

Exploring Feminism in *The Merchant of Venice*

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William Shakespeare is the most well-known playwright in the world. *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the four great comedies by William Shakespeare. It is set during the Elizabethan period with rapid economic development and wide spread Renaissance humanism. Kindness and love are the main themes of the play. Against the backdrop of the spirit of humanism, the female characters in the play have preliminary feminist spirit and subject consciousness though there are some limitations. This article analyzes the feminist spirit in the play and women's progress on their road of liberation. It suggests that while reflecting the initial emancipation of women in the West in the 16th century, the play also reveals the reality of the enormous social barriers on the road of women's emancipation. The emancipation of women is an enduring topic in the development of society and a goal that people all over the world are still striving for.

Keywords: *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare, feminism

Introduction

Humanism is the essence of Renaissance. It reflects the new ideas of the emerging bourgeoisie and emphasizes the dignity of human beings and the importance of the present life. The humanists express their belief that man is the center of the universe and that man has the right not only to enjoy the beauty of the present life, but also has the capacity to perfect himself. William Shakespeare is one of its representatives of humanists. Under the guidance of Humanism, Shakespeare wrote many plays emphasizing the theme, one of which was *The Merchant of Venice*. The play has two main plots. One is that Bassanio courts Portia. The other is the debt of flesh between Antonio and Shylock. Many studies have been focusing on the religious aspect of the play (Chen, 1995; Chen, 2019; Li, 2008). Shylock is the representative of the Jews and Antonio is the representative of the Christians. Many studies have also explored the character of Shylock (Chen, 2001; Han, 2002; Li, 2009). Though he is a mean, selfish, stubborn and bothersome character, he is also a miserable character. Another aspect of the play has not been studied enough, that is the feminist spirits of the female characters presented by the play. Jameson (2010) has noted in *Characteristics of Women* that Portia, Isabella, Beatrice, and Rosalind may be classed together as characters of intellect, because they are at once distinguished by their mental superiority when compared with others. This article will take feminism in the play as the main target and analyze feminist spirit embodied by the female characters.

Feminism

In 16th century Europe, the society was male power dominated and society placed men in a position of supremacy. The male was the absolute holder of power and the sole voice in social affairs. At the same time, the oppression of women by male power intensified. They were simply by-products of a male-dominated society.

The father's will determines the first half of the daughter's life and the husband's will controls the second half of the wife's life. Women have no rights to intervene in social matters or in family matters as they can only follow their husband's instructions. However, with the progress of Renaissance and against the background of Humanism, women were also influenced by the thought. They began to have their own thoughts and opinions and female consciousness began to wake.

Feminism is one of the most dynamic trends of thought in the world in the past three decades. The word "Feminism" gradually developed to eliminate economic, social and political discrimination against women as an oppressed group. Feminism first got its name in France and then was spread to Europe and to America. Feminist theory has developed to a point where a hundred schools of Feminism have blossomed. Although the different schools of Feminism have different ideas, the relations between them are not incompatible, that is they do not replace each other. Instead, they interpenetrate and compensate each other. Generally speaking, the basic principles and categories of feminist criticism are the same. Their main aim is to criticize the traditional male-centered culture, the manifestation of patriarchy in literature, and to advocate true equality between men and women. Feminism seeks to reflect on history, to contribute to an essential understanding of human, and to build a new society with healthier and more harmonious gender relations. Feminist literary criticism has established a unique academic position, but there is still much room for its development.

An Interpretation of Portia

Portia is a beautiful, gracious, and intelligent lady. She inherited a lot of wealth from her father. At that time, the traditional image for women is meek, which is the opposite of Portia. When she first appears in the play, the readers can notice her difference. Shakespeare shaped a noble woman of her own thought. In the play, though her father has passed away, she is bound by the will of her father, that potential suitors are given the opportunity to choose between three boxes composed of gold, silver and lead. In Act 1, Scene 2, Portia says:

"O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither
choose whom I would nor refuse whom I
dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed
by the will of a dead father."

which means that she can neither choose to marry the one she wants nor refuses the one she dislikes and her dead father overpowers her own wishes, and from this we can see that women at that time had a low status and their thoughts and feelings don't matter. But Portia won't let her destiny be decided only by her dead father's will. Portia's words show that part of the female consciousness in her has been awakened and she is brave enough to question and challenge the injustice and the restrictions placed on women by a patriarchal society. Although her fight against male authority remains at the level of words at that time, it is still of vital importance. Before the choose-the-casket ceremony, she examines and sees through every man who comes to court her: "for he doth nothing but talk of his horse" "He doth nothing but frown" "He is every man in no man" (Act 1, Scene 2). Her

sharp words reflect that she places those men at the same place with her. Those men also have flaws. She describes to the maid the suitors that she dislikes with extreme bitter sarcasm. She is the supreme power in her house and she is not subordinate to anyone.

Later in the play, in Act 3, Scene 2, She deals with all her suitors skillfully. For example, she guides them to make malicious vows so that they choose the wrong casket and she uses her suitors' preferences against themselves to stop them from choosing the right casket. And she is clever enough to help her preferred suitor Bassanio by providing her would-be lover with music full of clues so she will have the outcome she wants. Portia uses her wisdom to grab the right of her marriage firmly into her own hands. With the help of Portia, Bassanio successfully opens the right casket containing Portia's portrait. In this way she cleverly exerts her will in choosing the husband she likes against her dead father's will. And it suggests that Portia does not merely protest against male authority in speech level. Portia also takes action to choose the one she likes. This can also be seen as Portia's challenge to male authority. Moreover, Portia is dismissive of the prestigious and wealthy suitors, but she falls in love with the fallen nobleman Bassanio at first sight. She goes against the social values where money and power are the most important things at that time. In her view marriage is the fruit of love, rather than a victim of money and power, and she would never accept a marriage without love. Portia's view of marriage, which is that marriage is not based on money and is not all about power, is ahead of her time and progressive.

Later, when Bassanio receives the letter from Antonio, Portia says:

"Bassanio: I am half yourself,
And I must freely have the half of anything
That this same paper brings you".

She decides to face the sad news with Bassanio together. When she understands what is going on, she makes the decision to help his best friend first and to go through the wedding ceremony as simple as possible. It is evident that in Portia's consciousness, the relationship between men and women in marriage is equal. And as a wife she has the right to know anything about her husband and to share his responsibility. This is very different from the traditional women, who have no right to ask their husbands about their affairs. The traditional women can only do what they are told by their husbands. They have no rights or opportunities to give suggestions to their husbands. They have absolutely no say in any matters. In the face of problems, Portia shows women's decisiveness, competence and knowledge, which is a change from the stereotypical image of women as foolish and ignorant in traditional values.

When Bassanio has to leave Portia at the moment and go back to help his friend Antonio, Portia gives Bassanio a wedding ring and says:

"Are yours, my lord: 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."

Traditionally, men take the lead in giving rings. As long as women accept the rings, men would think them as their properties. Portia's action of giving the wedding ring to Bassanio implicitly declares that his body and all of his things belong to her. Above all, through the wedding ring given by Portia to Bassanio as a symbol of love,

which he later gives away, she is taming her husband and exercises her power and advantages over him, placing Bassanio in the position of a submissive husband, thus presenting a matriarchal challenge to Bassanio's patriarchal authority.

The most exciting part of the whole play is undoubtedly the court scene, which presents Portia's, boldness and intelligence to the fullest extent. In a patriarchal society where women have no right to participate in social affairs, Portia decides to borrow her cousin's assistant lawyer identity to appear in court to help her husband rescue his best friend. At the moment all the men present are at a loss and they do not know what to do about Shylock's demands. At first, she solidates her ground by referring to the law, saying:

It must not be; there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established:
'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state: it cannot be.

Then, in the name of the law, Portia gives Shylock the right to cut "a pound of flesh". She quickly and easily catches a flaw in Shylock's bond with Antonio, saying:

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.

Her words lead Shylock into her "trap". She ultimately wins the case and saves Antonio's life. Portia is not intimidated by defending Shylock in court, and she is confident, the quality that traditional women don't even think about having. Court at that time is thought to be men's territory. Portia bravely intrudes into the male territory, and shows her wisdom in front of other men, which is a challenge to men's exclusive right to participate in the affairs of society. This reflects her desire to achieve the same social status as men and to participate in social affairs and her awareness of gender equality. In court, she uses the law wisely to bring Shylock to justice, winning the approval of all the men present and proving that women are no less intelligent than men. Portia's sense of gender equality as well as her affirmation of self-confidence implies the feminism in her mind.

After winning the case of Antonio, Portia takes the opportunity to ask Bassanio for the ring to test her husband's fidelity. Unexpectedly, Bassanio not only reneges on his promise, but also uses excuses of human kindness, courtesy and his reputation to justify himself. In her husband's opinion, gratitude and reputation are far greater than the promise of marriage. However, from Portia's perspective, promise is a symbol of fidelity in marriage. In defense of her rights, she retorts that she too will leave her promise behind and, like her husband giving the ring away generously, give herself to the young lawyer, and give him whatever he wants:

"I will become as liberal as you;
I'll not deny him any thing I have,
No, not my body nor my husband's bed"

Portia deals with him as he has done to her, claiming that she has the same right to break the promise, which reflects her view of marriage that husband and wife have equal rights and status. As far as she is concerned, both

husband and wife in a marriage should shoulder the same responsibilities and enjoy the same rights. Fidelity is not a unilateral obligation of the wife. When a husband crosses the line, the wife has the right to defend herself. She is completely different from the traditional women who are submissive to their husbands and will only put up with them. On the contrary, she argues for herself and makes her husband realize his mistake, with the result of gaining Bassanio's sincere commitment to their marriage. Later Portia tells Bassanio the truth that it is she that saves his friend's life, adding gratitude and admiration to Bassanio's feelings for her. In this way Bassanio loves her even more and their marriage becomes stronger. She will have the equal status in her marriage with her husband and she won't be at her husband's mercy. After all of this, Portia takes the lead in their marriage, completely overturning the traditional image of women in a subordinate position in marriage.

Although Portia is an amazing character in *The Merchant of Venice*, she also has flaws due to the limit of the time. Even though Portia is so disgusted with her father's will that she wants to ignore it and follow her own will, she does not dare to defy her dead father's authority directly, but only dares to play small tricks on her suitors. In addition, although Portia uses her wisdom to win back her right of marriage from the patriarchal power, because of the deep-rooted traditions, she is willing to give all of her properties as well as her own body to her husband Bassanio:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. 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.

She does not realize that she has only broken from the shackles of patriarchal power but stepped into the prison of her husband's power, which suggests that she is not completely free from the control of male power.

An Interpretation of Jessica

In the shadow of Portia's radiant presence, an important female character, Jessica, is often neglected in studies of Shakespeare's plays. Admittedly, her initial awakening of female self-consciousness is not as direct and strong as Portia's, but it also deserves recognition.

Jessica is the daughter of Shylock. She seems to be more direct and rebellious than Portia. As her makes her appearance in the play, she says: "Our house is hell". She sees her home as hell and is ashamed to be Shylock's daughter. It is evident that, as Shylock's daughter, Jessica feels her life is very depressing and painful. For her love, she would elope with Lorenzo and turn her back on her beliefs. Her determination and perseverance about her love can be seen in such things as taking the initiative to plan to elope, to write a letter to tell Lorenzo about the plan, dressing as a man in order to elope and stealing a box of jewelry and money from her father. It is clear that Jessica plans very well and acts very decisively. On the contrary, Lorenzo seems to be a submissive character. Shakespeare's setting of this plot is intended to celebrate Jessica's bold pursuit of love during the time of the Renaissance. It also reflects, to some extent, the awakening of women's self-consciousness. However, this character is not a perfect character. Putting her courageous pursuit of love aside, there are many other qualities in her that could be explored. For example, she seems to be indifferent and unfilial to her father. During the period

of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's Jessica is woman ahead of time who boldly pursues love. She is intelligent, beautiful, and decisive. Jessica is a character who shimmers with the light of humanism, but she also leaves her father and turns her back on her own beliefs, which suggests that she is also ungrateful, selfish and cold.

Conclusion

Although Portia, Jessica and other female characters in the play are advanced because of their female consciousness and actions, at the same time their emancipation is limited and incomplete. They are subordinated to the conservative and backward side of patriarchy to some extent. But the female consciousness and the spirit of female emancipation that they embody are of great social significance. This is the initial emancipation of women in the West in the 16th century, which is a great step forward in history. While reflecting the initial emancipation of women in the West in the 16th century, the play also reveals the reality of the enormous social barriers on the road of women's emancipation. The emancipation of women is an enduring topic in the development of society and a goal that people all over the world are still striving for. The complete emancipation of women can only be achieved through the perseverance and concerted efforts of society.

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