

Tropes In The Merchant Of Venice

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William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* presents Portia as a wealthy, intelligent heiress who possesses substantial social privilege but lacks authority over one of the most personal decisions in her life. Her deceased father has created a test requiring each suitor to choose among gold, silver, and lead caskets. Portia must marry the man who selects the correct casket and must reject every man who chooses incorrectly. The original essay focuses on Portia's early conversation with Nerissa and interprets her language through irony, oxymoron, bodily metaphor, and the critical concept of sexual difference. This approach reveals a central tension in the play: Portia can reason brilliantly about law, morality, and human behavior, yet patriarchal authority restricts her ability to choose or refuse a husband. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The setting is not the seventeenth century in a strict historical sense, because the play was probably written in the late sixteenth century and is set in a fictionalized Venice and Belmont. Nevertheless, its gender relations reflect an early modern patriarchal culture in which fathers and husbands exercised considerable legal, economic, and social authority over women. Portia's inheritance gives her wealth, but the terms attached to it transform wealth into a mechanism of control. Her father's will continues governing her after his death, creating the irony identified in the original essay: a living daughter remains subject to a dead man's decision. (Bennett & Royle, 2004; Shakespeare, 2010)

Portia's Position in the Marriage Test

Portia's first important speeches establish that she understands the injustice of her situation but cannot simply reject it. She describes herself as weary and frustrated, while Nerissa reminds her that the casket test was designed by a virtuous father. Portia does not deny that her father may have intended to protect her from an unsuitable marriage. Her objection is that good intention has removed her choice. The test treats marriage as a puzzle solved by male suitors, while Portia becomes the reward given to the successful chooser. (Shakespeare, 2010)

This arrangement illustrates the distinction between possessing intelligence and possessing authority. Portia can evaluate each suitor with wit and accuracy. She recognizes vanity, foolishness, cultural prejudice, and incompatibility. Yet her opinions have no direct legal force within the test. A man whom she dislikes may marry her if he chooses correctly, while a man she loves must be rejected if he chooses incorrectly. Her capacity to judge is acknowledged privately but excluded publicly. The play therefore shows how patriarchy can rely on women's intelligence while withholding final decision-making power.

“The Brain May Devise Laws for the Blood”

Portia states that “the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree.” The original essay interprets this line as an oxymoronic conflict between reason and desire. The brain represents rational law, restraint, and inherited command, while the blood represents passion, bodily inclination, and emotional will. Portia understands what she is expected to do, but understanding does not remove desire. The metaphor turns her internal conflict into a miniature political system: the brain legislates, but the blood may rebel. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The line also complicates the assumption that Portia is entirely passive. She recognizes the possibility of disobedience even though she does not openly violate the test. Her “hot temper” is not necessarily uncontrolled anger. It represents the force of personal desire against an externally imposed decree. The adjective *cold* suggests that law can be detached from lived emotion. Her father’s rule may be rational as a protective mechanism, but it cannot experience the consequences that Portia must endure. The dead father designed the law; the living daughter bears its emotional cost.

The bodily metaphor is particularly powerful because the brain and blood belong to one organism. Portia cannot separate herself neatly into rational obedience and emotional resistance. Both are parts of her identity. Patriarchal culture often represents men as rational and women as emotional, but Shakespeare gives Portia command of both registers. She reasons about the law while articulating the force of passion. The conflict does not prove that women are governed by irrational feeling. It shows that any human being may experience a gap between knowing a rule and living under it.

Sexual Difference and Patriarchal Authority

The original essay connects Portia’s condition with Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s discussion of sexual difference. Literary representations of gender frequently organize authority through oppositions: man and woman, reason and emotion, active and passive, speaker and object, chooser and chosen. Portia’s situation appears to reproduce these oppositions because men travel to Belmont, interpret the caskets, and make the choice, while she waits to learn which man will acquire the right to marry her. (Bennett & Royle, 2004)

However, the play also destabilizes these divisions. Portia is intellectually superior to most of her suitors and later performs the role of a male legal scholar in the courtroom. She does not lack reason, rhetoric, or strategic ability. The restrictions placed upon her are therefore social rather than natural. Her intelligence exposes the artificial character of the gender hierarchy. If Portia can interpret law more effectively than the men in Venice, then her exclusion from choosing a husband cannot be defended by an inherent female incapacity. (Shakespeare, 2010)

Sexual difference in the play is consequently both enforced and performed. At Belmont, Portia must occupy the role of obedient daughter and future wife. In Venice, disguised as Balthazar, she adopts

male clothing and institutional authority, allowing the same intelligence to be heard as law. The disguise does not give her a new mind; it changes how society receives the mind she already possesses. Shakespeare uses theatrical cross-dressing to reveal that authority depends partly on costume, voice, role, and social recognition.

“If to Do Were as Easy as to Know What Were Good to Do”

Portia observes, “If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces.” The original essay uses this statement to emphasize the difference between understanding and power. Human beings often know what is wise or moral but fail to act accordingly. Portia applies the thought generally, yet it also describes her own condition. She knows what she wants and can judge the weaknesses of her suitors, but knowledge does not give her the ability to alter her father’s will. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The sentence is structured through exaggeration and comparison. If moral knowledge automatically produced action, small chapels would become great churches and poor cottages would become royal palaces. The transformation is impossible because desire, resources, habit, law, and power intervene between knowledge and achievement. Portia’s wit makes a philosophical point while indirectly describing the limitations placed upon her. She can articulate an ideal of wise action but remains trapped in a system where another person has determined the available choices.

The line also challenges simple moral judgment. It is easy to advise another person to be patient, obedient, courageous, or rational when one does not experience the constraint. Nerissa can praise the father’s wisdom because she is not the woman whose marriage depends on the test. Portia’s statement reminds the audience that moral instruction is easier than moral practice. Her father could design an idealized test; Portia must live with the man it selects.

Irony and the Will of a Dead Father

Portia states that “the will of a living daughter” is curbed by “the will of a dead father.” This is the clearest irony in the original essay. A dead person ordinarily possesses no physical power, while a living adult can speak, reason, desire, and act. Through property law and patriarchal inheritance, however, the father’s written will remains more powerful than the daughter’s present will. The repetition of the word *will* creates a pun: it refers both to personal desire and to the legal document governing the estate. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The legal will converts paternal authority into a force that survives the father’s body. Portia is wealthy because of the inheritance, but she cannot separate the economic benefit from the attached command. Her father’s property provides her social position and simultaneously restricts her. This

contradiction prevents the audience from describing her simply as powerless or privileged. She possesses wealth unavailable to most women, servants, and poor men, yet the wealth is structured by obedience.

The irony also exposes the limits of family affection. A father may believe he is protecting his daughter from deception, but protection becomes control when it refuses her judgment. The casket test assumes that the correct symbolic choice reveals a man's moral worth. It does not ask whether Portia feels affection, safety, intellectual companionship, or respect. Her father trusts a riddle more than her ability to evaluate a partner. The test therefore represents a paternalism that claims benevolence while denying agency.

Portia Can Neither Choose Nor Refuse

Portia explains that she can neither choose whom she would nor refuse whom she dislikes. This formulation captures the complete structure of her restriction. Freedom in marriage requires both positive and negative agency: the ability to select a desired partner and the ability to reject an unwanted one. The casket test removes both. A suitor's decision determines her fate, while her own answer has been supplied in advance by the father. (Shakespeare, 2010)

Her inability to refuse has particular ethical importance. Consent is meaningful only when refusal is possible. Portia may eventually be pleased that Bassanio chooses correctly, but the success of one desirable outcome does not make the system just. If Morocco or Arragon had chosen the lead casket, the same rule would have required marriage. The audience's satisfaction with Bassanio can obscure the coercive structure because romantic comedy rewards the characters with the pairing they want. The underlying restriction remains visible in Portia's earlier language.

Portia does exercise limited influence. She delays or directs the atmosphere of the choices, reveals her preference for Bassanio, and uses music during his test. Critics debate whether she gives him subtle assistance. These actions demonstrate that constrained people often seek agency within rules they cannot abolish. Her indirect influence should not be mistaken for full freedom. The need for hints and performance confirms that open choice has been denied.

Comparison With the Silenced Wife in "Sexual Difference"

The original essay compares Portia with the wife discussed in Bennett and Royle's chapter on sexual difference, drawing on the figure of a woman whose husband dismisses her account of illness. The comparison focuses on credibility. A woman can describe her body, preference, or suffering and still be treated as less authoritative than a man who claims to know what is best. Portia's father is absent and dead, yet his judgment is institutionalized through the will. The other husband is physically

present and dismisses his wife's interpretation. In both cases, male authority presents control as rational care. (Bennett & Royle, 2004)

The comparison helps explain why irony becomes important. A woman may praise male wisdom in words that expose its absurdity. Direct opposition may be unavailable or dangerous, so figurative language carries criticism. Portia speaks within the manners expected of an heiress while revealing the contradiction of her condition. Irony permits the socially subordinate speaker to say more than the literal surface appears to contain.

However, Portia's circumstances should not be treated as identical to those of every woman. Wealth, race, religion, class, and legal status shape power differently in the play. Portia has servants, property, education, and later the ability to influence a Venetian court. Jessica faces paternal control within Shylock's household and escapes through marriage and conversion. Nerissa is a servant and companion whose choices are tied to Portia's. The play presents several forms of female constraint rather than one universal experience.

Oxymoron, Antithesis, and Contradiction

The original essay identifies oxymoron as a central trope. Strictly speaking, Portia often uses antithesis and paradox more than a compact two-word oxymoron. "Hot temper" and "cold decree" place opposing qualities against one another, dramatizing conflict between desire and law. The living daughter and dead father form another antithesis in which the expected relation of power is reversed. These oppositions create the sense that Portia's world is logically disordered even though it is legally organized. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The rhetorical balance of her sentences also demonstrates control. Portia is not overwhelmed or incoherent. She constructs elegant contrasts, develops analogies, and anticipates objections. Her verbal skill contradicts the social rule that excludes her from decision-making. The audience hears proof of competence at the same time that the plot displays her lack of authority. Rhetoric becomes evidence against the gender hierarchy.

Portia's Later Use of Law

The courtroom scene extends the earlier conflict between law and desire. Disguised as the male lawyer Balthazar, Portia interprets the bond between Antonio and Shylock. She first appeals for mercy and then applies the contract's language with extreme precision. The scene demonstrates her mastery of the legal reasoning that her father used to control her. She can work within a written document, identify its limits, and reverse power through interpretation. (Shakespeare, 2010)

This later authority does not erase the gender critique. Portia must enter the court through male disguise and borrowed credentials. The men accept her judgment because they believe it comes from

a learned young man. The same society that denied her direct marital choice allows her to control life, property, and legal outcome when her gender is concealed. The plot therefore reinforces the argument that power is socially allocated rather than naturally connected to male intelligence.

Portia also uses the ring test after returning to Belmont, requiring Bassanio to account for giving away the ring he promised to keep. This episode can be read as playful comedy, but it also allows her to regain control over the terms of marriage. She possesses information Bassanio lacks and stages a test of fidelity. The daughter who was once the object of a casket test becomes the designer of a test for her husband. Her agency grows, though it continues to operate through disguise, manipulation, and the structures available to her. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The Limits of Portia's Liberation

Portia's intelligence and success should not lead to the conclusion that the play fully liberates women. She ends within marriage, and her authority remains connected to wealth, disguise, and exceptional skill. Other women do not necessarily receive the same opportunity. The comic ending restores couples and property rather than transforming the social system. Portia's individual maneuvering reveals the restrictions but does not abolish them.

Her conduct toward Shylock also complicates any simple celebration of her as a universal advocate of justice. She experiences gendered constraint yet participates in a legal outcome that strips a religious minority of property and autonomy. Power gained by one marginalized person does not automatically produce solidarity with another. Shakespeare's play invites comparison among different structures of exclusion without making them identical.

Conclusion

Portia's early speeches in *The Merchant of Venice* use irony, antithesis, bodily metaphor, paradox, and wordplay to expose the contradiction between her intelligence and her lack of marital choice. The brain and blood represent the struggle between rational command and living desire. The statement that doing is harder than knowing explains the distance between moral understanding and practical power. The living daughter controlled by a dead father reveals how patriarchal authority survives through property and law. (Shakespeare, 2010)

The original essay's central conclusion remains persuasive: women's decisions in the play are controlled by men, whether those men are present or absent, rational or irrational, living or dead. Portia can neither choose nor refuse under the terms of the casket test. Yet her language, legal performance, and later control of the ring plot show that she is not naturally passive. The restrictions are social structures that she learns to interpret and manipulate. Shakespeare gives Portia enough intelligence to expose the injustice of her position, making the patriarchal rule appear not inevitable but deeply ironic. (Bennett & Royle, 2004; Shakespeare, 2010)

Works Cited

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 3rd ed., Pearson Longman, 2004.

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by John Drakakis, Arden Shakespeare, 2010.