

**WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE :  
A REREADING**

**Editors**

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## Shakespeare's Portia – A Rereading

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Shakespeare lives in all our hearts as he wrote in an age outstanding in literary history and vitality of language. The Elizabethan literary language, in the era in which Shakespeare wrote, was addressed to a mixed public. The era of Shakespeare saw the rise in capitalism, Puritanism and evolved the period of renaissance. William Shakespeare penned his plays during a complicated time in history. Sixteenth century England awarded little worth to its female members of society but this steadily changed because the country was ruled by a woman. Queen Elizabeth I ascended an embattled throne, her country politically and religiously torn, but under her absolute rule England became increasingly powerful.

Though Shakespeare has created the character of Portia as the most superior in intellect, the most prominent and appealing of the heroines in Shakespeare's mature romantic comedies, she is portrayed an angelic girl. As Virginia Woolf states in her *Professions for Women* “:

...the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. ...you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the

difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace.

Men expect an angel who is ready to do all help. She should be submissive. Her wish would be nothing in front of her husband's desires. In this play, Portia loses her identity. Even though she voluntarily obeys to her father's wish, she loses her identity. In the trial scene, though she helps her husband's friend voluntarily, it shows that she loses her identity by entering the court in disguise. It proves that all men view a woman is a woman, and a woman she must remain but a 'man's shadow self', 'an appendage', and 'an auxiliary'.

In Act II of the play, a scene portrays the conversation between the Prince of Morocco and Portia. Portia is unable to choose her partner because of her father's will. She has no choice regarding her marriage or love. Shakespeare here clearly portrays the patriarchal society. She replies to the Prince of Morocco, a man of dark complexion, that she could not choose by outward looks as other maiden does. 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. The person who chooses the right casket – the casket containing Portia's portrait and a scroll– would win Portia's hand in marriage. If they choose the wrong casket, they must leave and never seek another woman in marriage. Portia says:

In terms of choice I am not solely led  
By nice direction of a maiden's eyes:  
Besides, the lottery of my destiny  
Bars me the right of voluntary choosing.

(2.1. 12-16)

She feels that she does not have the right of choosing her partner. Even though she likes or not, she takes the people to the temple before going to the place where the caskets are.

Next, the Prince of Arragon comes to make his choice. It is felt that a woman's marriage is dependant in the casket as in India, it is in the hands of astrologers and in the mouth of parrots. She is not given a chance to choose her own life partner. She is not given respect even as much as an unknown astrologer or an unintelligent bird is given and here a material thing 'casket' has a higher role in determining with whom she should live with.

When people come to make choices, a woman reader can feel the psychological agony of Portia. In this process, a female can feel the stress of another female. In Act II, Scene IX, Bassanio arrives there to make choice. Since he is the hero, it happens as the luck favours. Before going to choose the caskets, Portia begs him to wait, for in choosing wrongly, she will lose his company. She loves him more and it is vividly seen in the words of Portia:

I pray you, tarry: pause a day or two  
Before you hazard; for in choosing wrong,  
I lose your company: therefore, forbear awhile.

(2.9. 1-3)

Here she is in a situation not to teach how to choose right, because she has made an oath. She is portrayed as a woman of virtues. She is sincere and obedient to her father's command.

Brandes remarked in the same vein, "She has along with all womanly virtues, a larger share than most women have of some qualities...". She is beautiful, gracious, rich, intelligent, and quick-witted, with high standards for her potential romantic partners. She obeys her father's will, while steadfastly seeking to obtain Bassanio. As Elaine Showalter points out, "If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men thought women should be." Years of patriarchal rule has engraved in the minds of women a sense of obedience and it helps Portia to subjugate herself to Bassanio effortlessly in the name of love. Portia utters:

There's something tells me, but it is not love  
I would not lose you; and you know yourself,  
.....  
I could teach you  
How to choose right, but I am then forsworn;

(2.9. 4-11)

Bassanio chooses the correct casket. It is evident that men expect women to surrender everything to them immediately after marriage. It is portrayed in this play by Shakespeare. This complete surrender is expected by men in the world. She surrenders herself and her richness, property immediately after Bassanio has chosen the correct casket. Complete surrendering and submissiveness is depicted and it is expected by the men writers. In fact she is modest, rich and charming, describes herself as an "unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised". As Simone de Beauvoir rightly says in her *Second Sex*, her single most famous assertion—"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman... Instead of rejecting "otherness" as an imposed cultural construct,

women, in their opinion, should cultivate it as a source of self-knowledge and expression, and use it as the basis to critique patriarchal institutions". Portia speaks out:

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand  
Such as I am: though for myself alone  
I would not be ambitious in my wish,  
I would ne 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 virtues, beauties, livings, friends,  
Exceed account; but the full sum of me  
is sum of nothing, which, to term in gross,  
Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised;

...

What is mine to you and yours  
is now converted: but now I was the lord

...

This house, these servants and this same myself  
are yours, my lord... (3.2. 150-170)

When she wants to help Antonio, she dresses like a young man. It reveals the condition of women in that era that they are not allowed to enter into the court as civil doctors. She speaks with a voice of a boy passing into the deeper notes of a man. She herself said that she is unlesson'd girl but Shakespeare ends this play that Portia is the intelligent of all. Her resourcefulness, self-confidence and ability to achieve what men around her cannot even contemplate.

In the court scenes, Portia finds a technicality in the bond, thereby outwitting Shylock and saving Antonio's life when everyone else fails.

Even though Shakespeare heightens the character of Portia, the expectation of a male writer is proven. Women are treated as angels and mothers who sacrifices her life for the welfare of others. Portia offers herself to Bassanio in the name of love and adopts herself to her typical, traditional woman.

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