

# A 21st Century View of Shakespeare's Portia in the Merchant of Venice

Yousma Sajad

7<sup>th</sup> Semester, Integrated English, Amar Singh College, Cluster University, Srinagar

**Abstract** - The Merchant of Venice is a 16th-century comedy written by William Shakespeare, in which a merchant in Venice named Antonio defaults on a large loan provided by a Jewish moneylender, Shylock. Portia is a rich, gracious, charming, 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 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 composed of gold, silver and lead. If they choose the right casket – the casket containing Portia's portrait and a scroll – they win her hand in marriage. If they choose the incorrect casket, they must leave and never seek another woman in marriage. Portia is glad when two suitors, one driven by greed and another by vanity, fail to choose correctly, although she demonstrates tact to the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, who unsuccessfully seek her hand. She 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, then assumes the role of a lawyer's apprentice (named Balthazar) whereby she saves the life of Bassanio's friend, Antonio, in court. In the court scene, Portia finds a technicality in the bond, thereby outwitting the Jewish moneylender Shylock and saving Antonio's life from the pound of flesh demanded when everyone else including the Duke presiding as judge and Antonio himself fails. 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 his 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, continue to live together along with the former's lady-in-waiting Nerissa and her husband Gratiano.

**Index Terms** - Heroine, will, disguise, moneylending, wit, marriage, gender discrimination.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, women had very less or almost no rights of their own. They lacked the freedom to make their own decisions for example Portia being controlled by her late father's will. Men who decided to marry were entitled to all of their wife's fortunes and everything which belonged to them, like when Portia married Bassanio, he became entitled to all of her wealth and belongings. Men did not think women were as intelligent as they were, and did not listen or take advice from women, which is why Portia had to dress up as a man to get the men in the court to listen to her, even more precisely, to enter the court.

In Shakespeare's controversial comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is an underrated and complex character. Portia, the heroine of the play is endowed with a great deal of wealth. Despite her father's will preventing her from marriage to a man of her own choice, Portia remains a character of intense independence and tremendous self-determination. She is shrewd and calculating and does not exhibit similar characteristics of other female characters in Shakespeare. Her fate firmly lies in the hands of the patriarchal system around her and instead of fighting it, she manipulates it to serve her own interests. Portia does not present as an individual looking to fight against social norms and further the female cause, rather she looks to fight against her own personal oppressions. She successfully manipulates those around her to end the play with more independence than she began with. By absorbing Shylock's wealth, Portia in fact is able to increase and remain sovereign over her inheritance. She begins the play a prisoner to her father's will and ends as independent as she can be. (Caravella) However, the play is more than a tale of feminine wiles overcoming male dullness of wit. While Portia's wealth and intellect may power her marriage and courtroom success, it is her ability to usurp typically masculine roles that makes her a winner in both cases. Through her manipulation of the

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

The title of the play is '*The Merchant of Venice*' which refers to Antonio and starts with the introduction of Antonio and his riches. While he does end up putting his life for Bassanio, his friend, it is not clear whether he would sign the bond, if he knew his ships would not make it safely to their shores. As we'll see in the article below, Portia is clearly the main protagonist of this play, as she saves 'the merchant's' life, putting hers at stake by donning the apparel of a man and entering the court, which was exclusively for men during those days, purely for the sake of the fact that Antonio was her husband's good friend.

Portia is a beautiful rich heiress of Belmont, described by Bassanio, 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 wond'rous 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 suitors, 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 Shakespeare's time was characterized by gentleness and submission, while a man was characterized by strength, power, and social standing. Portia, however, is a far more complex personality than Bassanio's superficial description suggests. Portia evaluates her suitors with both 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 than about her unfortunate suitor. Unlike most 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 performs the role of a man so poorly that only God's intention qualifies

him as a man. In addition, she obviously believes that she has a better understanding of what makes a truly masculine man. She demonstrates her self-confidence in her opinions in Act 4, when she effortlessly assumes masculine dress.

Among Portia's most obvious characteristics is her graciousness, which can be measured by her tact and sympathy. Despite her real feelings about the Prince of Morocco, Portia answers him politely and reassuringly. Since the irony of her words is not apparent 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 is gone, she reveals that she did not like him. *"A gentle riddance,"* she says; *"Draw the curtains."*

When the Prince of Arragon arrives, Portia carefully addresses him with all the deference due his position. She calls him "noble." But after he has failed and has left, she cries out, *"O, these deliberate fools!"* To her, both of these men are shallow and greedy and self-centered; yet to their faces, she is as ladylike as possible. Lorenzo appreciates this gentle generosity of spirit; when Portia has allowed 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."*

Despite Portia's true grit, resourcefulness, intelligence, and wit, she is constrained by her late 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 them contains Portia's portrait, and the one who chooses that particular casket passes the test. Luckily, as an unsuccessful suitor must swear to never marry, most of them refuse to go as far as the ordeal, but she is still not happy with her circumstances. She likes Bassanio and is highly hopeful that he will succeed, but worried enough that she begs him to wait a few days before attempting the task, as she does not want him to leave as he will have to if he fails. By this point, she knows which casket is the successful one, and 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).*

At the beginning of the play, we do not see Portia's potential for initiative and resourcefulness, as she is a near prisoner, feeling herself absolutely bound to follow her late father's wishes. Portia delivers a sobering introduction in her debut, in which she is revealed as the rarest of all combinations: a free spirit who still adheres to rules rigidly. Portia's fate is determined by the test her father gives to her suitors. She is unable to choose her own suitor but is forced to marry whoever passes. She has wealth but has no control over her own destiny. It is sad that she has no option in such an important matter of her life, but rather than ignoring the stipulations of her father's will, she watches a stream of suitors come and go, happy to see these particular suitors go, but distressed that she has no choice in the matter. However, when Bassanio arrives, Portia quickly shows her resourcefulness, begging the man she loves to stay a little while before picking a chest, finding loopholes in the will that we never imagined existed, and surprising us with her inventiveness.

When Bassanio passes the test, Portia immediately agrees to divest all her riches, property, and power over to him in order to be his loving and dutiful wife. She is passed from one man's control, her father's, to another, her husband's. Portia slips Bassanio a ring on his finger and announces how she and everything she owns is now his inheritance, after Bassanio picks the correct casket for Portia and wins her as his wife. Here, Portia subtly assumes a male role – she gives herself away, a duty that is usually reserved for a bride's father:  
*"Myself and what is mine to you and yours  
Is now converted: but now I was the lord*

*Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,  
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."(Act 3 Scene 2, 170-179)*

Although Portia has not indicated whether she will test Bassanio's love or not, she has left a loophole for herself to reclaim her power. She hints that if Bassanio loses the ring, he might lose his wife and the property that comes with it, too. Nevertheless, Portia appears to have hardly given any power away.

In fact, Bassanio's correct choice of the casket overwhelms Portia, as this choice of his grants her a life partner of her choice, which would otherwise be impossible. After handing over everything she has including her ownself to him, she wishes she had more of everything to give Bassanio:

*"yet for you  
I would be trebled twenty times myself—  
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich—  
That only to stand high in your account  
I might in virtue, beauties, livings, friends  
Exceed account. But the full sum of me  
Is sum of something which, to term in gross,  
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticèd;  
Happy in this—she is not yet so old  
But she may learn. Happier than this—  
She is not bred so dull but she can learn.  
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit  
Commits itself to yours to be directed  
As from her lord, her governor, her king." (Act 3 Scene 2, 156-169)*

Though Portia's congratulatory speech appears submissive and feminine, it is laced with a variety of masculine undertones. Portia refers to herself repeatedly in oblique ways that, outside of the context of her speech, would have made any Elizabethan suitor uncomfortable:

*But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself; . . . (Act 3 Scene 2,167-9)*

Portia was not the 'lady' of the house but its 'lord,' not the servants' 'mistress' but their 'master.' Though Portia breaks the pattern by calling herself 'queen' as opposed to 'king,' the image she paints has connotations of masculine control and dominance. The archetype of the feminine caregiver is entirely absent.

Finding that Bassanio owes three thousand ducats to Antonio, which he owes to Shylock, Portia exclaims:

*"Pay him six thousand and deface the bond!  
Double six thousand, and then treble that"* ( Act 3  
Scene 2, 306-307)

Despite pledging all her property to Bassanio, Portia clearly maintains control over her wealth. Moreover, Portia can use this move to downplay Antonio's relationship with Bassanio, considering Bassanio's behavior suggests that he might put his friend ahead of his wife. Portia can offer 36 thousand ducats for Bassanio compared to Antonio's three, demonstrating her financial power and preference. Portia's money again has enabled her to break into the primarily male world of finance, allowing her to access a path towards Bassanio's love that previously only Antonio had been able to take.

Later, Portia shows her wit and intelligence in the court. However, she is only able to do this by dressing up as a man. Portia and her maid Nerissa were forced to disguise as young men, in order to enter the court. Knowing that the society of her time wouldn't accept a woman in the court, she wasted no time in just dressing up and taking up the name and identity of a man - Balthazar. She starts by asking Shylock to show mercy upon Antonio and take the principal amount instead of the flesh of pound mentioned in the bond signed by him. And when he asks why he must show mercy, she proceeds to give one of the play's most famous speeches:

*"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 thronèd 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 scepter'd sway.  
It is enthronèd 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 spoke 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."*  
(Act 4 Scene 1)

However, he remains inflexible and insists that the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Shylock demands to collect the bond as it is written, despite Bassanio's offer of twice the amount he was due. Portia examines the contract and declares that Shylock is entitled to the flesh of the merchant, finding it legally binding. Shylock lauds her wisdom exuberantly; Shylock is on the verge of cutting into Antonio when Portia reminds him that the bond stipulates a pound of flesh only and makes no allowances for blood. She urges Shylock to continue collecting his pound of flesh but reminds him that even if a single drop of blood is spilled, he will be guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen and all his lands and goods will be confiscated by the state. Hence, she finds a loophole in the bond signed by Antonio. Since Antonio was bidding farewell to his friends and had accepted his fate as death by the hands of Shylock, we can undoubtedly say that the deed must have been read by the men in the court very well. In fact, Shylock's intention while demanding a pound of flesh was Antonio's life. However, none of them could point out this loophole. After being shocked, Shylock makes a hasty decision to accept three times the sum, but Portia remains steadfast, insisting that Shylock must obtain the pound of flesh or nothing at all. In desperation, Shylock drops the case when he finds out he can't even take the original three thousand ducats for his pound of flesh, but Portia insists Shylock takes his bond as written, or nothing. Furthermore, Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against a Venetian citizen, which means he must hand half of his estate over to the state while the other half must be handed over to Antonio the scene not only shows that Portia is quick-witted, but also that she is well-versed with the law of

the state. Shylock is effectively manipulated by her, and at times, brutally, with little mercy shown to him in lieu of what she strongly advises, leaving him penniless and even compelled to become Christian in order to survive.

As a woman, Portia is submissive and obedient; as the judge and as a man, she demonstrates her intelligence and her brilliance. As thanks for saving Antonio's life, 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, later on, when they re-unite while Portia is in her own apparel, and Bassanio doesn't know she was the young lawyer in disguise, she points out that his ring is missing. He replies 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).

Despite his promises of good faith, she vows that she would sleep with the lawyer in possession of the ring if he showed up. She finally lets him in on the plot to his obvious relief. Furthermore, she lets Antonio know one of his ships reached shore after all, so he is not ruined after all. Even though she was a 16th century woman who had no rights of her own and was owned by a man, Portia ensures Bassanio is made aware of her alter ego; in disguise as the lawyer, she has him give her the ring that she has given him. In doing so, she proves that it was she posing as the judge and that it was she who was able to save his friend's life. In the process, she establishes her power and importance in the relationship and establishes a precedent for their future together.

Portia's final but most effective assumption of a masculine role seems to take place spontaneously. Having used what is traditionally a male study – law, in order to save Antonio, and disguised as a man, she seeks Bassanio's ring as a token of gratitude. The symbolism here is complex. If Bassanio gives the ring away, he also gives up his wife and his property, demonstrating that he values his friendship more than his marriage. However, in this case "the other man" is Portia. By receiving the ring, Portia takes on the male

role. Basically, Bassanio has accidentally given her control over her own body, and even returned the property and power that she had given with the ring. Therefore, Portia has cleverly exploited Bassanio's failure to pass her test of loyalty, and she has reaped the punishment of withholding any nominal control she had planned to give him. Interestingly, Portia has become the epitome of the traditional autonomous male at the end of the play -- her body is her own, she is financially independent, and she has more social power than any of the male characters. (Hoff Kraemer)

It is pertinent to mention the immense gratitude and thanks Bassanio and Antonio shower over Portia and Nerissa, when they thought the latter duo were young men. However, when Portia revealed that they were the ones disguised as the lawyer and his companion, they weren't appreciated as they ought to be. Also, it is noteworthy that Portia and Nerissa did not make a hue and cry about it. The subtle gender discrimination is noticeable by the readers, while male characters are offered the highest levels of gratitude possible, female characters are not offered any such thing, although it is very evident that they had to take more pains to accomplish the task.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Portia is the heroine in the play because all the men have failed, financially, legally, and by their own vengeance. When all the men have failed, she is the one who saves them. Quite heroically, she risks her life and reputation going into a man only gathering, dressed up as a man. As Portia's journey demonstrates, Shakespeare recognizes the intellect and abilities that women have but concedes that they can only be demonstrated when on a level playing field with men. Though Portia's empowerment represents an achievement for Elizabethan feminism, it fails to resonate in a modern feminist context. Portia is allowed to hold power only when she seizes a male role that is not hers, like when she plays the father by choosing her own husband and then hoodwinking him into relinquishing traditional authority. A man with Portia's wealth would automatically be regarded as a prominent and powerful figure in the finance-centric Venice. Portia, however, wields power *despite* her sex, not regardless of it. (Hoff Kraeman) 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 to have to be linked to the speech she gave in Act III, quite unfortunately. Although she will have complete control over herself, she still has to pretend that she's an "unlessoned girl," hiding her true authority under a thin veneer of submission. Ironically, it is only when Portia assumes a disguise that we see her for who she really is - a calculating judge willing to condemn not only the inadequate suitor or the Jew, but also her own husband.

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