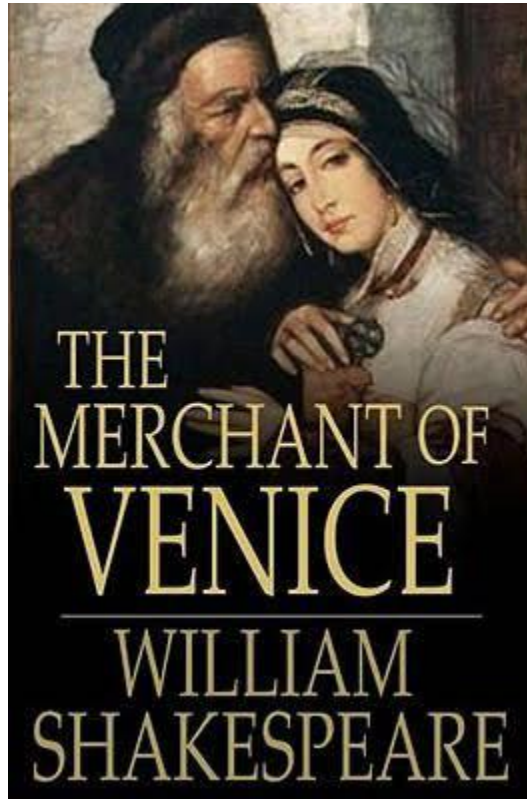


Re-reading Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as a
Romantic Comedy

Dr. Gautami Pawar, M.A., Ph.D.



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Abstract

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most popular of Shakespearean comedies and one of the most discussed; it has received much criticism as well. It displays a real blending of romance, wit, humor, and fantasy. Though written in the sixteenth century, there is still so much contemporary significance in the play. It is undoubtedly the most

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read and appreciated play of Shakespeare. This paper is an attempt to re-read *The Merchant of Venice* and find out how it is a romantic comedy of the Shakespearean age. The paper also attempts to have some glimpses of the contemporary relevance of the play.

KeyWords: *The Merchant of Venice*, Elizabethan Era, romantic comedy, love at first sight, Shakespearean comedy, disguise, female lawyer, Venetian court.

Introduction

Though well known for his world famous tragedies, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the play *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most appreciated plays of Shakespeare. It is a Comedy. Some critics may call it as a problem play or a tragic-comedy. Whatever is the conceptual variation for the term ‘Comedy’, *The Merchant of Venice* is undoubtedly a popular comedy displaying a real blending of romance, wit, humor, and fantasy.

What is a Shakespearean Romantic Comedy?

Shakespearean Comedy has got some common salient features. These include:

- Shakespearean comedy is primarily romantic.
- Shakespearean comedy takes us away from the dirty realities of life.
- Balance and blending of romance and realism.
- Love as a major theme of comedies.
- The technique of love ‘Love at first sight’ is used.
- Shakespearean Comedy contains songs, music, dance fun and mirth.
- The twist in the path of love is the common feature of Shakespearean comedy
- Chance plays a major role in the plot of the play
- Some comedies are with the main plot and the sub-plot, and they are beautifully interwoven in a unified whole.
- Characterization is more important than the story
- Disguise is another important technique used by Shakespeare

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- Female characters are dominant in the comedies.
- Female Characters are shown more intelligent, resourceful more active alert and witty.

Is *The Merchant of Venice* a Romantic Comedy?

The Merchant of Venice is undoubtedly a romantic comedy. It deals with the theme of love, is full of humor, humorous incidences and dialogues, disguise and violation of unities by the playwright Shakespeare. Shakespeare makes it look very real, but we can say it is a romantic comedy in the real sense of the term.

Love is the central theme. Three love stories have been interwoven with each other in such way that it appears to be unique, one single story. It is Shakespearean craftsmanship that he beautifully has interwoven the three stories. The major love story is that of a Bassanio and Portia, and the other love stories include Gratiano - Nerrisa and Lorenzo-Jessica. These three stories are interwoven in a breathtaking manner that one could not easily separate them from each others

Shakespeare is quite revolutionary in his approach while creating women characters. He projects Portia predominantly throughout the play. As readers, we have to note that Portia was crafted somewhere in the 16th Century, and this point of history is crucial because women's conditions in contemporary life are still not justified. Shakespeare could craft Portia as a very dominate character, and this move itself was a very revolutionary one. When we take a look at the contemporary social and political life, we come across the fact that at that time in history, women in the western world did not have the right to vote. So it can be said that women had limited rights at that point of time. So, Portia appears to be very emancipated and revolutionary when we see her in the casket scene and then she appears as a very prominent, confident figure in the court scene. We really appreciate her intelligence in the court scene. She has to face lots of challenges and she goes through them brilliantly. Portia, though rich enough, cannot marry anyone of her choice, rather she has to follow her father's will. Her father's will is that the one who chooses the right casket which contains Portia's Picture only can marry her.

Though Bassanio and Portia get attracted to each other as in all cases of love at first sight, Bassanio does not have money, so what he does is, he goes to Antonio and borrows money from him. In fact, Antonio has already helped Bassanio a couple of times in the past, and he is willing to help Bassanio again. However, this time, he does not have money, so what they do is that they decide to borrow money from the marketplace. There was no one to give them money. Shylock is ready to give money, provided Antonio should sign a bond. If they return the amount within three months, he will not charge a single penny. However, if he fails, then Antonio has to give a pound of flesh from his body.

Three Love Stories in One Play

Though, the ‘Love is the central concern’ of *The Merchant Venice* and there are three love stories: Portia- Bassanio, Gratiano-Nerrisa and Lorenzo-Jessica, there is also the embedded love of the two dearest friends, Antonio and Bassanio. Antonio loves Bassanio so much that he is ready to help him all the time and once he signs a very strange bond for the sake of friendship, The bond probably would take him to death. Bassanio also loves Antonio so much as he says that he can leave his dearest love for Portia if required, for the sake of his friend Antonio. That is why when we find that the young lawyer is asking for the ring as reward, he is ready to hand over the ring to the lawyer though Portia has warned him not to give it to anybody at any cost, because it is the symbol of their love. So, as readers what we find here in the play are love, parting, reunion, problems and difficulties and solution. Another thing that we come across here is that there are three prominent women characters.

The play *The Merchant of Venice* is full of humour. Basically, there are three major sources of humour. They include a) the wit of Portia, Gratiano, Bassanio and Lorenzo b) humorous incidents/episodes like the ring episode, the laments of Shylock, etc. c) The humorous characters like the fool – Launcelot Gobbo

The play is a romantic comedy in the real sense of the term as opposed to the classical concept of comedy. The crucial thing what we come across here in the play is that Shakespeare deviates from the

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classical rules of unities. The action of the play moves from one place to another frequently from Venice to Belmont and Belmont to Venice. The play also covers a period of more than three months. Moreover, there are four different stories interwoven in such a way that it appears to be a unique story. The subplots always add to the fun and story of the main plot. We also come across songs and music especially in the background as Bassanio chooses the casket. Apart from this, there are three little, fine pieces of poetry on the three caskets. These three caskets contain different inscriptions on them. The inscription on gold is 'who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'; The words of the silver casket are: who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves' and the lead casket contains, 'who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'.

Chance Plays an Important Role

Another crucial feature of Shakespearean comedy is that chance plays an important role in his comedies. In 'The Merchant of Venice' it is an account of chance or fate that Antonio gets the news of the drowning of all his ships in the sea voyage and it is also by chance that Antonio and Bassanio borrow loan from Shylock and there was nobody else to give them a loan. And it is also by chance Lorenzo and Jessica choose to elope as they are in love with each other being Christian and Jew.

Conclusion

Thus, the Shakespearean comedy consists of balance and the blending of romance and realism, which takes us away from the mundane realities of life. Love as a major theme and that technique of 'Love at first sight' and the twist in the path of love is used; Chance plays a major role in comedy too, the main plot and the sub-plot are beautifully interwoven in a unified whole. Disguise, prominent female characters, songs, music, dance, fun and mirth are some of the most important features of the Shakespearean comedy we can find in the play 'The Merchant of Venice'



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