

A Character Sketch of Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice'

(B.A. English Subsidiary. Part-1. Paper-1)

Portia is the heroine of William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'. She is one of the most prominent and appealing of the heroines in Shakespeare's mature romantic comedies. She is beautiful, gracious, rich, intelligent, and quick-witted, with high standards for her potential romantic partners.

Shakespeare crafts a dynamic female character uncommon to his collection of plays. Portia, the lovely and wealthy heiress, exemplifies stereotypical feminine qualities but also exhibits independent and intelligent thought. Most of Shakespeare's female roles function as static characters designed to further the plot action; they are elements of the backdrop against which the male protagonist and antagonist act. In fact, in Shakespearian drama, any strong female character generally exhibits masculine qualities. Thus Portia acts as an exception to the norm. Her command of logic is as stunning as her beauty, and this depth of character has placed Portia at the center of much literary analysis. Portia typifies the ideal, well-rounded woman. Portia has been called by critics one of the most perfectly developed female characters of Shakespeare. S. A. Brooke has called her, "the queen of beauty". Jessica calls her beautiful "past all expressing". She possesses physical as well as the beauty of character. She is so beautiful that suitors come to woo her from distant lands like so many Jasons in search of Golden Fleece.

Portia is one of the most prominent of Shakespeare's heroines in his

mature romantic comedies. She is beautiful, gracious, rich, intelligent, and quick-witted. Born in rich, aristocratic family, she is noble, generous and large-hearted. She has been given the best of education by a wise father, and so is cultured and refined. She represents all that is sweetest and best in womanhood. She can quote with perfect ease from classical writers, and frequently alludes to classical mythology. With all her refinement and love of learning, she is a typical product of Renaissance.

Her character is a clever blending of opposites. The gay and the serious, the feminine and the masculine, elements are skillfully mixed up in her character. The key-note of her character is her sprightly wit and humour and this trait is kept prominent throughout the play. Her wit and humour is first seen in her remarks to Nerissa about her various suitors. Her love of fun asserts itself even during the trial scene, and she cannot help joking with Bassanio, when he says that he will sacrifice even his wife to save his friend. She says, 'Your wife will give you little thanks, for that, if she were by, to hear you make the offer.'

Portia has great intellectual ability. She is shrewd judge of human nature. Her remarks to Nerissa about her six suitors reveal a keen intellect and a true understanding. She shows wisdom and resourcefulness in carrying out her plan of appearing in the court of Venice, disguised as a lawyer. She arranges all the necessary details with an almost masculine self-confidence and practical common sense.

Indeed, her intellectual ability has led critics, like Hazlitt, to accuse her of being unfeminine, masculine and pedantic. They point out that it is immodest and masculine on her part to appear in the court in man's clothing. No woman in the world would act in this way. She is entirely lacking in maidenly modesty. However, all such criticism is unjustified. Her truly feminine nature is seen even in the trial scene. Only a true

woman, with a deeply religious nature can make the famous “quality of mercy” speech. She remains faithful to the will of her father.

Her womanly nature is best displayed by her love of Bassanio. Her love of him is deep and passionate, sincere and true. In the expression of her love she is self-restrained and modest as a maiden should be.

She is self-surrendering and humble in her love. When Bassanio has made the right choice, she surrenders herself completely to his direction and calls Bassanio her lord and master. She places her own self and all that belongs to her, at the disposal of her husband.

Another quality to note about her is her poetic imagination. This is best seen in her speech at the time when Bassanio proceeds to make her choice. She compares him to Hercules, Nerissa and others to the weeping Trojan women, and herself to the ‘Virgin tribute’ whom Hercules had saved from the sea monster. She has artistic taste. She loves music and has her own band of musicians.

Many aspects of Portia’s character reflect the view of Shakespeare’s contemporaries that a woman ought to be obedient and humble. Even though her father is deceased, Portia commits herself to obeying his final command. She will not choose a husband for herself; instead, potential suitors must enter a lottery designed by her late father. Each man must select one of three caskets, and the bachelor who opens the casket containing Portia’s portrait earns her hand in marriage. Portia bemoans her inability to decide her own fate, but follows her father’s procedure, declaring, “If I live as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste / as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of / my father’s will”. She also shows great humility before her potential husbands. When explaining the pledge each suitor must take, Portia comments, “To these injunctions every one doth swear / That comes to hazard for my worthless self”. When the lottery finally produces Bassanio as Portia’s husband, she submits herself to him completely. Portia exhibits the

qualities of the submissive, humble woman that Shakespeare's society expected in the perfect female.

This dynamic female character also exemplifies the stereotypical heiress; only her beauty matches her immense riches. The extensive parade of suitors seeking Portia as a wife shows her high desirability. Shakespeare paints Portia as this demi-god, idealized and widely sought by eligible princes and wealthy suitors.

These feminine qualities are typical of Shakespeare's female characters; thus, Portia's distinctiveness lies in her depth. Not only does Portia illustrate clichéd female attributes, but she also possesses a keen sense of logic. This intelligence shines at Antonio's trial when she impersonates the Doctor. Portia first attempts to utilize her command of language and persuasion to convince Shylock to exercise mercy. She professes, "The quality of mercy is not strained, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed- / It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes". Shylock refuses to relent, however, and Portia uses his own pleas for justice against him. Shylock exclaims, "I crave the law" and Portia delivers just that. She examines the bond and declares, "This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood, / The words expressly are a pound of flesh. / Take then they bond, take thou thy pound of flesh, / But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are by the laws of Venice confiscate" Portia wields the letter of the law further, observing that Shylock intends to murder Antonio and should be punished accordingly. Portia secures half of the Jew's money for the state and the other half for Jessica and Lorenzo upon the father's death. Finally, as a joke meant to chide her husband for the cavalier attitude he expresses towards his wife at the trial, she cunningly convinces Bassanio to give her his wedding ring. Once all of the characters have returned to Portia's estate, Portia uses her sharp wit to

tease Bassanio before finally revealing the truth to him and returning the ring. Portia's entire scheme- from disguising herself to winning Antonio's freedom to tricking Bassanio and taking his ring- reflects her sharp wit and intellect. These final personality traits create a dynamic, rounded character in Portia.

Critics liked to compare Portia with Shylock, and the comparison brings out the salient traits of her character. One of them has said that while 'Portia is the beauty of the play, Shylock is its strength'. She stands for everything bright, generous and noble, while Shylock is dark, evil and mischief-making. She represents the forces of good, while he stands for those of wickedness.

Shakespeare's treatment of Portia is unique. As the plot progresses, her character gains more depth and becomes increasingly dynamic. At the beginning of the play Portia is merely an object Bassanio pursues, but by the end of the comedy her character plays a major role in the trial and ring episode. Thus, her character begins as an element of the plot and finishes as a driving force behind the plot. In Portia, Shakespeare creates a woman who demonstrates both conventional feminine traits and a strong intellect not typical in most female characters of the time. Her obedience and humility are juxtaposed against her independence and cleverness; Portia thus represents the perfect balance between the submissive and the strong woman. Her obedience, her wealth, her beauty, and her wit all form the idyllic female.

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