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Challenging Masculine Power Dynamics and Patriarchal Stereotyping: A Feminist Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*

A B S T R A C T

Describing Shakespeare as a feminist or misogynist is a debatable issue. While some feminist critics believe that Shakespeare's plays place women as equal to men, others suggest that they enhance the subordination of women. However, *The Merchant of Venice* enables one to argue that Shakespeare writes back 16th century women's emancipation through challenging women subalternity that confined them to nurturing and domestic sphere. This article tackles *The Merchant of Venice* from a feminist perspective aiming at highlighting feminist concepts that appeal to power dynamics and destereotyping. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the role of women in Elizabethan era as represented in *The Merchant of Venice*. As such, this article answers the question of literary representation which parallels in importance the thematic issues the play tackles. It, furthermore, follows a structural approach that comes across the different layers that constitute the contextual system of meaning in the play.

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تحدي ديناميكيات القوة الذكورية والنمطية الأبوية: قراءة نسوية لمسرحية تاجر البندقية

مروة سامي حسين / جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

الخلاصة:

وصف شكسبير مهتما بالنساء أو معاد للنساء هو مسألة قابلة للنقاش. بينما يرى بعض النقاد النسويين أن مسرحيات شكسبير تضع النساء على قدم المساواة مع الرجال، يعتقد آخرون أنها تعزز خضوع النساء. ومع ذلك تتيح مسرحية تاجر البندقية فرصة للجدال بأن شكسبير يدعم تحرر المرأة في القرن السادس

عشر من خلال تحدي تبعية المرأة التي حصرتها في مجال الرعاية المنزلية. تتناول هذه المقالة مسرحية تاجر البندقية من منظور نسوي بهدف تسليط الضوء على المفاهيم النسوية التي تتعلق بديناميكيات القوة وإزالة الصورة النمطية. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو توضيح دور النساء في العصر الاليزابيثي كما هو موضح في تاجر البندقية. بناءً على ذلك، تجيب هذه المقالة عن سؤال التمثيل الادبي الذي يوازي في أهميته القضايا الموضوعية التي تتناولها المسرحية. بالإضافة الى ذلك، تتبع المقالة نهجا بنيويا يتناول الطبقات المختلفة التي تشكل النظام السياقي للمعنى في المسرحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شكسبير، كاره النساء، تاجر البندقية، معادٍ للنسوية، التبعية، أبوي

Introduction

Role expectations in any given society are influenced by factors such as gender, culture, and social dynamics. During Shakespeare's day, there were societal standards around gender and its roles, similar to those present in contemporary culture. Shakespeare's plays are very popular all over the world because of his sensitive portrayal of the human condition. Therefore, despite living in a predominantly patriarchal society, he did not ignore women and depicted their situation realistically in his entire body of work. A large number of critics have shown that he was mainly concerned with the kind of life they would lead in a basically male world, one in which men are the dominant factors in the shaping of actions and attitudes. Shakespeare's female characters managed to cross the border of their isolation to have real human concerns but may normally find themselves acting according to determined stereotypes. The problem is whether this idea of women is the result of a deliberate dramatic necessity or whether they mirror a part of himself or belonging to a world that simply takes for granted. Women are shown to be prisoners of love and victims of the captivating power of men.

Before attempting an analysis of the representation of women in Shakespeare's drama, it would be helpful and important to remember that Shakespeare lived in an Elizabethan England which was a very patriarchal society. The leading poetical voice of the time, Edmund Spenser, spoke of "Et state" as a happy and glorious era when some female excellence was officially rewarded, but amid the joyous homages that such an admission naturally called forth, he did not fail to emphasize that women were inherently weaker than men and should always be guided, guarded, and limited by them.

Shakespeare's plays include an extensive variety of female characters. Such variety depends on the genre of the play. Conley Greer in his "To Be a Woman: Shakespeare's Patriarchal Viewpoint" (2003) illustrates:

The women of Shakespeare's comedies are, to some degree, in control and make life interesting for their male counterparts in the quest for love. On the other hand, Shakespeare's tragedies and romances reveal women to be much more complex creatures involved in greater philosophical struggles.
(p. 135)

To really grasp Shakespeare's brilliance at reading human nature, one can never ignore that Shakespeare elaborates his thoughts on the problematic aspects of femininity and provides his perspectives about the ideal female position in the patriarchal society he lived in. Despite having a female head of state, Elizabethan England adhered to the idea of socially dominant standards that were mostly held by men.

Though Shakespeare grants power, intelligence, and strong personalities to some of his female characters, he still believes that women are weak by nature. Hamlet states that "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Shakespeare, 1603. 1, 2, 146), reflecting his mother's obedience to her second husband and her childish happiness

beside a villainous man. Viola also, in *Twelfth Night*, mentions women's weakness, "Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we, / For such as we are made of, such we be" (Shakespeare, 1623. 2. 2. 62). She confesses that women are fragile, and in a moment of weakness, a lady may fall in love with the wrong person, as Olivia does with a woman disguising herself as a man. However, as weak or powerful women, in both cases, they need love, auspices, attention, and protection from others.

Shakespeare presents a model of a complex female character, a model that is almost ambivalent. Desdemona, for example, possesses a contradictory blend of uncompromising independence and deliberate submissiveness. Shakespeare presents her as an appealing and clever Venetian woman who is perfectly capable of expressing her own opinions and making her own choices. However, she also epitomizes the qualities of a faithful wife and a submissive daughter, even if it comes at a significant personal sacrifice. About her father and husband, Desdemona says:

My noble Father.

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (Shakespeare, 1622, 1.3.179-88)

Marianne Novy, in her "Demythologizing Shakespeare", (2002) confirms the perspective of considering Desdemona as the ideal Shakespearean woman:

It seems that Shakespeare's ideal woman is active but willing to subordinate herself [...] She can harmoniously combine strength and flexibility, individualism and compromise. Tragic heroines like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona also combine both of these qualities attractively (21).

The Elizabethan society seems perplexed by Desdemona's distinctive expression and distinguishing feminine duality. By honoring her father, she recognizes the authority of the patriarchal system, but she also declares her wish to marry according to her own rules, thereby combining traditional and modern ideas.

As far as the theme of love is concerned, love in Shakespearean comedy is different from that of his tragedy. It is stronger than the power of evil, cunning, or the fortunes of chance and time. In *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, and other comedies, the obstacles presented to love are triumphantly overcome, as conflicts are resolved and errors forgiven in a general aura of reconciliation and marital bliss at the play's closure.

The power of Shakespeare's female characters can be realized through more than one factor:

Self-Confidence

Shakespeare pays attention to self-confidence, especially in writing his mature comedies. Self-confidence is related, in one way or another, to the person's psyche, his/her upbringing, faith, and trust in one's self. Hence, confidence is often viewed as a key to happiness and inner fulfillment. It is one's ability to talk in the presence of a large number of people, take decisions, and proceed with action without hesitation. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia does not hesitate in confessing her emotions towards Bassanio after his right choice.

Portia: You see me, Lord Bassanio, when I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich, that only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 149 – 57)

Virginia Woolf (2001) states that "Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle" (p. 42). Shakespeare adds such an imponderable quality to his characters, especially in the comedies, and grants them superiority, unlike those in the tragedies. Lady Macbeth, in *Macbeth*, trusts herself and her ability to kill the king. Eventually, the events of the play prove her fragility, and, as a result, she leads her husband and herself to their downfall.

Self-confidence has always been a positive merit. It gives a huge amount of power to oneself. But, sometimes, it seems like a negative trait, especially when the person exaggerates in his/her pride or overconfidence in himself/herself. Being confident in oneself does not guarantee that one can accomplish anything. There should be limits for things, such as the huge obstacle between Portia and the man whom she wants to be her husband, the lottery of the casket. But she trusts herself, believes in her beauty, her wit, and, above all, her nobility as a virtuous woman.

In addition to what has been said, self-confident people tend to be independent. They do not fear failure. They are willing to risk the disapproval of others because they trust their own abilities. When Portia decides to save Antonio

by disguising herself as a lawyer, she neglects her fear of being discovered. She has trusted her ability to play a male role and to perform the plan she puts forth.

Portia: I'll hold thee any wager,
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 (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 4. 62-68)

Portia is courageous in her disguise because she trusts herself and that she will do her best without fear of being revealed.

Male's Authority and Female's Submissiveness

Marriage in the sixteenth century was very important to improve morality in society. Shakespeare believes that lovers must marry to keep their virtue. In his plays, he portrays lovers and their relationships in various ways. He shows the illicit love between Antony and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which ends in a catastrophe. He emphasizes the need for restraint before marriage, as in *The Tempest*, where Prospero advises his daughter and her fiancé not to engage in any illegal relationships before marriage. In *The Merchant of Venice*, though all the couples are interested in marriage, they fall in love first, but they keep their relationship under control.

Shakespeare pays great attention to the relationships between fathers and daughters. In his plays, male parents have complete authority over their sons and daughters, and especially the daughters. Victor L. Cahn (2001) mentions that:

... many of these young women seek to exercise their own wills. The resulting tension is intensified by universal conflict that exists between generations, as well as by the timeless male chauvinism that compels fathers to shield their daughters from worldly matters, including emotional and sexual attachment. These clashes resolve in a variety of ways, but the basis of the struggle is always how both generations are challenged to accept each other's values. In this way, the daughters may be seen as standing up against the strictures of medieval society, as well as representing the values of the Renaissance and its emphasis on individual social, political, intellectual, and economic freedom. (p. 71)

Fathers believe that they have to be cautious to make their daughters marry wisely, especially if they have fortune. Daughters' freedom in choosing their husbands is restricted for their benefit, as the fathers believe. Sometimes, such a case gives the daughter extra power and full protection from committing mistakes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia eventually recognizes that her father had taken the correct decision for her sake (Hailo, 2000, p. 98). Although she suffers from his will, she gets the one she wants.

Portia: 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? (Shakespeare, 1600. 1. 2. 19-22)

The situation in his tragedy is totally different. Although the society of *Hamlet* is ruled by patriarchal norms that state women are incapable of being independent of

males, in most of his plays, including *The Merchant of Venice*, yet Ophelia's submissiveness to her father leads to her death. What distinguishes Ophelia from Portia is her weak personality and complete dependence on the males in her family, which makes her obedience a passive one.

Portia is discontent with her father's will "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a weary of this great world" (Shakespeare, 1600. 1. 2. 1-2), but she obeys his wish and waits for the right person to open the right casket containing her image. By doing this she is considered a submissive daughter. D.J. Palmer (1972, np) states that, "Portia's submission is part of the discrepancy in the play between outward precept and inward impulse" (Dusinberre, 2003, p. 58). Juliet Dusinberre agrees with Palmer in that:

Portia's obedience is an act of courtesy, ceremonial to the reality of love in practice she retains total independence. Submission is a garment she wears as gracefully as her disguise Submission in Puritan eyes, was the handmaid of harmony in marriage, but the ideal it served was that of freedom. (p. 58)

Although Portia is upset because of her father's will, Nerissa, her maid, agrees with him, and admits that he was a virtuous man and took the right.

Nerissa: Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men
at their death have good inspiration. 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 you shall rightly love. (Shakespeare, 1600. 1. 2. 23-27)

Jessica, Shylock's daughter, is also trapped by her father. But she responds to him differently. She does not like her father's way of treating others; therefore, she escapes with her lover after she has taken his money and jewels.

Jessica: 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. (Shakespeare, 1600. 2. 3. 16-19)

Shakespeare's theatre presents "the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed them independence from men either physically or spiritually" (Dusinberre, 2003, p. 92). In the case of Jessica, it is true that she isolates herself from her father but she makes another bond with her lover. Although Jessica is not the main heroine in the play, Shakespeare gives her the power to admit that she feels ashamed of her father's wrongdoing. Furthermore, she leaves her religion to be a Christian.

Jessica: O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (Shakespeare, 1600. 2. 3.
19-21)

Jessica, also, is a strong woman for several reasons: she wants to be part of the society around her; she has the ability to accept its values and to be anti-Semitic; and she sees her salvation in isolation from her father and his home.

As far as submissiveness is concerned, M. Lindsay Kaplan (2016) mentions in her essay "Others and Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*" that Portia is compelled by her father's will and cannot act freely or even marry as she desires. Portia's father granted to the suitor who chooses the right casket his daughter and

his fortune (p. 369). S. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily IX*, discusses the origins of female inferiority and how male gratified the higher honour, saying that:

Man was formed first; and elsewhere Paul shows man's superiority: *Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man*. Why then does he say this? He wishes for the man to have the pre-eminence in every way; both for the reason given above [man's prior creation, and because of what happened afterwards]. For the woman taught the man once, and made him guilty of disobedience, [and ruined everything]. Therefore, because she made bad use of her power over the man, or rather her equality with him, God made her subject to her husband. (p. 70)

Women by nature must be obedient and submissive to their males, i.e., they have to obey their fathers as far as they are under their control until they obey their husbands. Portia proves that by putting herself and all her fortune under Bassanio's control. "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/ Is now converted." (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 166)

Shakespeare's interest in giving Portia a powerful role serves not only his play but also the conditions of his age. He presents her as fair, virtuous, and fortunate. He gives her the power to control others and herself. When she sees Bassanio, she knows that he is the one that she wants as a husband. But she does not tell him which casket to choose. The only thing that she dares to say is to ask him politely to delay his choice.

Portia: I pray you tarry, pause a day or two

Before you hazard, for in choosing wrong

I lose your company; therefore, forbear a while. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 1-3)

Because she has promised her father, she cannot tell him about the right casket. Although she knows that she may lose him, she controls herself. She has a belief that if he loves her, he will find her picture. (Ludowyk, 1962) mentions the belief of critics that "If she had done so, the play would lose its force" (p. 139).

Portia: I could teach you
How to choose right, but then I am forsworn
So will I never be. So may you miss me;
But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin,
That I had been forsworn. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 10 – 14)

Many critics accuse Portia of being coloured to Bassanio because, with no other suitor, she orders to sing a song. They believe that the first three lines of the song are all rhymed with "lead". It seems to them that Portia gives Bassanio a clue to find the right casket. (Halio, 2000, p. 5)

A song:
Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 63 – 66)

Portia does not use the song as a clue to the right choice, but to create a nice atmosphere for Bassanio, wishing that he may choose correctly.

Portia: Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
Fading in music. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 43 – 45)

Harold C. Goddard affirms that it is Portia's right to give Bassanio several hints to choose correctly, as long as she does not tell him directly. Thus, no one can blame

her. As well, when Portia orders the music to play, she does not tell which song to sing (1951, p. 102).

Portia displays her power of self-control when she shows the obligations of courtesy in the presence of the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon, and all her suitors. Though she does not feel comfortable with any of them, she respects them as suitors. It is true that she mocks them unmercifully after their leaving, but she bears their presence.

Another situation proves her power of self-control when she appears disguised in court as a law doctor with her clerk Nerrisa; she shows responsibility and confidence. French (1981) affirms that she controls herself when "Bassanio claims he would sacrifice Portia to Shylock if that would help Antonio" (p. 100).

Bassanio: Antonio, I am married to a wife

Which is as dear to me as life itself;

But life itself, my wife, and all the world,

Are not with me esteemed above thy life.

I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all

Here to this devil, to deliver you. (Shakespeare, 1600. 4. 1. 278-283)

All she does is to say that: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (Shakespeare, 1600. 4. 1. 284-85). At that moment, she decides to use her wit and play the trick of the ring in order to impose her control over her husband. Although women are known for their jealousy and that they cannot control themselves or their emotions, Shakespeare grants Portia such an exception and presents her as a strong and powerful woman who controls herself when Bassanio gives up the ring that she has given to him in their marriage.

Shakespeare adds fortune to Portia's character to give her more power. At the beginning, Bassanio does not propose to Portia because he loves her but because of her fortune and reputation.

Bassanio: In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and – fairer than that word –
Of wondrous virtues. (Shakespeare, 1600. 1. 1. 160-162)

After his first meeting with her, Bassanio falls in love with Portia, but her personal and aesthetic appeal is inseparable from the lure of her money. Portia accepts Bassanio in this spirit:

Portia: Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 164-167)

Later, with her intelligence, she recognizes at once that Antonio means a lot to Bassanio. Thus, she tells him to take money and go to Venice to pay his debt.

Portia : You shall have gold
To pay the petty debt twenty times over.
When it is paid, bring your true friend along. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 2. 305-307)

Since she displays all the graces and has a generous spirit and self-estimation, she decides to use her wit to save Antonio. She thinks of her cousin Bellario, who is a learned legal scholar, to help her with her plan.

Portia: ... take this same letter,
And use thou all th' endeavour of a man
In speed to Padua. See thou render this

Into my cousin's hand, Doctor Bellario;
And look, what notes and garments he doth give thee
Bring them, I pray thee, with imagined speed
Unto the traject, to the common ferry
Which trades to Venice. Waste no time in words
But get thee gone; I shall be there before thee. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3.
4. 47-55)

Without delay, Portia decides to attend the trial in Venice after disguising herself as a law man with his assistant.

Portia's Disguise

Disguise is to cover reality with a new appearance, either to deceive others or to save oneself and others. Portia's disguise helps her to enter the masculine world. She does not disguise to be evil or to do something immoral, but rather uses her power to save her husband's close friend. Marilyn French (1981) adds that:

Dedicated still to volitional renunciation of power-in-the-world and to the support of the masculine establishment, a disguised woman might exercise a degree of independence and assertiveness. If her goal, her aim, is "feminine," male dress does not compromise her natural female identity. (p. 99)

There is more than one reason for Portia to disguise. It is essential to serve her purpose in Venice. The society of Venice does not accept the feminine principle. Thus, Portia has to find a solution. The only way to get to the Venetian society is to hold the appearance of male power (French, 1981, p. 99). The other reasons why Shakespeare uses disguise are: 1) the Elizabethan values obliged him to introduce a woman in a male community; 2) women are

prevented from working outside their houses; and 3) Shakespeare wants to heighten his comedy by making it more comic. It is not merely funny; it is deadly serious because Antonio's life is at stake. 4) Shakespeare wants to deliver a message to his audience concerning women's power. Women have power and the ability to solve problems when they want and have the chance.

Shakespeare adds to Portia's personality the power of intelligence. From the very beginning, she realizes that she has always been the victim of the belief that it is not a good thing for women to be intelligent. As a result, she used to hide and allow herself to behave in a socially acceptable way. But when she feels that her intelligence will help her in solve a problem, she uses it. Actually, she has a license to use it because she is masquerading as a man. She decides to go to the courtroom. Her maid, unbelieving, asks her:

Nerissa: Shall they see us?

In a total confidence Portia answers her:

Portia: They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit

That they shall think we are accomplished

With that we lack. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 4. 59-68)

W.H. Auden (1964) states that "Portia we can admire because, having seen her leave her Earthly Paradise to do a good deed in this world ..., we know that she is aware of her wealth as a moral responsibility," (pp. 260-261). Ludowyk (1962) describes Portia as an angel who comes secretly from Belmont, leaving everything behind—home, friends, fortune—to save Antonio; then she leaves Venice mysteriously (p. 127).

Portia is used to convey the theme of deceptive appearances. Throughout the play, Shakespeare uses his characters to show the audience that a person cannot be judged by how he appears to the eye and that a person can truly be identified by his

inner soul. He shows that the lead casket is trustworthy and proves that "All that glisters is not gold" (Shakespeare, 1600. 2. 7. 65). Later, she dresses up as a man and finds a way to release Antonio from his bond with Shylock, which no one else is able to. She proves to the audience and to her friends that even though she might have been perceived as an 'unlesson'd, unschool'd girl', her inner self possesses the strength, intelligence, and experience that enable her to do what she did.

As the action progresses, Portia's personality has a touchable development, especially in the courtroom. By giving her such an essential role, Shakespeare's aim is to surprise his audience by introducing the obedient lady with a wise and strong personality in the courtroom. She dominates the situation and enchants people's minds around her.

Portia's triumph in the trial starts with Shylock's sentence. "O noble judge, O excellent young man!" (Shakespeare, 1600. 4. 1. 242). She has the ability to convince all those in the courtroom that Shylock has won his case. But the surprise does not end here. She turns on Shylock to defeat him and to surprise all by giving her last word concerning the bond. "... you must cut this flesh from off his breast; / The law allows it, and the court awards it" (Shakespeare, 1600. 4. 1. 298 –99). Then she continues:

Portia: Tarry a little, there is something else.

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 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. (Shakespeare, 1600. 4. 1. 301-307)

Shylock loses his case because of a woman because he is merely a smug. His only aim is to get revenge on Antonio. Portia uses her wit to help her husband's friend and wins the case. The play does not end with Shylock's tragic exit for more than one reason. M.M. Mahood (1987) states them as:

... the ups and downs of courtship for which there was no scope in the casket story, and the traditional wedding-night ending of which we have been kept in mind by the conclusion of each of the play's earlier movements. The affair of the rings allows the wooing to begin afresh. Bassanio must now plead and Portia must remain obdurate until the battle of the sexes ends with a graceful capitulation of her power. (p. 40)

Portia has uncontrollable power of her intellect and wit.

Portia: I have within my mind
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging jacks,
Which I will practise. (Shakespeare, 1600. 3. 4. 76-78)

Victor L. Cahn (2001) states that:

... she [Portia] has opportunity to prove herself the equal of the men around her, she holds nothing back. Even after she has trapped Shylock in court and contributed to the series of cruel punishments inflicted upon him, she still toys with Bassanio, demanding the ring that he promised her he would never surrender. All Portia's actions reflect her need to stand on her own by liberating herself from society's male influence, particularly that of the father who condemned her to years of inactivity. (p. 74)

Portia's power challenges male society. By using the trick of the ring, Portia and Nerissa look smarter than their husbands. She wins Bassanio and makes him

submissive and faithful to her. She puts a limitation to the relationship between him and Antonio. Portia becomes Bassanio's only treasure.

Conclusion

Portia, one of the central characters in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Vience*, stands out as a remarkable figure due to her intelligence, wit, and moral integrity. Despite the constraints of her time, she navigates the social and legal landscape with exceptional skill. Disguises as a young male lawyer, she shows her eloquence and deep understanding of justice and compassion. Portia's actions not only save Antonio but also challenge the gender norms of her society, illustrating Shakespeare's progressive approach to female characters. Her ability to achieve justice, alongside her unwavering loyalty and resourcefulness, makes Portia a timeless and compelling character, embodying the virtues of intellect, empathy, and strength.

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