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**PINK IN PROMINENCE: WOMEN TAKE CENTRE STAGE, MARGINALIZING MEN IN
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

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ABSTRACT

Whatever stands for weakness, meekness, incompleteness and derogatory, is associated with women always but in *The Merchant of Venice* 'Pink' comes into prominence and women take the centre stage, marginalizing men and subverting the established structure of dominance. Through an assessment of various female characters gradually moving with the story line, the message of Shakespeare, hidden behind the play has been attempted to be unveiled in course of the paper. Apart from this, the paper also attempts to display how, as Shakespeare appears to have intended, women, in a patriarchal society, can not only challenge the unchallenged patriarchal authority and practices and paves the way of their survival, but also shows how Shakespeare's women characters in the play appears to set the examples for the other. It has been tried to establish in the paper how a dominant, wise and prudent man appears to be helpless and at his wit's end before a woman's wit.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Feminism, Marginalization, Critical theories, Shakespeare's society and dramatic situations, Elizabethan theatre, Comic Heroines.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare seems to have raised women's questions again just as he has done in his other comedies. In this play he introduces female characters who are charged with feminist spirit. What is new in the play is that Shakespeare does not demonstrate male domination over the female directly. Here a woman does not need to raise her voice for her right against her father or husband as Hermia does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She also does not need to fight for her independent identity and power as Titania does against Oberon. Here a woman does not fight to better her gender but to rescue a man. All her efforts are to protect man from the cruelty of man.

Sometimes Shakespeare introduces male characters to solve the problems of women in his comedies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is Oberon to intervene in the problem of Helena and solve it by anointing Demetrius' eyes. In *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio comes to help Isabella and Mariana. But in *The Merchant of Venice*, the case is different. Here Shakespeare seems to appoint a lady to solve a man's problem. When all the male characters are helpless in the critical situation and are at their wit's end, it is Portia who comes as a new hope for them and protects Antonio from the sacrificial knife of Shylock.

The world of Belmont and Venice that Shakespeare creates in *The Merchant of Venice* is not like the world of Vienna in *Measure for Measure* where pimps and bawds rule the society. Nor is it similar to the world

of Messina in *Much Ado About Nothing* where a girl is publicly slandered for the crime she has not committed. But, like Vienna and Messina, Belmont and Venice reflect the patriarchal nature of society. It is a world where several male biased practices are in vogue, and male points of view pervade the whole plot of the play. Reflecting on this male-biased situation, Ruth Nevo comments: "In both Belmont and Venice there is a treasure, and a treasure of girl, locked up in a casket or a locked or barred house, and liberated by a Prince charming ready to take risk. (Ruth Nevo 115)

Like in his other comedies, the society that Shakespeare presents in *The Merchant of Venice* is patriarchal. In a male dominated society the dowry that a bride brings with her has generally been a fascination for man. He always expects a big dowry from the side of the bride. In the case he does not get it in a proper proportion, he will refuse to marry the girl. Often, dowry is given no less priority than the bride. A suitable bride is expected to be both beautiful and wealthy, as Portia is. Shakespeare has raised this issue in his latter comedies like *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*. Angelo abandons Mariana for dowry, and Claudio postpones the announcement of his marriage with Juliet for the sake of dowry. Claudio in *Much Ado* falls in love with Hero and decides to marry her only after being assured that she is the only heir to her father Leonato. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare, again, seems to have brought up this dowry-related problem which is very common amongst males. A man loves a woman because she is rich or because she is the only heir to her father. Perhaps Bassanio wants to marry Portia also because she is the only heir to her father's property. It is possible that he wants to marry her because by doing that he can possess her property and get rid of his debts. He reveals his intention to his friend Antonio:

. . . but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Where in my time, something too prodigal,
Hath left me gaged. (I. i. 126-129)

Commenting on the same point Marguerite Alexander maintains: ". . . Bassanio is the young man who has spent more than he has and needs a rich wife, Portia's gold is important to him, though he has the wit to realize what the caskets require of him and to choose lead". (Margurite Alexander 62) John Palmer disapproves of Bassanio and comments that he is "charged with being a spendthrift and a gold-digger. He sponges on his best friend and marries for money". (John Palmer 61) During his conversation with Antonio, Bassanio tells him about Portia and his plan that he wants to execute:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and fairer than the word
Of wondrous virtues. Sometime from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia. (I. i. 160-165)

He further says:

O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them
I have a mind presages me such thrift
That I should questionless fortunate. (I. i. 172-175)

In a patriarchal society, a man, after marrying a woman, becomes the master of all her property. In such a situation he does not only possess her person but her property as well. What is significant here is that the woman willingly hands over all her wealth to him and becomes subordinate to him. Portia says to Bassanio

that he, after their marriage, has become the master of "This house, these servants and this same myself" (III. ii. 170). Since a man acquires, after marrying the girl, her property along with her person, John Stuart Mill denounces this relationship and maintains that: ". . . it confines upon one of the parties to the contract, legal power and control over the person, property and freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes". (J S Mill 158) What is noteworthy here from a woman's point of view is that a woman, who is higher in social rank and more wealthy than her husband, is, in a patriarchal society, subordinate to her husband. If she is not, she is thought to be secondary or she is made to project herself in such a way as to make herself subordinate. She treats her husband as her "lord" and "master". The "shrew" Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* calls her husband her "lord", "keeper", "head" and "sovereign" (V.ii. 145-146). So also does Portia who describes Bassanio as her lord, her governor and her King. Portia says to Bassanio:

. . . her (Portia's) gentle spirit Commits itself to yours to be directed

As from her lord, her governor, her king.

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. (III. ii. 163-171)

The view that Shakespeare's "witty women", though committed to the idea of marriage, "are not committed to wifely obedience" (Simon Shapher 159) seems without foundation. Reflecting on the same idea Lisa Jardine comments:

And it is by no means the case that Kate is obliged in Christian humility to serve her breadwinning husband: he is a fortune hunting rascal, supported by her fine dowry. If obedience correlates with financial support then it is Petruchio who should kneel to Kate. . . . Portia supports, the some empty fiction that husbands are of their essence economically superior to their (extremely wealthy) wives, when she abdicates her rank and status in favour of Bassanio. (Lisa Jardine 60)

In a patriarchal society, traditionally a woman is under the control of her father before her marriage, and after being married she is to be dependent on her husband. Daughters, as wives do not dare to disobey their husbands, are not supposed to disobey their fathers. They have to like what their fathers like and make their choice in the choice of their fathers. If they do not follow that code of conduct, they are thought to be immoral and are liable by the law for strict punishment. Hermia in *A Midsummer* is given either death punishment or asked to abandon forever the society of man for her disobedience in not marrying Demetrius chosen by Egeus, her father, as an appropriate groom for her.

Like in *A Midsummer*, Shakespeare, in *The Merchant of Venice*, seems to have stressed on the patriarchal domination over women which is generally prevalent in society. In *A Midsummer*, he makes the mention of the law that a daughter is bound to marry the man chosen by her father, in *The Merchant* he brings in the will of a dead father. Portia discusses with Nerissa the terms of her father's will, that is, any suitor of herself and of her fortune must submit to the casket test. It is because of her father's will that Portia is compelled, "to endure the trial of patience and passivity of her own." (William C. Carroll 119) Portia does not support these patriarchal restrictions and this limbo makes her "weary of this great world" (I.ii.2). Portia expresses her helplessness to Nerissa: "But this reasoning is not in fashion to choose one a husband. One, 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. It is not heard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none? (I. ii. 18-22) Through the casket scene and the will of Portia's father Shakespeare seems to suggest "the traditional helplessness and passivity of woman. . . ." (William C. Carroll 119)

The question that is significant here is, why does Portia not disobey her father? Like Hermia, she does not have to risk her father's anger and complaints. Then, why does she not oppose her father's will? Instead of a daughter in flight from her father, throwing the casket containing his gold out of the window in effect flinging herself after it, we are, here, "confronted with a daughter who is the passive model of filial duty as she waits for the opening of the casket containing her image". (M.M. Mahood 31)

Portia's weariness shows that she does not support this sort of patriarchal bond for girls, and that she does not willingly obey her father's will. M.M. Mahood is of the view that Portia's dead father "acts much as the divinely directed fortune of the romance, exercising a protective role over his daughter such as she in turn is to exercise over Antonio." (M.M. Mahood 10) Mahood may be correct in his conclusion, but the point that goes against him is that Portia is intelligent enough to protect herself. Her father may be protective about her but why is she dependent on her father's will? If she can protect Antonio, she can protect herself too. Shakespeare seems to have shown "the decorum which prevails in Belmont" and its "post-medieval attitude to women" in which we find "Portia's acquiescence in the will of a living daughter being curbed under the will of a dead father." (M.M. Mahood 31)

Money has occupied a significant place in the play. Jessica elopes with Lorenzo by taking the money of her father. Bassanio wants to marry Portia because of her money. It is money which lies behind Antonio's life in peril. Further, Shylock appears to love money rather than his daughter Jessica. The point, however, that I am trying to make is that Portia seems to be dependent on her father's will because of his property. The term, "will", that Portia's uses seems to be a legal document that her father would have made. It is possible that Portia's father had made the will in such a way that if Portia did not marry in the way he wanted her to marry, she would be deprived of his property. If Lear in *King Lear* could deprive Cordelia of his property and Egeus in *A Midsummer* could demand death punishment for his daughter Hermia, it seems to be logical that Portia's father should have made the "will" that compelled Portia to obey her dead father. Harley G. Barker maintains that Shakespeare cannot do little enough with Portia while she is still the slave of caskets. . . . ("Harley G. Barker 84)

In a patriarchal society, a lady is traditionally supposed to obey her father's authority. She has to follow her father's suggestion and accept his decisions, whether right or wrong, about herself. Shakespeare appears to have demonstrated two kinds of responses on behalf of daughters: one is to obey their fathers (as Hero and Ophelia for example do) and let the tragedy occur, and the other is to oppose or disobey them and to establish their own identity (as Hermia and Portia do, though indirectly).

One way of disobedience to the father has been shown by Shakespeare in elopement. Hermia opposes Egeus and elopes with Lysander. Similarly, Jessica, without caring for her father's will, elopes with Lorenzo. Both, Hermia and Jessica oppose their fathers' will and elope with their lovers. But the basic difference between these two elopements is that Hermia runs away as Hermia but Jessica runs away not as Jessica but in the disguise of a man.

To depict women as men has been one of Shakespeare's favourite methods. Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is Shakespeare's first comic heroine to become a man. Similarly, Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* also disguise as men. In *The Merchant*, all the three female characters (Portia, Nerissa and Jessica) introduced by Shakespeare appear on the stage as men. The question that is significant here is, why was Shakespeare interested in presenting women as men? Was it the demand of the plot or did he wish to convey something through this method? As far as the plot is concerned, Shakespeare might have changed it in other ways. He seems to have presented his female characters in male disguise for the sake of their safety. Since the society that Shakespeare seems to portray is patriarchal, his heroines disguise themselves as men to hide their female identity. In a male dominated society, one of the several ways to control women "is the use of rape and sexual violence as tools of domination." (Jane Freedman 66) Shakespeare's comic heroines like Rosalind and Viola hide their female self to protect themselves from "the fear generated by the threat of rape that keeps women subordinate." (Jane Freedman 66)

But in *The Merchant of Venice* the case is different. Here the women seem to disguise themselves as men for other reason rather than this. Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, so she should not have the fear of sexual harassment, because Lorenzo is to protect her. Portia and Nerissa also have other reasons than this. Since in a patriarchal society, the male voice is more influential and a man is more seriously heard, Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer and Nerissa as her clerk. The other important reason for the male disguise is that females are seldom allowed to participate in public affairs, so Portia represents herself in a man's robes. The last but not the least reason is that Portia wants to spy on what her husband does in her absence, and Portia disguises herself as male lawyer to remain hidden from Bassanio. What is important from a woman's point of view is that in an androcentric society it is man who has occupied the primary place and woman has been accorded a secondary position. In a man made society, a woman always lives under the threat of rape and sexual violence. For her safety, she is compelled either to disguise herself as a man (as Viola does) or to have a male support with her (as Rosalind and Celia take Touchstone with them). If she has to say something publicly and she wants her voice should be heard seriously, she is compelled to disguise herself as a man (as Portia disguises herself as the male lawyer).

In a male dominated society, it sometimes becomes necessary for women to have a male to support them. If they are alone, they should either represent themselves as men or have some male chaperon. In case they do not do that they are open to all sorts of risks, particularly rape and sexual violence. Juliet in *Measure for Measure* is made pregnant by Claudio and Lucio gets a prostitute with child. Shakespeare has made the same reference in *The Merchant of Venice* through the character of Lancelot. Lancelot has got a Negro lady with child and has no fear of that crime. Lorenzo says to Lancelot:

I shall answer that better to the Commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro's belly: the Moor is with child by you, Lancelot. (III. v. 30-32)

About the characters of the play John Middleton Murry opines that "*The Merchant of Venice* is not a realistic drama; and its characters simply cannot be judged by realistic and moral standards." (J.M. Murry 191-192) But to judge the major characters of the play in the light of feminism helps us in a better analysis of the text. Since Portia stands to be the most prominent and the strongest female character in the play, we can start with Portia. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the female characters in *The Merchant of Venice* cannot be categorized as weak or strong women or as typical or individual women. They represent only one group of women who are independent and bold in their action and behaviour. The female characters, in the present play, are strong and intelligent enough to take decisions and determine their future plans. They are not silent women like Hippolyta and Hero, nor are they weak and helpless as Mariana is. The women characters are bold and witty enough to participate in man's affairs and act as the chief solvers of their problems. They know how to tackle the critical situation and face the problems. To study these female characters in detail, it is necessary to deal with them individually. Since Portia is the most significant and intelligent among them, we can start our examination with her character.

Portia

Portia is generally regarded as one of Shakespeare's "most attractive and admirable women". (Murray Biggs 153) She is the most significant character, "the centre of the play". (Harold Bloom 177) From the beginning to the end it is she, around whom the whole plot of the play revolves. The play begins with her description by Bassanio and ends in her palace. Stopford A. Brooke views Portia "as the queen of the play, the muse of wisdom and of love." (Stopford A. Brooke 141) Her wisdom is above all the wisdom of a fine womanhood. (Stopford A. Brooke 141) About her importance in the play Harold Bloom comments: "Shakespeare's comedy is Portia's play, and not Shylock's, though some audiences now find it difficult to reach that conclusion". (Harold Bloom 172) H.G. Barker finds Portia "a great lady in her perfect simplicity", (H.G. Barker 85) and "the Portia of recourse and command". (H.G. Barker 85)

Portia has been the centre of discussion among critics. Scholars have praised her for her wit and intelligence. Let us observe how her character develops, in the light of feminism. Actually, from the beginning to the end of the play, a change or evolution may be observed in the character of Portia. She changes in the

play "from one bristles because 'the will of a living daughter is curbed by the will of a dead father' (I. ii. 23-24) to one who "drop(s) manna in the way /of starved people" (V.i. 294-95). Portia seems to have gone under these changes and "become a man in order to win her man." (William C. Carroll 118) The character of Portia develops from an obedient daughter to an educated man, the doctor of laws, and it is "important to become a man in this play . . . because power is vested in man."(William C. Carroll 118)

In the very beginning of the play the problem that Portia faces in a patriarchal society is in the form of her father's will. It is because of her father's will that she has to bear the problem: "I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike" (I. ii. 22-23). The casket scene seems to ritually epitomize "the traditional helplessness and passivity of a woman, who has no "will" (with both assertive and sexual overtones) of her own." (William C. Carroll 118) Through the casket scene Shakespeare seems to have demonstrated the tradition, which allows Portia's father, even after his death, to take all decisions about his daughter. If in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare makes mention of the law which allows fathers to compel their daughters to marry the man of their choice, in *The Merchant of Venice* he seems to exhibit the patriarchal practice that allows fathers to decide the future of their daughters even after their deaths.

Being intelligent and of independent will, Portia never appears to be helpless and a victim of her father's will. Before choosing the casket she points out some flaw of each of her suitors, which is "traditionally (the) masculine flaw." (William C. Carroll 118) She directs Nerissa to make the caskets more mysterious, so that, the person whom she does not like could not be able to choose the right casket. She says to Nerissa:

. . . I pray thee set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket, for if the devil be within and that temptation without, I know he will choose it. I will do anything Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge. (I. ii. 78-81)

Judging the character of each of her suitors, she rejects all. About the Neapolitan Prince she says to Nerissa:

Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse;... (I. ii. 34-35)

About the County Palatine she comments:

He doth nothing but frown, as who should say, 'And you will not have me, choose'. He hears merry tales and smiles not; I fear he will prove a weeping philosopher when he grows old,

Being so full of unmannerly sadness in his youth. (I. ii. 39-42)

Portia views the French Lord Monsieur Le Bon as the combination of the personalities of both Neapolitan and count palatine. She states:

I know it is a sin to be mocker, but he! why, he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's, a better bad habit of frowning than the Count Palatine: he is every man in no man. . . . If I should marry him, I should marry twenty husbands. (I. ii. 46-57)

Portia seems to have formed the idea of a perfect man who may suit her sensibility. She appears to have been waiting for a man who has all the qualities of Renaissance man, the man who she may accept as her husband; and Bassanio is that man, "a Scholar and a soldier" (I. ii. 97) who "deserves a fair lady" (I. ii. 97).

Portia requests Bassanio to stay for some time with her so that she could teach him how to choose the right casket. She does not want him, as she wants her other suitors, to choose the wrong casket because she loves him and finds all qualities of a man in him. She says to Bassanio:

I pray you tarry, pause a day or two

Before you hazard, for in choosing wrong

I lose your company; therefore forbear a while.

There's something tells me, but it is not love,

. . . .

I would detain you here some month or two
Before you venture for me. I could teach you
How to choose right. . . (III. ii. 1-11)

What is noteworthy is that Portia does not seem to obey her father's will. She mystifies the caskets for those of her suitors whom she does not like and wants to help Bassanio for the sake of her love for him. Her desire to help Bassanio is the disobedience of her father's will. But, Portia, as she has "the training of New learning," (William C. Carroll 118) seems to establish her true identity. She obeys her father and his will only to the extent that would not harm her own interest. Here Portia appears to be wiser than Hermia. Hermia challenges the law and refuses to marry Demetrius but Portia does not challenge her father's will and frees herself through her wit and intelligence from its influence. The result is that Hermia is compelled to elope with Lysander and Portia marries Bassanio and possesses her father's property. In this regard, Portia appears to act as a Marxist-feminist because her father's property seems to be one of her several priorities. As a feminist, Portia would not sacrifice her own interests in the interests of her father.

Portia as a lawyer, in the court scene, appears in a male disguise. Like Jessica, she does not feel uneasy in a man's robe and is at home in legal procedures. She knows law and the legal applications better than anyone else; even the Duke himself does not know the subtle applications of the law. Portia seems to come to the court with twofold purposes: one is to keep an eye on her husband and the other is to rescue her husband's friend. She intervenes "to save Antonio as providentially as the Virgin Mary." (M.M. Mahood 9) But she has been attacked by some critics for keeping the wretched Antonio and his friends on tenterhooks. John Palmer, commenting on the same point, maintains: "Surely it was most unkind to bring the poor merchant to the point of bringing his breast for the knife when she had it in her power at any moment to shatter the whole case against him". (John Palmer 84)

Actually, Portia wants Antonio and his friends to realize the catastrophe of the result and the seriousness of the situation. Perhaps, her purpose lies also in exposing the limitations of the law. She seems to have the Duke realize the loose poles of the law, which is influential in his kingdom. The bond is legal and cannot be cancelled. Even the Duke does not have the power to cancel it. Portia's purpose may also be to make them realize the consequence of the law wrongly used. Shakespeare seems to present a woman to show weakness of the legal code which is man made, and, therefore presents her with more wisdom than what he gives to the men. Portia's purpose therefore, seems not to torture Antonio and she should not be charged for that.

Portia's other purpose to present herself in a male-disguise is to observe Bassanio and his activity in her absence. When Bassanio makes the offer, as it is frequent and common in a patriarchal society, of his wife, Portia, for the deliverance of Antonio, she criticizes him for that. She says to Bassanio:

Your wife would give you little thanks for that
If she were by to hear you make that offer. (IV.i. 284-85)

Portia would never like to be treated as commodity. It is possible that Bassanio's statement might have prompted Portia to give a new test to him. This test, she gives him by demanding Bassanio's ring. On the insistence of Bassanio, Portia demands the ring she has given to him. The ring was the token of Bassanio's love and devotion to Portia and the loss of that would be the loss of his love for her. Portia appears "to make her assurance of Bassanio's loyalty double sure." Both, in her presence and absence, Bassanio should be loyal and faithful to her.

The other way to see the ring episode may be to look upon Portia's demand as the right of the woman for equal freedom. She wants Bassanio to realize that a husband is not free to treat his wife and her gifts in any way he likes. If he can, as Bassanio does, then, a wife also has the right to do anything with the things she has; she may even offer her body to anyone. She says to Bassanio:

I will become as liberal as you;

I will not deny him anything I have,
 No, not my body, nor my husband's bed:
 Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.
 Lie not a night from home. Watch me like Argus:
 If you do not, if I be left alone,
 Now by my honour which is yet my own,
 I will have the doctor for my bedfellow. (V. i. 226-233)

Portia wants the surety from Bassanio that he would never be unfaithful to her, and that she would treat him in the same way. When Bassanio realizes his fault, and promises her "Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear/I never more will break an oath to thee" (V. i. 248-9); Portia pardons him. Now Portia wins Bassanio not in the way Mariana wins Angelo, Hero wins Claudio, and Helena wins Demetrius that is by subordinating herself to her husband. She wins Bassanio in the way Beatrice wins Benedick, Isabella wins Duke Vincentio, and Hermia wins Lysander that is on her terms. Portia does not subordinate herself to Bassanio, and maintains the relationship on equal terms.

Nerissa

The character of Nerissa can be viewed in the light of Portia's character. Since she is Portia's maid servant, she follows her mistress. As Gratiano follows Bassanio, she follows Portia. She does what Portia does or what Portia directs her to do. If Portia marries Bassanio, she would marry Gratiano. Since Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer, she would become her clerk. If Portia reproaches Bassanio for his improper consideration towards her, Nerissa criticizes Gratiano for his unfair attitude towards her. She says to Gratiano:

'Tis well you offer it behind her back;
 The wish would make else an unquiet house. (IV. i. 289-290)

Nerissa again follows Portia and demands Gratiano's ring. The condition of the compromise between Gratiano and her, would be the same as is the case between Bassanio and Portia.

Although, Nerissa is often believed to have "a thought of her own," (Murray Biggs 155) she lacks the spirit to judge or decide individually and independently. Nerissa seems to represent those women who could not take decisions individually. She decides what Portia decides, and judges what Portia judges. When she gives her own idea on the casket-test and its result, she simply believes in it and the wisdom of Portia's father: "Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations. Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in these three caskets of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love" (I. ii. 23-27). Here Nerissa appears to believe, like Ophelia and Hero, that the decisions taken by fathers should always be correct and healthy for their daughters. Actually, Nerissa can do anything, can raise her voice against anyone but she needs a leader to lead her; and Portia is her leader.

Jessica

Shakespeare has given Jessica a very short role in the play, but it is important. Through the character of Jessica and her relationship with her father, Shylock, Shakespeare has tried to present a contrast of Portia and her relationship with her father. Portia does not disregard the filial duty and remains "faithful to her bond to the will of a dead father", (Ruth Nevo 116) but Jessica does not. The only act that she does in the play is her elopement with Lorenzo with her father's money. By marrying Lorenzo, Jessica becomes a Christian. Critics have charged Jessica for her unfilial act and criticized her for that. John Plamer comments that "Jessica (is) a heartless minx who robs her father," (John Palmer 61) and "she is damned for it." (John Palmer 77) Talking about Jessica's faithlessness to her filial bond Ruth Nevo comments: ". . . faithless to her filial bond, Jessica makes off with another young prodigal, with her father's wealth in a locked casket". (Ruth Nevo 116)

It seems that the assessments of the critics like Ruth Nevo and John Palmer about the character of Jessica are biased and coloured with their prejudices. In fact, Jessica, in her father's house, is "starved of affection." (M.M. Mahoodm 30) She is not happy with her father. Shylock's house is like hell, says Jessica. For Shylock, money is more important than his daughter, he has no time for her. Because of her revolting nature Jessica cannot endure this and quite justifiably elopes with Lorenzo and becomes a Christian. If Jessica does not care for her father she is right. If Shylock does not care for her, why should she be caring towards him? Why should she obey the patriarchal authority and social codes that hamper her interests? She seems to realize that the society is male biased and she cannot sacrifice her own interest for it. Here Jessica acts like Hermia. Both of them revolt against the male oriented practices in society and establish their independent identity. John Middleton Murry sees no fault in Jessica when he says: "Jessica, taken out of the play, and exposed to the cold light of moral analysis, may be a wicked little thing; but in the play, wherein alone she has her being, she is nothing of the kind - she is charming." (J M Murry 194) Murry further defends Jessica and states: "She runs away from her father because she is white and he is black, she is much rather a princess held captured by an ogre than the unfilial daughter of a persecuted Jew. (J M Murry 194) Jessica is of the feminist bent of mind and cannot sacrifice her own interests for her father. She knows that society is gender biased (male biased). If a male Christian like Lancelot may make a Negro pregnant then why can she not marry a Christian? Jessica will do what suits her.

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare, in *The Merchant of Venice*, turns out to be a feminist. All the female characters in the play are charged with the feminist spirit. Portia is the strongest character in the play. She solves not only her problems but also Antonio's. She brings Bassanio on the right track by plotting the ring episode. She makes him realize that a man should be liberal and free but not at the cost of woman. In the disguise of a male-lawyer she acquires male power and authority. She also represents the well-educated woman who could take part in man's affairs and tackle the critical situation through her wit and intelligence. In portraying Nerissa and Jessica, Shakespeare has probably represented the group of women who are wide-awake about their own interests.

The society that Shakespeare seems to have painted in *The Merchant of Venice* is patriarchal. The property of the bride in a male oriented society, has been a fascination with Shakespeare. He has raised the issue of dowry in his latter comedies like *Much Ado* and *Measure for Measure*. But what is important in the present play is that here money seems to be the preoccupation of women as well as of men. Women seem to be interested in money as much as men. In *Much Ado*, Claudio is interested in Hero's property and Hero does not think about her father's property. In *Measure for Measure* Angelo abandons Marianna for the sake of dowry. Claudio postpones the announcement of his marriage with Juliet for her dowry, and Juliet's consent seems to be included in this. But Shakespeare does not give the impression that Juliet's interest is dowry. Juliet appears to do only what her lover wants her to do. On the contrary, in the present play, Portia does not appear to disobey her father's will because of his property. She has the fear that if she disobeys the "will" she may be deprived of her father's property. Further, Jessica elopes with Lorenzo by taking her father's ducats.

As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare again focuses here on the father's authority over his daughter. How and to what extent a father may take decisions about his daughter and compel her to fulfill his desire? Through the reference of the pregnancy of the Negro lady (due to Lancelot) he seems to have shown the injustices and the sexual violence done to women. Through the character of Bassanio and Lorenzo, Shakespeare seems to have shown men who like to take possession of their wives' property. Shakespeare, therefore, seems to suggest that in the society that is male structured and male dominated women like Portia, Jessica and Nerissa can survive.

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