

Women in disguise in merchant of venice essay



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One of the main concerns of many Shakespearean scholars is that of the role of women and issues of gender which are explored in a number of his texts. Numerous questions are raised when exploring Shakespeare's heroines, for example: why has he chosen a female protagonist, given that he is writing in a predominantly patriarchal time period; how does he manipulate Renaissance gender constructions in order to convey his message; how is the patriarchal attitude explored through the women in the text; and many more. Using *The Merchant of Venice* as an example, this essay will attempt to explore Shakespeare's representations of the characters of Portia, Nerissa and Jessica.

It will seek to examine their role in the text, as well as explore representations of gender and cross-dressing. It is important for the audience to remember that at this time a female monarch was in power. It was therefore less of a taboo to represent strong female figures in literature than previously. The queen can be seen as one of the most influential literary characters at the time and nothing could be seen to threaten her power. Issues concerning succession to the throne were at the forefront of people's minds.

It was therefore inevitable that Shakespeare would create a character that would challenge the social norms which had been constructed by this society. The audience's first introduction to the character of Portia is through the eyes of Bassanio. Immediately the female protagonist is located in the male gaze. This technique not only emphasises the patriarchal environment in which Shakespeare is writing, but also the audience behind a male lense when we first view her. Shakespeare's use of Petrarchan imagery

emphasises the placement of the heroine on a pedestal. Bassanio says that “ her sunny locks hang on her temples like a golden fleece, which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos’ strand, and many Jason’s come in quest of her.” (1: 1 lines 169 - 172) These images are later reinforced through the setting of the first scene in which we encounter Portia.

These settings, in addition to the fact that circumstances of Portia’s fate are to be determined by the will of her father, indicate that we cannot view her as an independent entity, capable of functioning autonomously in this male dominated society. It is important to note that Bassanio’s opening lines do not focus on her beauty, grace or intelligence, but rather on her wealth. By referring to the fact that she has been “ richly left” (1: 1 line 161), Shakespeare not only emphasises the economic nature of the world of Venice, but also ensures that the audience immediately becomes aware that one of her primary functions in the text will be to assist Bassanio in his financial dilemmas. It also firmly locates her in the role of someone who has inherited wealth rather than acquired it by her own means.

The audience should remember that in many instances, “ Renaissance women are often described as commodities, whose marriages are arranged for the advantage or convenience of men, either their fathers, or the male authority figures in their and their prospective husbands’ families.” 1

However, we cannot dismiss Bassanio merely as a gold digger, as he goes on to briefly discuss her winsome nature and righteous attributes, and goes on to comment that if he was in the same financial position as her, then he would be able to woo her. In this way, Shakespeare has cleverly drawn his

audience back to the financial concerns of the play. This idea is reinforced through Antonio's words "Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;

Shakespeare then introduces the character of Portia within the context of her home and the city of Belmont. The location of Belmont needs to be seen as representing the opposite of Venice. Portia's opening lines are "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this world" (1: 2 lines 1 - 2), whilst Antonio's are "In sooth I know not why I am so sad: It wearies me, you say it wearies you" (1: 1 lines 1 - 2). By allowing the opening lines of Portia's discussion with Nerissa to echo those of Antonio with Salerio and Solanio at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare not only juxtaposes Portia and Antonio as melancholic characters, but also immediately pits them against each other to battle for the attention of Bassanio.

In this way, Shakespeare illustrates the various types of love which existed within society, but he focuses specifically on love as a financial transaction. At the end of act 1 scene 1, it appears as if Bassanio's love can be bought, either by Portia's wealth or Antonio's credit. This juxtaposition of Antonio and Portia also represents the dynamic of comparing Belmont and Venice. The character of Portia may be seen as a personification of Belmont. Throughout the text we associate Belmont with feminine characteristics of love and passion. It is an environment in which anything can occur and love relationships are established. Venice on the other hand, is the sterile unemotional environment of Venice and the Rialto. In act 1 scene 3, the audience is made aware of the serious nature of engagement and relationships which are established in the fiscal environment of Venice.

It is in this environment that the audience becomes acutely aware of the superior nature of men within a Renaissance society. When Shylock refers to Antonio being a “good man” (1: 3 line 12) he does not refer to his nature but goes on to say that he has wealth. Shylock is hesitant in giving Bassanio the loan because of the lack of financial assurance he has, as well as the fact that he doesn't like Antonio, however, through the discussion between Antonio, Shylock and Bassanio the audience becomes aware that financial relationships and engagements are paramount to any others. These relationships may only be established by men within the society. With this in mind, it was essential that Shakespeare disguised his female protagonist as a man.

Initial readings of the text may dismiss the nature of disguise as it is explored in the play, as a frivolous dress up game on the part of Portia, rather than an attempt by Shakespeare to show a deviant female protagonist who would be capable of disrupting the well-established social order.

However, a closer analysis of the text indicates that there are a number of reasons why Shakespeare may have chosen to represent his female heroine in male garb. On the most simplistic level, “the male disguise acknowledges the shortcomings of the female in almost every instance in Shakespeare, the heroine changes clothes because she needs to present herself in circumstances where a woman would be rebuffed or, more typically, subjected to injury.

Traditional female fashions are designed to hamper movement as traditional female roles hamper mobility; only an exceptionally gifted woman will dare cross the boundaries defined by both fashion and role” 2 Portia successfully

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breaks all these boundaries and through disguise not only challenges the carefully structured nature of the Renaissance society but also free herself from the restriction of dress code. An additional technique used by Shakespeare to explore the patriarchal society of the Renaissance epoch, was the character of Portia's father. Although he is dead, he still exercises some level of control in her life. Portia's father completely undermines her ability to make intelligent decisions by choosing the way in which her husband will be chosen for her. The decision will be made by the suitor himself.

Portia's father has drawn up a test or lottery in which the suitor who chooses the correct casket will be allowed to marry his daughter. By leaving love open to the decision of the lottery, Shakespeare emphasises the inferior role which women played within society, and that Portia's entire destiny has been left to chance. Unable to exercise her freedom of choice within this society, Portia will merely pass from the hands of one male in the form of her father, to another in the form of her husband. Portia, however, cleverly manipulates the outcome of Bassanio's choice and in that way determines her own destiny - an unheard of idea during the Renaissance era. In act 1 scene 2 she has expressed her horror and disdain at the suitors who have already been presented to her.

Whilst Nerissa is reminding her of the different men who have tried to woo her she says " I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth than to either of these: God defend me from these two!" (1: 2 lines 43 - 45) and later in the same scene " If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will. I am

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glad that this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence: and I pray God grant them fair departure." (lines 90 - 94). It is clear to the audience that there seems to be no suitable suitor for Portia and she is willing to die a virgin rather than take any of these men into her favour. However, in act 3 scene 2 the audience is made aware of the fact that Portia's father's patriarchal will has worked in her favour.

Through the process of selecting the incorrect caskets, it has become clear that she does not need to reject Arragon or Morocco as suitors. In her opening words we become aware that she would like Bassanio to choose the correct casket. She says, " I pray you tarry: pause a day or two before you hazard, for in choosing wrong I lose your company" (3: 2 lines 1 - 3).