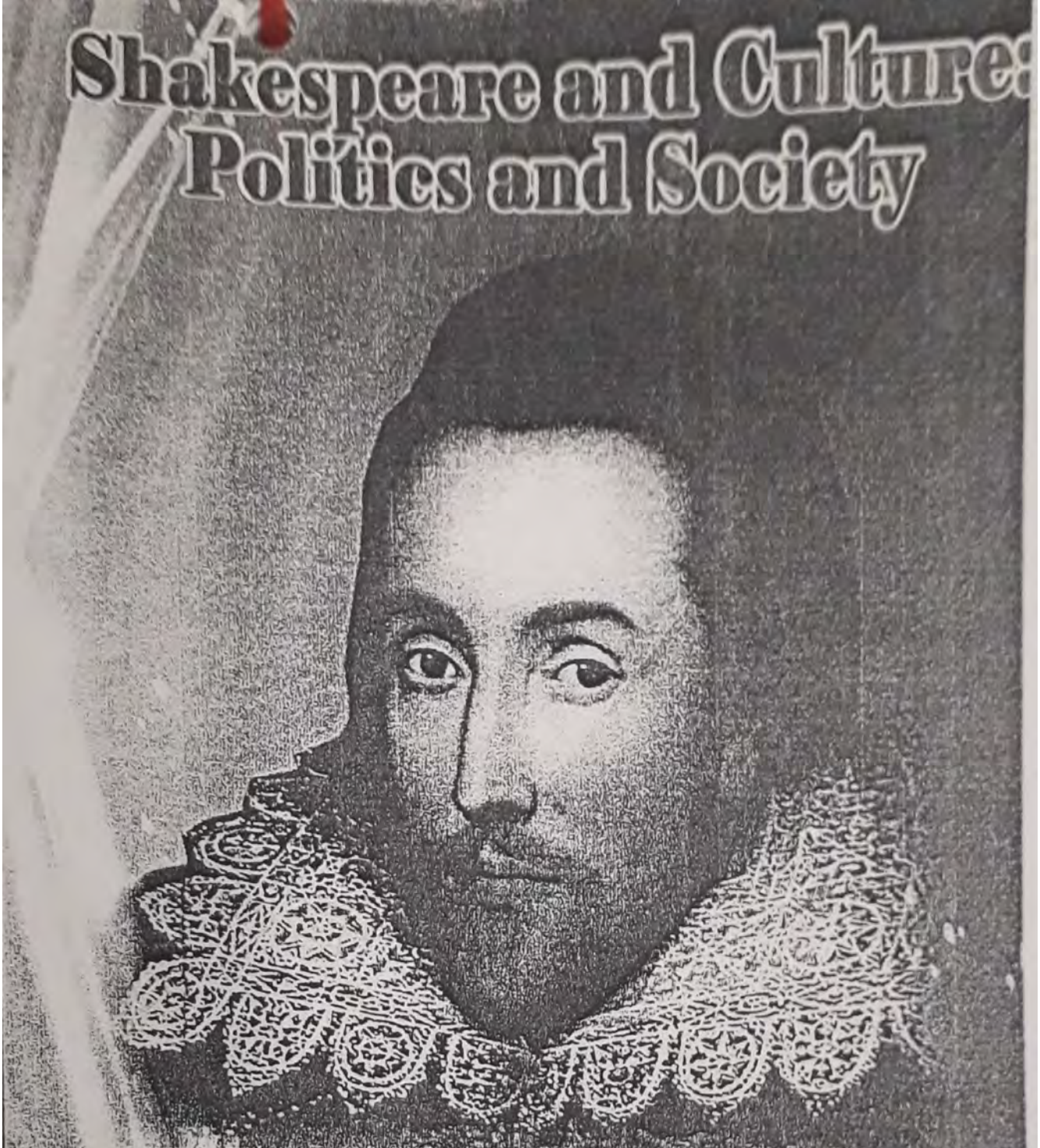
Shakespeare and Culture: Politics and Society



Selected Papers Presented in the National Seminar

on

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Dr. A. Joycilin Shermila
Dr. V. Chanthiramathi

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William Shakespeare's Immortal Portia

Dr. Gomez Sophia & Mrs. G. Vijayalekshmi
Associate Professors of English
Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women,
Periyakulam

Shakespeare's creation of women is a true work of art, an expression of the bard's innermost feelings in a singular manner that has no resemblance to anything else. Inspiration wells exclusively from his plays. His ideas thoughts and images blazon abroad like a golden horn with his characters carrying messages to the world. His plays are a gift, a diamond. We have treasured his collection, we shall never lose time to polish, to show its brilliance to generations to come. His deep vision penetrates the essence of things and he broadly covers various aspects of life in his portrayals. Every play of Shakespeare is a prism that refracts perception of life. His plays are a high minded work of art which unavoidably sets the readers thinking about life. His works enlighten and assert man on earth, they are bearers of all that is best, dearest, wisest and wonderful. Nothing is more enlightening, nothing more purifies the soul than what we experience perusing a play of Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare's women, we find the author see distinctly and hew the characters admirably. Except a few, his women would be a blessing anywhere. They are so structured that they are guided by cautious decision of sober reason, judgment and enlightened conscience. They are a blessing to their family and their prospects in this world and in the better world, are a gift.

Shakespeare never designed or patterned a lightening hero to confront or overcome people like Shylock. He brought in a heroine like Portia under the guise of a Judge

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to redeem Antonio. This is where the great dramatist stands high. Shakespeare's creation of Portia is something entirely unique. Portia has been richly portrayed with real talent, a gorgeous, gracious flower of crowning beauty, who saves Antonio in the hour of mortal danger. Shakespeare's character Portia carries light wherever she goes. She shows that she has strength of purpose, a strong symmetrical beautiful character. A faithful obedience to her father's requirements has a surprising influence to elevate develop and strengthen all her faculties.

Her speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* elevates, refines and ennobles. She enlightens as one who professes to serve the needy. She stands high in the opinion of the readers and to the world. The truth in her appeals to the intellect. Shakespeare shapes her mind with pure principles. We could see every stamp of the great writer in Portia who is balanced by right principles. Her talk on God's infinite mercy reflects God's love, a fresh honest zeal. As the dew and the still showers fall gently on the withering plant, so are her words on mercy. A. C Ward says that Portia resembles a princess in a fairy tale but her character has depth and a certain sharp tongue that spices her sense of humour her intelligence and wit, her tenderness and generosity.

When we first see Portia she is nominally mistress of herself and heir to a rich estate. Her father's will stipulates how her marriage is to take place. He has left behind three caskets –Gold Silver and Lead. In one of them is the portrait of Portia. The man who selects the right casket will win her hand in marriage. Portia believes her father as a holy man who has got inspirations before death. To Portia however it is an anxiety about her future. When she falls in love with Bassanio, her degree of anxiety rises. Bassanio describes Portia in glowing words to Antonio. She is an heiress richly left. "Her name is Portia, nothing

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undervalued/To cato's daughter Brutus Portia" (I, I, 165 - 166).

Bassanio describes her eloquently and his impassioned description proves that she was a beauty sought by many

> . . . and her sunny locks. . .
> Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;
> Which makes her seat of BelmomColchos' strand,
> And many Jasons come in quest of her. (I. i. 169 - 172)

Immense wealth has been left behind by her father and the fame of her beauty and wealth draws suitors from all over the world. The golden locks clustering round her face may be compared to the Golden Fleece which Jason sought. Portia is very keen in observing her suitors. But she respects her father and declares to abide by the terms of her father's will even at the risk of dying unmarried. She is even prepared to live to be as old as the Cumaen sibyl and remain unmarried till her death as chaste as Diana rather than break the conditions imposed on her marriage by her father's will. "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as/Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will" (I. i. 98 - 100).

These words prove Portia's character to be earnest pious and sincere. Many men desire Portia from distant parts of the world.

> From the four corners of the earth they come,
> To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint:
> Of wide Arabia are as thoroughfares now
> For princes to come and view fair Portia. (II. vii. 39-43)

The deserts of Arabia and Hyreania have become thoroughfares now being continually traversed by many princely suitors of Portia. They come like pilgrims to kiss a famous shrine. The prince of Morocco likens her to 'an angel

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stamped in gold'. In the casket scene Portia vainly tries to detain Bassanio a few more days or even hours before making the choice which might end in irretrievable disaster to their love. She commands music to be played so that if Bassanio fails he might fade away in music like a dying swan. During the time of Shakespeare a popular belief was that a swan died in a wild rapture of song. "Let music sound while he doth make his choice:/Then, if he lose, he makes a swan- like end" (III, ii, 45-47).

Portia appears entirely different. She forgets her maidenly reserve and coyness her girlish weakness is very well seen and when Bassanio succeeds she is overwhelmed with delight. She is so happy to surrender her whole self to him. She appears to be more sincere, passionate and romantic in the casket scene. She is very anxious that Bassanio chooses the apt casket. So she compares him to Hercules and herself to Hesione. Hercules rescued Hesione slaying a monster.

The love for Bassanio is strong in Portia that she becomes more active in the salvation of Antonio. Portia's concern for Antonio is an unreflecting generosity of feeling not a measured fulfillment of obligation. Portia has been portrayed as the most interesting character Portia reveals a fresh facet of her rich and complex personality in all successive role in the play. She is her own mistress of all intents and purposes. She excels in neat and quick retorts. She plays the role of Dr. Balthazar so accurately that any reflection of her own feminine self could be seen. She is far more at home in her disguise and entirely serious as Dr. Balthazar.

In the great Trial scene she displays her admirable histrionic talent. In her disguise she acquits herself with distinction. Her poise and self- restrain are superb. Her keen sense of observation plays upon Shylock's feelings with

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consummate skill. She gives Shylock a long rope, to soar to absurd heights in order to smash everything to nothing. Her dialectical skill eloquence and insight into motives and behaviour is greatly admired. She excels in the Trial scene. The scene shows Portia's triumph and intellectual supremacy.

She dominates her surroundings in a way that many men might envy her. Her intellectual abilities are well above the average. As a judge she admirably discharges her duties in the Trial scene. Her plea for mercy is a masterpiece of eloquence in support of the extra- legal principle of equity. Her intellectual endowments are admirable. Her famous speech on 'the quality of mercy' is really an adequate explanation for the punishment of Shylock. She points out that revenge is only a partial remedy and mercy alone can render happiness.

> The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
> 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 is an attribute
> to God himself;
> And earthly power doth then show likest God's
> When mercy seasons justice. (Act IV, Scene i)

Women assuming the garb and playing the role of men is a favorite dramatic device with Shakespeare. Portia's appearance at the Trial scene is highly dramatic and picturesque. Her role is not only appropriate but essential in a dramatic sense. Portia has been successfully portrayed by Shakespeare as an exceedingly dramatic and happy device to deliver Antonio from shame disgrace and death. Portia is perhaps the most perfectly developed feminine character depicted by Shakespeare.

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