

Reimagining Female Authority in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: Portia's Voice in Bao Tianxiao's *The Lawyeress*

César Guardé-Paz
University of Barcelona
Spain

Abstract

This paper offers a critical analysis of the reinterpretation of female authority in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* by exploring the role of Portia and her transformation in early Chinese translations. First, it provides a brief survey of recent interpretations of Portia's role in *The Merchant* to familiarize the reader with current debates and the different readings. The objective is to present a concrete understanding of Shakespeare's intentions regarding sexual dynamics in order to assess how these elements were recontextualized in Chinese translations for specific cultural purposes. Next, the paper examines the first Chinese translations of the play to determine how faithfully they preserved the original portrayal of female characters. Finally, this paper analyzes Bao Tianxiao's adaptation, *The Lawyeress*, considering how deviations from Shakespeare's original text reflected evolving attitudes toward sexual equality in early twentieth century China and contributed to the creation of a uniquely feminist reading of Portia's character.

Keywords

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Lin Shu, Bao Tianxiao, *The Lawyeress*, feminism

摘要

本文旨在重新詮釋莎士比亞作品《威尼斯商人》中的女性權力，探索其中人物波西亞扮演的角色，以及人物在早期漢語譯本中的轉化。首先，本文將概述近年學界如何詮釋波西亞在劇中扮演的角色，闡述當前學術辯論走向和作品的不同解讀，以具體了解莎士比亞描繪兩性互動的意圖，評估這些元素在漢語譯本中，如何為了特定的文化目的而被重新詮釋，切合中國語境需要。其次，本文會評估劇作的早期漢語譯本，以及譯文在重構原著女性角色描寫時的忠實程度。最後，本文會分析包天笑的改編作《女律師》，並從觀察此譯本對原文的偏離如何反映中國二十世紀初對兩性平等的態度演變，並說明譯本如何有助從女性主義角度解讀波西亞的角色。

關鍵詞

莎士比亞、《威尼斯商人》、林紓、包天笑、《女律師》、女性主義

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is often regarded as one of his more complex plays, an exploration of legal interpretations and socioeconomic conflicts in which sexual dynamics seem to play a significant role.¹ The character of Portia and her famous speech on behalf of Antonio stand at the intersection of these themes, navigating the limitations placed upon her as a woman through wit, legal knowledge, and her cross-dressing performance as a male lawyer. But while modern scholarship has frequently tried to interrogate Shakespeare's plays through a feminist lens, particularly focusing on Portia's subversion of patriarchal norms, less attention has been paid to how these interpretations have evolved in translated versions. In the early twentieth century, Chinese translations of *The Merchant of Venice*, filtered through the prose retellings of Charles and Mary Lamb, presented Portia's character with significant changes that reflected both the constraints and aspirations of Chinese women during this period. This paper examines how Portia's role was transformed in the first two Chinese translations of *The Merchant*, culminating in Bao Tianxiao's 包天笑 (1875–1973) play *Nü lüshi* 女律師 (*The Lawyeress*), based on Lin Shu's 林紓 (1852–1924) translation, which