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From Casket to Court via Mercy and the Ring: Commemorating Shakespeare's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*

Abstract: Shakespeare's comedies mark his artistic excellence in the portrayal of woman characters. Shakespearean women have invariably moved the audience and their understanding towards them from being sweet and mawkish to expressing their needs sternly for integrity, justice through wit and intelligence in his plays. Often strongly approved by the modern feminists, the qualities of intelligence and assertiveness are regarded as admirable qualities in Shakespearean comic heroines. As revolutionaries, Shakespearean female characters have always been projected as strong, sometimes stronger than the male counterparts; often going against the conventions of the society to symbolize what gender equality in the future may be like. Essential qualities like intelligence and wit always fulfilled and made Shakespearean heroines independent personalities. The female characters in Shakespeare's plays always played an important role in the dramatic run in both tragedies and comedies. This article studies the portrayal of intelligence by Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* making her the hero of the play.

Keywords: Elizabethan drama, Portia, intelligence.

Elizabethan Drama, Portia, Intelligence

The age was exemplified by vigor towards adventure that made it distinct among the ancient sources of knowledge. Literature flourished during the Elizabethan Age in the form of various genres like poems, essays, drama, etc. The period was famous to bring cultural and the artistic reformation in England. Writers like Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Thomas Watson, Edward de Vere, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene and Ben Jonson were the most prominent literary professionals of that

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period. It is for reason that many historians considered this period to be the Golden age in English History.

Although the pursuit of literature was prosperous, and it demonstrated many artistic styles, however, the approach of common people towards literature was coarse and largely filled with criticism. But, “it was the Elizabethan writer’s vigorous vitality alone, which overcame all obstacles, just as it still gives to his work its main value” (Sheavyn 1909, 7). The Elizabethan period encouraged a considerable number of playwrights make employment through the royalty offered by the patronage. Theatrical arts started consistently taking place, thereby encouraging many public, theatres that were gradually built on the outskirts of London. Although the Elizabethan society observed distribution of classes of the masses from monarch to nobility, from knights to merchants, from common citizens to laborers, theatre and drama attracted people from all segments of the society and thus became a fashionable amusement activity for all.

The Elizabethan society, however, also witnessed disparity in gender apart from class. Although England was governed by a queen, gender equality in that period was nonexistent. Heavy sexism prevailed and the society was patriarchal. Women were discriminated fiercely. They were raised to believe they were incompetent, inferior and inappropriate to execute dependency of family and outside. Women were deprived of their right to speak. Studies claim that women were the representatives of virtues like submission, calmness, sexual chastity; modesty, fidelity and fortitude all have their meaning in relationship to men. While men were considered the sole wage- earners of the family women were expected to be virtuous housewives and raise children (Balestraci 2012). However, Shakespeare in his dramas during Elizabethan period has represented women in the most diversified and organized ways. The characteristic features of women in Shakespearean drama remain as a persistent theme that although does not focus on “cultural observation or social criticism but primarily as a mythic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male” (Lenz 1983, 18). Many authors argued that the queen was considered as a paradigm of innocence, modesty and continence; untouched and pure but with a kernel of a royal king and that the gender issues in the Elizabethan patriarchal society would be brought into forefront and resolved, however, “it became more important for patriarchy to maintain control of every other woman’s behavior through a constricting moral ideology that posited feminine chastity as the ultimate virtue adorned by feminine silence” (Ritscher 2009, 29). The existence of a female reign could not eradicate the existing patriarchal codes rather they had become more rigorous than before. The disparity in gender also reflected in Elizabethan theatre where only men were permitted to take over the stage and women were judged to undertake any role as it seemed extremely unappealing.

The Elizabethan Drama

Elizabethan drama was among the most prominent and glorified literary forms in the Elizabethan Age. Although the reformation in the field of literature, art and culture bloomed across Europe, it has emphasized on subjects like religion and philosophy in Germany, art, architecture and sculpture in Italy and drama in England. The English drama had often been recognized for its spiritual and preachy essence. When Queen Elizabeth came into power most of the plays offered stories from the Bible, saying of the saints, stories extracted from the lives of the great people in the form of moralities that acted as guidance of life. Most of the teachings in the drama were about God and religion and nothing about the people or their lifestyle. But gradually that reformed and shifted from the religious essence to more or less secular. The crowd at the theatre was more willing and pleased to find the manifestation of their own and day-to-day activities. The drama made them laugh and cry through humor and disfavor of situations respectively, and made them ponder over their actions. The various forms that exhibited human actions in Elizabethan drama were in the form of love, revenge, hate, selfishness, passion, cheating, sacrifice, stealth, misery, guilt and everything that related to the audience.

Shakespeare comedies are gentler, the characters decreeing plays with a happy ending, but they fail to be funny. It is like, although the plays make the audience laugh, they laugh out of nervousness or in the words of Habib "if they live in a sunny world, it is a sunlight that is edged with an unsettling darkness. They love, make tender friendships, meet perils and villains, and overcome them" (Habib 1993, 41). Shakespeare's comedies mark his artistic excellence in the portrayal of woman characters. His woman characters are just the sunlight that is often hidden behind the clouds and storms of glum, but never restrained or crushed.

Most of his comedies are appreciated because of the comic confusion they create. Like Champion delicately elucidates the comic confusion and endeavors to bring clarity for the same as he claims that for a reader "if it is a situation comedy, he must understand the situation to enjoy its incongruities; if it is comedy of identity, he must perceive the gap between appearance and reality to which, at least for a time, the character is impervious; if it is comedy of transformation, he must understand the nature of the evil or the adversity which purges the character and be assured that its power is only temporary" (Champion 1970, 21). One of the most interesting features of the characters of Shakespeare comedies is that they gradually develop a harmony with the audience to act as an adviser. Shakespeare's expansion as a humoristic playwright is the easy and steady incorporation of the adviser into the plot with the intention that both the performance serves as the dual role; first of being the comic guide and the second an important character to the plot in his own right.

The wholeness and the vigor of the characters in Shakespeare's dramas revolve constantly around the scope, power and profoundness of Shakespeare making the plot of the drama gradually unfold. Despite the fact that Elizabethan society was strict in the even distribution of gender roles in dramas, the women characters especially in Shakespearean plays constituted the centrifugal part. Bamber describes Shakespeare's involvement with the feminine characteristics with the external world as he says "the playwright associates the feminine with the nature of external reality itself; that nature seems to change as he looks at it through the prisms of the different genres" (Bamber 1982, 25). However, his characters nevertheless depicted the discrimination in their dialogues for example in *As You Like it* when Jacques speaks "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" however as he proceeds to give a detail narration on "the seven ages of man", "the roles played by women are omitted from the stage without comment or notice" (Kemp 2010, 29) depicting the typical Elizabethan society.

Shakespearean Women

The concept of gender and sexuality have always been able to vary both in focus and emphasis through the modifications within the debate on feminism. Interestingly, both the theories actually traverse and are corelative. The theory of feminism attempts to form equality among various kinds of rights namely social, political, and economic in addition to equal opportunities irrespective of gender. The concept follows to eradicate sexism, discrimination, obsequiousness and domination towards women in the patriarchal society. Studies on feminism and relevant concepts reveal that "feminist critics look at how women are portrayed in literature as well as the political motivations for gender roles" (Habib 2022, 220-223). Representation of women in literature differ from men because of biological and societal theories. Frequently depicted as emotional and submissive, studies have analysed how feminist criticism has transisted over time.

Shakespeare's work, however, have been "used to articulate supposedly fixed notions of power and identity in which women are marginalised and othered" (Ferguson & Aughterson 2020, 4). In Shakespearean plays, unlike other traditional forms of literature, there is so much to explore. The plays "reflect much of the contemporary popular attitudes of the time; women characters in his plays usually occupy the margins, and if powerful, they are demonised or seen as unchaste" (Sharma 2022, 64). Female characters in his plays have been able to be active and more resistant towards the stereotypes that the contemporary society has been defining. Feminist criticism of Shakespeare have brought into forefront some of the most pertinent aspects of Shakespeare's plays that

traditional criticism have either observed insufficiently or wholly ignored. Most of Shakespearean plays are distinguished since they challenge the conception of femininity by destabilizing the established stereotypes that revolve around women during the Elizabethan age. Feminine characters in all Shakespearean plays develop as an idealized source of power, an exemplary symbol that arouses both love and abomination among the male characters. Shakespeare uses performative possibilities allowing the female characters to take the lead and dominate the challenging stereotype very much prevailing during his time. Studies reveal that “more often, Shakespeare uses disguise devices in his plays” (Shahwan 2022, 161) thereby empowering female characters to discover their vulnerability and determine opposition to the male society. The concept of clothing and appearance according to Shakespeare can in fact affect and shift the way people perceive others. Shakespeare's plays particularly the comedies propose “a fuller narrative through several cross-dressed characters that enjoy a greater freedom of speech and movement” (Park 2019, 195). Adopting male disguise for objectives and motives, the female characters demonstrate their witty discourse and pursue romance which receive constant academic attention. More recent studies demonstrate creative responses and transpositions of Shakespeare's plays that depict and empowers females' voice. The adaptations explicitly convey how “for centuries women writers like novelists, playwrights, and poets have responded to Shakespeare with inventive and often transgressive retellings of his work” (Carney 2021, 1). These exposures inform of feminist approach from a feminist perspective involve “exposure of patriarchal prejudices, explicit condemnation of misogynistic behaviours, compensatory reallocation of positions of power, and a decided shift to female-centred narratives” (3).

Elizabethan Age was an extremely hierarchical society and much of the rules and conventions were demonstrated in Shakespearean drama. Women were the second gender, weak and passive. Although, Shakespearean's plays reflect the Elizabethan image of woman, he manages to put their representations into question and revises them. Shakespeare is seen challenging, contesting and resisting the patriarchal ideology that “stereotypes, distorts, ignores or represses that experience, misrepresenting how women feel, think and act” (Gibson 2016, 27). Shakespearean women like Cleopatra, Viola, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Portia, to name a few, celebrate free spirit, confidence, resourcefulness and independence. Shakespeare has always regarded his women characters as the driving factors of the action of his plays, both in comedies and tragedies. Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* is identified for her strong determination to accomplish her goals, extraordinary grace, tantalizing seductions, royalty, and truth in her character makes her an unparalleled character in the play. Viola in the *Twelfth Night* is known for her perseverance, her sense of obligation and her loyalty towards her duty. Rosalind in *As You Like*

It, for example, is one among the most important characters of the play. With her wit, elegance, humor, and patience, she dominates the play. Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* is shown as an ambitious, sinful, cold woman who is stronger and more willful to commit a gruesome act of a murder. Desdemona in *Othello* is portrayed as an independent woman, adventurous and naïve about her relationships. Although passive, virtuous and innocent, Desdemona could not be seen demonstrating her wit and thus could not prove her innocence and fidelity before Othello.

The focus of the paper is to portray Portia both with the conventional quality of the women in Elizabethan Age that is mercy and violating the bounds of the same being logical, manly, independent and confident in the Shakespearean drama *The Merchant of Venice*. To maintain the same dramatic run Shakespeare in his *The Merchant of Venice* is seen portraying Portia as a submissive nature and later mounting her character as the leading one in the play and overcoming the cliché that hold back women during that time.

Shakespeare's Portia

Although, Shakespearean's plays reflect the Elizabethan image of woman, he manages to put their representations into question and revises them. Shakespeare is seen challenging, contesting and resisting the patriarchal ideology that "stereotypes, distorts, ignores or represses that experience, misrepresenting how women feel, think and act" (Gibson 2016, 27). Shakespeare's Portia is considered "particularly an empowered heroine" (Cieslak 2019, 51). Further, Tripathy justifies "empowered because of her cleverness in the use of words judiciously and the way she manages to outperform her limited rights through her intelligence in order to make it work in her favor" (Tripathy 2022, 10). Although Portia is a daunting and obedient daughter and could not go against the will of her father, however, like a traditional daughter Portia agreed upon taking a risk and abiding by the instructions of her father she welcomed every suitor who comes to beseech her. Her submissiveness and obedience towards her father portrays a feminist concern. She is lamented over the impact of her father's death and this clearly is an indication of male dominance in women's freedom in choosing her husband. Her silent protests against her incapability to use her freedom in private and delicate affairs clearly demonstrates her intellectual ability.

An excerpt from Act 2 Scene 7 where the Prince of Morocco enters the hall of Portia's house at Belmont is analyzed below.

PORTIA: [to servant] Go, draw aside the curtains and discover the several caskets to this noble prince.

[A curtain is drawn showing gold, silver, and lead casket]
[to MOROCCO] Now make your choice.

MOROCCO: The first, of gold, who this inscription bears:
"Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire."
The second, silver, which this promise carries:
"Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves."
This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt:
"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."
How shall I know if I do choose the right? (2.7.1-14)

In the above scene, Portia is seen with confidence as she welcomes the Prince of Morocco to choose any of the caskets with no iota of fear about the consequences that may lead if he chooses the casket that contains her portrait. Very boldly as though she is throwing a challenge to the Prince she insists the prince to give try as she says: "The one of them contains my picture, Prince. / If you choose that, then I am yours withal."

Portia projects the same confidence, wit and will that clearly projected in her voice towards Arragon as she says:

Behold, there stand the caskets, noble Prince.
If you choose that wherein I am contained,
Straight shall our nuptial rites be solemnized.
But if you fail, without more speech, my lord,
You must be gone from hence immediately. (2.9.4-8)

It was quite evident from the suitors' attitude towards caskets that they did not hold any strong feeling for Portia. The theme of illusion- reality is clearly demonstrated. Prince Morocco, choosing the gold casket and Prince of Arragon choosing silver and both of them rejecting the dull lead casket made obvious portrayal of the flaw in their choices.

In act 2 scene 9 after Arragon leaves making the wrong choice of casket and reading aloud the content kept in the casket where he asserts "Still more fool I shall appear / By the time I linger here" (2.9.74-75).

Portia speaks perspicaciously as she compares men with moths who are attracted to the dazzling lights only to get burned by them.

PORTIA: Thus hath the candle singed the moth.
O these deliberate fools!
When they do choose,
They have the wisdom by their wit to lose. (2.9.80-82)

Portia is seen mocking at Arragon by calling her a ‘deliberate fool’ who believe that they are wise to deliberate, but in the end their excessive deliberation ultimately defeats them. The use of animal images in the play *The Merchant of Venice* Portia attracts considerable attention; however, most of the animal imageries are used both in a positive and negative manner. In the above excerpt, Portia uses ‘moth’ that is not so negative rather gentle ones as Ray affirms “these are negative images, but there is no violence or disgust in them” (Ray 2005, 135).

The messenger alerts of a young Venetian with all good manners and greetings and who has with him has brought all niceties and expensive gifts. This young Venetian in the words of the messenger seemed like an ambassador of love who is “so ripe and replete with the burgeoning promise of impending fruitfulness” (Pearce 2016, 7) that clearly suggests a prognostication of the one who would not only overshadow the nostalgia of the former precursors unworthy and monotonous but also a prediction of good hopes for Portia. Although Portia herself is very excited to know and see who this gentleman is, she still asks the messenger to stop praising this young man so much as if he is his cousin. She says:

No more, I pray thee. I am half afeard.
 Thou wilt say anon he is some kin to thee,
 Thou spend’st such high-day in praising him. (2.9.96-97)

The Elizabethan audience is well aware of the fact that a messenger’s cousin holds no status to marry a princess; but still Portia uses wit and humor to present her thoughts that eventually will lead to the love tryst of Portia and the young man as according to Bloom “this swift fillip, stirring up the courtship plot, is genially and very effectively tossed off” (Bloom 2006, xxvii). In the next scene the young man is identified as Bassanio, who Portia really likes, but due to the societal conventions she is unable to keep her feelings straight to him. Portia insists Bassanio to spend some time with her so that she does not feel sad should he leave if he made a wrong choice. However, she tries to control her temptation in not helping Bassanio know the right casket: “I could teach you / How to choose right, but I am then forsworn. / So will I never be” (3.3.10-12).

This scene demonstrates both her ardent love and respect towards the promise she made to her father and her morality to achieve her love towards Bassanio in a genuine way. Many authors suggest that Portia’s eagerness for Bassanio’s efforts to win her hand is in true spirit a comedy by Shakespeare as she achieves her choice despite the terms and conditions of her father who would not have agreed with her choice. Portia identifies the significance of the harsh observations to law that later on emerges to be the legal instrument that is her father’s will. Although tired of this world and her inability to make proper

decisions with a rich mix of unhappiness towards the prospects of her marriage, Portia “over the course of the scene she comes to appreciate the will’s ability to shield her from unworthy suitors who are unwilling to risk everything they possess” (Beecher, Wallace, Williams, DeCook, & Cormack 2015, 82). She remains ethical to her father’s will and bond.

Soon after the casket scene where Bassanio chose the right casket and ultimately wins Portia, the audience witnesses a shocking scene where Antonio, Bassanio’s dearest friend has sent him a letter that describes his financial loss in all his business ventures thereby giving him a mental pain. And also there is Shylock, a Jew who is typically compared with an animal; whose greed for money can’t just be satisfied; who cannot be merciful enough to vindicate Antonio’s loan and provide justice. Bassanio considers Antonio as the kindest person, cordial and a typical paradigm of ancient Roman honor alive in Italy. As soon as Portia listens to the dilapidated state of Antonio Portia offers to pay the loan to the Jew around twelve times the original sum as she says:

What, is that it?
Pay him six thousand ducats and scrap the agreement!
Double six thousand, and triple it
before allowing such a close friend to lose even a hair on account of Bassanio.
(3.2.320-23)

Portia is enriched with generosity as she pays 6000 ducats to Bassanio to be further offered to Shylock to save Antonio’s life. This makes her the most sympathetic and thus an admirable character of all the heroines of Shakespeare. As a capable lady Portia shows generosity purely out of love with Bassanio and also because she is generous with her money. The rare and harmonious unification of love, generosity and emotions in her refined character places her infinitely as the most celebrated and glorious character of Shakespeare. In act 3, scene when Portia is seen missing her husband Lorenzo praises Portia for her kindness towards a gentleman who, although a close friend to her husband but unacquainted with her.

LORENZO: But if you knew to whom you show this honor,
How true a gentleman you send relief,
How dear a lover of my lord your husband,
I know you would be prouder of the work
Than customary bounty can enforce you. (3.4.1-5)

What makes her even truly an honest and noble soul is that she never regrets doing good. Also, her heart is as clear as crystal where, unlike Lady Macbeth, who speaks something and means something, Portia speaks exactly what she intends to. Later in scene 4 Portia shows her sense of clarity towards

relationships. For her Antonio must be a good person because he shares a close relationship with Bassanio, who is genuinely a good person and because both of them share time, are well mannered individuals both of them must be shared equal qualities as well.

PORTIA: I never did repent for doing good,
 Nor shall not now, for in companions
 That do converse and waste the time together
 Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,
 There must be needs a like proportion
 Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit,
 Which makes me think that this Antonio,
 Being the bosom lover of my lord,
 Must needs be like my lord. (3.4.10-18)

Interestingly, the very term *disguise* has been used in its true sense in Shakespearean dramas especially in the comedies particularly by female characters as Julia, Portia, Rosalind and Viola, who are in fact the male actors disguised as young women however, only Cleopatra and Rosalind are the only two female characters in the top ten biggest roles in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare allocates female characters to male divulges a complex understanding of gender and what it means to be a woman. Perhaps this is what Shakespeare always wanted to bring to the forefront the very importance of women in a society and by uplifting the woman characters in his plays by giving them life Shakespeare envisioned what a society actually should be made of. Disguise in Shakespearean drama frequently gives an impact on the audience regarding a feeling of hubris and, thereby, alienating from the characters that are swindled. Shakespearean drama uses disguise as an important tool for gaining information that would otherwise be withheld from them. Rosalind, for example finds out that Orlando is genuinely in love with her only when Rosalind was disguised as a boy. In Act 3 Scene 4 Portia develops a plan along with Nerissa to be disguised as a male where she is seen to describe the masculinity in a satiric manner as she declares:

PORTIA: When we are both accoutred like young men,
 I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
 And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
 And speak between the change of man and boy
 With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
 Into a manly stride, and speak of frays
 Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,
 How honorable ladies sought my love,
 Which I denying, they fell sick and died. (3.4.68-76)

Wells describes "Shakespeare gives Portia more pre-disguise scenes than any of the other disguised heroines, firmly and extensively establishing her character before she disguises" (Wells 1999, 58). What makes Portia's disguise an exemplar is unlike Julia and Rosalind, who were more interested in probing their self- emotional consequences of a sexual disguise, Portia's disguise was a feed on the central theme of the play that is the conflict between self interest and love, to transform for a better reason. Portia's initial state of being weary, confused and in plight to chose a suitable suitor, but later on a transformed personality to save a life from death, to save a friendship and to gain confidence from Bassanio that would make their marriage sustain is an amazing flexibility that Shakespeare unfolds gradually.

Act 4 Scene 1 happens to be the most dramatic, and the most famous trail scene not only in the play rather in the history of theatre. Portia, disguised as Balthazar comes to rescue Antonio from the cruel hands of Shylock. Trained in law, Portia knows exactly and enough to cleverly save her husband's dear friend as she has already conceived a plan. Calderwood views "Portia's transformation into the lawyer Balthazar endows her at the trail with the masculine power over life and death- a power she carries back into womanhood and Belmont where as the possessor of secret knowledge she can rescue Bassanio from dishonor and infidelity and can revivify Antonio with news of his ships" (Calderwood 1987, 36).

Shylock has already discarded the offer of six thousand ducats by Bassanio and still in continuation to demand a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast instead. In act 4, scene 1 Portia urges Shylock to be merciful and excuse Antonio as she absolves the famous mercy plea:

PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strained
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice bless
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 sceptered 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. (4.1.192-205)

Portia is seen both as an eloquent and humble person using rhetorical factors of mercy as a plea to Shylock and where Shylock is seen to repeatedly scorn her

plea. With the most beautiful lines Shakespeare has ever quoted and Portia's personalized opinion on mercy comes with the idea of deliverance in Christianity. Portia, who is well-versed, expressive and rhetoric conveys Shylock and also the audience in a way that mercy is a subtle feeling that is, an individual's trait, gentle and soft just like the showers of rain which when touch the surface of the earth nurtures it from within. Mercy is considered to be the most powerful thing. It is mightier than the kings who hold their crown symbolizing worldly powers to impress their subjects and instill deep rooted reverence among the neighbors. However, while power is one of the qualities of a king, Mercy happens to be the trait of God. And when the king harmoniously amalgamates the heavenly trait of mercy with the power to administer justice, it results in the power that approaches nearest to that of God. Portia's well-ordered mind led her to true wisdom. Holmes, Walter and Bidwell cite Mr. Moulton, who believes "Portia's speech on mercy is one the noblest in literature, a gem of purest truth in a setting of richest music" (Holmes, Walter and Bidwell 1886, 131).

Bassanio's reply to Antonio that he might as well stand to lose a wife who is so dear for a friend who means a world to him, makes the silver-tongued Portia speak in irony: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer."

This irony may have been understood by the audience as if spoken as an address from Portia disguised as Balthazar to the audience. Portia is trying to add a little pun to her speech and he does this deliberately as she clearly understands her relationship with Bassanio is harmless to his friendship with Antonio and vice-versa. Gradually, Portia makes the court scene intense by agreeing to the contract and to Shylock by almost getting praised as noble judge, excellent young man, wise and upright judge, honest judge. The intensity gets profounder when she with bravery and confidence asks Shylock:

Tarry a little. There is something else.
 This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.
 The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."
 Take then thy 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
 Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.321-328)

The above scene is one of the finest qualities of Portia. She is fine-tuned with the art of rhetoric. The trial scene indeed brings the best of her, her divinity that lets her shine. The scene not only demonstrates her wit, her lofty sense of religion, her decent yet highly applauded principles, but also her thoroughly picked feelings as a woman. Baker and Vickers profess "she maintains at first a calm

self-command, as one sure of carrying her point in the end; yet the painful, heart thrilling uncertainty in which she keeps the whole court, until suspense verges upon agony, is not contrived for effect merely; it is necessary and inevitable" (Baker and Vickers 2005, 48). How cleverly and craftily Portia avoids the tension created through her finest logical abilities. Just a pound of flesh and not a single drop of Christian blood, which is both impossible and plausible and thus unavoidable. Portia not only saved Antonio's life from Shylock, but also made him refuse to accept thrice the sum of money that was offered to him earlier. Rather, in addition, as per the law, because he had attempted to take a Christian's life being a Jew, the victim that is Antonio now would take half of his goods and that his life is now in the hands of the Duke. Portia not only overturned slavery, but also turned the scale in favor of Antonio. The scene "locates in Portia a power to destabilize the system of masculine dominance through her intercessory influence" (Espinosa 2013, 66). Portia's verbal and equivocation capacity makes her a crucial figure in the masculine world.

Despite being recognized as a life savior, when she was offered money, her rejection to three thousand ducats, not only makes her a grounded character in the whole play, but also shows how pragmatic she is for not taking credit of her own achievements: "He is well paid that is well satisfied. / And I, delivering you, am satisfied, / And therein do account myself well paid."

For Portia, the highest reward is the satisfaction of delivering a job successfully. Portia is aware of her potentialities and exactly know how to make use of them in the right way. Although appreciated as a noble lawyer in the form of Balthazar, Portia recognized for her performance enhanced her self-worth that she already is aware of. Not only she is confident about her own stature, she exactly knows how to carry herself as well too. In the concurrent plot after Portia circumvented Shylock with the legal obscurity, what occupies the attention of the audience is the playful nature of Portia. When Bassanio has persuaded Portia to take something just for a remembrance as a gift, very intentionally, and facetiously, Portia asks him: "And for your love, / I'll take this ring from you. / Do not draw back your hand. / I'll take no more, / And you in love shall not deny me this" (4.1.51-52).

Portia constantly tests Bassanio the first time during the casket scene and the second time when she "provides Bassanio one more opportunity to assert the primacy of his marriage" (Mahon 2002, 295). Portia is aware, of course, is aware that the ring in dispute is the ring that Portia had presented to Bassanio and that he had vowed then never to part away from it come what may. Disguised Portia keeps Bassanio in the dark while the audience is privy of the small script that she is in fact teasing and testing Bassanio's affection for her to the very limit. Despite Bassanio's denial and unwillingness of parting from the ring, he decides to take it out because he cannot disapprove Antonio's urge to do so. Knowing Portia now completely, the audience is conscious that Portia would

ask for the ring and this keeps the audience intact with more drama in the upcoming scene. Muir describes “love acts rightly, for Bassanio, in satisfying the plea of one love, gives the ring back to his other love. The three are held together in a bond of reciprocal love” (Muir 1975, 84).

Portia knows that Bassanio parted with the ring half-heartily in the name of his friendship, but still she likes to continue showing her false anger to him.

PORTIA: If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honor to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring. (5.1.214-217)

Bassanio had pledged never to part with the ring but has certainly broken his pledge. He is moreover also certain, that his giving away the ring does not portend his sabotaging of his love as Holmer notes “Shakespeare resents Portia wisely aware of the potential for error in the man she loves” (Holmer 1995, 265). Many authors compare Portia’s ring to Bassanio with Othello’s handkerchief to Desdemona, and both the gifts are a lover’s first gift. However, while Othello had a tragic situation Portia forgives Bassanio. Portia understands her magnitude and love for Bassanio is equal with his friendship towards Antonio. With the falsification in her anger towards her husband, Portia attempts to secure her husband’s loyalty towards her. The ring plot manifests Portia’s teachings to Bassanio “a good lesson about marital loyalty, which in her view supersedes the loyalty between friends” (Halio 2000, 12). The dramatic quarrel between Portia and Bassanio describes the argument-reconcile relativity that usually takes place between the couples in love and that manifest the physical and the spiritual sides of human nature. Portia has already witnessed Bassanio offers to forfeit her love conducive to Antonio’s life and his friendship. Her confidence in Bassanio received support when she learnt that Bassanio denied to take off the ring, but quickly breaks as she finds the ring has been sent to her. This must have shaken her wifely crux and reminds her husband to focus on her wife. However, Bevington is positive as he points out that “Portia can hope that Bassanio, who has shown such loyalty in male-to-male friendship, will also turn out to be the loyal husband she has been seeking” (Bevington 2005, 71).

Portia giving the ring to Bassanio through Antonio and telling him to hold onto it better than the last one clearly portrays how harmoniously she has included Antonio in her relationship with Bassanio and in fact at the same time she is dexterous enough to use the ring plot as a reminder that she still knows how to control Bassanio. Wheeler on this point views that it is Portia, who has to teach both Bassanio and Antonio to identify the significance of marital love over friendship. Wheeler points that it is important that “both Venetians have to learn the serious consequences of the implied contract in any oath” (Wheeler 2015, 201).

Conclusion

The paper analysed texts from the play *The Merchant of Venice* of Shakespeare to portray, glorify and signify Portia as an empowered heroine. The play demonstrates a great deal of feminist values throughout. Shakespeare is insubordinate towards the conventional gender stereotypes in the play. Although Shakespeare existed in a culture where men were considered powerful and privileged, however, his advocacy of gender equality in the play triggered the audience to realise that some female characters are more spiritual and intellect driven in comparison to their better halves yet unrecognized by the society. The female protagonist emphasises on challenging the traditional style stereotypes of weakness and silence and does not initiate the societal standards of naivety and obedience. Portia is portrayed as a radical feminist considering gender as her source of discrimination and oppression. As an eminent role in the play she represents a strong woman who symbolizes a woman of knowledge and wisdom. She is a combination of being both rebellious and submission which further adds both charm and progression to the play. Through her eloquence Portia is able to successfully make Bassanio chose the right casket. In the court, Portia is seen giving a wonderful speech on mercy exhibiting exquisite knowledge about an individual being merciful. She successfully invalidates the situation and turns the table where Shylock is seen falling into his own trap. The ring episode deliberately reveals the pre-determined agenda of Portia and her control over husband and a constant reminder that Portia is not a stereotypical wife. She is fun loving, adorable with a plethora of patience. Her keen sense of logic suggests she's only one of its kind female character compared to those who conventionally obey and follow the rules of the era. Her act of getting in disguise and fighting for justice in the court overturns the conventional behavior in the Elizabethan age. Portia presents apparently negative traits stereotypical of women, like pride in appearance and paltriness, however, she holds a good grip over her disguise and successive implementation of masculine traits smartly. The feminine assertiveness that comes with her disguise further emphasized by the development of her eloquence is accepted and celebrated by the audience. The entire play was Shakespeare's treatment towards the Portia's character that only got deeper as the scenes unfolded, making her one of the most commemorated and unconventional heroine of the conventional Elizabethan age.

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