

Portia-‘The merchant of Venice

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Abstract: Shakespeare the greatest writer in the English language, the world's pre-eminent dramatist and the ‘Bard of Avon’ in his plays chisels his female characters into phenomenal women of substance and strength, who could reflect and deflect time and ethos of Elizabethan society. One cannot deny the fact that Shakespeare's portrayal of his female characters is far more positive and more dignified than their portrayal in their sources. Although Shakespeare resonates the Elizabethan hegemonic patriarchy and its stereotype roles and responsibilities of women and men in society, he never obliterated to question, challenge, and modify those representations in his plays. One of Shakespeare's stalwart female characters who earned disapproval of many critics, shunned and left in the lurch and, yet, never failed to draw deliberation and emerges very fascinatingly as the protagonist of the play is Portia of The Merchant of Venice. This paper titled Portia-‘The Merchant of Venice’ is an attempt to analyse Portia as the real ‘Hero’ as well as ‘The Merchant of Venice’ of the play.

Shakespeare's Portia has provoked literary analyst and critics to engage in criticising as well as appreciating her. Early critics of 18th century were not really happy with Portia. However down the ages Portia has gained approval and acclaim and has been the favourite of feminist critics. In 1710, Charles Gildon expresses abhorrence for Portia's lack of femininity in his Remarks on The Plays of Shakespeare:

The Character of Portia is not every where very well kept, that is, the Manners are not always agreeable or convenient to her Sex and Quality; particularly (in III.iv. 60-78) where she scarce preserves her Modesty in the Expression. (Bloom 47-48)

William Hazlitt, writing in 1817 in his Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, seemingly annoyed with her intellectual display, positively attacks her.

Portia is not a very great favourite with us; neither are we in love with her maid, Nerissa. Portia has a certain degree of affectation and pedantry about her, which is very unusual in Shakespeare's women, but which perhaps was a proper qualification for the office of a ‘civil doctor,’ which she undertakes and executes so successfully. The speech about Mercy is very well; but there are a thousand finer ones in Shakespeare. We do not admire the scene of the caskets; and object entirely to the Black Prince, Morocchius. We should like Jessica better if she had not deceived and robbed her father, and Lorenzo, if he had not married a Jewess, though he thinks he has a right to wrong a Jew. (322)

However, Portia was rehabilitated by 19th century critics. Jameson, one of the noted critic of 19th century commented positively on Portia's obvious intelligence. To him Portia was not simply a character in a given play but was an individual who could be compared with individuals in other plays. Jameson remarks:

Portia, Isabella [in Measure for Measure], Beatrice [in Much Ado about Nothing], and Rosalind [in As You Like It], may be classed together as characters of intellect, because, when compared with others, they are at once distinguished by their mental superiority. In Portia, it is intellect kindled into romance by a poetical imagination.(12).

Heinrich Heine in 1838, presents Portia as an antithesis to Shylock and acknowledging the heroine's centrality to the play, while still holding great admiration for Shylock says:

In fact, with the exception of Portia, Shylock is the most respectable person in the whole piece (382).

Asserting Gervinus, Denton J. Snider, writing around 1890 comments:

Portia is the third great character of the play, and in importance stands quite on a par with Antonio and Shylock. Her function is mediatorial; in fact, she may be called the grand mediatrix of the entire drama. In her we see the instrumentality by which the main results are brought about.(Snider 316).

Many researchers on Shakespeare's female characters have also endorsed the magnitude of Portia to the play and also recognises her as a celebrated representation of liberated feminist spirit of the present age.

Emily Boulton, in her article, ‘I Stand for Sacrifice: The Heiress of Belmont and her Role as Hero’ states:

Of all of Shakespeare's heroines, perhaps none is stronger than Portia, the wealthy noblewoman in The Merchant of Venice. She is no Juliet or Cleopatra, to take refuge in suicide when things get tough. Nor is she a hapless Hero or doomed Desdemona, wrongfully maligned by backbiting villains. Rather, she is akin to the resourceful Rosalind or Viola, matching exquisite beauty with a sharp wit and keen intellect.

And in the words of Julie Hankey, Portia is,

A lady of standing, bristling with all the intellectual and artistic associations of Renaissance Italy (Hanley 440)

Even though the play begins with Antonio we realise that it very quickly shifts to conversation on Portia between Antonio and Bassanio. Bassanio, a young venetian of noble rank, wishes to woo the beautiful and wealthy heiress Portia of Belmont. Although we don't get to see her we still get to know her in Act I itself. Bassanio, we see is completely bewitched by her beauty and acknowledges and equates her with Cato's daughter and Brutus' Portia. She is a woman of virtue who is worthy and coveted by her suitors.

In Belmont is a lady richly left;
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages:
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.

O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift,
That I should questionless be fortunate! (TMV I.i.168-183)

Having squandered his estate, Bassanio is in need of 3,000 ducats to subsidise his expenditures as a suitor. Bassanio asks his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice. Antonio agrees, but since he is cash-poor, his ships and merchandise are busy at sea, he promises to cover a bond if Bassanio can find a lender, so Bassanio turns to the Jewish moneylender Shylock and names Antonio as the loan's guarantor. Antonio who has antagonised Shylock firstly through his outspoken antisemitism, next through his habit of lending money without interest which has forced Shylock to charge lower rates Shylock is at first reluctant to grant the loan. But finally agrees to lend the sum without interest to Bassanio upon one condition: if Bassanio is unable to repay it at the specified date, Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio does not want Antonio to accept such a risky condition; Antonio finally signs the contract.

In this scene we see Portia as an indirect catalyst of what precedes. Even though she is not directly responsible, we see her as the main cause for the fatal contract. This situation is typical of market impact, where one variable impacts the other causing a chain reaction which can favour some and disfavour some. Here the favoured are Bassanio and his friend Gratiano and disfavoured are in certain sense Antonio and to a greater extent Shylock. This is the first instance where Portia is also begotten as the Protagonist of the play. Some stories weave many characters into an ensemble story but even in such stories there is one character that is more important to the story than the rest. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien there are many characters that have great significance to the story but Frodo Baggins is the one who stands out because everyone else's destiny rests in his hands.

Portia is placed in a unique locale by her creator. She is young, beautiful and wealthy, having no male member to dictate terms. Absence of her father has made her more independent in her thoughts and actions. Although her father's will controls her choice for marriage, she remains a character with fierce autonomy and an astonishing sense of self. She is not happy being steered by others but rather wants to be the steerer of her own life. She is the very epitome of indomitable spirit and hence questions Nerissa of her father's will which is contrary to her independent spirit.

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none? (TMV I.ii.206-220)

Shakespeare while portraying Portia's father as dead, metaphorically suggests that even when the old orders (here the hegemonic patriarchy) is blotted out or annihilated from the

society or system still its mystic influence (father's will) continue to haunt the life of the people (Portia) (metaphorically symbolising all emancipated and empowered women). Shakespeare however, by implying Portia's assistance to Bassanio in choosing the right casket and succeeding in marrying the man of her choice leaves hope that, any haunting or impeding influence can be intelligently appropriated to fulfil once dreams.

Portia gives a hint in the song which is sung while Bassanio examines the caskets. The first three lines are particularly telling:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished? (TMV III.ii.1430-1433)

It does not take a superior intellect to realise that the last syllable of each line rhymes with lead, the material of the prize casket. The power of suggestion succeeds in penetrating Bassanio's subconscious, and he chooses correctly. Here Portia wins as the shrewd merchant by being patient and taking calculated risk which are essential qualities of a successful merchant and by setting the ground for further action in the play claims her chance as protagonist.

Next important scene where we see her both as a hero as well as a shrewd merchant is at the time of marriage where she seals the contract of marriage by giving Bassanio a ring and extracting an oath in addition. This particular scene rings a striking resemblance of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. Here Portia takes the place of Dushyantha the ring giver and Bassanio the place of Shakuntala the ring receiver. This reversal of role in my view gives credibility to Portia as a Protagonist.

This house, these servants and this same myself
Are yours, my lord: I give them with this ring;
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (TMV III.ii.1540-1545)

The giving and taking that happens here symbolises what happens in a trade transaction. Bassanio barter his life and fidelity to ring. Portia in offering all that she has, just by giving the ring profits more.

But when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence:
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead! (TMV III.ii.1553-1555)

Portia further is depicted as perfect counsellor and problem solver which is typical of a protagonist. She is not a 'Damsel in distress' but as a panacea to all her husbands worries. She displays a fine quality of a merchant by nudging her husband to confide in her the true cause for his worries. And also solves by offering 6000 ducats to pay Shylock and there by fixes Bassanio at her mercy. Later when refusal of Shylock to accept the money lands Antonio in the court it is Portia not Shylock who profits an ultimate bargain. The court scene is an icing on the cake wherein Portia unveils her acuity, agility, intelligence and shrewdness. The helplessness the playwright creates, leaves the court and the assembly paralysed and crippled. They become mute spectators incapable of saving esteemed Antonio. At this befitting time Portia arrives at the court in disguise as a young lawyer. This gender hybridity symbolically represents Portia evolving as 'Man hero' over 'female protagonist' or 'romantic protagonist'. And then as a man in control, powerfully brings the situation under control

and amazes the court with an unexpected twist defeating Shylock and saving Antonio.

Portia here profits doubly, one by establishing herself as an equal to man in intelligence and shrewdness before oppressive Venetian society and secondly by winning a chance to test her husband's loyalty who emotionally had told Antonio in the court that he esteemed his friend's life more and was ready to sacrifice his wife and all the riches he had to deliver him from the devilish money lender Shylock.

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life:
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you. (TMV IV. i.2227-2232)

When insisted by Bassanio to receive something in return as token of gratitude for saving his friend's life, Portia asks him to give his wedding ring, but Bassanio who now had to stand by his word had to part with his ring inevitably. Later when he reaches Belmont he is taken to task by Portia who holds enquiry against her husband and accuses him of infidelity. Here Portia is not a docile 'yes boss' Sita who jumps into Agni, to prove her chastity but an intelligent and a conscious Sita who questions 'Rama's fidelity'. While exhibiting the ring in her possession she makes an outrageous statement that she got the ring from a Doctor of law, emphasises equal law to men and women in matter of chastity which was impartial then. She is not ready to yield unless Bassanio feels guilty and pleads for forgiveness. She negotiates with him for one last time and bargains a dear profit by grinds him down at her mercy and threatens him with her infidelity if he loses the ring again.

Let not that doctor e'er come near my house:
Since he hath got the jewel that I loved,
And that which you did swear to keep for me,
I will become as liberal as you;
I'll not deny him any thing I have,
No, not my body nor my husband's bed:
Know him I shall, I am well sure of it:
Lie not a night from home; watch me like Argus:
If you do not, if I be left alone,
Now, by mine honour, which is yet mine own,
I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow. (TMV V. i.2691-2700)

In conclusion Portia stands better ground as the real 'Hero' and 'The merchant' of the play than Shylock. Not denying the fact the dynamic mutation the character of Shylock offers to literary analysts, Portia in collation to Shylock, is discredited of eminence. Even though Shylock receives ratification, his role is significantly small with 352 lines, appearing only in four scenes, whereas, Portia hauls nine scenes, with 574 lines and her part represents the fourth largest female role in the Shakespeare canon; only Rosalind, Imogen, and Cleopatra speak more lines. ([https://www.denvercenter.org/blog-posts/news-center/2015/08/21/shakespeare's-largest-female-role-might-](https://www.denvercenter.org/blog-posts/news-center/2015/08/21/shakespeare's-largest-female-role-might-surprise-you)

surprise-you) In addition to this she represents the nexus of the play: Bassanio's courtship crusades the action by creating a motive for him to borrow money and which in turn initiates the bond plot and trial plot, which later culminates the ring plot. Furthermore, she serves as deus ex machina to resolve both the bond episode and the ring episode, manipulating the trial as well as, the comic resolution of the play. If it not for Portia, the play might have ended very differently. She of all the female characters of Shakespeare is a fully drawn character who dominates the play as well as the stage. 'Portia the Hero'-as a key ingredient who works as an emotional heart of the story, attracts the audience emotionally and lets them relate with her joys, fears and hopes and ultimately emerges herself as more worthy 'Protagonist' and the true 'Merchant' of the play.

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