

The role of daughters in 'the merchant of venice'

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



The daughters of Elizabethan England were predominantly subject to their father's wishes. This is particularly evident in terms of the main female character, Portia, who must obey her father even after his death: 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 Nerrissa that I cannot choose one nor refuse none? What seems to be normal prose is permeated by poetic devices such as repetition and internal rhyming which emphasise Portia's lament. "Choose" is repeated three times, and the internal rhyme of "choose" and "refuse" is also repeated. The word "will" is repeated and seems to be punning on 'last will and testament', which serves to further press the finality of her father's sentence. This rhetorical style seems to be a pre-cursor to the later court scene in which Antonio is saved by Portia's ingenuity and subtlety of speech. Harley Granville-Barker said in his essay on the character of Portia that; "to the very end she expands her fine freedom, growing in authority and dignity, fresh touches of humour enlightening her". This is interesting to the modern reader as she has no freedom in the sense that we would understand. Portia's choices are initially governed by her deceased father to the extent that he restricts her selection of husband, who will in turn take command of her finances and supervise her future decisions. It could be seen from the point of view that this is not necessarily a bad thing, indeed it is Nerrissa who says, "Your father was ever virtuous,...therefore the lottery that he hath devised...will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love". (The merchant of Venice, Act 1: 3, lines 27 - 31 page 429) Is Portia's father therefore giving Portia the freedom not to choose? After all

there is “ freedom to and freedom from”#, and Portia is free from the pressure of unwanted suitors, interested in her fortune only. This is due to “ the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver and lead” which arguably, by the nature of their riddle, deter this form of suit. It is true that the suitors which she and Nerrissa ridiculed were all undone by this riddle and that Portia’s eventual marriage to Bassanio, whom was chosen by her also, is a well matched one. It is possible that this is some kind of cautionary allegory to women to instruct them that they must obey their fathers, because they know best. However, it could be argued that Portia is no mere instrument to her fathers will and that she in fact, takes her freedom for herself, by such delicate means as are barely perceptible. This is evident in Act Three, Scene Two, where it falls to Bassanio, her favoured suitor, to make his decision. Strangely Portia orders, “ Let music sound while he doth make his choice” (The Merchant of Venice, Act 3: 2, line 43, page 439), this she does not do for any other suitor, and the reasons she gives do not seem as important as the fact that the song holds a potential clue to the riddle: Tell me where is fancy bred, Or in the heart, or in the head? How begot, how nourished? Reply, reply. It is engendered with the eyes. With gazing fed, and fancy dies In the cradle where it lies. Let us all ring fancy’s knell. I’ll begin it: ding, dong, bell. Ding, dong, bell. Firstly, and most notably, the first three lines of the song end with words that rhyme with lead, it is as if Bassanio is being sub-consciously prodded towards the correct choice. Secondly is the subject of the song; which is “ fancy”. It implies a “ superficial or transient feeling of attraction”, made clear in the first lines of the second stanza, where it is discouraged. The rhymes here are on “ eyes”,

"dies" and "lies" all which may have a double meaning. "Eyes" are the only place such superficial love pervades, not in the heart or in the head, and this love is short lived once "gazing (is) fed". "Dies" can be said to emphasise the idea of sexual love if taken as a pun meaning 'to climax', and "lies" which can have several meanings, literally 'to lie down' or to lie down in death, also lie as in to tell an untruth, implying that this is what aesthetics can do, and lie as in to sleep with, once again emphasising the sordid aspect of "fancy". These combine to give Bassanio a hint as to which casket to pick, therefore Portia has not been entirely passive in the decision process. Jessica is different in that she actively opposes her father's wishes. She is also different in that it does not seem that her father for her in the way that Portia's father has done. Shylock is more interested in money, and as Lancelot points out, "...look you, the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children" (The Merchant of Venice, Act 3: 5, line 31, page 442), to which she jokingly replies, "you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of Pork (The Merchant of Venice, Act 3: 5, line 57, page 442)". His words are almost biblical in their sound, and emphasise the sense of their separation through religion, and also show the general dislike of Jews and their "sins". Jessica shows her awareness of money and commerce; she is parodying her father's concerns to make light of the situation. Jessica is shown to be witty, just as Portia is when discussing her suitors. Jessica however, deceives her father, whilst being outwardly compliant. For example when Lancelot tells her to prepare to elope, she tells her father, "His words were 'Farewell mistress', nothing else.", (The Merchant of Venice, Act 2: 5, line 10, page. 434) and her final

words to his back, "Farewell; and if my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter lost." (The Merchant of Venice, Act 2: 5, line 55, page 434) seem to show no emotion at the parting, and the word "fortune" accentuates the idea of women being used as a commodity, and what she is escaping from. Is she perhaps also playing on the word "crossed" in relation to her later change of sex? It is important that both Jessica's and Portia's cross dressing help them to escape the male dominance of the world, but it shows that they still must have the appearance of being male to do this, it is the classic route of the Shakespearian heroine to dress as a man to achieve her own ends. Portia acknowledges this when she says; "They shall [see us] but in such a habit / That they shall think we are accomplished / with what we lack" (The Merchant of Venice, Act 3: 4 line 60, page. 442), she knows that women are not able to be taken seriously in the male spheres of medicine and the law. She is being ironic, knowing that she lacks nothing, but also knowing that her wit and intelligence could not be recognised as a woman. The giving of the rings to their husbands taking them back when cross-dressed is perhaps not so cruel as it initially seems, are Jessica and Portia merely demonstrating to their husbands that outward appearances can be deceptive. This is a significant theme in the play, and an undercurrent to other aspects of the plot such as in the casket scene, and in Shylock's speech concerning Jews. After all Portia's speech on the quality of mercy, (in the same scene) shows her pragmatism, but she does not follow her own example because she wants to kill Shylock, saying "For as thou urgest justice, be assured / Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st." (The Merchant of Venice, Act 4: 1, lines 313 - 314, page 446). This subtle threat,

with the accusatory repetition of the word " thou", seems to inform Shylock that it is his own evil that will bring evil upon him. Shakespeare's heroines are shown to be inherently tough characters, and able to act using their own judgement and intelligence. This is not only shown in *The Merchant of Venice*, but with Rosalind in *As You Like it*, as well as Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, to a certain extent, and Desdemona in *Othello*, to cite just a few examples. In the comedies it is usual that cross dressing, or the use of masques are what enable the daughters to the most part, and they are outwardly compliant whilst being secretly defiant. It is also important that Shakespeare does not stereotype the female reaction to a father, different fathers are reacted against with different levels of resistance, as is evident in Portia's very mild deviation from her father, and in Jessica's abject violation of her father's wishes. To some extent therefore, Shakespeare could be said to be making a feminist statement, by not treating all women as a single entity, and by presenting each case by merit, and by using the language of his poetry to show the hidden facets of his characters. In other words, he portrays women as real and important people. Bibliography: Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (Vintage 1996) Granville-Barker, Harley, 'The characters, and The Crises of Action', in *Shakespeare, Modern essays in Criticism*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York, Oxford University Press, reprinted 1967) Granville-Barker, Harley and G. B Harrison (editors), *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge University Press, first printed 1934, last printed 1962) Shakespeare, William, *The Oxford Shakespeare, The complete Works*, (Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1988) Soanes, Catherine and

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