

Progress and Limitations of Female Characters in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract: The article interprets and analyzes Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa, the three new bourgeois female characters created in Shakespeare's famous work *The Merchant of Venice*, and illustrates their complexity that though they have had preliminary feminist spirit and subject consciousness, they are still willing to submit to and be bound by the male hegemony. Their nature is the coexistence of progress and limitations. Since Shakespeare does not provide any practical solutions, the work merely reflects the tragedy of women in the patriarchal society at that time.

Keywords: *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare, feminism

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, a famous playwright in the English Renaissance, has written a great many works that mostly reflect the social phenomenon at that time and reveal the nature of reality. In those works, he depicts various characters who are different in personalities but equally vivid and striking, thus promoting humanism, which is the main content of the Renaissance. Among them, the female ones in Shakespeare's four great romantic comedies are of great typification and advancement. As representatives of the new women images in the Renaissance period, they possess both wisdom and beauty, courage and kindness, and attract readers from generation to generation with their unique charm. They embody not only a humanist sensibility but also an initial feminist spirit and sense of subjectivity. However, due to the limited conditions of a patriarchal society where men still had absolute dominance and women were considered only subordinate to men, the female characters in Shakespeare's works, though seemingly bold and independent, were, in fact, willing to be trapped in the cage of a patriarchal society, with marriage as the highest, ultimate and only destination in life rather than complete affirmation and realization of their own needs and values. This is not only their own limitation but also the one that their time and society inevitably encounter.

The paper interprets the female characters, Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa, in *The Merchant of Venice* from a feminist perspective and analyzes their progress and limitations in detail.

2. An interpretation of Portia

Portia is an intelligent and beautiful heiress of a wealthy family living in Belmont. Unlike the traditional image of female characters that are meek and gentle, Portia captures the readers' attention when she makes her first appearance with perceptiveness and sharp words: she describes to the maid the suitors that she dislikes with extreme bitter sarcasm, humorous, and truly penetrating. The French writer of existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir, has pointed out in her work *The Second Sex* that traditional thinking takes women as "the second sex", and therefore women are "defined and differentiated with reference to man", while the converse is not true. But in Portia's House, she is not subordinate to anyone. On the contrary, she is the owner of her property, and of herself as well, hence she is able to equally "define and differentiate" any man who desires her wealth or beauty, which also reflects her consciousness of female subject: she's not "the inessential as opposed to the essential", "the other" or "the object" anymore, which is mentioned in *The Second Sex* as a traditional definition, but exists as "the subject" and "the absolute", just the same as men^[1]. The emergence of the sense of subjectivity is just what makes the female roles progressive.

What also reflects Portia's consciousness of female subject is her attitude towards her father's

selecting a husband for her. Though the father has passed away, he leaves her three caskets, which are made of gold, silver and lead respectively, and as long as the suitor chooses the right one, he can then marry the heroine. However, during the whole process which decides her marriage and fate, Portia herself is not given any freedom to choose by her own will. Thus, she inevitably complains about it: "G me, the word 'choose'!" For she can neither choose to marry someone she loves, nor to refuse the proposal of anyone who chooses the right casket with her portrait in it, even if she dislikes him. Out of discontent, Portia goes so far as to say, "so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." Though may seem unfilial, it is actually a true and frank statement of the situations of women in the patriarchal society at that time: they had no right of speech at all, and can only follow men's arrangements in a subordinate position. Portia's complaint is an indication that she has awakened a part of feminine consciousness, and is brave enough to question and challenge the constraints imposed on women in the patriarchal society. Though her protest remains only in speech level for the time being, it is still precious.

The most exciting part of the whole play is undoubtedly the scene in the court of justice, which adds to much more charm of Portia, who has already been notable for her boldness and cleverness. When all the men present are at a loss as to what to do about Shylock's demands, Portia, dressed as a young male lawyer, comes and defends for Antonio. She quickly and easily seizes on a flaw in Shylock's bond with Antonio, leads him into her "trap", and eventually wins the case and saves Antonio's life. During the whole process, she shows her great intelligence and competence to the top of her bent. Calm as she is, she plays cat and mouse with Shylock and cleverly makes use of the loopholes, which makes her more attractive and overshadow any of the men in the court. Shakespeare makes it clear that even under the social conditions of the time, women could still escape from home workload and make a difference in other areas. And Portia's consciousness of female subjectivity is even more fully expressed in this scene. If the two details before indicate Portia's awakening but merely through words, her defending for Antonio in court have been progress in act, as she is not only conscious of her own identity, but is also able to participate in the transformation of social life in a unique way, affirming and realizing her own needs and values [2].

But just as Belmont, where Portia lives, is made up by Shakespeare from the French words, "bel" and "mont", meaning "beautiful" and "great mountain" respectively, it is also a paradise which represents the author's ideal society, wonderful but short-lived. Ultimately, it is bound by the social conventions and goes back to the cruel reality.

Although Portia is unhappy that her father has left her marriage to be decided unilaterally by the suitor's choice of caskets, she does not fight against this decision and chooses to accept and obey it. And though she treats the other suitors as equals, when her beloved Bassanio selects the leaden casket containing her portrait, knowing that he can be her husband, she becomes no longer confident and independent as she is before. Firstly, she belittles herself, saying that she's neither beautiful nor wealthy enough to marry him, and "the full sum of me is sum of nothing". Then she willingly surrenders herself to a subservient position, and treats her husband as her "lord", "governor" and "king", saying "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." Portia's humble and submissive confession to win her husband's heart is so different from her opening image that it inevitably makes the readers disconcerted. Yet in fact, it is not hard to understand her self-contradictory behaviors: Despite the certain progress and awakening, Portia has not been able to break free from the shackles of patriarchal thinking however. She even takes them for granted and put them on of her own accord. The defence in court also exemplifies this point. It is true that the more brilliant she is in this scene, the more ironic the readers feel, because the whole thing happens all based on the premise that she is dressed as a man. Before heading to court, she says to her maid, "but in such a habit they shall think we are accomplished with that we lack". In other words, all they lack is not wisdom, kindness, wealth, or any other thing that is important, but the identity of being a man. Only when she is treated as a male that her intelligence can be recognized and that she can be considered as a capable person. This is undoubtedly extremely ridiculous, and even pathetic, but what is regrettable is that Portia embraces the idea, and also the belled yoke behind it.

3. An Interpretation of Jessica

Shadowed under the radiant shine of Portia, an important female character, Jessica, is often overlooked in the analysis of Shakespeare's plays. It is true that the initial awakening of female self-consciousness of her is less direct and intense than of Portia, but it is equally worthy of recognition.

Despite the fact that Shylock is her father, Jessica is always ashamed of his selfish and callous behavior. She once frankly told Launcelot, the servant of her family, that she thought her house is hell, and that “though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners”, showing that she has her own independent consciousness and personality, and is not a subordinate who is subservient to her father with no capability of judging right from wrong. Later, in order to escape from this kind of depressing and miserable life, she writes to her lover, Lorenzo, of her own accord, and proposes that they should elope. In her letter, she makes arrangements for her elopement clear and watertight, which shows her intelligence and carefulness. They involve changing into a servant’s outfit so as not to attract attention, taking her father’s one chest of jewellery to ensure her prosperity after her elopement, and teaching Lorenzo how to pick her up from Shylock’s house, which is the only thing that he needs to do during the whole process. His passivity highlights Jessica’s boldness and rebellion in her pursuit of true love and freedom, and her decisiveness in daring to defy the bondage of patriarchal society, which are important manifestations of her preliminary awakening to female self-awareness ^[3].

What is equally unfortunate, however, is Jessica’s inadequate consciousness of female subjectivity, and her very one-sided rebellion against the patriarchal society. The servant in the play, Launcelot, has joked about Jessica’s mother twice, claiming that the mother must have fornicated with a Christian to have such a kind daughter. The statement in itself is demeaning to the virtue of Jessica’s mother, and also ignores mothers’ value and their genetic effects on children. Certainly, it is a denial of Jessica herself as well, as if she is completely incapable of thinking by herself. But Jessica does not react to the unreasonable jokes, but only retorts to another statement that “the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children”, saying “I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian”. Regardless of whether the sins of parents have anything to do with their children and whether they need to bear the consequences; even if they do, Jessica is not thinking about escape the shadow of her father by her own virtue, but instead put herself in a subordinate position by hoping to be a Christian’s wife and seeking refuge in her husband. This reflects her limitations that her rebellion against the authority of her father is based on a total dependence on the authority of her husband, or rather than fighting against the patriarchy, she is actually trying to make use of her husband to get rid of her father and the identity as a Jew, in order to escape from the fate of being humiliated and discriminated against. Hence what she does appears to be rebellious and daring, yet at the same time it is a kind of humble submission, of backwardness and conservatism. She tries her best to break free from the shackles of male control, but only to step willingly into another cage to put them back on.

4. An Interpretation of Nerissa

Nerissa is Portia’s maid, ending up in the play marrying Bassanio’s friend, Gratiano. She is to some extent influenced by Portia’s thoughts and behaviors, thus possessing preliminary progressiveness, but more in the role of a reminder of the patriarchy society, calling the heroine back to the male-dominated reality again and again.

Nerissa accompanies Portia both when she attends the court dressing as a man, and when she makes fun of her husband after the court. Although she does not play a leading role throughout the process, her boldness to act in such an unconventional way in the face of the social conditioning of that time is evident. Moreover, she is only the maid of a wealthy family, and does not have Portia’s status and wealth to back her up though having a good relationship with the master. So, it is rather rare that given the social circumstance, she still manages to do so.

And yet, Nerissa’s limitations are also more obvious than those of the other two female characters. When Gratiano says that he wants to bet a thousand dollars on which of Portia and Nerissa can give birth to a boy first, the maid’s first reaction is “What! And stake down?”, rather than questioning the reasonableness of the bet itself, suggesting that she does not realize that it is not appropriate to make such a bet, or just a joke. In addition, she often implicitly persuades Portia to submit to male power. When Portia makes her first appearance and complains that her father’s will shackles her freedom to pursue love and marriage, Nerissa says, “Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations.” Although it is an attempt to console Portia, it is also an assertion of her father’s authority, reflecting her inner deference to patriarchal authority to the extent that she automatically rationalizes things that are unreasonable, and convinces not only herself but also others to accept it as willingly as she does. And near the end of the play, Nerissa accompanies Portia on her triumphant return from court, and on the way a conversation takes place. The master sees the lights in the hall and hears the music from afar, and can’t help but admire them as more beautiful than ever. At that time, she has just made a splash in court, so the admiration for the lights and music in her house is also an implicit affirmation of her

worth. But Nerissa pours cold water on her. She argues that the candle flame, though particularly bright at the moment, cannot be seen “when the moon shone”. Similarly, no matter how beautiful the music is, it is only because “silence bestows that virtue on it”, and if it is in the daytime with noise, nobody will pay attention to it. Her words serve as a reminder to Portia that though she wins the case in court, the reason why she is able to achieve so is that she encounters just right circumstances. Otherwise, no matter how excellent she is, no one will pay attention to her. Therefore, as a woman, she should not set foot in the so-called male domain, though of great talents. Certainly, Nerissa is not intended to belittle the heroine, but rather to persuade her to accept the shackles of the society, and to know how to be happy under the male power of the time, even if that the happiness is nothing more than an act of self-hypnosis from modern people’s perspective. On the one hand, the reminder reflects Nerissa’s consideration for Portia and the pleasant relationship between them, which is in line with the feminist view that women should help each other. But on the other hand, it also hinders Portia’s further awakening of her consciousness of female subjectivity and self-thought.

5. Conclusions

All great men of letters and their works are expressions of worldviews. And worldviews are phenomena of collective consciousness, which can reach its greatest heights of clarity in flexible sensation in the consciousness of the thinker or the poet. [4] As a remarkable playwright, though Shakespeare has tried to create a progressive image of the new bourgeois woman, his works are ultimately a microcosm of his time and society, reflecting the values then, which are inevitably backward and conservative nowadays when people view them from the ever-awakening and progressive feminist perspective, as the characters are still “perfect woman” under the gaze of a patriarchal society: they are beautiful, noble, and intelligent. They are independent but also submissive, and their rebellion do no harm but rather add charm. Tragedy is at the heart of comedy. Since *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare’s four great comedies, there must be a profound tragedy in it. Most studies have focused on the tragedy of the Jew Shylock, but in fact it is also reflected in the contradictory nature of the three female characters Portia, Jessica and Nerissa, who are both progressive and limited. And the tragedy is not only found in the three characters, but also in every woman in the society then. Shakespeare at least creates a utopian world for his characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, but does not provide any solutions to the problems of women in real life.

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