win. The play's resolution, where she reverts to being a dutiful wife to Bassanio, places a strong accent on the tension between her public success and the private constraint of female subservience marking the illusion of women empowerment within the play. Nerissa, Portia's maid and confidante, is yet another example of the play's engagement with female agency. Unlike Portia, she does not wield as much public authority, but in her devotion, intelligence, and support for her mistress, we can see possibilities that fortify female solidarity. The very act of her participating in the courtroom disguise as a clerk, illustrates the potentialities for women to help one another in a male-dominated society. Yet, like Portia, Nerissa's moment of empowerment is foreshadowed by the constraints imposed by social expectations surrounding the roles of women. Nerissa, however, also returns as a subordinate wife, having married Graziano. The ending of the play reaffirms the illusion of female empowerment which follows their temporal win of controlling the male dominated-world and their willingness to return back to the masculine shadow.

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