



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ABIGAIL FROM *THE JEW OF MALTA* AND JESSICA FROM *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* ANALYSED ON THE BASIS OF THE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL MATERIALISM

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This essay explores the treatment of Abigail in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Jessica in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* through the lens of cultural materialism. Both characters are doubly marginalized—by gender and religion—and their portrayals reflect the societal norms of Renaissance England. **Methods:** Using the framework of cultural materialism, the analysis focuses on historical context, political commitment, and textual analysis. The essay draws on feminist and Marxist perspectives to examine how patriarchal and anti-Semitic ideologies shape the characters' roles and fates. **Results:** Abigail's silence and obedience lead to her demise, while Jessica's rebellion allows her to escape patriarchal control, though not without consequences. Both characters reveal the contradictions and tensions within the dominant ideologies of their time. **Conclusion:** The plays subtly critique the patriarchal and anti-Semitic structures of Renaissance society. Through Abigail and Jessica, Marlowe and Shakespeare expose the limitations and dangers of these systems, offering a subversive commentary on gender and religious identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the treatment of Abigail in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Jessica in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* through the lens of cultural materialism. Both characters are doubly marginalized—by gender and religion—and their portrayals reflect the societal norms of Renaissance England. The analysis focuses on how their relationships, decisions, and fates are shaped by the historical and ideological context in which the plays were written and performed. The goal is to uncover how these characters reflect and resist the dominant cultural ideologies of their time.

## METHODS

**Theoretical framework:** Cultural materialism, as defined by Graham Holderness, is a "politicized form of historiography." It gained prominence through the work of Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare* (1985), emphasizing four key elements: historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis. This approach critiques dominant ideologies and highlights literature's role in both reflecting and resisting social norms. Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" is central to this framework, referring to lived experiences and

values that often oppose dominant ideologies. In Marxism and Literature, Williams argues that the structures of feelings are often opposed to both clear systems of values and beliefs, and to dominant ideologies within a society (128). Cultural materialism views literature not as transcendent but as embedded in the power structures of its time. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing Renaissance drama, written at a time when patriarchal and anti-Semitic ideologies were present. By applying cultural materialist principles, we can uncover the subversive potential in the portrayals of Abigail and Jessica.

## RESULTS

**The Constraints of Patriarchy: The Good Daughter vs. the Bad Daughter:** Abigail and Jessica are daughters of powerful Jewish men—Barabas and Shylock—who embody patriarchal authority. Both expect their daughters to be obedient, submissive, and self-sacrificing. Abigail conforms to these expectations, while Jessica defies them. Abigail is portrayed as the "good daughter," silent and compliant. She obeys her father's schemes, even when they conflict with her desires. Abigail from *The Jew of Malta* adheres to the rules of patriarchy: she is a silent, devoted, and obedient daughter. But obedience and silence are fatal for Abigail and they carry her to the grave. Self-sacrifice is reflected in the high price of

silence which is shown through Abigail's disastrous obedience. There is a continual performance of Abigail's self-sacrifice through her constant submission to the will of the male authority in her life (her father). She is consciously silencing herself, protecting male authority and harming her own interests. The irony was too great to go unnoticed and certainly influenced the minds of Londoners who watched the plays as groundlings in the theatre. The echoing message is that obedience and silence are not worthwhile. Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* subtly acknowledges that following the rules set by the patriarchy is not beneficial. Abigail is portrayed as an obedient and submissive daughter who does everything to please her father, even though it goes against her wishes and beliefs. According to the ruling and generally accepted norms of the patriarchy, the "good daughter" supports her father with her obedience, submission and unconditional trust. The father is the greatest authority in the life of a young unmarried woman, the father is the figure a daughter should respect and follow without exception. Abigail is the "good daughter" and leads a life governed by the principles of patriarchy. She does not ask for an explanation, nor does she give her opinion regarding the scheme that her father is preparing. She tries to discreetly hint that she is not happy to deceive Don Lodowick, because she is in love with Don Mathias. Barabbas imposes his will at the very beginning, as the following brief dialogue between them shows: "Abigail. O father, Don Mathias is my love! / Barabas. I know it: yet, I say, make love to him; / Do, it is requisite it should be so. -- [Aside to her] "(II. iii. 238-240). Abigail's silence reflects the expectations that the patriarchy sets up for every "good" girl. She finally realizes that her father is dragging the two young men into a deadly confrontation, but she also sees her own role in the tragic event. Abigail goes too far in blaming herself for the unfortunate development. She is adamant to punish herself but cannot punish the real culprit because he is her father. Although Abigail blames herself for causing the great calamity, she continues to follow the rules of patriarchy and refuses to speak out about her father's atrocities: "O Barabas, / Though thou deservest hardly at my hands, / Yet never shall these lips bewray thy life! "(III. iii. 194-195). Even in her anger and rage, Abigail does not dare to break the rules of conduct for a good and humble daughter. She does not find the strength to enter into conflict with her father. She directs all her anger at herself, exaggerating her own guilt.

Abigail continues being silent until she herself becomes Barabas' victim. Barabas quenches his bloodthirst with his own daughter's life when he decides to poison her and all the nuns in her convent. This shows that the patriarchal tactics are cruel and gruesome, even for patriarchy's most ardent followers. Barabas does not have appreciation for the freedom and protection he enjoys because of his daughter's silence, yet he is inclined to execute her. Abigail finally breaks her silence, but when she is on her deathbed and under the seal of confession. The economy of Abigail's language is operated by a male authority - that of her father. Abigail reduces herself to silence. The fatal side of women's conscious self-silencing is depicted in *The Jew of Malta*. Abigail's death can be interpreted as a demonstration for women in the audience, as a warning of the distorted logic of the patriarchy, which repeatedly oppresses women and leads them to ruin. In *The Jew of Malta*, the silence which is recommended by the patriarchy with great enthusiasm is at the very least equated with poison. The message echoing from Abigail's demise is that women should never relinquish their voices in the face of oppression. Jessica, by contrast, is the "bad daughter." She

does not defend her father, nor does she sacrifice herself for him. Jessica refuses to be put in a position where she would have to risk her life or the life of the person she is in love with. She rebels against her father, steals from him, and elopes with a Christian. Her actions defy patriarchal expectations, yet they also reflect a strategic escape from oppression. But just because she is Jewish who disobeys a Jew, Jessica seems to be charming, or at least more acceptable. "For Shakespeare's audience, patriarchal authority was divinely ordained, and it secured the right of princes as well as that of fathers. Jessica's disregard for that authority thus creates the first obstacle to a Christian audience's acceptance of her as a Christian" (Metzger 56). Karen Newman observes that, "in early modern England, among the elite at least, marriage was primarily a commercial transaction determined by questions of dowry, familial alliances, land ownership and inheritance. Daughters were pawns in the political and social manoeuvres of their families, particularly their male kin" (109). Jessica obviously does not fit the mould of a good daughter. She assumes responsibility for her financial future and does not allow her father to have financial gain by means of her marriage, as well as not allowing him to control her life and destiny. By eliminating Shylock from his paternal role as a ruler and decision maker about her life, Jessica destabilizes the patriarchal order. Jessica's rebellion is complex—while she rejects her father's authority, she does so by transferring allegiance to another man, Lorenzo. Jessica goes against the patriarchal rules which oblige her to nurture respect and obedience to the male authority that is her father. But she is reasonable and knows that she cannot completely discard the male authority, which is why she opts for the only way out of her situation, which is to replace her father's male authority with that of her potential husband Lorenzo.

O Lorenzo,  
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,  
Become a Christian and thy loving wife!  
(II.iii.19-21)

In this statement of hers, the sense that guides Jessica in navigating the waters of society of that time is further pronounced. She wants to convert to Christianity, but nowhere does she talk about being motivated by religious reasons. The impression is that she treats her religious conversion as a practical means which will help her become more socially acceptable. Jessica is indeed a compelling character because she manages to transcend the strict limitations of the patriarchy and live a life parallel to the patriarchal frame imposed on women. By sheer determination, strength, and intelligence Jessica starts living her life on her own terms, even though still on the margins and partly isolated, never fully liberated of the stereotyping because of her Jewishness. Her conversion to Christianity appears more practical than spiritual, aimed at gaining social acceptance. Jessica's defiance would have been controversial to a Renaissance audience, but her rejection of a Jewish father may have made her rebellion more palatable. Still, her actions challenge the patriarchal order by asserting autonomy over her life and marriage.

## DISCUSSION

***Being a Jewish Woman in Renaissance England:*** Jews were officially expelled from England in 1290. Edward I had "expelled the entire Jewish population from the nation—

perhaps as many as 15,000" (Simkin 140). In terms of culture, Jewishness was mainly an abstract concept for a sixteenth century English citizen, even though there are certain studies that confirm that there were, in fact, Jews who were living secretly in Renaissance England. However, people were not directly and knowingly exposed to the lifestyles and practices of Jews, which established a fertile soil for the development of anti-Semitic sentiments, discrimination and stereotyping of Jews. The characters of Abigail and Jessica are subject to manifold oppression, not only because of their gender, but also because of their racial, national, and religious affiliation. Both convert to Christianity, thus being considered "good" Jews. But despite their rejection of their own religion, they are never truly accepted in the dominant Christian circles. Namely, Abigail is exposed to the corrupt practices of the priests in the nunnery. She is isolated and spends the rest of her days disappointed and doubtful of the people in her surroundings.

Jessica, on the other hand, converts to Christianity via marriage. However, it can be argued that the text of the play provides for certain proofs that Jessica is never fully integrated into her new social circle. When Portia welcomes Lorenzo as Bassanio's friend, but Jessica is in the background, since Gratiano must urge Nerissa, "cheer yond stranger, bid her welcome" (3.2.237). Referring to Jessica as a "stranger" confirms her status of an outsider, a person who is not fully integrated in Christian society, even though she herself became Christian by means of marriage. Their religious and ethnic identities compound their marginalization. Despite abandoning their heritage, they remain excluded. Their portrayals reflect the broader societal discomfort with religious and ethnic difference, especially when embodied by women.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the characters of Abigail and Jessica through the lens of cultural materialism, focusing on how gender, religion, and ethnicity intersect in their portrayals. Abigail's obedience and silence lead to her destruction, while Jessica's rebellion grants her partial liberation but not full acceptance. Both characters reflect the ideological tensions of Renaissance England, where patriarchy and anti-Semitism shaped societal norms. By applying cultural materialist principles, we uncover how these plays subtly critique dominant ideologies. Marlowe and Shakespeare use Abigail and Jessica not only to reflect the constraints of their time but also to challenge them. Their stories reveal the costs of conformity and the risks of resistance, offering a nuanced commentary on power, identity, and marginalization.

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## Key Points

- Analysis of Abigail and Jessica through cultural materialism
- Abigail and Jessica are doubly marginalized as Jewish women in Renaissance England.
- Abigail's silence and obedience lead to her death; Jessica's rebellion offers limited freedom.
- Cultural materialism reveals how their portrayals critique patriarchal and anti-Semitic ideologies.
- Insights are provided into socio-economic and religious contexts.
- Both characters expose the contradictions within dominant social norms.
- The plays suggest the potential for resistance and subversion through literature.

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