

She is not what She Appears Perfect: An analysis of Portia in *the Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract

Among all Shakespeare's female characters, Portia has often been deemed as the most idealized protagonist, attributable to her various merits, inclusive of beauty, intelligence, wealth, rank, kindness, etc. Some of her suitors even praise her as "perfect" as she is thought to be. The current essay aims to roundly analyze such adoring heroine through combining plot analysis and the evidence from second resources, criticizing this viewpoint. Portia's admirable virtues and her hidden sides are thoroughly disclosed in the analysis, reflecting that it is somehow exaggerating to describe her as a "perfect" creature.

Keywords: Portia, perfect, The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare, feminism

1. Introduction

Relatively more critical attention has been devoted to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* compared with Portia, and understandably so. The play title easily leads audiences to pay heed to the character as a merchant who might be Shylock or Antonio, which somehow overshadows the fascination of the intriguing heroine, Portia. In fact, the role of Shylock or Antonio has significantly smaller stage time and spoken lines than Portia. Basso's (2011, p. 2) statistics discovered that "Portia emerges in nine scenes with 574 lines while Shylock appears in four scenes with 352 lines and Antonio in six scenes with 182 lines". Alternatively, in the play Portia also manipulates the results of three celebrated scenes, which are respectively the casket test scene, the trial and the ring scenes. Evidently, Shakespeare intended to highlight Portia's significance and influence in the play. Hence, though not explicitly mentioned in the title, she still deserves much particular attention and insights from audiences or reviewers.

Portia has often been regarded as the finest heroine among all other Shakespeare's female characters, for the sake of her beauty, intelligence, wealth, rank, kindness etc. Martin (1888, p. 30) praised her as "a perfect piece of Nature's handiwork". Jameson (2021, p. 5) depicted her to own "the noblest and most loveable qualities that ever met together in woman". Some of her supporters also put her in the lens of feminism, applauding her empowerment and dominance over the male personas in the play, such as saving Bassanio's friend, controlling the results of casket test and urging Bassanio to re-establish his faith through the ring trick. Her admirable merits allow her to act different roles from "the lady of Belmont", "the daughter constraint by her father's will", "eloquent judge" back to "loving and smart wife", allowing her to possess "sovereignty" throughout the play (Van Pelt, 2009, p.26). Undeniably Portia's brilliance cannot be overlooked, which constructs her as a glaring star particularly in the patriarchal society in the Elizabethan Era. Nevertheless, it might be somehow exaggerating to describe her as "perfect" or "finest". The current essay would roundly analyze such adoring character, Portia, combining plot analysis and second resources from other critics, disclosing her merits as well as her hidden sides and arguing that she is not that purely flawless as she is thought to be.

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2. The merits of Portia

Portia's traits were first mentioned during Bassanio's borrowing money from Antonio to compete with her other suitors. Bassanio described her in the perspectives of property, appearance and virtue:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
 And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
 Of wondrous virtues.

 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. (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 161-172)

The delineation reveals Portia is an attractive lady with wealth, breath-taking beauty with bright golden hair and wonderful virtues, captivating various admirers around the world. Also, one of her suitors, the Prince of Morocco, was so infatuated with her attractiveness that he claimed, "I would not change this hue, /Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen." (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 11-12). He even compared her to "the shrine, the mortal breathing saint" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 40) and "angel" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 58) to accentuate her goodness. Both suitors' high praises clearly portrait Portia as a wealthy gentle beauty with admirable friendliness and virtues.

Some of her actions in the play display her other virtues as well. Her selfless help for Antonio reflects her kind-hearted and helpful qualities. She offered a fortune much higher than the loan without any hesitation once she recognized Antonio, who is her lover Bassanio's friend, was in trouble. Towards her such act, Lorenzo acclaimed her to "have a noble and a true conceit/ Of godlike amity, which appears most strongly/ In bearing thus the absence of your lord." (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 2-4). Her friendliness, generosity and helpfulness are acknowledged through the benevolent act to Bassanio's friends and companies. Additionally, she is a loving person to Bassanio. While she confronted a variety of royal and princely admirers, she is loyal and devoted to her lover, Bassanio. Even if she afterwards realized Bassanio was indigent and owed a ton of debt to his friend Antonio, she never abandoned him but willingly lent a hand to his friend. And on top of these is her intelligence contrasted with the male characters in the play. She disguised herself as a learned Judge, Dr. Balthasar, rescuing Antonio's life by her cleverness and wisdom. Her well-known speech about "Quality of Mercy" at the trial still demonstrates her fabulous verbal eloquence (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 181-202). The speech was so touching and compelling that it was memorized for generations and frequently quoted on courts (Kornstein, 2005, p. 76). Plus, in face of others' applauds on her merits, she always presented humility and gentleness with graces and manners. She described herself as "an unlessoned, unschooled, unpractised girl" in front of her lover, Bassanio (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 159). Facing Lorenzo's praises, she degraded her contribution by replying with "How little is the cost I have bestowed/ in purchasing the semblance of my soul/ From out the state of hellish cruelty" (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 19-21). Her generous and courteous manners plus her intellect beyond doubt make one more into her.

Some scholars examined Portia character through a feminist' lens, contending that she is the one who controlled the outcomes of the events throughout the play. Seng (1958, p. 192) claimed, Portia employs the "riddle song" to implicitly direct Bassanio to select the correct casket, enabling him to win the casket contest. The hint hid in the song lies in the repetition of words rhyming with "lead". Seng's explanation could be sensible since the song appears solely in Bassanio's round for selection. And afore the selection, Portia also implied her desire to assist Bassanio how to choose right (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 10-13), which means it could be very likely for Portia to do so. Thus, the song here appears more like a clue Portia intends to merely provide for Bassanio because she wants to control over her own marriage against the demands of the patriarchal dominance of her father, echoing her narration in her first appearance, "I may neither choose who I/ would, nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a liv-/ing daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 22-24).

Moreover, in the ring plot, Portia again employed her verbal skill to re-establish her authority in the marriage and skillfully make Antonio become the surety for Bassanio's future faithfulness (Johnson, 1996, p. 144). Not to mention, her clever plan to rescue Antonio and her disguise in a male judge appearing on the court are also added to her actions as a controller over the events. All these examples collectively disclose her struggle against the patriarchal society and her desire to dominate own life.

Portia possesses a wealth of adoring merits, such as beauty, wealth, rank, wit, helpfulness, kindness, modesty and her bravery to manipulate her own life, all of which associate together to shape her as a brilliant heroine. She helped the men overcome the difficulty through her wisdom, controlled tactfully her marriage and re-built the marriage authority before her lover, ruling the events' developments in the play. Seemingly she looks more like the protagonist in the play than Shylock and Antonio. In this sense, it is unsurprising that some audiences would have irresistible affection for her, depicting her as a "perfect creature" and "ideal woman" (Fodor, 1959, p. 61). Nevertheless, nobody could be perfect. Albeit endowed with multiple ideal qualities of womanliness, she is outside of being "perfect". A close view in the following section, magnifies her kind deeds, moving speech and her other praiseworthy behaviors, to expose her hidden sides.

3. The hidden sides of Portia

Above analysis manifested Portia is a courteous and kind-hearted person. However, her comments on her suitors appear to overturn this view. Her descriptions on the six candidates come off as quite mean and harsh, although just spoke in private with her gentlewoman, Nerissa. She described the first suitor, the Neapolitan prince as "a colt" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 39) and even offensively commented that his mother "played false with a smith" (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 42-43). Her remarks here, especially for the eldership, seem quite insulting. As for the second candidate, the County Palatine, she characterized him as a "weeping philosopher" (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 47-48) and claimed that she would rather be married to "a death's head with a bone in his mouth" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 50). It sounds like, the County was even worse than a death's head. Then for the French lord, she called him "every man in no man" to highlight his ordinariness, for the young baron of England she described him as "dumb show with odd suiting" to mock his language barrier and dressing, for the Scottish lord she teased his relationship with England and she scorned the young German as "worse than a man, better than a beast". Likewise, after the African prince's and Arragon's failures to choose the correct casket, she exclaimed and called them as "deliberate fools", although in private (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 80). These words are—at least, to me—rather disrespectful and rude, especially for a well-educated lady. She belittled all her foreign suitors from other countries whom she did not show affection for with extremely mean words, some of which are even very hurtful. For certain, she is a remarkable word player, either seen from her mercy speech or from the vivid but harsh characterization about her admirers. But these utterances are not thought to correspond with her kindhearted and modest personality. These satirical comments reflect that she upgraded herself but degraded others (at least for the ones whom she showed no affection to). Presumably her inborn superiority contributes to shaping her such qualities as somehow narcissistic and mean, though she shows polite manners ostensibly perhaps owing to the etiquette education in her childhood.

Race has always been a central issue in *The Merchant of Venice* (Basso, 2011, p. 49). It is also sensed from Portia's utterances, particularly with her seventh wooer, the Prince of Morocco. When the serving man informed her the comer was from Africa, she delineated him to have "the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil" (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 126-127). Demons were regarded to be with black color skin in Medieval and Renaissance lore (Harrington, 2017, p. 54). In this case, "the complexion of a devil" here indicates she despised him for having a devil alike black skin, signaling her prejudice on the prince. During her reception with the Morocco prince, Portia's responses and manners are polite. However, as soon as the prince chose the wrong casket and grieved to depart, Portia exclaimed with relief that "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 80). She exposed her antipathy the moment he departed. Evidently, however courteous she showed in front of the African suitor, her inner true thought was actually full of bias and hatred on his skin color.

The pivotal trial scene has been gaining great attention since it serves as the climax of the play and triggers a heated debate on different dimensions. The overwhelming majority of critics view Shylock as a villain who was moralized by the great Portia at the trial (Kornstein, 2005, p. 79). However, the current article argues the truth is, she was not exactly what she appeared.

Firstly, her different naming to Shylock and Antonio displays her discrimination. She called Antonio as "the merchant" while Shylock as "the Jew". Although Shylock was a debtor, he could also be counted as a merchant. Or, she could have accordingly named them as "plaintiff/debtor" and "defendant". But she did not do either. The following naming statistics consolidate this viewpoint. "Jew" was observed to be used for nine times at the trial by Portia while only three times for "Shylock". She could have directly called his name "Shylock" instead of "Jew", but she did not. I would reckon, Portia's frequent use of the "Jew", seems to accord with her consciousness to distinguish and treat Shylock as an outsider.

If so, the trial cannot be viewed as fair and equitable. Her personal bias on the outsider and decenteration in favor of the insider -- Antonio, combined with her close relationship with the insider party -- Bassanio and Antonio, violate the justice and equity for a judicial conduct required at the trial (Saxe, 1993, pp. 118-119).

Portia's well-known speech about "the Quality of Mercy" was delivered to persuade Shylock to withdraw the bond:

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 sceptre 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 sceptred 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. (Shakespeare, 2008, pp. 181-199)

One would easily think that a person who delivers such an affecting address must be the "personification of that virtue" (Benston, 1979, p. 375). But her subsequent merciless judgement on Shylock demolishes this idea. Even after Shylock decided to give up the flesh and accept the thrice offer, she still asserted confiscating his property and did not show any inclination to discontinue the judgement. Instead, she further inflicted a death sentence for his contriving against Antonio's life and endorsed his religion conversion to Christian. Although the religion conversion was proposed by Antonio, Portia did not intercede for him as a merciful judge. Mercy can hardly be seen from these cruel deeds by Portia.

Cook (2000, p. 528) explained for Portia that her inconsistency with her "quality of mercy" speech was because she acted as a "teacher" to teach Shylock a lesson. If that is the case, the lesson indeed cost a fairly high price – wealth confiscation and religion conversion, almost including the death sentence. It seems more likely that Portia planned the whole process afore, leading Shylock into her trap through the mercy speech and her initial endorsement to Shylock's pursuit of justice. She could have mercifully mitigated and discontinued the judgement after Shylock confessed and quitted his bond. But she did not show any inclination to halt, seemingly being determined to proceed her "an eye for an eye" revenge.

Portia's merciful treatment to Antonio greatly differed from to Shylock. She did not treat everyone fairly. Just as Schwartz (2017, p. 76) said, "The gentle rain did not fall on everyone. Instead, it protected the landed nobility". Her kindness and mercifulness do not drop to everyone, but only protect her own party, which weakens herself as a just and merciful heroine. Her partiality and unjust verdict as a Christian violate God's appeal to "love all creatures (Schwartz, 2017, p. 69) and love thy enemy (Schwartz, 2017, p. 72)", even running counter to Lorenzo's praises for her "godlike friendliness" (Shakespeare, 2008). The plaintiff, Shylock finally turned to the defendant just by the disguised judge's sophism (Li, 2017, p. 81) and speech. The absurd trial appears more like a bully which ruling class guided by Portia inflicted on the alien minority.

4. Conclusion

The Merchant of Venice is a play full of criticism due to its complexity. And Shylock has been a focus since most of reviewers are attracted to the nature of the play -- Shakespeare wrote to criticize the anti-Semitic or for other purposes. As another key character with higher visibility, Portia received relatively less attention compared with Shylock. But her importance cannot be undervalued since she controls the outcomes of most events in the play. She is worthy of acquiring particular attention equaling to Shylock as well.

Reviewers hold mixed opinions towards Portia, in which majority tend to hold positive views while minority hold negative ones (Kornstein, 2005, p. 66). Some even upgrade her as a “perfect” creature. However, the current article under plot analysis argues that she was some way off from being flawless. Portia undoubtedly possesses multiple idealized qualities which womanhood dreams of, such as riches, status, beauty, intelligence, kindness and eloquence. Around the play, she takes controls of the events, from the casket test, trial outcomes to the ring scene, serving as the adoring model of feminism. However, albeit her politeness and manner when communicating with people, her private speech with Nerissa are found to be mean and unkind. She is also a racist, implied from her comments on the African suitor’s skin color. Her belittling conversation with Nerissa and sarcastic speech mirror her prejudice and bias towards the outsiders from foreign countries. Her inborn adoring merits and superiority seemingly contribute to her arrogance and narcissism. Moreover, although her mercy talk at the trial scene is unquestionably impressive and touching, her manners to outsider, Shylock, does not correspond to her affecting narration about mercy. Her close relationship with the defendant party also signifies her corruption and partiality, further revealing the trial is not fair at all. Her different mercy standard towards different subjects unveils her hypocrisy. On ground of these defects, how could Portia be considered as a flawless creature? She cannot be even counted to a qualified Christian as she fails to treat every human fairly, obeying the Christian justice -- “love thy enemy”.

Truly and understandably, her conspicuous virtues could veil people’s eyes to discover her defected qualities. But -- under nowadays’ social value systems, at least – acclaiming her to be “perfect” maybe somehow overstating. I agree with Lobban’s (2009, p. 205) polite comment on her, “Portia is not a very great favorite with us”. She is indeed a character filled with admiration, but also full of complexity. At any rate, she is definitely not what she seems perfect.

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