

## The Price of Virtue: Portia's Crisis in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Portia is considered one of the most virtuous of Shakespeare's heroines. Her virtue (in every sense of the word) is regularly lauded within *The Merchant of Venice*. Thus, it seems ironic that Portia should not presume her own virtue. However, I find that she becomes concerned with proving it over the course of the play. I argue that this concern is not conjured in a vacuum, but rather emerges organically, from doubt germinated in a clash between agency and identity. Furthermore, with this argument I aim to problematize the assumption that Portia's having such a doubt could ever be ironic. I will prove such an assumption *itself* to be ironic with my analysis and propose that the circumstances of its mistake lie within *and* without the diegesis of the play.

When examining the evolution of Portia's character arch through the lens of modern theories in philosophy and psychoanalysis, a maladaptive behaviour pattern comes to light. Portia's actions are neatly classified into psychoanalytic defence mechanisms of repression<sup>1</sup>, identification, rationalization, and transference<sup>2</sup>, all of which aim to distort and then deny her *unfortunate* reality. I will illustrate that said mechanisms are employed explicitly to the purpose of reconciling how Portia's "father...scanted [her] / And hedged [her] by his wit to yield [her]self," (2.1.17-18) and so corroborate the lady's social reality as the loam in which her anxiety is moulded.

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<sup>1</sup> *Psychoanalysis*. The action, process, or result of keeping unacceptable thoughts, memories, or desires out of the conscious mind; an instance of this. — *OED Online* (see Freud)

<sup>2</sup> *Psychoanalysis*: The transfer to the analyst by the patient of re-awakened and powerful emotions previously (in childhood) directed at some other person or thing and since repressed or forgotten; the process or state of such a transfer. — *OED Online* (see Freud)

Throughout the play's five acts, Portia works hard to repress *how* "hard" (1.2.25) she finds her situation by choosing to identify with others' valuation of it and herself. She then rationalizes performing this identification in bad faith<sup>3</sup> as taking the virtuous 'high road' that proves her value. By so doing, she comes to transfer her consternation towards her father onto herself. Hence, Portia's posthumous conservatorship presents a conflict between authenticity and duty which fuels the cognitive dissonance<sup>4</sup> between valuing herself on her own terms as opposed to those imposed by society and law. According to others' *invalidation* of it, Portia equivocates this dissonance into a moral conflict: her anxiety over how her social role *precludes* her agency becomes transformed into self-doubt of, and compulsion to prove, her virtue.

Early on, external circumstance leads Portia to doubt her virtue. She is derided for her weariness (1.2.1) from the first by her lady-in-waiting Nerissa, who deems her "sick [from] surfeit with too much" (5-6). Thus, Nerissa challenges Portia's virtue with a passive-aggressive accusation of gluttony. Despite Portia's conceding the principle of these words (10), Nerissa persists to tell her that "They would be better if well followed" (11). From Portia's response, it is evident that this accusation of sin inspires doubt. Nerissa's comments incite a troubled introspection in Portia, who articulates the conditions and difficulties of virtue, and then measures her own conduct against them. Needless to say, she finds herself wanting.

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<sup>3</sup> In the philosophy of existentialism, bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is the psychological phenomenon whereby individuals act inauthentically, by yielding to the external pressures of society to adopt false values and disown their innate freedom as sentient human beings. — *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism.*, p. 103

<sup>4</sup> *Psychology*: A state of mental discomfort that occurs when a person holds beliefs, opinions, etc., which are inconsistent, or which conflict with an aspect of his or her behaviour; (also) the fact of holding such inconsistent or conflicting beliefs. — OED Online (see Festinger)

To start, Portia identifies the disparity between knowing and doing good, (12-14) then stipulates that “It is a good divine that follows his own instructions” (14-15). Together, these notions suggest that knowing what is ‘good’ is not enough to qualify one as virtuous, in Portia’s estimation. However, they likewise lead her to recognize how she violates them herself. Admitting so demonstrably upsets Portia, given how quickly she then tries to absolve herself for not living by her own values. When Portia admits that “[She] can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow [her] own teaching,” (15-17) she supplies the explanation almost as quickly that “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree” (17-19). Her struggling to rationalize her behaviour speaks to her upset, as does the fact that Portia cannot fully buy into “this reasoning.” (21) Notwithstanding its endeavour to extend clemency, she identifies her attempt at rationalization as “madness the youth, to skip o’er the meshes of good counsel” (19-20). Reprehension for falling prey to ‘youthful madness’ when attempting to rationalize her ‘immoral’ behaviour demonstrates Portia’s intolerance for not practicing what she preaches, as well as Portia’s belief that her rationality is compromised. Said intolerance and belief combine with Nerissa’s previous challenge to create doubt in Portia as to her own virtue, such that hereon, Portia articulates persistent worry over whether her behaviour is virtuous. This worry manifests itself in verbalized doubt and performance in bad faith, both aimed at fulfilling the will of the father.

Since her father’s lottery is presented as the virtuous avenue, Portia is obliged to go along with it to confirm her virtue and thereby allay her doubt. Although Portia is candid in her dismay at how “the will of a living daughter [is] curbed by the will of a dead father,” (25) her consternation is met with further invalidation from her lady-in-

waiting. When Nerissa cites her lady's father as being "ever *virtuous*, and *holy*..." (27, emphasis added) in order to corroborate the lottery's "*good* inspiration," (28) the assurance that "*Therefore* the lottery that he hath devised...will no doubt never be chosen by any *rightly* but one who [Portia] shall *rightly* love" (28-33, emphasis added) becomes something of a back-handed prescription that serves to fortify Nerissa's previous "sentences" (10). Constraining the 'right' love as that which submits to the will of the father, directly after challenging her lady's virtue presents the lottery as the arena in which Portia can prove herself virtuous. Consequently, Portia conflates her own virtue with its fulfillment and is inspired to acquiesce, promising that she "will die as chaste as Diana unless [she is] obtained by the manner of [her] father's will" (106-8).

Hereafter, Portia tries to align herself with how she is valued by others, projecting and performing that valuation in order to disprove her perceived moral and emotional fallibility. However, it becomes obvious that engaging in the lottery in this way *reinforces* the doubt over her virtue, because doing so compromises her self-image. After all, the lottery—and society in general—consistently position Portia as a "prize"<sup>5</sup> to be "won,"<sup>6</sup> and bestow infantilizing epithets such as "sweet,"<sup>7</sup> "gentle,"<sup>8</sup> "fair,"<sup>9</sup> and "dear."<sup>10</sup> Characters alternately (and paradoxically) objectify and deify

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<sup>5</sup> (2.9. 65), (3.2.145)

<sup>6</sup> (1.2.104), (2.1.33), (3.2.49, 250 & 251)

<sup>7</sup> (1.2.3), (2.9.83), (3.2.230 & 261), (5.1.208, 231, 304, & 306)

<sup>8</sup> (2.1.12), (3.2.193 & 263)

<sup>9</sup> (1.1.169 & 189), (1.2.119), (2.7.49 & 53), (3.2.119, 143 & 150), (5.1.259 & 315)

<sup>10</sup> (3.2.267), (5.1.124)

Portia as “richly left;” (1.1.168) “a golden fleece, / ...[that] many Jasons come in quest of.,” (177-79) “[a] shrine, [a] mortal, breathing saint,” (2.7.46) “To whom [is] swor[n] a secret pilgrimage” (1.1.127). Such attributions collude to set superficial conditions for Portia’s value and then equate that value with virtue. Unfortunately, parroting them has the side effect of teaching Portia to value herself and her virtue on others’ terms. How Portia comes to equate herself with her portrait in the lead casket aptly demonstrates this. At first, Portia tells Morocco, “The one of them contains *my picture*, prince. / If you choose that, then I am yours *withal*,” (2.7.14-15, emphasis added) but the phrase shifts to: “if / *my form* lie there, then *I am yours*” (67-69, emphasis added) directly after he venerates Portia as a “heavenly picture,” (54) of “...an angel in a golden bed [that] / Lies all within” (64-65). Thereafter, her phrase shifts further when spoken to Arragon — “If you choose that *wherein I am contained*,” (2.9.5, emphasis added) — and still further when uttered to Bassanio: “I am locked in one of them” (3.2.42). The evolution of this phrase is reactive, representing incrementally internalized objectification. Portia reflects this internalization in the way she analogizes herself as “The virgin tribute... / ...[that] stand[s] for sacrifice” (59) while Bassanio reasons through the casket riddles. In fact, the gradual osmosis of others’ opinions into Portia’s psyche converts the conflict between her own will and the desire to follow that of her father into crisis when Bassanio comes to “hazard all he hath.” (2.7. 11-12). When she verbalizes her moral identity crisis, Portia realizes how she has participated in the lottery in bad faith, and ergo, has *not* secured her virtue to the spirit of the societal standard. The anxiety this realization brings is palpable.

Before Bassanio can make his guess for her hand, Portia extraverts all her doubt over her virtue and how to value herself. Although she acknowledges the

contemporary cultural adage that “...a maiden hath no tongue but thought,” (3.2.8) she *still* succumbs to the compulsion to explain her anxiety to Bassanio. Portia finds her desire for him to succeed tempts her to “teach [him] / How to choose right,” (10-11) *but* she acknowledges that to do so would render her “forsworn” (11) to her father’s will. Portia then restates her resolve to “never be” (12) so forsworn, fearing nonetheless that to lose Bassanio “[wi]ll make [her] wish a sin, / That [she] *had* been forsworn” (13-14, emphasis added). Because her feelings entice her to violate her father’s will, and thus put her in conflict with societal conditions of virtue, Portia becomes distressed. This dilemma leads her to displace<sup>11</sup> her distress onto Bassanio: to “Beshrew [Bassanio’s] eyes, / [as] They have ... *divided* [her] / [so that] One half of [her] is [his], the other half [his]— / [Her] own, [she] would say— *but if* [hers], *then* [his] / *And so all* [his]” (14-18, emphasis added). Portia curses Bassanio for how her father’s lottery—and the custom and law that enable it—constitutes “...*naughty* times / [for] Put[ting] bars between the *owners* and their *rights!*” (18-19, emphasis added). Her transference reveals the crux of Portia’s doubt: cognitive dissonance. She does not feel she can ‘own’ or value herself when she obeys her father’s will, and yet not doing so de-values her virtue in the eyes of society. This crux stymies Portia’s continued attempts to confirm and conform to her virtue, and ultimately, she finds herself susceptible to the ‘youthful madness’ which she deemed in the first act as “not in the fashion to choose [her] a husband” (1.2.21-22). Although Portia claims at first that “...it is not love” (3.2.4) that tempts her to throw the lottery, she marvels later in the scene “How all the other

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<sup>11</sup> In psychology, displacement is an unconscious defence mechanism whereby the mind substitutes either a new aim or new object for goals felt in their original form to be dangerous or unacceptable. — Berne, p. 399

passions fleet to air, / As doubtful thoughts and rash embraced despair” (111-12) when Bassanio chooses the correct casket. Realizing that she is, alas, overcome by emotion despite the earlier resolution to the contrary, Portia’s doubt reasserts itself. She harkens back to Nerissa’s initial accusation of sin when she pleads with love to “allay [its] ecstasy, / ...For fear [she] surfeit[s]” (114-17). Then Portia reacts to her fear with an aspired remedy that further proves the objectifying valuation of herself by others which she has internalized. Her fear moves her,

To wish [her]self much better [:] yet for [Bassanio]  
 [She] would be trebled twenty times [her]self,  
 A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times  
 More rich, that only to stand high in [his] account  
 [She] might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,  
 Exceed account. (157-61)

Thus, participating in the lottery in bad faith *bolsters* Portia’s doubt and compromises the valuation of both herself and virtue, such that she comes to the self-deprecating conclusion that she “Is the sum of something, which, to term in gross, / Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed,” (162-63) *which* “for [her]self alone / ...would not be [so] ambitious... / To wish herself much better” (154-56).

Given her circumstances and agents of socialization, it is no surprise that Portia should come to such a conclusion, and still less that its angst should compel her to try *again* at reclaiming qualification and esteem as a virtuous person. On this second try, her solution is to abandon her identity altogether. She conflates the prospect of winning Antonio’s trial to “purchasing the *semblance of [her] soul* / from out the state of hellish cruelty” (3.4.20-21), emphasis added. and is thus motivated to pose as a

male lawyer in order to circumvent Shylock's bond so that the moneylender forfeits Antonio's (which is her husband's, and now *her*) debt. Moreover, when Portia weds Bassanio before the trial, she stipulates a loophole in their union "with [a] ring, / Which, when [Bassanio] part[s] from... / ... [is her] vantage to exclaim on [him]" (3.2.175-78) and *reclaim* being "Queen o'er [her]self" (173). Both of these gambits prove pyrrhic victories, however, for in the end she must return to Belmont as its lady with the knowledge that her husband broke the principle of his oath.

Portia's disillusionment at these events waxes philosophical as the play closes, when once more her internalized objectification works to *dim* her self-esteem. As she and Nerissa approach her estate, Portia perceives it as an extension of herself, but the metaphor sours as their conversation uncovers the metaphor's glass ceiling—that being, the unacknowledged barrier to personal or professional advancement.

Beholding Belmont from afar at night, Portia is awed by "That light [they] see [there] burning in [her] hall" (5.1.98) for "How far that little candle throws his beams," (99) and analogizes that "So shines a good deed in a naughty world" (100). However, personifying the light within *her* hall in order to analogize *her* good triumphing over bad only adds insult to injury when Nerissa reminds her that "When the moon shone [they] did not see the candle" (101). Portia's concession that "So doth the greater glory dim the less" (102) demonstrates the poignancy that Nerissa's reminder bears on her; Portia realizes that the desire to prove herself virtuous will remain a futile venture as long as its qualification relies on *externally* validated and arbitrarily operationalized conditions of virtue. Indeed, if such were not the case, then "the virtue of the ring, / ...[and] her worthiness that gave the ring, / ...would [have]... / ...urge[d] the thing held as a ceremony" (215-22) by Bassanio. Hence, Portia comes to the final diagnosis that



“Nothing is good...without respect / ...[so] things by season seasoned are / To their right praise and true perfection!” (108-117) Thus, Portia cannot resolve her doubt; all her efforts to prove her virtue according to others’ standards are for naught; the crux of her doubt—the cognitive dissonance between the law of the father and her sense of possessive individualism<sup>12</sup>— is at an impasse.

In all, I contend that Portia is inspired to doubt her virtue when her dismay over “the lott’ry of [her] destiny” (2.1.15) goes against how others value and expect her to behave. Seeking to resolve this conflict and thereby allay the doubt, I observe Portia aligning herself with others’ valuation of her, in order to cope with forsaking her choice of husband unto her father’s will. However, I perceive that this reinforces the doubt as it leads Portia to internalize her own objectification. Thus, her cooperating in the lottery is proven an exercise in bad faith. When Portia realizes this, her doubt evolves into a quandary over what qualifies as virtuous at all, and so spurs her on to confirm her own virtue *beyond* the constraints of her social situation. So, presented with the new conflict of her very recent husband’s debt, and having already circumvented following the rules of her father’s lottery, Portia is compelled to reconcile her crisis of virtue by dissociating from her identities as a newlywed and heiress in order to sidestep the debt Shylock’s bond incurs and prove Bassanio’s esteem and devotion to her as one “Of wondrous virtues” (1.1.170). Although she accomplishes both, she cannot take credit without *also* admitting that she broke the law and her oath to her father, and thus her quandary is not resolved upon her return to her estate. There,

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<sup>12</sup> The theory in political philosophy which conceives an individual as the sole proprietor of themselves, such that an individual commoditizes their skills as their own and owes nothing to society for them. — see Macpherson

Portia is forced to admit an impasse in the final act as she is confronted with her own fallibility, and that of her husband and his friends. Hence the lady of Belmont learns the price of virtue: *perpetually* ‘hazarding’ doubt.

There must seem, now, an obvious irony in the conception of Portia’s virtue. The basis of its assumption by other characters has proven superficial at best, abusive at worst. My analysis reveals how their esteem of her rests on her performance of social convention *as it benefits them*; Portia’s handmaid chooses her own bridegroom, Portia’s husband gains her fortune, his friend is freed of his mortal debt to Shylock, and the moneylender’s daughter both inherits her father’s fortune *and* marries the man she wants. All are blessed by the boon of Portia’s performance but for Shylock...and Portia. She resolves everyone’s problems but for her own. Thus, I find that Portia is excluded from comedic renewal in a less obvious fashion than the Jew. She is ‘divided’, as she says, with half herself given over to “a noble and true conceit / Of godlike amity” (3.4.2-3) such that extricating her identity from her estate to determine an intrinsic value and authentic virtue for herself is left an insurmountable internal schism—one in which audiences and critics alike are complicit. As Shakespearean scholar Dr. Emma Smith says on Oxford University’s podcast series, “Portia was a great sort of Victorian heroine, and the idealized interpretations of her character—which we still have, [and] which we inherit from that period— tend to resist... ‘belittl[ing] Portia’s integrity...’ [even though] we only know whether Portia has integrity... because of what [she] does onstage” (10:35-11:22). Viewers’ perceptions of Portia as a paragon of virtue have been and continue to be led by those of the characters in the play, and most critical analyses pass over her in favour of the more obvious outsider, Shylock. How can this be, when Portia’s stake in the plot is so

*invaluable*, when she has over twice as many lines as Shylock (574, the most of any other character in the play), when her plight is so salient in the story, as I have demonstrated? How can Portia *continue* to be valued for her performance of virtue, as a fixture in *The Merchant of Venice*? How can this be, in the present day?

One wonders whether all this is not a rhetorical query on Shakespeare's part. Perhaps the whole point of portraying such glaring iniquity is to prove its invisibility, even *beyond* dramatic irony; to prove that, despite so much of the play being devoted to her, despite her devoting so much of herself to convention and society, despite her fortitude, ingenuity, perseverance, and wit, Portia's value and virtue are forever doomed to be derived from her gender-role as the gentle hostess. Perhaps the Bard means to tell us what Portia comes to understand: that the world will "Let [her] give light, but...not be light" (5.1.142). Perhaps paying 'the price of virtue' means forever living in another's shadow, even—and especially—her own.

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