FACULTY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME

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Date of Event: 15 January, 2026

Faculty-in-Charge: Ms. Gigy Johnson

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Thrissur District
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REPORT

As part of the Faculty Enhancement Programme, a presentation was held on 15 January 2026 at the Seminar Hall, Main Block, from 03:15 p.m. to 04:00 p.m., by Ms. Sabina Leo, Assistant Professor, Department of English. The topic of the session was "Portia as a Proto-feminist in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* through Contemporary Feminist Lenses". The presentation examined the character of Portia through contemporary feminist perspectives, highlighting her role as a proto-feminist figure in the play. The session was attended by 31 faculty members from various departments. Participants actively contributed to the session through questions and discussions.

Prepared by:	Verified by:	Approved by:
Ms. Gigy Johnson	Dr. Sabu Varghese	Rev. Fr. Dr. Paulachan K.J.
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BROCHURE

FACULTY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME

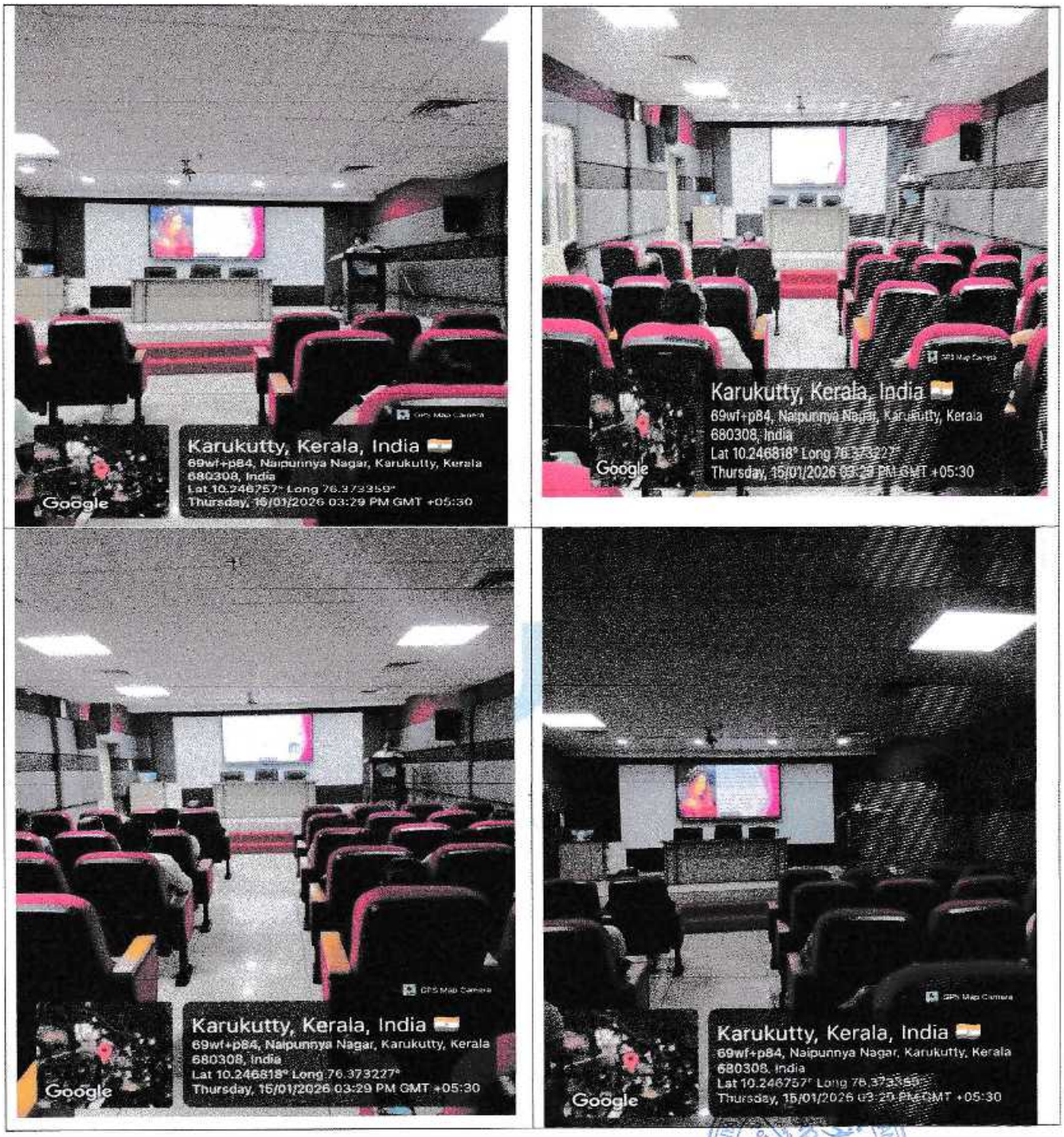


Ms. Sabina Leo
Asst. Professor
PG Department of English

Topic : Portia as a Proto-Feminist in Shakespeare's, "The Merchant of Venice" Through Contemporary Feminist Lenses

DATE : 15 JANUARY, 2026
TIME : 03.15-04.00 PM
VENUE : MAIN BLOCK, SEMINAR HALL

PHOTOGRAPHS



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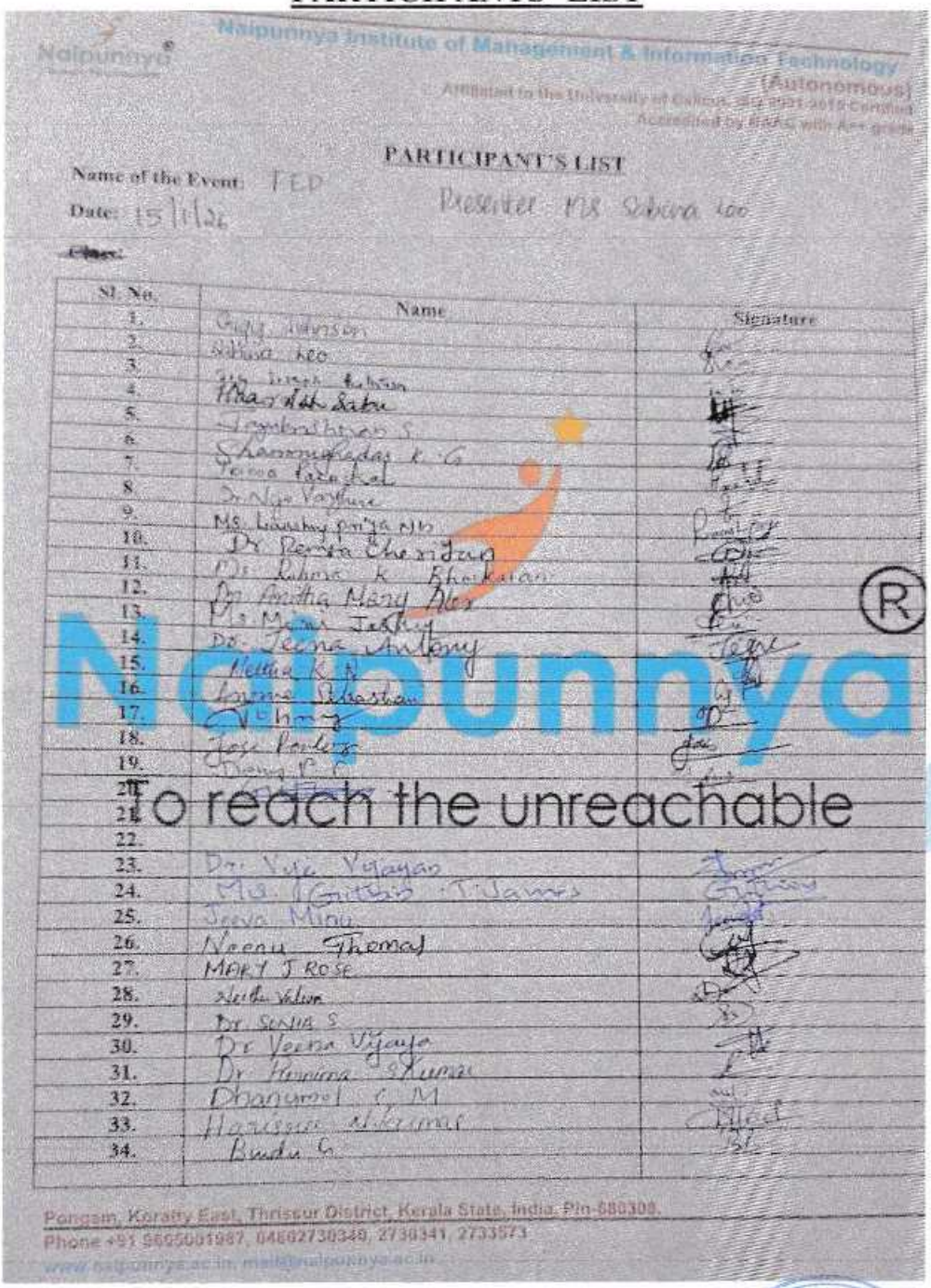

PARTICIPANT'S LIST

Name of the Event: FED

Date: 15/1/26

Presenter: Ms Sabina Leo

~~Class:~~

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2.	Sabina Leo	
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27.	MARY J ROSE	
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Portia as Proto-Feminist: Reassessing Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* Through Contemporary Feminist Lenses

Ms. Sabina Leo

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Abstract

This paper explores the feminist dimensions of William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" through the remarkable character of Portia. It asks: How does Portia's intelligence, agency, and quiet defiance of gender norms operate within the limits of her Elizabethan world—and how might her actions be reinterpreted through the lens of modern feminist thought? Alluding to concepts such as gender performativity, intersectionality, and feminist legal theory, this study argues that Portia functions as *a proto-feminist* figure—one whose wit and autonomy anticipate modern debates about gender equity and empowerment. At the same time, her story reveals the limits of early feminist possibility—the weight of patriarchy, class privilege, and the social constraints of her era.

Keywords: Feminism; Portia; gender performativity; intersectionality; Elizabethan drama; proto-feminism

Introduction

Few female characters in Shakespeare's plays have intrigued readers as deeply as Portia. Intelligent, witty, and strategically minded, in other words, *beauty with brains,* she stands apart from many of her contemporaries in Elizabethan drama. According to Mariwan Hasan and Bamo Burhan Mahmood, "Portia is a multifaceted character whose intelligence, wit, and autonomy set her apart from the conventional female characters of the Elizabethan era. Through Portia, Shakespeare presents a character

who defies traditional gender roles, exercises authority, and demonstrates exceptional acumen in navigating the male-dominated world around her."[1].

Examining Portia's role opens a window into Shakespeare's reflections on the societal dynamics of his time, gender, particularly regarding the role of women, and the exercise of power and social order. Portia's role also offers a lens through which to analyse contemporary issues related to gender equality and justice. Portia's character serves as a bridge between the traditional expectations of the past and the progressive ideas of the future, making her an essential subject for literary and cultural analysis. In conclusion, the exploration of Portia's character in The Merchant of Venice is significant due to her central role in the play's narrative and her impact on its major themes. By "analysing her actions, motivations, and the challenges she faces, this research seeks to uncover new perspectives on Shakespeare's work and its enduring relevance to modern audiences."[2]. I view her as a woman navigating the structures of her time, and I compare her moves (and missteps) with the language of modern feminist criticism, including ideas of gender as performance, intersecting social identities, and empowerment through the law.

Historical and Literary Context

Written in the late 16th century, *The Merchant of Venice* reflects a world deep-rooted in rigid hierarchies and patriarchal norms. Women were legally and socially bound to the men around them: daughters to fathers, wives to husbands. Even a wealthy heiress like Portia was controlled by her father's will, unable to choose a husband of her own choice or refuse the one who chose the right casket. Ironically, her future life depended on this lottery of caskets. "The Elizabethan woman's life was mostly confined to obedience, modesty, and domestic duties. Women were expected to be obedient, modest, and subservient to men, with few opportunities for education and independence. This context provides an essential backdrop for examining Portia's character and the complexities of her actions within the play."[3] .

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The Elizabethan era portrays Portia as a remarkable exception. Despite her limitations, she exhibits intelligence, confidence, and a subtle shrewdness in the male-dominated society that she must navigate. Her superiority to her male counterparts is clearly observed in her legal victory in the courtroom scene. Thus, Shakespeare seems to challenge the stereotypes of his time, giving recognition to his heroine to use and manipulate the very systems contrived to debar her. Portia's portrayal in *The Merchant of Venice* diverges from the traditional expectations of Elizabethan society. Despite the constraints of her era, Portia is depicted as an intelligent, assertive, and resourceful woman. She shows a deep knowledge, especially in the courtroom scene, where she argues the case with impressive legal skill and wit. This portrayal "challenges the conventional depiction of women during the period, presenting a character who is more than capable of navigating and even excelling in male-dominated spaces."[4]

The feminist framework examines how "Portia challenges and subverts traditional gender roles and societal expectations."[5] These frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of Portia's character and her importance within the play. Yet, within these limitations, she manoeuvres with intelligence and subtlety. With the rise of second-wave feminism in the twentieth century and beyond, feminist interpretations of Portia started to gain traction—shifting from simply asking "What does she do?" to "With what freedom does she act?" and "What system must she navigate?" It is clear that "Shakespeare Plays challenges traditional thought and highlights new liberal thinking."[6] In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare depicts female heroism, which questions the traditions of male virtue. The play demonstrates the power of female characters through their actions and thoughts. In The Merchant of Venice, Portia represents women of knowledge and wisdom in a new era.

Portia's eloquence and wisdom rescued a vulnerable merchant from the clutches of a Jew. Thus, we find the women characters challenging the very identity of women. Perseverance, strength, intelligence, and resilience are envisaged in the roles of the female characters. ***This reveals the playwright's intention to emphasize gender equality.*** The play concludes with the leading women achieving their goals without any retaliation from their men, thus domesticity with their husbands. Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica, disguised as men, move quietly between Belmont and Venice, highlighting feminist ideals. The

male disguises worn by these female characters allow them to pursue different goals in a society dominated by men. In the play, all the leading women show strength, subtlety, and resourcefulness in achieving their desires. As a result, they all manage to protect their power, wealth, and status.

Portia as a Radical Feminist

Even with her wealth and independence, Portia still has to operate under male counterparts; however, she skilfully bends the rules to serve her needs without being a rebel. The eloquence she displays while arguing the case, disguised as a lawyer, leads to a bittersweet outcome because she has to adopt a male identity to be heard. "Portia is typically lauded as feminist in a male-dominated society; however, the opposite view can also be taken. Portia's most prominent moment as a successful, intelligent, rational female happens in the courtroom scene when she is dressed as a man. What would be a moment of success for feminine wit and wiles instead becomes the opposite. Portia must don a cloak of masculinity to speak in court—that much is clear. The Venetian court system did not permit female lawyers, nor were there educational institutions that supported this. However, Portia, as a woman, takes it upon herself to 'fix' the problems the men cannot solve, taking no credit".[7]

Is Portia a feminist? She is shrewd and calculating and does not display the characteristics typical of other female characters in Shakespeare's works. It is difficult to classify Portia as a feminist because her destiny is obstinately controlled by the patriarchal system around her, and so she manipulates it to her own interest thus classifying herself as a radical.

As defined by Angela Caravella, "A radical feminist is someone who believes their oppression is solely rooted in their gender and its portrayal as inferior." Radical feminism coordinates with Portia's character in many ways. She refers to herself as "lord/ of this fair mansion, master of my servants" (3.2.167-9), rather than lady and mistress, reflecting her perception of gender roles. Portia realises that she cannot be the lady of the house because that will imply the existence of a lord. After her father's death, Portia takes control of the 'lord' of the house. Likewise, she sees her gender as a sign of her

oppression despite being 'radical'. She doesn't seek to challenge social norms or fight for women's rights; instead, she challenges to fight her own personal oppressions.

The play ends with more manipulation than independence with those around her. Her witty tactics to acquire Shylock's wealth not only increase but also maintain control over her inheritance. At the beginning of the play, she appears to be a prisoner to her father's will, but ends up exercising her independence. "In terms of changing her destiny and fate, Portia could claim to be the ultimate merchant at the end of the play: the true Merchant of Venice".[8]

Methodology

1. This study uses a qualitative humanities approach, combining: Close textual analysis of Portia's major scenes—particularly her speeches, her courtroom disguise, and the ring subplot.
2. Theoretical framing through contemporary feminist ideas from Judith Butler. Judith Butler[9], the originator of the theory of gender performativity, challenges binary gender norms by arguing that "gender identity is constructed through repeated acts of performance." Judith Butler's framework suggests that gender is not something one is, but something one does—repeated acts and performances that produce the appearance of a stable identity. In Portia's case, her disguise and eloquence as a male lawyer exemplify this. Her masculine garb performance results in gaining access to legal authority. Her success shows how gender is shaped by society and how power relates to gender. The need for her to act masculine highlights that being female alone was not enough to gain power in her situation.
3. Intersectionality and Class Privilege. Modern feminism emphasizes that gender cannot be separated from class, race, sexuality, and other factors. Portia is wealthy and enjoys social privilege as a rich heiress. Other women in the play lack such resources. However, Portia's actions reflect feminist goals; they also highlight how class privilege restricts those actions. Her feminist attitude is class-bound and partial. When we view Portia through an intersectional lens, she shows the complexity of her position, though she is limited by other axes of power. Drawing

on Kimberlé Crenshaw's[10] "concept of intersectionality and feminist legal theory, this analysis places Portia's actions within the dual contexts of Elizabethan gender standards and modern feminist thought. By recognizing the lawful and cultural restrictions that defined women's roles in Shakespeare's England, the discussion provides a nuanced view of Portia as a proto-feminist figure—one whose agency is both empowered by intellect and constrained by the patriarchal structures of her era".

4. Feminist Legal Theory: "An essential collection introducing feminist perspectives on law, justice, and gender identity"[11] — This collection introduces feminist views on law, justice, and gender identity. It is useful for analyzing Portia's courtroom performance and legal reasoning by Kimberlé Crenshaw.
5. Historical Context: Jardine examines the limits on women's public, legal, and intellectual roles in Elizabethan society, placing Portia's actions within these constraints.

Gender Performativity

In Act IV, Scene I, Portia's transformation into a male lawyer illustrates Judith Butler's idea of gender as a performed act. By wearing male clothing and adopting male speech, Portia gains authority and credibility that society denies her as a woman. Her act of masculinity gives her the power to interpret and manipulate the law, showing that gender differences are not inherent but performed.

However, her success highlights the restrictions of her environment. She must imitate masculinity to gain power, underscoring that female identity alone lacks credibility in public. This conflict between defiance and submission makes Portia a classic proto-feminist figure. Intersectionality and Class Privilege Although Portia's actions seem feminist, her freedom is tied to her privilege. As a wealthy heiress, she has freedoms not available to poorer women like Jessica or Nerissa. Her ability to disguise herself, travel, and influence men relies on her social and economic status. Seen this way, Portia symbolizes both empowerment and exclusion, with feminism constrained by class. An intersectional view shows that her freedom is limited to women of her social standing.

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Intersectionality and Class Privilege

Though Portia's actions appear feminist, her agency is inseparably linked to her privilege. As a wealthy heiress, she enjoys freedoms unavailable to poorer or less connected women, such as Jessica or Nerissa. Her ability to disguise herself, travel, and influence men depends on her social and economic status. Through this lens, Portia represents both empowerment and exclusion—feminism limited by class. An intersectional analysis reveals that her liberation is partial, available only to women of her standing.

Feminist Legal Theory

Portia's courtroom performance also invites a feminist view of the law itself. She outsmarts male lawyers and judges by using the very language of the system that excludes her. Her manoeuvring of the "no blood" clause shows the flexibility and bias of supposedly neutral law. However, her victory over Shylock, achieved through deceit and privilege, raises moral questions—justice is achieved, but not always fairly. Portia's manipulation of Venetian law critiques patriarchal legal structures: - The law initially Favors Antonio, a Christian man, and imposes harsh penalties on Shylock. - Portia exploits a loophole—the "no blood" clause—to turn the law against Shylock, exposing how legal systems can be twisted for personal gain. - In Act IV, Scene 1, Portia's legal reasoning is sharp, but the result prompts ethical inquiries about justice.

Portia's courtroom performance also encourages a feminist interpretation of law itself. She outsmarts male lawyers and judges by using the very language of the system that excludes her. Her manipulation of the "no blood" clause reveals the flexibility—and bias—of supposedly neutral law. However, her victory over Shylock, achieved through deceit and class privilege, also highlights moral vagueness: justice is served, but not necessarily fairly.

Portia's manipulation of Venetian law critiques patriarchal legal structures:

- The law initially favours Antonio, a Christian man, and threatens Shylock with severe penalties.
- Portia uses a loophole — the "no blood" clause — to twist the law against Shylock, but this also exposes how legal systems can be manipulated to one's own interest.

- **Act IV, Scene 1:** "Portia's legal reasoning is brilliant, but the outcome raises ethical questions about justice, mercy, and bias"[12].

From a feminist legal perspective, Portia's actions represent both the opportunities and boundaries of reform within patriarchal systems. She reclaims a space in the legal world but cannot fundamentally change it.

Here's a curated list of feminist theorists whose work aligns with the three frameworks you've been exploring: gender performativity, intersectionality, and feminist legal theory. Each entry includes a brief note on their contribution and how it might connect to The Merchant of Venice or broader literary pedagogy.

Analysis

Legal Acumen and Gender Disguise

One of Portia's most iconic moments is when she disguises herself as a male lawyer and steps into the courtroom, delivering the famous lines: "The quality of mercy is not strained…" (Shakespeare, Act IV, Scene I). Her mastery of legal rhetoric and her control of the situation clearly put her above many male characters. From a feminist perspective, this moment is revealing: she performs masculinity to access authority, highlighting Judith Butler's idea that gender is an enacted performance rather than a fixed identity. At the end, Portia's success shows how gender roles are created and how power relates to those social norms. The play points out a limitation: Portia's freedom relies on adopting a male identity. Her individual identity alone would not allow her to enter the legal realm. This paradox lies at the heart of her proto-feminist status. She challenges gender norms but does so within the boundaries of a patriarchal system.

Autonomy and Strategic Agency

Ultimately, her intelligence and manoeuvring lead Portia into marriage and domestic life. She sheds the male disguise and leaves the public legal sphere. Some critics argue that she reinforces, rather than dismantles, patriarchal structures. Additionally, her class and wealth give her opportunities that other women in the play, like Jessica or Nerissa, do not have, highlighting the intersections of gender and class. The fact that her freedom is partial, conditional, and based on new hierarchies emphasizes the incomplete nature of her proto-feminism

Limitations and Patriarchal Reinforcement

Subsequently, her intelligence and manoeuvring lead Portia to the realm of marriage and domestic life. She discards the male disguise and the public legal sphere. Some critics debate that she restores, rather than breaks down, the patriarchal structures. Moreover, her class and wealth provide her with opportunities unavailable to other women in the play

Critical Debates

Scholars remain divided over Portia's feminist status. Some see her as an icon of female intelligence and defiance; others view her as complicit in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Her brilliance and independence coexist with submission and privilege. She wins the trial—but still ends the play within marriage, her autonomy reabsorbed into domesticity. These contradictions reflect ongoing feminist tensions between reform and revolution, as well as personal agency and systemic inequality.

Conclusion

Portia remains one of Shakespeare's most complex heroines—a woman who thinks, acts, and strategizes in a world that denies her formal power. She navigates patriarchy with intellect rather than rebellion; she achieves partial freedom through wit and disguise. Her story reminds us that early expressions of feminism were often subtle, negotiated within boundaries rather than beyond them.

Viewed through modern feminist theory, Portia is not a perfect heroine but a deeply human one—ambitious, intelligent, and conscious of her limitations. She represents both progress and compromise, making her a timeless symbol of women's fight for autonomy and recognition.

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