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**Breaking Down Barriers**

 Back in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, women were viewed quite differently than they are now. They were treated as feeble creatures whose intelligence was thought to have paled in comparison to that of men. Over the past five centuries, people have worked to tear down the superiority complex that men of that age had set up. One of the first people to help bump up the image of women was William Shakespeare. In his play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare showed women in a very different light than what was normal for that time, which may have caused a cascade effect that eventually lead to the Equal Rights Movement. He showed that women could be cunning, sneaky, and more intelligent than the men in the play without making them masculine. He accomplished this through his use of irony and diction.

 *The Merchant of Venice* is a play about a Jewish man’s hatred and attempt at revenge against a Christian man who borrowed money from him. While the Christian, Antonio, is being tried for failing to pay off his debt to the Jew, his best friend’s wife, Portia, and her maid, Nerissa, enter the courtroom. They, however, are wearing disguises. They wanted to help Bassanio, Portia’s husband, help his friend, Antonio, the Christian. Portia decided to pretend to dress up as a male. “…doctor of laws…” and had Nerissa dress as a male, “…lawyer’s clerk…” so they could help Antonio (iv,I,147-151). Shakespeare had Portia and Nerissa take on these personas because without them they would not be taken seriously. Heck, they might not even be permitted in the courtroom. Cross-dressing was a device typical of women in Shakespeare’s comedies He also had them become men because it added one of the only comedic elements to the play. You see, a woman cross-dressing was comedic because men thought it was a heinous idea that was too crazy to actually happen. This was also comedic to women because it sparked thoughts in women that made them wonder what it would be like to actually cross-dress and if it would work. Unfortunately, this is one comedic element that lost its appeal as the idea of feminism started to spread around the world.

 Once everyone got situated, the trial of Antonio began. Portia read over the bond that bound Antonio. She then came up with the cleverest loophole ever devised; she said that the Jew, Shylock, could take a pound of Antonio’s flesh, as stated in the bond, but none of his blood. This sort of quick thinking and analysis broke through the status quo of the Shakespearian era by having the woman come up with the plan to save the heroine. By doing this, Shakespeare challenged the male stereotype that women were not as smart as men as well as challenged every woman who saw the play to show men what they are capable of.

 Shakespeare used dramatic irony in *The Merchant of Venice* to add another comedic element into the mix. The audience of the play knows that Portia and Nerissa are pretending to be the men while the other characters on stage do not. This creates a sort of bond between the people in the audience and the play that is in front of them. This sort of engagement has helped this play become one of the greats.

 Even though he pushed the limits of the common clichés and prejudices of his time, Shakespeare was extremely popular during his lifetime and even after he died. It is because of this appeal that the messages Shakespeare placed in his plays were spread. Much like the common cold, simply being in a room with someone who was infected with the Shakespearean ideas could have led to the spread of Shakespeare’s ideas, much like a virous. This could have increased the number of feminists that in turn fought and won many battles for women’s rights. This play especially would have made women think, “Hey, I am smart. I can contribute something.” Simply introducing the idea of strong, independent women was first stone on the path to what we now call the Equal Rights Movement.