

Unveiling the Male Gaze: Exploring Perceptions and Objectification of Women

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE & THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

I.Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the male gaze as depicted in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" and Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Through these works, we explore how men of differing social statuses perceive and interact with women, and how these women resist and challenge their objectification. The analysis focuses on characters such as Portia and Esmeralda, who subvert traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy despite societal constraints. By comparing the male gaze in a Renaissance literary context and a modern animated film, this study highlights the persistent nature of gender inequality and the ongoing struggle for female empowerment.

Keywords: Male gaze, Societal power structures, Objectification, Female autonomy

II.Introduction

The intersection of gender dynamics and societal power structures has been a compelling subject in both literature and film. This paper seeks to examine the concept of the male gaze as it is depicted in two culturally and temporally disparate works: Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" and Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Through these narratives, we explore how men of varying social standings perceive and interact with women, and how these women resist and challenge their objectification.

In "The Merchant of Venice," the male gaze manifests through characters such as Bassanio, whose attraction to Portia is initially rooted in her wealth and beauty, reflecting the economic and social motivations of men during the Renaissance. Portia, bound by her father's will, must navigate a society that commodifies her, ultimately subverting these constraints through her intelligence and legal acumen. Conversely, Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" portrays the male gaze in a more modern context, albeit through the lens of a historical setting. Characters like Frollo, whose obsessive desire for Esmeralda exemplifies the objectifying and controlling nature of the male gaze, are juxtaposed with characters like Phoebus, whose initial superficial attraction evolves into genuine respect. Esmeralda's resistance against Frollo's oppressive gaze underscores her fight for autonomy and equality in a patriarchal society.

By analyzing these works, this study highlights the persistent nature of gender inequality and the ongoing struggle for female empowerment. The comparison of a Renaissance literary context with a modern animated film underscores the enduring relevance of these themes, offering insights into how different societal structures shape and are shaped by the male gaze. Through characters like Portia and Esmeralda, who challenge traditional gender roles, this paper illustrates the complexities of female agency and resistance in the face of systemic objectification and oppression.

III.Literature review

Jean E. Howard's analysis is pivotal for understanding the societal context in which "The Merchant of Venice" was written. Howard argues that Renaissance literature often mirrors the social and political dynamics of its time. For instance, she states, "The Renaissance text is... a product of the historical forces of its time, and it both reflects and helps to shape those forces" (Howard 23). This perspective is crucial for analyzing Portia's character, who is bound by her father's casket test and Bassanio's pursuit. These elements underscore the commodification of women and the power dynamics inherent in Elizabethan marriage practices. However, Howard's analysis might overlook the subconscious biases that underpin male characters' interactions with female characters, such as the inherent male gaze that subtly dictates these dynamics.

Stephen Orgel explores the performance of gender and how characters in Shakespeare's plays navigate societal constraints. He writes, "Gender in Shakespeare's plays is a performance, a role that is acted and reacted to within the confines of societal expectations" (Orgel 45). This is particularly relevant to Portia in "The Merchant of Venice," who uses her intelligence and wit to subvert the gender expectations imposed on her. However, Orgel's work could be expanded to include a more nuanced analysis of how the male gaze operates within these gender performances, influencing how female characters are perceived and controlled by their male counterparts.

Jack Zipes critiques Disney's reinforcement of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. He notes, "Disney's narratives... often reinforce existing social hierarchies and power structures" (Zipes 36). This critique is evident in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," where Esmeralda's interactions with male characters are framed within traditional power dynamics. However, Zipes's analysis could be critiqued for not sufficiently addressing the subconscious biases and the implicit male gaze that underpins these power structures, particularly how these biases shape character motivations and audience perceptions. -Summary These sources provide a foundational framework for examining the male gaze in "The Merchant of Venice" and Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." By integrating direct quotations and critically assessing the limitations of these analyses, it becomes possible to explore how male perceptions of female characters reflect and critique societal norms. Moreover, addressing the potential oversight of subconscious male biases adds depth to the understanding of how power, social status, and wealth influence these perceptions.In many societies, there are clear expectations regarding gender roles, which are based on traditional gender stereotypes. Men are expected to display power and rationality, often being required to embody independent and strong roles, while women are confined to roles of subordination and are perceived as emotional and fragile. However, in works such as "The Merchant of Venice" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," the challenge to traditional gender roles becomes evident through characters like Portia and Esmeralda. According to "Gender Roles in The Merchant of Venice and Othello" (2022), Saed Shahwan argues that Shakespeare portrays characters like Portia "To ridicule the social and gender norms of the Elizabethan order and to give a foretaste of women's capability to the Elizabethan patriarchal society" (160). Portia's assertive actions in the courtroom stand as a direct defiance of traditional gender stereotypes, reflecting a desire for equal standing among male counterparts (160). Portia's character thus symbolizes a rebellion against the gender norms of her era, prompting a deeper reflection on societal values of the time within Shakespearean narratives.

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As noted by Beth Wiersma in her article "The Not So Wonderful World of Disney: An Exploratory Content Analysis of Gender Themes in Disney Full Length Animated Feature Films" (1999), stating, "The fact that the females have to be rescued indicates they are passive, weak, and dependent upon males. ... Male characters, who are not lead males, are assertive, but this may be a result of their societal or familial power" (53). This portrayal reinforces traditional gender roles and societal expectations, suggesting that women should conform to conventional norms. She also mentions the relationship between gender and social status, "Most of the positions held by main male characters are positions of nobility, and those held by the minor male characters are assistants to those in positions of power and prestige. There are few occupations held by females whether in or out of the home" (55). Most male characters occupy noble, powerful, or prestigious positions, whereas female characters rarely have clearly defined occupations either within or outside the home, further entrenching male dominance in the public sphere(55) Esmeralda stands as one of the few Disney female characters to defy these stereotypes. Thus, analyzing the biases of men towards women and how women challenge this notion in these two works becomes our primary research focus.

By examining these analyses and critiques, we can better understand how characters like Portia and Esmeralda challenge and subvert traditional gender roles. This exploration reveals the complexities of gender dynamics in both Renaissance literature and contemporary media, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the persistent influence of the male gaze.

IV.Textual analysis and interpretation

Focusing on "The Merchant of Venice" and Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," our analysis delves into how gender roles and power in marriage are depicted, emphasizing the commodification and objectification of women. Additionally, the concept of the male gaze and its impact on female characters is examined, highlighting how women are often viewed as objects of desire rather than autonomous individuals. Our analysis further investigates the performance and subversion of traditional gender roles, showcasing how characters challenge societal expectations through their actions and decisions. Finally, the discussion reflects on contemporary gender norms, comparing historical and modern perspectives to underscore the ongoing struggle for gender equality and autonomy. These themes collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of the portrayal and implications of gender dynamics in both historical and modern contexts.

Male Gaze and Objectification of Women

• Frollo's Gaze on Women

Judge Claude Frollo considers Esmeralda an object of sexual desire, fixating on her physical qualities rather than viewing her as a person. His desire to control and possess her turns into obsessive madness, shifting from love to hate when Esmeralda rejects him. In the lyrics of "Hellfire," we see this clearly: "It's not my fault. I'm not to blame. It is the gypsy girl. The witch who sent this flame." Frollo blames Esmeralda for his uncontrollable desires, exemplifying the objectification of women by absolving himself of responsibility and blaming her for not becoming his possession. Frollo's powerful position as a justice minister amplifies his arrogance and sense of entitlement, driving his possessive and destructive obsession when she disobeys him. His status lets him rationalize his behavior and dismiss Esmeralda's humanity entirely. Frollo's possessive and controlling behavior is a manifestation of his desire to dominate and own Esmeralda, reflecting broader themes of power and subjugation. His intense desire and subsequent guilt are expressed through the imagery of fire and sin. His determination to possess Esmeralda, or else destroy her, underscores his view of her as an object to be controlled. In the lyrics of "Hellfire," "You know I am a righteous man," "Choose me or your pyre." Frollo's ultimatum to Esmeralda reveals his belief in his moral righteousness and entitlement. The choice he offers—him or death—strips her of agency and illustrates the coercive power dynamics at play. Frollo's behaviour towards Esmeralda illustrates the gaze that high-powered men place on women and how female characters are objectified and controlled by male authority figures.

• Phoebus' Gaze on Women

Comparing Frollo to Phoebus reveals different manifestations of the male gaze towards Esmeralda. Phoebus, a soldier, is initially mesmerized by Esmeralda's beauty, and his captivated stare and flirtatious behavior when first seeing her dance underscore this. During Esmeralda's escape to the church, Phoebus's flirtation amidst tension highlights his initial superficial attraction. However, as he gets to know her, Phoebus's view shifts from physical attraction to genuine respect and admiration for her courage and independence. Phoebus's admiration for Esmeralda deepens when he stands up to Frollo and helps Esmeralda escape from Notre Dame. He even denies Frollo's order, Frollo "I'm waiting you, Captain", Phoebus "I'm sorry sir, she claimed sanctuary. There's nothing I can do." It shows Phoebus's change from just a soldier following orders to a hero who stands against tyranny, motivated by his newfound respect and admiration for Esmeralda. It marks the start of their partnership and mutual respect, setting the stage for their joint efforts against Frollo's oppression. His status, distinct from Frollo's, allows him to be more open to seeing Esmeralda's inner qualities, eventually leading him to respect her for who she truly is. For instance, Phoebus witnesses Esmeralda's acts of kindness and bravery, such as when she defends Quasimodo and helps those in need, which profoundly changes his perception of her. Through their conversations and shared experiences, Phoebus starts to admire Esmeralda's resilience and strength, recognizing her as a person rather than just a romantic interest.

• Bassanio's Gaze on Women

A similar issue is present in "The Merchant of Venice." Bassanio is attracted to Portia for her wealth and status, ignoring her wisdom and independence. The men in the play see Portia as fulfilling their desires for beauty, wealth, and status, neglecting her intelligence. Portia's dissatisfaction with her lack of autonomy, as seen in her quote about being unable to choose or refuse suitors, underscores how societal constraints limit her potential. If she lived today, Portia could be a successful entrepreneur rather than being confined by the male gaze. Bassanio's economic aspirations and superficial view of women reflect his lower social standing and desperation to secure his future through marriage.

• Quasimodo's Gaze on Women

In contrast, Quasimodo, with his low social status as an outcast, values Esmeralda's kindness and humanity, demonstrating genuine affection free from the male gaze. His marginalized position allows him to see and appreciate Esmeralda's inner beauty and character, rather than viewing her as an object to be possessed. Quasimodo's pure and unselfish love for Esmeralda starkly contrasts with the other male characters' possessive and objectifying attitudes. Despite his physical appearance and societal status, Quasimodo's affection for Esmeralda is rooted in gratitude and admiration for her compassion. This is evident in scenes where Esmeralda shows him kindness, which deeply moves him and fosters a sincere bond between them. Quasimodo's respectful and selfless regard for Esmeralda highlights how his experiences of marginalization and empathy shape his non-objectifying view of women. Growing up under Frollo's oppressive and manipulative control, Quasimodo was led to believe he was unworthy of love and kindness. Frollo's treatment instilled a deep sense of self-loathing and inferiority in Quasimodo, making him feel that he did not deserve any good treatment. Isolated in the bell tower, Quasimodo's view of the world was limited, and he believed Frollo was the only one who cared for him. However, Esmeralda's kindness and integrity profoundly affected Quasimodo, as it was the first time he experienced genuine compassion. Her actions revealed to him the possibility of goodness in others, fundamentally shifting his perception. Unlike other men, Quasimodo was captivated by Esmeralda's inner virtues, appreciating her for who she truly was.

• How Women Perceive the Objectification

In "The Merchant of Venice," in this scene "I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." (Act 1, Scene 2, Line 20-22) shows that Portia's marriage is controlled by her deceased father's will, which stipulates that her suitor must choose correctly among three caskets to win her hand. This scenario reflects the commodification and objectification of women in society. Portia is treated as an asset to be won, rather than an individual with autonomy. Portia laments her lack of agency, underscoring how her father's will continues to control her life. The word "curbed" suggests restriction and lack of freedom, highlighting the power dynamics in marriage and the objectification of women. In this lines, "One half of me is yours, the other half yours—Mine own, I would say, but if mine, then yours, And so all yours." (Act 3, Scene 2, Line 16-18) Upon Bassanio's successful choice of the lead casket, Portia offers herself completely to him. The repetition of "yours" emphasizes her subjugation and the transfer of her person as property. Portia's situation exemplifies how women were commodified within the marriage market, with their values and choices dictated by male authority figures. Her father's will is a legal and symbolic representation of the societal norms that governed women's lives and reduced them to objects of exchange.

Challenging Gender Roles: Portia and Esmeralda as Icons of Empowerment

Portia's decision to disguise herself as the male lawyer Balthazar in "The Merchant of Venice" allows her to navigate and subvert the gender restrictions of her time. Through this performance, she demonstrates intelligence and legal acumen, challenging contemporary stereotypes about women's capabilities. "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." (Act 4, Scene 1, Line 179-180) Portia's eloquent speech on mercy and justice highlights her wisdom and rhetorical skill. Her ability to sway the court's decision showcases her competence in a male-dominated sphere, subverting traditional gender roles. "I see, sir, you are liberal in offers. You taught me first to beg, and now methinks You teach me how a beggar should be answered." (Act 4, Scene 1, Line 434-436) Portia cleverly manipulates the situation to test Bassanio's loyalty. Her control over the proceedings and strategic thinking further challenge the notion of women as passive or subordinate. Portia's cross-dressing and successful legal intervention illustrate how gender roles can be performed and subverted. Her actions demonstrate that women are capable of the same intellectual and professional achievements as men, questioning the rigid gender norms of Shakespeare's era.

Similarly, Esmeralda in Disney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" is portrayed as a strong and independent character, whose actions challenge traditional gender roles. Despite needing rescue in certain situations, her physical prowess and defiance assert her autonomy and strength. "Just look at that disgusting display!" (Scene: Esmeralda's dance at the Festival of Fools) Frollo's reaction to Esmeralda's dance reveals his contempt for her open expression of femininity and freedom. His disdain underscores the subversive nature of her performance, as it challenges his strict moral and societal norms. Esmeralda's dance is both a performance of femininity and a subversive act of defiance against societal norms. Her confidence and self-sufficiency are highlighted, challenging the notion of women as passive or dependent. "You mistreat this poor boy the same way you mistreat my people! You speak of justice, yet you are cruel to those most in need of your help!" (Scene: Esmeralda sets Quasimodo free) Esmeralda's confrontation with Frollo showcases her courage and moral conviction. Her willingness to stand up to authority and fight for justice underscores her strength and independence. Esmeralda's character embodies a challenge to traditional gender roles, showcasing that women can be both nurturing and fierce, vulnerable and strong. Her actions and defiance against patriarchal control position her as a figure of resistance and empowerment, reflecting broader themes of gender equality and autonomy.

V.Findings and conclusion

In The Merchant of Venice and Disney's The Hunchback of Notre Dame, men of different statuses and positions view women differently, reflecting the profound impact of the male gaze on female characters.

Judge Claude Frollo exemplifies the extreme of the male gaze, as his power and status lead him to desire control and possession of Esmeralda. He views her as a sexual object and turns to madness and hatred when she rejects him. Frollo's actions highlight the intense objectification of women by powerful men, reinforcing their self-perceived moral superiority and entitlement. His high status exacerbates his need for dominance and control over women, showcasing how elevated social positions can amplify the tendency to view women as objects.

In contrast, while Phoebus is also part of the power structure, his perspective changes as he interacts with Esmeralda. He evolves from being attracted to her physical appearance to respecting and admiring her inner qualities. Although he initially displays superficial attraction typical of those in higher social standings, Phoebus's transformation demonstrates that, in different contexts, men can transcend superficial attraction to appreciate a woman's intrinsic value truly.

Bassanio, another example, is drawn to Portia mainly for her wealth and status, reflecting his practical needs amid economic hardship. His objectification of Portia illustrates how men of lower social standing may pragmatically approach marriage and wealth. Despite his lower status, Bassanio's initial gaze is still influenced by societal values emphasizing wealth and external attributes.

Lastly, Quasimodo's marginalized status allows him to see Esmeralda's true humanity. His love for her is sincere and unaffected by the male gaze, highlighting how those on the societal margins can see beyond surface-level objectification to recognize kindness and beauty in others. Quasimodo's perspective underscores how lacking social power can enable a more genuine and humane view of women.

These characters' different statuses and positions deeply influence their perspectives and attitudes toward women, demonstrating how the male gaze affects the portrayal and treatment of female characters across varying social contexts and power structures. This not only impacts gender dynamics within the stories but also reflects broader social realities, showcasing the complex challenges women face in their pursuit of equality and autonomy.

Moreover, female characters actively respond to and resist the male gaze. In "The Merchant of Venice," Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer to demonstrate her intelligence and legal skills, challenging gender restrictions. In "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," Esmeralda uses dance and public defiance to showcase her courage and independence.

In summary, these female characters successfully challenge and resist the male gaze through their actions and intelligence, demonstrating resilience and wisdom in the face of power and gender inequality. The gender dynamics in these stories reflect historical social realities and highlight the ongoing struggle for gender equality in contemporary society. Men with higher status often have a more intense and objectifying gaze toward women, further complicating the dynamics of power and control in gender relations.

VI.References

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