Hermia and Jessica

At first glance, Hermia of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Jessica of *Merchant of Venice* appear to be similar characters. Both women run away from homes characterized by commanding fathers and absent mothers in order to marry their lovers. Patriarchy is blatantly defied in both situations, but Hermia and Jessica have very different relationships with their fathers and defy them to varying degrees. If the term "defy" is used in its most malignant context, it means, "to renounce faith, allegiance, or affiance to (any one); to declare hostilities or war against" (Oxford English Dictionary). By this definition, and assuming that more rebellion equals more success, Jessica is more successful in defying her father. This can be seen through Jessica's hostile relationship with her father, her renunciation of Judaism, and her cruel robbery of Shylock that includes trading his ring for a monkey.

Jessica has a negative relationship with her father, Shylock, which Shakespeare never fully explains. In her second line of the play she declares, "Our house is hell" (II.iii.2, *Merchant*). Before she even mentions Lorenzo, Jessica speaks of her father with distain. She goes on to say, "Alack, what a heinous sin is it in me/ To be ashamed to be my father's child! But though I am a daughter to his blood,/ I am not to his manners" (II.iii.16-19, *Merchant*). Jessica openly states that she is ashamed to be Shylock's daughter, and though she admits that her feelings are sinful, she does not show any signs of guilt or remorse. She takes comfort that she is not like her father, but she never elaborates on what she finds distasteful in his character. A fair assumption may be that she is unhappy about being born a Jew and that she resents her father for passing on Judaism to her. Jessica loves a Christian man and plans to convert so she can marry him:

"I shall end this strife,/ Become a Christian and thy loving wife" (II.iii.20-21, *Merchant*). One definition of "defy" is "to renounce faith [to]", which Jessica does both in terms of faith as loyalty to her father, as well as faith in a religious sense. Hermia, on the other hand, does not insult her father Egeus's character or oppose him beyond his choice for her husband. His favor for Demetrius appears arbitrary and he lacks a valid argument against Lysander's character, family, or wealth. This portrays Hermia's defiance as less severe and more sympathetic than Jessica's.

In the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Hermia pleads with her father to let her marry Lysander instead of Demetrius. She boldly tells the duke, "I would my father look'd but with my eyes" (I.i.56, *Midsummer*). She would rather have her father's blessing than rebel against him, but she feels entitled to a choice in which man she marries. Conversely, Jessica never gives her father the chance to disapprove of her lover. She prepares to run away with Lorenzo in secret, commanding Launcelot to, "give him this letter, do it secretly… I would not have my father/ See me in talk with thee" (II.iii.7-9, *Merchant*). Both women speak of their father's sight, but with opposite hopes. Hermia wishes her father would relent and see from her perspective, while Jessica hopes her father remains blind to her scheme to run away. Hermia is ultimately unsuccessful at changing her father's view as the last thing Egeus says in the play is: "I beg the law, the law, upon his head. /They would have stol'n away… Demetrius, Thereby to have defeated you and me:/ You of your wife, and me of my consent" (IV.i.155-158, *Midsummer*). Egeus never gives his consent for Hermia and Lysander to marry; it is Theseus who overrules Egeus and gives the lovers his blessing. Jessica, however, is successful at running away with Lorenzo without Shylock discerning her plan.

Ironically, Shylock asks Jessica to take care of his house while he is away, "Jessica, my girl,/ Look to my house… Lock up my doors… Let not the sound of fopp'ry enter/ My sober house" (II.v.15-36, *Merchant*). Not only does Jessica disregard her father's orders (as she does earlier when he tries to call her) but she robs the house of its treasures, including a casket of jewels and Shylock's wedding ring. When Tubal informs him that the ring was traded for a monkey, Shylock bursts into hysterics: "Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turkis, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (III.i.120-124, *Merchant*). Shylock is sympathetic here, especially as the importance of wedding rings becomes integral in Act V when Portia and Nerissa berate their husbands for giving their rings away. Jessica's careless dispense of the ring goes beyond defiant to cruel and vindictive. Hermia, on the other hand, steals only herself from her father's house. She never inflicts the kind of pain on Egeus that Jessica inflicts on Shylock.

If success in defying one's father is measured by the degree of hostility, Jessica certainly achieves more success than Hermia. However, at the end of the plays, Jessica's marriage seems doomed and Hermia's appears successful. When Hermia and Lysander enter after the wedding ceremony, Theseus says, "Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth" (V.i.27, *Midsummer*). Little else is said about the couple, but there is no reason to think they will be unhappy. Conversely, the scene between Jessica and Lorenzo at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* does not bode well for their future. First, they compare themselves to famous lovers whose stories end unhappily. Then Jessica says, "Did young Lorenzo swear he lov'd her well,/ Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,/ And ne'er a true one" (V.i.17-19, *Merchant*) and Lorenzo replies, "Did pretty Jessica (like a little

shrow)/ Slander her love…" (V.i.21-22, *Merchant*). This may hide in the guise of playful romantic banter, but Jessica's accusation of false vows, and Lorenzo calling his wife a "shrow" (meaning shrew) has a serious undertone. Later in the scene the lovers seem to be disconnected and lacking communication. The musicians enter and Jessica says: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (V.i.69, *Merchant*). Lorenzo replies in a long speech that ends with: "The man that hath no music in himself,/ Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,/ is fit for treason, stratagems, and spoils… Let no such man be trusted" (V.i.83-88, *Merchant*). The "man" Lorenzo speaks of is not literally male, but mankind in an all encompassing sense. He does not seem to notice that this grave accusation of treason and untrustworthiness applies to his new wife, who has just said she is unmoved by music. The fact that Jessica's last line of the play includes "I am never merry" gives weight to the feeling that the lovers are not going to live happily ever after. It gives the reader cause to question how much Jessica and Lorenzo loved each other in the first place. Jessica may have seen Lorenzo as an opportunity to escape her father and convert to Christianity. Running away and renouncing her faith are never portrayed as a sacrifice or risk for Jessica. Rather, she eagerly betrays her father in a manner that could be construed as careless and hasty.

At the end of *The Merchant of Venice* Jessica reaps the consequences of betraying her father and her faith, as Portia and the other Christians are unwelcoming. This outsider status could possibly symbolize a future exclusion from Heaven for Jessica. After her escape, Shylock declares, "She is damned for it" (III.i.31, *Merchant*), meaning that he believes Jessica is going to Hell for running away from him and becoming a Christian. Lancelot also thinks Jessica will be barred from Heaven as he tells her, "the sins of the

father are to be laid upon the children… for truly I think you are damn'd" (III.v.1-6, *Merchant*). Lancelot does not blame Jessica's sins for her damnation, but rather her father's. However, it remains ambiguous whether Shylock was serious about taking a pound of Antonio's flesh until he learned of Jessica's flight. Her actions were the last straw for him, and after declaring his daughter damned, he gives his famous speech: "To bait a fish withal- if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge… Hath not a Jew eyes?" (III.i.53-59). Therefore, it's possible that if Jessica had not defied her father, he may have had a change of heart, consequently, alleviating sin from herself. This may be farfetched, but at the end of the play, Jessica remains an outsider. Despite her efforts, she is more like her father than ever, as they are both Christian converts that risk never being accepted by Jews, Christians, and possibly even God. When examined in this light, Jessica's defiance against Shylock has gone terribly wrong.

After close inspection of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Merchant of Venice* it becomes clear that both Jessica and Hermia are successful at defying their fathers in different ways. If successful defiance is measured by greater rebellion and cruelty, Jessica certainly wins. However, if the daughter's happiness at the end of each play is a better measure for successful defiance, then Hermia's less severe approach achieves more. Ultimately, if success is to be associated with happiness and not the degree of defiance, one must conclude that less is more.