

Portia's Journey from the Margin to the Centre in Shakespeare's Play *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract: Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, (a play rife with positions of marginality and bondage), begins as a woman 'castrated' by a patriarchal society. She will have to marry and spend her life with any male who happens to open the right casket containing her picture. Her father, now dead, took away from her the right to choose a life partner to her liking. She conforms to the expectations that a patriarchal society has from an obedient daughter by submitting to the lottery drawn over her life, her happiness. Trying to salvage some redeeming features about Portia from this situation, it could be said, however, that she has the power to love (and not to question), even if it is a tyrannical father. It is this power to love that later on gives her strength to do something unusual for a woman of her class at that time in the Venetian society. Thus it is that her love for Bassanio enables her to perform a 'reversal' of the gender roles. It is not that she puts on the dress and appearance of a young man in a not-so-serious frame of mind somewhat in the manner of Rosalind in *As You Like It*. As she carefully thinks out her procedures, there is a playful attitude in her, infecting Nerissa, too (cf. Act 3, Sc.4). But then there is an exigency behind that move of hers. Where the learned, efficient, empowered males are failing to rescue her husband's dearly loved friend, she must achieve that feat. And her society would not allow her *to even try to do that* in her capacity as a woman. She therefore determinedly ventures into the social space in the disguise of a man. It is like an adventure for her, exciting and challenging at the same time. Portia successfully executes the 'much-needed reversal' of the roles of the sexes. But Shakespeare does not allow her story to stop there. There is another dimension to her character that is revealed at this point in the play. Strengthened by her love for her husband she can confidently put him to a test of fidelity. She raises issues of her "worthiness" and his "own honour" vis-à-vis their marital relationship (cf. Act 5, Sc.1). Now *it is she who determines and defines* the bond between herself and her husband, in sharp contrast to her situation earlier, when she was in a relationship of 'bondage' traditionally enjoyed and wielded by Portia's father between her and himself. My paper would be a study of Portia's gradual emergence as a New Woman in the play.

Keywords: Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Centre-Margin.

In the play *The Merchant of Venice* (a play rife with positions of marginality and bondage) Portia begins as a marginal member of the patriarchal society in which her father decides entirely arbitrarily how she is to marry. Worse still, the manner in which her marriage can be initiated at all and then finalized, will also determine *whom* she is to marry. The entire

procedure is a lottery: it has no relation whatever to *her* opinions, principles or preferences arising in the mind, or to the dictates of *her* heart. Moreover, the test set by her father does not ask the prospective bridegroom to show any special quality such as courage, generosity, kindness, creative talents, eloquence etc. that one would normally look for in a human being in general and in a bridegroom in particular. For that matter, even beauty or wealth is not an essential criterion for eligibility. Any adult male lucky enough to guess rightly at the meaning of the riddles set upon each casket will manage to win her as a bride as well as her property, inherited from her father, as the dowry. Of the suitors who come seeking her hand in marriage, she knows and likes none except one y Bassanio. There has been a former acquaintance between them, and a seed of love has already been sown in their hearts. But that seed cannot reach the stage of fruition propelled by the momentum of two souls' very natural desire for union. Bassanio must face the lottery before either he or Portia can look forward to such a union. What is even more frustrating is that Portia is powerless to prevent anybody else from trying a hand at solving the riddle of the boxes and winning her in the process. Of course, persons of an inferior rank would not presume to present themselves as prospective bridegrooms. But equality in terms of social prestige, wealth or politico-economic authority is not necessarily important enough or even conducive to attraction in matters of the heart. Hence the Neapolitan prince, the County Palatine, the French lord Monsieur le Bon, Falconbridge the young baron of England, the Scottish lord, the young German who is the Duke of Saxony's nephew, the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon all equally disqualify in her eyes, though she is not empowered to dismiss them. To her great relief, most of them are dismayed to learn of the test/gambling they must go through in order to be considered a suitable bridegroom for Portia. They therefore decide "to return to their home and to trouble" her "with no more suit, unless" she "may be won by some other sort than" her "father's imposition depending on the caskets" (1. 2. 98-102). Only the last two wooers, i.e. the Princes of Morocco and Arragon venture to choose, and choose wrongly. But for the rest, Portia has only one answer: "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" (1. 2. 103-105). This subordinate position is maintained by her steadfastly though she is also aggrieved about it that "the will of a living daughter should be curbed by the will of a dead father" (1. 2. 23-24). As she talks with Nerissa about it in subsequent lines, *the awareness in her* of this marginality as also its unreasonableness becomes clear.

However, there is a staunch allegiance in her to her dead father, whose physical absence provides ample scope for violating his wishes. She is now her own guardian, and the mistress of all the landed property and wealth left by her father as a legacy. Yet her own attachment to her father stands guard against any possible betrayal to him, as it were. It is by no means a dumb, callous submission on her part. When she is apprehensive about the German suitor's prospects of success in this lottery (whom, moreover,

she specially disapproves of for his habitual drinking), she thinks desperately, on the spur of the moment, of resorting to the device of tempting him away from the right casket with “a deep glass of Rhenish wine”. But fortunately enough she does not have to carry out this impulsive plan. Similarly, when Bassanio's turn comes, she seeks to postpone the decisive action on his part, preferring to “pause a day or two/ Before” he hazards, for in his “choosing wrong/ I lose your company” (3. 2. 1-3) ý as she tells him imploringly. There is no gainsaying the fact that the procedure in which her marriage takes place is an odd, unusual one. But her love for the arbitrator of her fate enables her to face this strange, unconventional and considerably unpleasant situation without faltering. Three factors, i.e. the power to love and an open mind able to face and continue to be in the midst of untoward, out-of-the-way happenings and last but not the least, courage to remain undaunted by threats to one's secure, stable world ý *ensure her sailing smoothly through another strange, unconventional (even though within the legal provisions of the land) and extremely unpleasant situation* that emerges as soon as the first situation of the kind concludes satisfactorily. Bassanio the suitor becomes the bridegroom through the successful selection of the leaden casket: it transpires that his presentation of himself as a prospective bridegroom along with the paraphernalia it involves has been made possible by a friend borrowing money on his behalf. This same friend, viz. Antonio had solid prospects so far of gaining huge profits from the merchandise on ships out at sea, but by an unexpected reversal of fate those ships have foundered, leaving him bankrupt. The time limit for paying back the debt has expired: the creditor demands the forfeit nominated as the bond. The bond is specified as one pound of flesh from Antonio's body “to be cut off and taken/ In what part of your body pleaseth me” (1. 3. 147-8), as Shylock the creditor had said at the time. Shylock being the creditor and Antonio the debtor, their racial and business enmity of long-standing has led to the creation of such a bond and has now determined Shylock into exacting it. His daughter's elopement with the Venetian Christian Lorenzo, taking away from her father's house much cash and many costly jewels has added fuel to this fire of desire for revenge in so far as it is now fanned by an enmity against all Christians, *epitomized in Antonio*. Like the topping of the cake is the fact that the Jew can execute such a plan against the Christian and yet remain on the right side of the laws of Venice! All these revelations rushing upon her at one and the same moment bring home the enormity of the situation. Something must be done: but how?

Nothing is expected of Portia beyond what is normal and possible for a woman. Being a rich heiress, she can offer monetary support as much as may be necessary. But the history of rivalry and hatred mutually expressed by Antonio and Shylock over a long period of time threatens to make any monetary offer futile. Portia realizes that Shylock must be bent on getting his revenge against Antonio. So an alternative strategy must be thought out to counter this serious threat to Bassanio's friend. Shylock invokes the laws of Venice in support of his declared plan of action with reference to

Antonio, who is already in legal custody as a bankrupt debtor. So something must be searched out from among those very laws that can provide a way out of danger, thwarting Shylock's plan. (Removing Shylock from the surface of the earth altogether is the other drastic and effective, but obviously unsuitable and unlikely option for a woman of Portia's taste and delicacy.) She has not studied the law; even if she had, she cannot practise as a lawyer in the 16th century courts of Venice simply because she *is* a woman. The present-day scenario of women lawyers and judges thronging all the courts that be in nearly any and every country of the world materialized long, long afterwards. She takes care to obtain first the legal council necessary to ensure Antonio's security, through her consultation of cousin Bellario of Padua who is a learned Doctor of Law. The Duke has requested him to "determine this case" between Shylock and Antonio: Bellario could have conducted the trial himself. But Portia does not make the same request as the Duke has done. She wants the legal advice first, and then she wants his help further also to disguise herself as a man *ý* as a lawyer, to be precise. That is to say, she wants to be in the court, a public and predominantly male sphere of action *ý* observing men, interacting with men as one of them *ý* and not simply observing Bellario or some other lawyer argue out the dispute in favour of Antonio but doing it herself in the open court.

Could it be that she trusts nobody else to execute this task properly, i.e. no man (and no other woman)? Her love for Bassanio makes her protective towards *his* friend who did so much for him and who must mean so much to him. The motherly instinct is roused in her about Bassanio and everything surrounding him, as it were, through the magnitude of her love for him. One can put it in Cixous's words: "a woman is never far from 'mother'...there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk..." (252). She wants jealously to guard against anything happening amiss in course of the trial. The woman subordinated by the whims of her dead, patriarchal father, the woman who had submitted to the subjugation out of a staunch filial allegiance thus recedes, and the woman of Amazonian dimensions takes her place. This is not a *slow but steady* metamorphosis, however. The time scheme of the play does not allow her the luxury. The situation calls for immediate, urgent action. She rises to the occasion. The key to all this lies in her capability of loving, demonstrated earlier in the relationship with and attitude to her dead (and tyrannical) father. The female 'commodity' to be handled as per the whims of her male proprietor now gets ready to handle the males at her will as so many 'commodities'. What happens at the court and afterwards is well known: she successfully settles, unsettles and then again settles everybody else's affairs, taking care of their interests... Could it also be that apart from the urge to do something *herself* for the sake of *her* love and *her beloved's* love i.e. Antonio, she had some other urge, too? Could it be that one part of her complex, adult self wanted also to taste the experience that this risky step implied *ý* the thrill of doing something novel and dangerously as Yeats would call it, "The Fascination of What's Difficult"? That seems to be the case, as with a tongue in the cheek she contemplates

the nature of the proposed venture in lines 57-84(3. 4.). Half-amusedly, half-mischievously she boasts to Nerissa that she will “prove the prettier of the two/and wear my dagger with the braver grace...” She happily visualizes how this act of cross-dressing would enable her to “tell quaint lies/ How honourable ladies sought my love, / Which I denying, they fell sick and died...” The 'slighting, conceited male picking and choosing at his sweet will' borne ad nauseam could be thus bypassed for a brief spell, and this would yield huge entertainment. She has other plans of this kind up her sleeve: “And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell, / ... I have within my mind/ A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks/ Which I will practise”. This utterance reveals no woman pursuing some desperate course of action with gritted teeth but actually relishing every bit of it.

It is not, it need not be transvestism, however. Being saturated with the monotonous, monolithic version of life that the phallocracy *can only offer*, she wants to 'reverse her role' for the sheer *kick* of it, as it were...of passing herself off as women's heartthrob. It is not as if she is planning to try her hand at being a ladykiller or a womanizer. Being in love with as well as (only just) married to Bassanio, she does not need to win or coax or convince anybody else who may be like the obstinate/ insensitive/ ignorant object of love of Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Viola in *Twelfth Night*. *With them* it may be a source of vicarious pleasure to be with the 'right man' of their life, to see him, talk with him, share and intervene in his thoughts and concerns, if possible, since he is not immediately available as a lover or husband. Though it is given that Portia does not have to seek anyone apart from Bassanio as an object of sexual fulfilment, she does nevertheless foresee some splendid delight /enjoyment of which the source is not her bond with Bassanio but men outside that bond, i.e. men in general. Could it be some kind of settling of accounts, for the 'social castration' she has been subjected to by her father? Could it also have been that the same motive of a 'racial' redressal sought drives her to conduct Shylock's trial herself for the 'social castration' she shares in common with other women y enforced by other societal apparatuses such as the laws of the state which make it a male prerogative to study and apply the legal system in order to decide the fate of males (and females)? This may be the result she seeks (and derives) from the reversal of the gender roles that Laura Brown talks about, addressing the dynamics of “identification or interchangeability” in course of her reference to the episode of a female Yahoo trying to 'rape' Gulliver in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* (329). Obviously Portia *wants some change*. She does succeed in initiating a series of changes, viz. coming out of a bond of filial love and duties due to a (dead) father thrust upon her, entering into another bond for herself of romantic love and duties towards Bassanio as a husband, as also simultaneously creating one of fidelity for Bassanio, with her wedding ring; dissolving Shylock's bond related to finance (therefore pertaining to the nature of surface dealings), and setting Antonio free; creating a fresh bond for Bassanio of gratitude to *herself incognito* as Balthasar the lawyer, forcing him to violate the marital bond thereby by giving away the wedding ring. As the play begins, Antonio and Bassanio live in an

exclusive world of their own, of friendship for each other. There is an inviolable bond between the two, a bond of male love which leaves Portia out at first as a less important claimant for Bassanio's love and attention. When Portia enters into the marital status the second, new bond created by her for only herself and Bassanio, encompasses automatically within itself the already existing bond of Bassanio's love for Antonio and vice versa. When she executes the self-appointed task in the social space successfully and resumes her role in the domestic space once again, she conducts affairs with great expertise (and enjoying herself every moment of it). So much so that Bassanio is relieved to be made to enter into a fresh bond by his wife. This time Antonio *is an outsider* to this world of romantic reconciliation and wedded love. She does not stop at that; she creates another bond for Antonio as well. The latter has to acknowledge finally Portia's capacity for operating *far beyond* the world of friendship and love confined to himself and *her* husband (in which the latter has been a sleeping partner and the former the sole executive): "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living. / For here I read for certain that my ships / Are safely come to road" (5.1. 286-8). The knowledge of his own propensity for self-sacrifice had armed him with tremendous self-confidence. Thus when after the trial the duo "stand indebted over and above/ In love and sacrifice to" Balthasar "evermore", seeing the lawyer's eagerness to have Bassanio's ring, Antonio overrules Bassanio's hesitation as well as whatever bond he may have entered into with his wife, for the sake of *their* friendship/bond and all that Balthasar has done to keep it intact: "Let his deservings and my love withal/ Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.446-7). One is reminded in this context of Cixous's observation that the equal barter promised by heterosexual love to the female partner is a myth:

...the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body (Selden 543).

As is to be expected, a domestic quarrel ensues because of the wedding rings, between Portia & Bassanio and Nerissa & Graziano (who imitate their master and mistress in both giving and taking the ring), bringing on charges of insincerity and callous violation of the bonds of love (within wedlock) in Act 5. Sc. 1. Antonio, so far an insider in Bassanio's concerns in both public and private spaces, finds himself an outsider and ineffectual observer of all that happens in Bassanio's domestic space. Then Portia's revelation leads him to the realization of another bond having been created in Bassanio's private space, a bond of *heterosexual love which has contributed* to Antonio's well-being and so has helped to keep their bond of male friendship and love, intact! Bassanio, along with other male and female listeners is also all amazement and all gratitude. Portia vindicates herself in two ways: *her father marginalized her* from his possessiveness and also must have thought that issues such as love, happiness, etc. were redundant where her marital life was concerned;

entirely disregarded questions such as whether she already loved anybody, or whether she could love just anyone who won in the lottery, or whether that winner would *ever love* her, apart from enjoying the state of being the owner of her body and property (and mind also?). *But she wins her way to the centre* with a fierce fight and consolidates her position there, though it is not publicly known at the time. She becomes the prime mover, making things happen. Thus she retrieves her long-denied power of action and intervention as also the right to act or intervene where and when and how she pleases. This right and this power can seriously undermine, even inhibit the growth and proliferation of the patriarchal species. Being thoroughly unacceptable, both of these had been “invisibilized”, a highly expedient gesture. As Valerie Traub sees it, the only way of curbing any such exercise of self-autonomy is by rendering all female desire and pleasure “invisible” (117-144). Once the jinx is broken as it were, through her release from the filial bond, Portia moves in and out of bonds, weaves one bond after another, sometimes for herself and sometimes for others. Her space is by this very process “rhythmic” in the sense that every bond has its specific rhythm leavening her existence anew. And a bond is circular, i.e. it encloses a personality or a relationship with a boundary, a limit like a circumference within which it moves round and round... Moving from one such circle to another is, again, getting involved in repetition. Portia's movement is therefore distributed in cycles, making the time scheme itself necessarily cyclical as well. She journeys through life from one cycle to another...finally weaving the greater outer circle encompassing all these smaller circular spaces and cyclical movements. The cyclical rather than linear concept in Julia Kristeva of “Women's Time” thus fits into the pattern of Portia's existence. In Plato's *Symposium* the Greek playwright Aristophanes (ca.450-ca.385 B.C.) argues that the primal man was double, in a nearly spherical shape, until Zeus divided him in two, like a cooked egg divided by a hair. The search begun by the split halves of the original 'one' man, i.e. man and woman, for the lost unity and harmony can be described as love. Love is seen as an attempt to make good all the losses and restore the lost unity. It would not be amiss to say that Portia's achievement of (long-lost) equality with men through self-empowerment, and attainment of control of her “monarchy” into which she transforms her domestic and social spaces, overlapping one another, shows one individual avatar of that restoration of identity and/or resumption of harmony. The invigorating, restorative principle is love all along the way. Considering how the tentacles of patriarchy perennially surround Portia to nullify her existence like the octopus that *it is*, the issue of “penis envy” — a Freudian term in the discourse of emancipatory politics as expounded by Elizabeth Janeway is relevant in this context:

In Freud's time the advantages enjoyed by the male sex over the inferior female were, of course, even greater than at present, and they were also accepted to a much larger extent, as being inescapable. Women were evident social castrates, and the mutilation of their potentiality as achieving human creatures was

quite analogous to the physical wound (58).

The bonds in the play are almost all related to matters below the surface, i.e. the inner workings of the heart or mind. By shaping, dissolving and re-shaping them as and when it is necessary and as she pleases, she reinstates her identity as that of a sentient human being capable of emotion and moral choice, revoking her father's assessment (or failure to do that) of her as a chattel or merely one species of livestock. The males, busy and efficient in the social, public space have to stop in their track and take cognizance of the effective presence of the so-called 'inefficient' female relegated so far to the domestic and private space.

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