Why has Portia Disguised Herself as a Male Lawyer?

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' (1600) is a remarkable tragi-comedy and here Bassanio's wife Portia is a remarkable character. Bassanio, the citizen of Venice, loves Portia but his financial condition is not good. So, he approaches his friend Antonio. Antonio takes loans from the cruel money lender Jew Shylock on a bond sign that he has to return the money on a certain date and failure to repay the debt Shylock will cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's heart. Antonio agrees it. But due to the delay of his ships from business he is unable to pay the debt. And Antonio demands the flesh according to the bond Shylock is able to take the flesh from near Antonio's heart. At that time Bassanio's lover Portia has rescued him in the disguise of a male advocate named Balthazar. She has an assistant Nerissa (who is the lover of Bassanio's friend Gratiano) who is also disguised herself as a male assistant.

Till now the topic is discussed focusing on the ingenuity of Portia. But here it is trying to focus on a different perspective. Why does Portia disguise herself as a male lawyer instead of a female lawyer?

The research article is all about the above question and the probable various answers.

Key Words: *Male Dominance, Women's Right, Dramatic Device, Disguise, Mercy.*

Abbreviation: *TOMV- The Merchant of Venice*

Main Article:

It is seen that Shakespeare has written many plays where women's role is minimum, for example 'Hamlet' (1602) where his lover Ophelia has not much role in comparison to Hamlet and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (1619) also the women have no significant role. But there are many plays where the role of women cannot be ignored for example, 'Macbeth' where Lady Macbeth's character is a strong character. From that point we can tell that Shakespeare has not discriminated characters as male or female. We can tell that the Elizabethan audience accepted both male and female characters.

Before directly come to Portia's action, in Act IV, Scene I, let's see whether Shakespeare, in 'Merchant of Venice', has discriminated his characters on the basis of sex or not or whether

there is any other instance of male dominance in the play. Then the context of the topic can easily be discussed. There are three female characters-Portia, Nerissa and Shylock's daughter Jessica. All the females have their important roles in the play along with their male counterpart.

Portia, however, follows her father's wish in choosing her husband. As her father wished her suitor, Bassanio among other suitors has to test his luck of choosing the right caskets among the three where there was Poria's portrait inside. He has chosen the right casket. And Portia is happy in getting Bassanio as her husband. Narissa is also happy to get married with Bassanio's friend Gratiano. The cruel usurer, Shylock is a Jew and he dislikes Christian but his daughter Jessica elopes with a Christian boy, named Lorenzo. So, Shylock disinherits her his property. In all these we do not see much male dominance except Portia's father's wish and Shylock's rude behaviour towards his daughter after her elopement. But these two incidents can also be justified as a father should have the right to think good for his daughter. Because only in the leaden casket there is the portrait of Portia, not in the gold or silver. He had deep insight to choose the right suitor for his daughter who is not lured by gold and silver. Shylock's action although not right but can be seen from a different perspective instead of telling it is a male dominance.

There may be one reason that Portia and Nerissa do not want to reveal their identity in front of their husbands as their husbands, although are intelligent and handsome to look do not have enough money to take them from Belmont to Venice after their marriage. For which Bassanio has to borrow 3000 ducats from his friend Antonio. So, they do not want them to feel ashamed.

There may be this reason also that in order to teach a lesson to Shylock they may use a fake identity for which they have to reveal their identity and disguise like a male advocate and a male clerk.

Or, this may also be happened that the male dominating society of that time would listen to man so that- Portia and Nerissa, disguise themselves as male advocate and clerk respectively. But so far as the society is concerned at that time it was Queen Elizabeth who ruled the British society, so we cannot say completely that it was a male dominated society.

It is not known to us whether Portia really has a law degree or at that time such degree's requirement was there or not. But we come to know that the main advocate, Bellario is unwell so he has sent a letter from Padua in the hands of the clerk and Balthazar, who are Nerissa and Portia in disguise, that both will take the case on behalf of him (Bellario). Portia's act is praised by all for her ingenuity and her great speech on kindness. She tries to persuade Shylock to leave Antonio freely without cutting his flesh. The following is a part from the great speech-

"The quality of mercy is not strained

……………………………….

It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes'' (TMOV, Act IV, Scene I)

Thus, Portia tries to appeal Shylock to pardon Antonio by showing the quality of mercy that those he gives and those who receives both are blessed. But the hard hearted, usurer Jew

Shylock does not listen to her and is about to cut his flesh. At that time Portia saves Antonio's life because she reads the bond in the bond, it was written about flesh not about blood,

"…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." (TMOV, Act IV, Scene I)

In this way the clever girl Portia not only saves the kind hearted man Antonio's life but also gives justice to Shylock's eloped daughter because he has to pay half of his property to her as fine or compensaton.

Instead of male-female issue much, two other issues come to the front- they are religion and dramatic techniques.

In the paly we clearly see that Shylock hates Christian and Antonio the Jew. Shylock always seeks chances to do harm to Christian people. He even disinherits his daughter when she elopes with a Christian. Antonio tells if Shylock converts himself to Christian then he will not take the compensation money from him instead he will give it to Venice.

The next possible reason for Portia's disguise as a male advocate and her friend Nerissa as a male clerk is the appropriateness for dramatic purpose. When a girl becomes a man then obviously it becomes easy to decorate in order to hide the identity. As Shakespeare was a consummate dramatist, who had a share in the Globe Theatre and acted there, had employed such idea to adopt such technique.

If we see literary history then we see that there are a smaller number of female writers almost none in the Anglo-Saxon period and in the medieval period. And the dearth of women characters also can be seen. For example, in Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tells' we find that the Wife of Bath has five husbands. It may also be happened that the number of females was less than males. If there were more female writers, then we might get more females in the text and more texts written by female writers. We find women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Fanny Burney (1752-1840), Jane Austen (1775-1817), Bronte Sisters -Anne Bronte (1820-1849), Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) and Emily Bronte (1818-1848) in much later age. We get more women writers only after the Second World war. This is because women did not get proper education, child marriage was in vague. Even in India we find that child marriage was in vogue for example Mahatma Gandhi got married at the age of thirteen and his wife Kasturba Gandhi was eleven years old at that time. So, women had to look after their family instead of pursuing education at that time. With the passing of time only women education has been spreading.

In Portia's case also we see that many suitors from different countries come to test their luck by revealing the caskets where her portrait lies. This may be also a fact that there were a smaller number of females than males. So, suitors from different counties came. Or, this may be a fact there were less no of educated women so they were in high demand in marriage. This fact cannot be overlooked that Portia's father was a king so he has a huge amount of wealth for which many suitors come to test their luck.

However, there is an interesting fact which we cannot ignore is that Portia is an educated lady. She can argue in the court although in disguise. Suppose she gets her education at home by tutors, then also we can say that her father was a progressive person.

This may be a fact that women were not allowed to practice in the court. But there is not sufficient evidence regarding this. This point may have some logic that even after many centuries women had to fight for universal suffrage. In France and in all Euroe women did not get universal adult suffrage till the last eighteenth century. They had to fight for equal justice. Even Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) had written a short article, 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), where she tells that to write novels woman should have a room of her won. Which she received severe criticism. Even Mary Ann or Marian Evans, the famous novelist had to change her name as George Eliot (1819-1880) to ger readership.

Conclusion: From all the above discussion it can be said that Shakespeare uses the dramatic devise of disguise personality to create dramatic effect, however, the male favouritism or dominance of male personality cannot be totally ignored if we analyse the total literary historical scenario regarding the focus of women in the public domain.

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