

The Feminist role as presented by Portia in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

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Abstract

Merchant of Venice which a tragic-comedy play is one of the most important plays that were written by Shakespeare. Shakespeare is a great writer offers an interesting plot from the beginning until the end . He creates female characters which influence the play dramatically. The power of female characters can add new events to the play of Merchant of Venice . The critics believe that the female character in this play stands for the woman in modern society who is equal to man ,and Shakespeare deals in this play with the important role for women as men in the society.

Portia is one of the female protagonist characters in Shakespeare's play Merchant of Venice . Portia is a rich girl from Belmont and she has a powerful personality, pure love and the ability to change the fate of man . Portia uses her intelligence to Bassanio to choose the correct casket by her song .she saves Antonio when she becomes a lawyer in the court to free him from shylock` pound .She defeats shylock when she orders him to cut pound of Antonio`s flesh without any drop of blood but he fails to do this .

In some of Shakespeare's play women have no power or intelligence yet in merchant of Venice, Portia has strong personality and power , she uses her intelligence to solve ther problems that face her and she has power to self-control.

Shakespeare's life

Shakespeare is a great English writer and one of the greatest writers in the literary world . He was born in late April 1564 in Stratford –upon-Avon . His mother was called Mary Arden ."Mary was a member of the family that had been lords of warwick before the Norman Conquest ,and an heiress in a small way , she was a wife who would be able to help and advise an energetic and ambitious husband"(1). She helped her husband and taught her children in a good way . She told them stories that were full of wonders of local folklore and encouraged their progress . Shakespeare was educated at the local grammar school at the age of six or seven and latin was the primary language of his learning . .

At the age of 1582, Shakespeare married Ann Hathaway when he was 18 at that time Ann was 26 . After six months of their marriage Susanna , the first child was born this was the reason behind their hastily marriage. Shakespeare `experience with love and his marriage's life is still an ambiguous matter. Shakespeare had the ability to hid the condition of his relationship with his wife .It could be happy or sad life but many of his works reflected his view that the man must marry and his wife must be younger than him this reflect the different in Shakespeare's marriage life unlike his wife who older than him.

Shakespeare explains things that he suffered from but indirect way . Many critics believe that the marriage life of Shakespeare was not good and fixed , Shakespeare did not tell any information about his life .he is more popular and readable than other writers , his plots and characters have continued to be living in mind of his reader. "Jensen's prophecy says that Shakespeare was not of any age but for all age"(2) .he is a writer of great intelligence and of wide imagination . He shows a deep knowledge of human behavior that are revealed through portraying of actions .He uses

optic language and other literary devices to create an aesthetic effect upon his readers.. By words and action Shakespeare wants to show the deep emotions of human beings and individual situation ."Shakespeare is a psychologist and can be known of the heart of man may be found in his plays said Goethe"(3). Most of critics believe there are things are hidden analogy between what he wrote and his own life in deep his characters.

Shakespeare is a poet and his writing draws true feelings and emotion . He uses his intelligence to create action arrives to the heart of audiences or readers .Most of the stories he wrote are derived from old stories . He re- wrote them by using his own style . Shakespeare continues to write until his death in 1616 on the day of his 52nd birthday.

The source of merchant of Venice

Merchant of Venice is an Italian collection written by sir Giovanni in 1378 (4), the events of the play is about Giametto ,Ansaldo`s godson who wants to marry a rich girl of Belmont .The girl puts condition that she will marry the first man who pleases her but if he fails , he will give her all his wealth . Giametto is given drugged win , he feels a shamed of Ansaldo so he pretends , he has twice been shipwrecked . Ansaldo borrows 10,000 ducats from a Jew on condition that if the money is not repaid on the data the Jew decides ,he will cut a pound of his flash . Giametto marries a rich girl of Belmont because he warned by her maid not to drink the win .He marries her and forget the condition of the Jew .

After a long time , Giametto tells his wife all the story of condition . His wife decides to send her husband with 10,000 ducats to the Jew but the Jew refuses the money and insists on the pound of his flash . Giametto`s wife disguises as a lawyer and follows her husband . Giametto`s wife asks the jew to cut pound of flash of

man no more or no less without any drop of blood but the jew fails to cut a pound of flesh and Ansolfo is freed . Giametto offers 10,000 ducats to the lawyer for helping his friend but the lawyer refuses .

The lawyer tells Giametto about his wish to Giametto`s ring, Giametto refuses but in the end he gives his ring to the lawyer . when he returns to the home ,his wife asks him about the ring Giametto tells her the story and he swears that he has no one but only . Then his wife tells him the truth of the lawyer in the court .Giametto and his wife live a happy marriage life with their children.(5)

Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice

ANTONIO, A VENETIAN MERCHANT, complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain. His friend Bassanio is desperately in need of money to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in the city of Belmont. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel in style to Portia's estate. Antonio agrees, but is unable to make the loan himself because his own money is all invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea. Antonio suggests that Bassanio secure the loan from one of the city's moneylenders and name Antonio as the loan's guarantor. In Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father's will, which stipulates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets. None of Portia's current suitors are to her liking, and she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan. Shylock nurses a long-standing grudge against Antonio, who has made a habit of berating Shylock and other Jews for their usury, the practice of loaning money at

exorbitant rates of interest, and who undermines their business by offering interest-free loans. Although Antonio refuses to apologize for his behavior, Shylock acts agreeably and offers to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest. Shylock adds, however, that should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio's own flesh. Despite Bassanio's warnings, Antonio agrees. In Shylock's own household, his servant [Lancelot](#) decides to leave Shylock's service to work for Bassanio, and Shylock's daughter [Jessica](#) schemes to elope with Antonio's friend [Lorenzo](#). That night, the streets of Venice fill up with revelers, and Jessica escapes with Lorenzo by dressing as his page. After a night of celebration, Bassanio and his friend [Graziano](#) leave for Belmont, where Bassanio intends to win Portia's hand.

In Belmont, Portia welcomes the prince of Morocco, who has come in an attempt to choose the right casket to marry her. The prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets and chooses the gold one, which proves to be an incorrect choice. In Venice, Shylock is furious to find that his daughter has run away, but rejoices in the fact that Antonio's ships are rumored to have been wrecked and that he will soon be able to claim his debt. In Belmont, the prince of Aragon also visits Portia. He, too, studies the caskets carefully, but he picks the silver one, which is also incorrect. Bassanio arrives at Portia's estate, and they declare their love for one another. Despite Portia's request that he wait before choosing, Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket, which is made of lead. He and Portia rejoice, and Graziano confesses that he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The couples decide on a double wedding. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love, and makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it. They are joined, unexpectedly, by Lorenzo and Jessica. The celebration, however, is cut short by the news that Antonio has indeed lost his

ships, and that he has forfeited his bond to Shylock. Bassanio and Graziano immediately travel to Venice to try and save Antonio's life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

Shylock ignores the many pleas to spare Antonio's life, and a trial is called to decide the matter. [The duke of Venice](#), who presides over the trial, announces that he has sent for a legal expert, who turns out to be Portia disguised as a young man of law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy, but he remains inflexible and insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money due him, but Shylock insists on collecting the bond as it is written. Portia examines the contract and, finding it legally binding, declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant's flesh. Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom, but as he is on the verge of collecting his due, Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed, as the contract does not entitle him to any blood. Trapped by this logic, Shylock hastily agrees to take Bassanio's money instead, but Portia insists that Shylock take his bond as written, or nothing at all. Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, which means he must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The duke spares Shylock's life and takes a fine instead of Shylock's property. Antonio also forgoes his half of Shylock's wealth on two conditions: first, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death. Shylock agrees and takes his leave.

Bassanio, who does not see through Portia's disguise, showers the young law clerk with thanks, and is eventually pressured into giving Portia the ring with which he promised never to part. Graziano gives Nerissa, who is disguised as Portia's clerk,

his ring. The two women return to Belmont, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight. When Bassanio and Graziano arrive the next day, their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women. Before the deception goes too far, however, Portia reveals that she was, in fact, the law clerk, and both she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands. Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock, and the joyful news arrives that Antonio's ships have in fact made it back safely. The group celebrates its good fortune.(6)

Portia as The main female character in *merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare is an important writer who can draw a wonderful picture of females characters in his play .Portia is the heroine of this play, Portia is a wealthy and beautiful women who is desired by many, so much so that her father has devised an ingenious test all suitors must perform to win her hand in marriage. This consists of a suitor choosing one of three chests in which her portrait lies and (7) .She is a rich girl of Belmont and she has the power to change the events of the play . she has been clearly evident as an instrumental character of the play's development. As result of her greatness , high self –esteem , abilities and power , she speaks three language which are Latin , Italian and French and this emphasizing her intelligence as well as abilities . she stands for a loving woman who is ready to sacrifice for others .

Critics believe that Shakespeare presents strong and loyal woman in the society in his play . Portia leads the readers to believe that Bassanio`s love for her is the guide which leads to the discovery of the correct casket . when we examine Portia's song the first two lines of rhyme with lead this makes Bassanio wins the correct caskets . Portia is a afraid that Bassanio will make the wrong

choice and help him by her song . In this play , Portia has roles and the first role of Portia as a savior to Bassanio from failing in the test and the second role of her as a savior to Antonio when she becomes a lawyer in the court and save him from Shylock's condition .

the third role of Portia as a punisher to Shylock when she asks him to cut pound of Antonio's flesh no more no less without any drop of blood , Shylock fails to do this and Antonio frees . Portia as a lawyer in the court who can change the fate of man , she stands for strong and loyal woman that she is equal to man in abilities . critics believe that Portia in her power depends on her pure love and this power makes her more intelligence than others female characters in this play . Shakespeare puts Portia in high dramatically events of the play to draw the woman that Shakespeare wishes in his life .

The power of female personality as it is presented in the character of Portia

Shakespeare writes merchant of Venice and presents female characters that influence the play dramatically . Naturally the man has powerful more than woman but in this play woman has a power more than man such as Portia in this play saves Antonio's life by her intelligence and can add main theme of the play because she has loving heart makes her powerful.

Shakespeare creates female characters which have beauty , wealthy and freedom . Portia is a rich girl has abilities to change the fate of man , she speaks wisely and this makes her more appealing . Portia has kinds of love such as pure love and love of nature ,in her acting creates power when she stands for as lawyer in the court to save Antonio's life , by her style and personality any one in the court cannot recognize her and she fights for correct wrong action

.Shakespeare wants to prove that women have a great power in their heart more than power of weapon in the war .

Shakespeare gives Portia a considerably powerful role, yet he doesn't want to make her at least for the audience smarter than men but as far as the trick of the ring is concerned Portia looks smarter than her husband (8).

Portia's Love in *merchant of Venice*

Love is a pure emotion that is hidden inside the heart of man or woman and leads the person to do hard or strong things without any condition to help others."Love is not a necessity but it is life's greatest gift and luxury. It is the desire to be intimate.. physically and emotionally"(9) .Love in *Merchant of Venice* comes in a variety of forms .There's love between family members , between friends and of course between lovers. Shakespeare presents Merchant of Venice like all his plays is full of meaning in many levels and true love is one of these levels .Shakespeare reveals insights about the human nature and the nature of love and Portia is the main character in this play stands for true love to Bassanio , Portia faces hard situation to help Bassanio . Shakespeare draws pure picture about love of Portia stands for gold standards in this play.

In The Merchant Of Venice, Portia has a lot of long speeches in which she displays her intelligence by either making fun of her suitors or showing her love for Bassanio or her knowledge of law. Portia knew that he is not as wealthy as the other suitors, but there is something different about him. Portia has enough money to live; she does not need a rich suitor, so she fell in love with the man whom she thought could love her, and not just want to be get rich . Shakespeare reveals that true love is not interest in self or concerned about what is offered in return it just loves unconditionally and

when loved one has need , true love is quick and willing to come to the rescue .

Portia loves Bassanio and help him in hard situation such as in correct caskets and free Antonio from Shylock's condition . This love is not superficial , it gives freely .Bassanio wins Portia's hand because she loves and helps him by her song this depends on true love in her heart to Bassanio .Shakespeare portrays Portia's character in a good way to be a favorite character

Notes

1. F.E .Halliday, The life of Shakespeare (Middlesex :penguin Books, 1961), p.31.
2. Ben jonson, William Shakespeare :The complete works , ed., peter Alexander(NP, ND),P.XXVIII.
3. Harold C. Goddard, The meaning of Shakespeare (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1951),p.347.
4. M.M. Mahood, ed., The Merchant of Venice (Cambridge: Cambridge University pressm1987),p.2.
5. Muir,1965,p.48
6. <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/merchant/su->
7. [mary.htm](http://www.freeessays.cc/db/42/saq236.shtml)
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7. <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/merchant/summary.html>
8. <http://www.freeessays.cc/db/42/saq236.shtml>
9. URL.<http://www.etoile.co.uk/love/lovdef.htm/2005>.Retrived july2005.