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LTEN 112

2 June 2022

### Women and Power in *The Merchant of Venice*

One of the questions that Shakespeare raises in his play *The Merchant of Venice* is the ability of women to have autonomy and exercise power. Within the context of the play, autonomy refers to the freedom of choice and power refers to intellectual and social authority. Women in the play are commodified by men, but they do possess autonomy and power. This autonomy and power, however, is confined to the domestic sphere between the husband and the wife. In the public sphere, women get to exercise power when they disguise themselves as men. Shakespeare, by portraying women in this manner, challenges the conventional social system of patriarchy.

There are numerous instances in *The Merchant of Venice* where women are commodified by men through puns on words that mean money. Bassanio, when conversing with Antonio about the woman whom he wants to marry, says, “In Belmont is a lady richly left, / ... [whose] name is Portia, nothing undervalued / To Cato's daughter, ... / Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth” (Shakespeare 1.1.164-70). The first quality of Portia that Bassanio describes is how rich she is. He also uses several puns on words that are related to money—“worth”, “undervalued”—which equate Portia to money. Bassanio is implying that through his marriage to Portia, he wins her, and thus, money. Not only Bassanio, but also the Prince of Morocco who is a suitor for Portia commodifies her when choosing the gold casket as part of the casket contest. The prince,

as part of his reasoning behind why he chooses the gold casket, says, “Or shall I think in silver she's immured, / Being ten times undervalued to tried gold? / ... Never so rich a gem / Was set in worse than gold” (Shakespeare 2.7.52-5). Regardless of whether the prince wants to marry Portia for her money or for her personality, he does commodify her by comparing her to a “rich gem”. While the phrase “being a rich gem” indicates someone’s uniqueness in terms of their personality and grandeur, it is punning on its literal definition of someone being rich and high in monetary value. Men in *The Merchant of Venice* commodify Portia, and their attempt to marry her because of her wealth suggests a patriarchal view of Shakespeare’s society that others women and sees them as the inferior sex.

Fathers within *The Merchant of Venice*, like Bassanio and the Prince of Morocco, curb their daughters’ autonomy and agency and commodify them to some extent. Portia, when describing the casket contest to Nerissa, says, “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” (Shakespeare 1.2.20-2). Portia does not get to choose whom she wants to marry; her autonomy is restrained by the casket contest that her father has set up for her. Portia’s father is dead, but she still follows what he has set in place. While it may seem that Portia “chooses” to follow what her dead father arranged and that she benefits from doing so because “whereof who chooses his meaning chooses [her], will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who [Portia] shall rightly love” (Shakespeare 1.2.27-9), one cannot dismiss that Portia must abide by her dead father’s will as a form of respect that she pays to him. Portia’s father is the head of the household in a patriarchal society. Another father-daughter relationship in the play is that of Shylock and Jessica. When Jessica runs away with Lorenzo and robs her father of his money, Shylock exclaims, “My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian, O my Christian

ducats” (Shakespeare 2.8.15-6). Shylock commodifies his daughter by not being able to distinguish her from his money. The phrase “Christian ducats” refers to Jessica who has converted to Christianity. By calling her daughter “ducats” and implying that she is recognized only for money, Shylock disregards the very humanity of Jessica. Commodification of women in this manner, while it suggests the growing economic system of capitalism at play, stresses on women being dominated and any autonomy and power that they possess being curbed by men.

Not only do men commodify Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, but Portia also commodifies herself when she gifts Bassanio a ring. When Bassanio chooses the lead casket and is allowed to marry Portia, Portia gifts him a ring and begins her speech in first person by saying, “You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, / Such as I am” (Shakespeare 3.2.152-3). Towards the end of her speech, Portia refers to herself in third person when she says, “her gentle spirit / Commits itself to yours to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king” (Shakespeare 3.2.166-8). Portia, through this shift to the third person, “objectifies herself and thereby suppresses her own agency in bestowing herself on Bassanio” (Newman 25). Referring to Bassanio as her “lord” and asking to “be directed” by him implies a loss of autonomy and power. Bassanio, who is a man, rules over Portia, a woman, reinforcing the traditional patriarchal view. In response to Portia’s surrender of herself to Bassanio, Bassanio says, “And there is such confusion in my powers / As after some oration fairly spoke / By a beloved prince” (Shakespeare 3.2.180-2). Bassanio calls Portia a “prince”, identifying her oration as that coming from a man. In doing so, he “figures Portia as dominating and distant” (Newman 27). Powerful oration is the mark of a powerful person. Bassanio, by reserving this quality exclusively for a prince, who is a man, constrains the exercise and display of power by women. He inverts the traditional gender

roles to invalidate such power coming from women. *The Merchant of Venice* places women within a society of male authority and privilege that fails to recognize women's power.

Shakespeare also commodifies women in *The Merchant of Venice* by inverting the gender roles in the casket trial. Charlotte Artese, about the source for the casket trial in the play, says, "In [the *Gesta Romanorum*], the daughter of an emperor ... must prove that she is really the prince's intended by passing the casket test. The emperor asks her to choose among gold, silver, and lead caskets" (329). This inversion of gender roles can be interpreted in two different ways, if not more. The first interpretation suggests that Shakespeare, by making men compete against each other for marrying Portia, establishes her as a prize to be won by one of her suitors; Shakespeare commodifies Portia. The second interpretation is that Shakespeare alters the original tale of the three caskets because he does not want to attribute power to Portia. In the original tale, the woman has autonomy in choosing a casket. Shakespeare is trying to portray women as submissive in his play. Both these interpretations conform with how men—young men and fathers—in the play treat women and how Portia treats herself when she gives a ring to Bassanio. Shakespeare is himself a man and his understanding of women is a result of the society that he has grown up in. He is familiar with the duties of husbands and wives, as presented in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, which quotes from the *Homily of the State of Matrimony* where St. Paul says, "Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church" (285). Shakespeare maintains the traditional social structure of patriarchy in his play *The Merchant of Venice* that his audience is familiar with and the society in his time follows.

While women in *The Merchant of Venice* are commodified by men, they do possess some form of autonomy. Before the casket trial, Portia says that she does not have any autonomy in

choosing whom she wants to marry. This, however, is not true. There is some evidence that suggests that the casket trial is not entirely fair, and that Portia allegedly gives out musical clues to Bassanio to allow him to win and marry her. When Bassanio deliberates on which casket to choose, Portia sings a song: “[Fancy] is engend' red in the eye, / With gazing fed; and fancy dies / In the cradle where it lies” (Shakespeare 3.2.69-71). Portia tells Bassanio that fancy engenders in the eye from the outward appearance of a person. This fancy, however, dies quickly since one cannot judge a person solely based on their outward appearance. This is a hint that suggests Bassanio to not choose the gold or silver caskets based on their outward appearance and value, and instead to pick the lead casket. Portia, before the casket contest begins, says to Nerissa, “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” (Shakespeare 1.2.92-3). Portia displays autonomy as she challenges the patriarchal notion of respecting one’s father’s will by allegedly cheating at her father’s contest and deciding who wins. This autonomy, however, is limited to the domestic sphere between just Portia and Bassanio. There is no one else except for Bassanio, and perhaps Nerissa, who witness Portia’s display of autonomy. Shakespeare, by not portraying women with autonomy in the public sphere, maintains the traditional patriarchal view of the society.

Women like Portia display more than just autonomy in *The Merchant of Venice*; they exercise power over men by using imperatives and making cuckolds of their husbands. Portia instructs Bassanio on what to do when Bassanio hears about Antonio’s court trial. She says, “First go with me to church and call me a wife, / And then away to Venice to your friend” (Shakespeare 3.2.312-3). Portia’s use of a commanding tone over Bassanio is a display of power and shows her to be powerful. Such display of power occurs again in the play when Portia and Nerissa make cuckolds of their husbands. They say that they have slept with the doctor and his

clerk to whom Bassanio and Gratiano gave their rings as an expression of gratitude for saving Antonio from Shylock (Shakespeare 5.1.273-277). Portia, when giving the ring to Bassanio, says that she is giving herself to him. Bassanio, when he gives away the ring to the doctor, gives away his authority and possession of Portia. Portia and Nerissa's alleged infidelity makes them powerful as they show social and marital superiority over their husbands by rebuking them for losing their rings. These inversions of power dynamics from the husband to the wife, however, occur in Belmont. Venice can be seen as a society where most people live and where social, political, and economic exchanges occur. Belmont is a place away from Venice and the public sphere—away from the society. It is a private sphere where women get to exercise power over men within the context of domesticity. Such portrayal of women with power within the domestic sphere but not outside still enforces the patriarchal notion of the superiority of men over women in Venice and the society.

There is one single instance in the play where women get to exercise power in the public sphere in front of all men—during the trial of Antonio. The trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* portrays Portia's intellectual power as she literally interprets Shylock's contract and accuses Shylock of attempting to take Antonio's life (4.1.357-62). Portia exercises her intellectual power in front all men in Venice—the duke, the maginificos, Antonio, Bassanio, Salerio, Gratiano, and Shylock. While it may seem that attributing such power to Portia challenges the patriarchal view of the inferiority of women against men, this tension is quickly resolved as we notice that Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men before appearing in the court and exercising their power (Shakespeare 3.4.81-2). The circumstances have changed when women are seen with power in public. Shakespeare turns women into men to allow them to exercise power in public. Venice being a patriarchal society refuses women the right to autonomy and power. So, when Portia and

Nerissa want to help Antonio through their intellectual powers, they must disguise themselves as men because men are seen as the superior sex in the society. The trial scene implies that women like Portia have a lot of autonomy and power, but the society restrains them from practicing them. Allowing women to exercise power and autonomy has been restricted to the domestic and private sphere in *The Merchant of Venice* as patriarchy is still prevalent in the public sphere of the society.

Men in *The Merchant of Venice* disregard Jessica's autonomy as she chooses to run away with Lorenzo, contributing to the notion of women being insignificant in the society. Jessica, when in Venice, runs away with Lorenzo, robs her father Shylock of his money, and converts to Christianity (Shakespeare 2.8.16-9). Respecting one's father is one aspect of patriarchy. Jessica, by going against her father's religion by converting and robbing him, disrespects him. She shows autonomy when she does these things. Jessica, however, does this privately—within the context of her home and, therefore, the domestic sphere. When men within the public sphere hear about Jessica's flight and display of autonomy, they disregard it completely. Shylock, upon knowing that his daughter ran away, cries, "Find the girl. / She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats" (2.8.21-2). Shylock does not care about Jessica's autonomy of choosing to run away from him; he is more worried about his money. Also, when Shylock asks Salerio if he knows about Jessica's flight, Salerio makes a joke by punning on the word "flight" and says, "I, for my part, knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal" (Shakespeare 3.1.25-6). Men do not care about Jessica going against the ideals of patriarchy because she does not openly display her power and autonomy in choosing to do what she wants. The way in which men act here suggests that Shakespeare is trying to disregard and dispose women's power and autonomy in the

domestic sphere by deeming it insignificant when compared to male authority and power which is exercised in front of everyone in the public sphere.

Given the binary opposition between subjugation and autonomy and power, as it pertains to women in *The Merchant of Venice* and has been brought up in this paper, the tension is accentuated by the end of the play and no resolution or synthesis is offered. Women like Portia and Jessica in the play step out of their perceived gender roles defined by the society and display autonomy and exercise power, mostly in the domestic sphere. Natalie Zemon Davis calls such women who act in an unruly and disorderly fashion as women-on-top. About the topos of women-on-top, Davis says, “[they] are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society. ... [They] do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it” (130). Davis says that women with such power and autonomy do not affect the conventional patriarchal system; their power is insignificant. In Act 5 Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, Nerissa, Bassanio, and Gratiano move to Belmont, away from Venice and its patriarchal social structure. Portia and Nerissa remove their disguise of men and return the rings back to their husbands. Bassanio and Gratiano now possess authority over their wives again as their wives submit to them through the rings. The play ends with Gratiano making a promise: “Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (Shakespeare 5.1.324-5). Gratiano promises to never lose the ring, implying that he will always maintain his authority over his wife. He also puns on the word “ring” by claiming sexual authority over Nerissa’s genitals. Even though the couples have moved to Belmont—the domestic sphere—away from Venice, men still claim control over women. The temporary powers and autonomy that Portia and Nerissa had received by disguising themselves as men and making cuckolds of their husbands for them having given away the rings is now lost.



*The Merchant of Venice* does not end with complete subjugation of women to men. About the display of autonomy and power by women in the domestic sphere, Newman challenges Davis' claims mentioned above by saying that "[sexual] inversion affects not only the distribution of power in society but structures of exchange themselves that historically have insured male hegemony and patriarchal power" (Newman 265). The small exercises of power by women in the domestic sphere are significant enough to affect patriarchal notions of male superiority in the society. In Act 5 Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, while men claim authority over women, women's power and autonomy is not non-existent. In the trial scene, Antonio advises Bassanio to "let [the doctor] have the ring / [and to] Let his deservings and [Antonio's] love withal / Be valued 'gainst [Bassanio's] wife's commandment" (Shakespeare, 4.2.462-4). Male friendship, as part of the patriarchal social structure, takes more value than the relationship between husband and wife. Portia is not happy with how her relationship with Bassanio has been undervalued. Toward the end of the play, Bassanio is rebuked and cuckolded by Portia for losing the ring, Antonio is dumbfounded when Portia reveals that three of Antonio's ships are safe (Shakespeare 5.1.295), and Lorenzo says to the women: "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starved people" (Shakespeare 5.1.311-2). Portia displays a lot of power here. Women are compared to the Hebrew God who drops manna from heaven for the Israelites. God is the epitome of power, and by comparing women to God, Shakespeare implies that women are not entirely subordinate to men; their autonomy and power challenge the conventional patriarchal social structure that exists in society.

In conclusion, the tension between subjugation and autonomy and power, as it pertains to women in *The Merchant of Venice*, is accentuated as no resolution or synthesis is offered. Women in the play do possess autonomy and exercise power, but such autonomy and power can

only be displayed by them in the domestic sphere. Within the public sphere, the conventional social system of patriarchy exists. As women become more powerful and start challenging men to reconsider their place in society and the existing notions of patriarchy, women slowly get to come out of their domestic spheres and exercise power in the public sphere.

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