

Father-daughter relationships in the merchant of venice

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Despite the lack of a strong paternal figure in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, two separate father-daughter relationships play an integral role in the central plot of the play. The strained relationship of Venetian moneylender Shylock and his daughter Jessica, as well as the nonexistent association between Portia and her deceased father, lead the two young women to act as they do, in turn affecting the entire cast of characters. As a common theme in the works of William Shakespeare, suffering in the name of love also applies to the two heroines of *The Merchant of Venice*. The delicate subject of love is further complicated by the demanding, unwavering standards set by the respective fathers of Jessica and Portia. It is these strict rules, decreed by the two powerful patriarchs, which bring Jessica and Portia together as sympathetic characters in the eyes of the reader; two women deeply in love, unable to consummate their feelings with the men they care for because of the iron rule of their fathers. However, as the play progresses, it becomes apparent that the two women are quite different. While love consumes Jessica, clouding her judgement and eventually bringing harm upon Shylock, Portia chooses to respect the dying wish of her father, letting the situation work itself out correctly. It is these choices, along with others, which play an important role in the conclusion of the play. Throughout the play, Shylock is portrayed as a selfish man, concerned only with monetary gain, often at the sacrifice of others. The moneylender takes his love of money to such an extreme, it permeates his daily life, as well as the lives of his family. When Jessica successfully elopes with her Christian lover Lorenzo, stealing her father's gold and jewels on the way out, Shylock is equally upset about the loss of his daughter as his is about the loss of his money. Solanio

witnesses Shylock's outburst in the streets of Venice after the robbery, quoting the incensed Jew as saying, ³My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter²(II. 8. 15-18)! The reader has no way of knowing what Shylock is more upset about: Is he upset because his daughter has escaped his rule, to be wed to a Christian? Or is he more perturbed about the loss of a portion of his great fortune, the one thing he loves more than life itself? Shakespeare never really answers this question, leaving the reader to decide themselves. However, in the end, it appears as if Shylock's fortune supercedes everything, including family and love. In addition to this apparent apathy towards his daughter, Shylock sees Jessica, his only female offspring, as a commodity, vital to continuing the family name. She becomes just like the jewels and gold he owns, another possession he can keep locked away. In fact, he does just that, exiling her inside the house, assuring she will not be sullied by Christian suitors. However, Jessica will not be imprisoned while her true love is waiting for her. She both despises her father and feels sorrow for him, saying ³I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so; Our house is hell, and thou a merry devil didst rob it of some taste of tediousness²(II. 3. 1-3). Because of his belief that his daughter is a possession, Shylock is doubly hurt by Jessica's marriage and subsequent conversion to Christianity. He has lost gold, jewels, his daughter, and finally, the ability to continue the family name in the form of a grandchild. As the couple prepares to flee Venice, Jessica tells her fiancé ³O Lorenzo, if thou keep promise, I shall end this strife, become a Christian and thy loving wife²(II. 3. 19-21)! It is evident that Jessica's hatred for Shylock is so great, she is willing to do anything,

including leaving her homeland and converting religions, just to escape his maniacal control. As we see later in the play, this decision, perhaps unavoidable, will have a great affect on Shylock and the entire story. At first glance, it appears Jessica and Portia are in similar situations, two women in love, their desires being withheld because of the demands of their fathers. However, after closer examination, there are glaring differences between both the situations and the two characters themselves. Portia is a wealthy heiress, left in charge of Belmont by her deceased father, the former king. Before his death, Portia's father added a condition to his will, stating that his daughter could only be married to the suitor who selected one of three caskets. The caskets, bearing three separate inscriptions, are meant to separate the gold diggers from the true suitors, a final helpful measure taken by the king to ensure that neither his daughter nor his fortune is taken advantage of. Of course, Portia cannot understand the precaution, instead desiring freedom from her deceased father. She wants total autonomy while selecting a groom, complaining to Nerissa, ³I 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 father²(I. 2. 22-24). While Portia's father is obviously looking out for his daughter's best interests when he writes the addendum to his will, the same can not necessarily be said for Shylock's maniacal behavior. Shylock sees Jessica more as valued property, a collectable that will one-day produce a grandchild, thus carrying on the family name. Portia's father, on the other hand, has experienced years of unscrupulous people, eager to get a piece of his fortune. He realizes his daughter may encounter problems separating well-meaning suitors from greedy con men. Therefore,

he devises a test, a way in which Portia will be sure the man she marries is noble and good intentioned. A set of three caskets, one gold, one silver and one lead are set before any potential suitor. The prospective husband and future king of Belmont must choose one of the three caskets. If the correct one is chosen, the man will receive all that accompanies the title of king. However, an incorrect choice means the man must go the rest of his days unmarried, a punishment for making the wrong decision. The Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Argon go first, selecting the gold and silver caskets, respectively. The Prince of Morocco sees the skull of death in the gold casket, while the Prince of Argon, an old and decrepit man, sees the picture of a fool in the silver casket. When Bassanio, the true love of Portia's life, appears, she begs him to take his time so as to insure he will make the correct decision. However, Bassanio, ever the gambler, insists on selecting immediately. He chooses the dull lead casket, a decision, which wins him the hand of Portia. It is at this point that Portia realizes her father's intentions are pure, as she is destined to be with the one she had always wanted. As the play concludes, the reader begins to see how intrinsically different Jessica and Portia really are. In turn, this makes the tyranny of the two fathers different as well. Shylock holds Jessica hostage, a mere possession to be counted amongst the rest of his fortune. On the other hand, Portia's deceased father is only looking out for his daughter's best interest, ensuring she find a suitable groom. Shakespeare makes this point in Act V, when Jessica and Lorenzo discuss their relationship in terms of three love stories, each of which ends in tragedy and heartbreak. While Portia, at the behest of her father, forces her suitors to earn her love, Jessica hands her ³casket²

freely to Lorenzo, without a test to prove his affection. Like the unsuccessful love stories of the past, Jessica and Lorenzo's love is fated to be a failure, while Portia and Bassanio's love will flourish.