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Shakespeare's Portia: A Dominant Figure in Elizabethan Female Society

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Abstract

The Merchant of Venice is a 16th-century comedy written by William Shakespeare, in which Shakespeare provides a wide range of information from the Elizabethan era through his works. Portia is a central female figure of William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Portia is a rich, clever, attractive, beautiful, intelligent and quick-witted heiress of Belmont; her only weakness is being a woman in the 16th century, which she quite wittily doesn't let get in her way of being the heroine and the center protagonist of the play. This paper mainly deals the leading role of Portia in female characters. The roles of characters, as described by Shakespeare, reveal social norms that define female and male genders. Female characters in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice are underestimated because of the stereotypical gender roles. The roles of female characters revolve around the homestead, unless where a female character is from a wealthy family, a queen or a princess.

Keywords: Class, Elizabethan-period, feminism gender, renaissance, romantic-comedy, society, theatre, femininity, masculinity etc.

Introduction

Portia's character in The Merchant of Venice plays an important role in how the story goes on to the extent that we can consider it as the central character of the play. She is the one who does different things to change the destiny that defeats Shylock towards the end of the play. Portia's personage may be from one aspect regarded as feministic with regards to the historical and cultural context in which the story takes place. Portia is a rich, gracious, beautiful, intelligent and quick-witted heiress of Belmont; her only weakness is being a female character in the 16th century, which she quite wittily doesn't let get in her way of being the woman and the main protagonist of the play. She is bound by the lottery set forth in her father's will, which gives potential suitors the chance to choose between three caskets made of gold, silver and lead. If they select the right casket-the casket containing Portia's portrait and a scroll-they win her hand in marriage. If they select the incorrect casket, they must leave and never look for another woman in marriage. Portia is glad when two suitors, one driven by greed and another by vanity, fail to choose correctly, although she shows tact to the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, who unsuccessfully seek her hand. She secretly favours Bassanio, a young Venetian noble, and using her wit and intelligence, she does end up getting married to him. Later in the play, she disguises herself as a man and then acts the role of a lawyer's apprentice, named Balthazar whereby she saves Antonio's life, who is Bassanio's friend. In the court scene of the play Portia disguised as a lawyer enters and seeks a technicality in the bond. She outwits Jewish moneylender Shylock and saves Antonio's life from the pound of flesh demanded by Shylock. In the end

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Shylock leaves the trial with both his life and his job intact but retains only half of his money and is deprived of his identity on being forced to convert to Christianity, while Shylock's daughter Jessica and her husband Lorenzo with whom she had previously eloped are found in Portia's castle in complete happiness. Portia and Bassanio, on the other hand, live happily together along with Nerissa and her husband Gratiano.

Interdependence of wealth, masculinity, and public authority in her society, Portia remains the only character in the play who consistently controls her own destiny. (Hoff Kraemer)

Feminism takes various subdivisions touching on a specific area within the province of women's inequality. Radical feminism is a key subdivision, which demands a fundamental restructuring of the society in which male supremacy or patriarchal hierarchy is overthrown in economic and social backgrounds. In The Merchant of Venice, Portia is pictured as a radical feminist considering gender as her source of discrimination and oppression. A radical feminist basically believes that her discrimination and oppression originate from a woman's gender's inferiority. Portia is stereotypically treated a radical feminist in a male-dominated society due to her high-class locality and position as a single, extremely wealthy female without a father figure.

Main Discussion

Portia is also fond of wordplay and proverbs, frequently quoting and coining them, which was regarded a sign of wisdom and sharp wit in Elizabethan era. Some suggest that the character of Portia was depended on Queen Elizabeth herself, who also had a penchant for proverbs. The original

Portia Shakespeare drew from was Portia, Cato the Younger's daughter and wife of the Roman statesman Brutus, as well as several biblical allusions. Portia is a main character in the play as she is the center of the play taking a very leading role. She is the heroine of the play. She is the lady of Belmont. Of course she is rich as well since her father left property. She is cultured, refined, young and pretty. S.A Brooks calls her, 'queen of Beauty'. The fame of her beauty has spread far and wide, and a number of lovers are eager to marry her. As Bassanio puts it: For the four blow in from every coast, Renowned suitors, and sunny locks

*'Renowned suitors, and sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colcho's strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1. 168-172)*

Portia is considered one of the intellectual heroines of Shakespeare. Her intellect is seen in her wit, which is an expression of her wisdom. When she is introduced in Act I, Scene II of the play, she comments on the various suitors that have already arrived and her comments in each case are witty and to the point. When Morocco has made his choice, and taken to leave, that she sums him up in the following words:

*A gentle riddance,-Draw the curtains,-go,
Let all of his complexion choose me so.(2.7. 78-79)*

In the trial scene, Portia finds a technicality in the bond, she outwits the Jewish moneylender Shylock and saves Antonio's life from the pound of flesh demanded by Shylock when everyone fails to save the life of Antonio including the Duke. Portia delivers one of the most famous speeches in The Merchant of Venice:

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoken thus much to mitigate the
justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (4.1.
180-201)*

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Bassanio considered Portia, a beautiful rich heiress of Belmont, and described one of her suitors, whom she also likes back, as:

"In Belmont is a lady richly and she is fair, and fairer than that word, Of wondrous virtues. 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 suitor, and her sunny locks Hang on her temples like a golden fleece, Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchis' strand, And many Jasons come in quest of her" (Act 1 Scene 1, 160-172).

A woman in The Elizabethan Age was characterized by gentleness and submission, while a man was characterized by strength, power, and social standing. Portia examines her suitors with clarity and scorn-she deconstructs each man while questioning their masculinity with a pathological ferocity, commenting scornfully of the French lord,

*"God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man" (Act 1
Scene 3,47).*

Quotes like this reveal far more about Portia's character than about her unfortunate suitor. Unlike other descriptions of masculinity, Portia's appears to have little to do with merely physical characteristics. While the French lord, she says, is outwardly masculine, he does the role of a man so poorly that only God's intention qualifies him as a man. In addition, she clearly believes that she has a better understanding of what makes a truly masculine man. She shows her self-confidence in her opinions in Act 4 when she effortlessly puts on a masculine dress.

Among Portia's most obvious characteristics is her graciousness, which can be measured by her wit and sympathy. Despite her real feelings for the Prince of Morocco, Portia replies to him politely and reassuringly. Since the irony of her words is not clear to him, his feelings are spared. She tells him that he is

"as fair As any comer I have look'd on yet For my affection."

She shows Morocco the honor his rank deserves. But once he has gone, she reveals that she did not like him. *"A gentle riddance,"* she orders; *"Draw the curtains."*

When the Prince of Arragon reached, Portia carefully addressed him with all the deference due to his position. She calls him "noble." But after he has failed in test and has left, she cries out, "O, these deliberate fools!" she considers them shallow, greedy and self-centered; yet to their faces, she is as ladylike as possible. Lorenzo appreciates the gentle generosity of Portia; when she allows her new husband to leave to try and help his best friend out of his difficulty, he says to her:

"You have a noble and a true conceit of god-like amity."

Portia's true grit, resourcefulness, intelligence, and wit but she is constrained by her father's will to accept in marriage whichever suitor successfully passes the test of the three caskets. There are three caskets, each made of gold, silver and lead. One of the caskets lies Portia's portrait, and whoever chooses that particular casket, passes the test. Luckily, as an unsuccessful suitor must swear to never marry, most suitors refuse to go as far as the ordeal, but she is still not happy with her circumstances. She loves Bassanio and is highly hopeful that he will succeed. But she was worried enough so she begs him to wait a few days before attempting the task, as she does not want Bassanio to fail. This shows she knows which casket is the successful one so she has her band of personal musicians play a little tune during his meditations that contains many words rhyming with "lead" and that helps Bassanio make the right choice.

*"Tell me where is fancy bred.
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourishèd?
It is engendered in the eyes,
With gazing fed, and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
Let us all ring fancy's knell*

I'll begin it.-Ding, dong, bell. (Act 3, Scene 2, 65-74).

Shylock is very cunning, cruel, and inflexible and turns down all appeals to mercy. He even rejects to call her a lawyer. But very immediately she reverses and shocks him. He is offered to have only his pound of flesh as mentioned in the bond without shedding even a drop of blood. Later he comes to realize his inhumanity, mercilessness and cruelty.

It is apparent that during the Renaissance period women were not equal to men. So female roles were performed by young and handsome men. Naturally it would reflect in literature. Very effectively using these techniques, Shakespeare had shown the gender inequality prevailing during his time. In the play when her beloved's friend is in almost in dangerous situation, she has come for his rescue. Here she has proven her intelligence and witty by defending Antonio's case. May be those days women were not even allowed inside the public institutions like court. She with her assistant being disguised

as a male lawyer came prepared and won the case by showing her immense knowledge on mercy and law. She not only taught the lesson of mercy to Shylock but to the whole world. It can be said that there is no difference as far as gender is considered, for it is just an imposed one. She argued as any learned lawyer would do. Cross-dressing in this play is used to subtly criticize the society and the mindset of the patriarchal notions.

When Portia first comes into the play, it is assumed that she is in the traditional dress of women as suitors come and try to win her hand. Portia is not in control of her luck because she will not go against her father's wishes in regard to whom Portia will marry. She is assumed the dutiful, subordinate role of women at the time, she urges Bassanio to choose the right casket because she does not break the rules of her father's will. As a woman, Portia is submissive and obedient; as the lawyer and as a man, she shows her intelligence and brilliance. She saves Antonio's life, as fees she specifically asks for the ring that she gave Bassanio that he had sworn never to part with. He reluctantly gives it to her. However when they reunite later while Portia is in her own apparel and Bassanio doesn't know that she is the young lawyer in disguise, she points out that his ring is missing. He replies to Portia that he gave it to the lawyer, not best pleased by this, especially as he has earlier sworn he'd give her up to save Antonio, she tells him: "If you had known the virtue of the ring, Or half her worthiness that gave that ring, Or your own honour to contain the ring, You would not then have parted with the ring" (Act 5 Scene 1, 199-202).

Portia's choice of cross-dressing proves useful to her in proving Bassanio's faith in her and testing his vow to never remove the ring he gave her. As a lawyer, Portia is successful in saving Antonio from death, and Bassanio promises the lawyer anything that "he" wishes. Taking the opportunity to test her husband's loyalty, she asks for her own ring and Bassanio eventually agrees to give it due to gratefulness. Portia's test, and Bassanio's subsequent failing of the test, gives Portia an uncomfortable level of control over Bassanio as she is now able to dissolve their marriage if she wants. She practices the mercy that she suggested to Shylock and ends the play merrily in a way typical of Shakespeare's comedies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shakespeare's opinions on the role of women are not always certain because his strong female characters do eventually end up in the submissive and restraining role of marriage. But at the very least Shakespeare poses important questions on what it means to be a male or female, what the limitations of each are, and how those limitations are regulated by society. When all of the men have failed, she is the one who saves them. Quite heroically, she risks her life and reputation; she dresses up as a man. Shakespeare recognizes the intellect and abilities of women As Portia's journey shows. Portia's empowerment represents an achievement for Elizabethan feminism, but it fails to resonate in a modern feminist context. Portia is allowed to hold power only when she disguises a male role that is not hers, like when she plays the father by choosing her own husband and then tricks him into relinquishing traditional authority. A man with Portia's wealth would automatically be considered a prominent and powerful figure in the finance-centric Venice. In spite of Portia's strong, intelligent, sometimes vicious character, it is unacceptably vain for her to be such a woman in her society. Hence, Portia's public image will continue due to the speech she gave in Act III. Although she will have

complete control over herself, she still has to pretend that she is an “unlessoned girl” hiding her true authority under a thin veneer of submission. Ironically, it is only when Portia is disguised as a man that we see her for who she really is—a calculating judge willing to condemn not only the unworthy suitor or the Jew; but also her own husband.

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