

**I STAND FOR SACRIFICE:
THE HEIRESS OF BELMONT AND HER ROLE AS HERO**

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Of all of Shakespeare's heroines, perhaps none is stronger than Portia, the wealthy noblewoman in *The Merchant of Venice*. She is no Juliet or Cleopatra, to take refuge in suicide when things get tough. Nor is she a hapless Hero or doomed Desdemona, wrongfully maligned by backbiting villains. Rather, she is akin to the resourceful Rosalind or Viola, matching exquisite beauty with a sharp wit and keen intellect. She is, moreover, "a lady of standing, bristling with all the intellectual and artistic associations of Renaissance Italy" (Hankey 440). Her chief characteristic, however, is none of these, but dominance. More than Antonio, Bassanio, or even Shylock, Portia is the most dominant figure in the play, engaging all three central male characters, and one by one, triumphing over each—proving herself the true protagonist of the play.

Antonio, at first, seems the most likely candidate for the place of protagonist. He is, after all, the first character to appear onstage, his the first lines spoken, and his the first conflict introduced to the audience. As a character, he has many noble qualities which elicit sympathy from the reader, chief among which are his deep-rooted senses of loyalty and generosity. When his friend Bassanio requests a loan to finance his wedding sojourn, Antonio unhesitatingly offers to put forth the sum, even though "all my fortunes are at sea, / Neither have I money, nor commodity / To raise the present sum" and in consequence, his credit "shall be racked, even to the uttermost, / To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia" (I.ii. 181-185). Even when he discovers that the only means of acquiring the money will lay him bare to the mercy of his enemy, the Jewish moneylender Shylock, Antonio does not falter. On the contrary, he responds to Shylock's demand of "an equal pound / Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" with surprising equanimity and pronounces himself "content" (I.iii. 151-153). When the time comes to pay the bond, Antonio, while no longer so complacent, is still willing to die for his best friend. Thus his loyalty remains constant throughout

the play, and even when the knife nearly reaches his throat, he never expresses regret at signing the bond.

Nevertheless, however boundless Antonio's kindness proves, he is no hero. He is a steadfast friend and a laudable ally; but when real danger threatens, he fails to rise to the challenge. When his ships sink, he cannot pay the debt, and thus Shylock demands his forfeit. In response, Antonio decides he would rather die for his friend than try to save himself. His speech in the courtroom is not heroic in tone but resigned:

Therefore I do beseech you
Make no mo' offers, use no farther means,
But with all brief and plain conveniency

Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will. (IV.i. 82-85)

With Antonio offering no resistance to his imminent fate, it is left to Portia, in the guise of Balthasar the young lawyer, to rescue him from pointless martyrdom. Not Antonio, but Portia, faces the villain of the story; not Antonio, but Portia, defeats said villain and saves the day. Thus, it is ironically by defending Antonio that Portia proves herself the stronger character and, ultimately, a more worthy protagonist.

As an opponent, Portia could ask for no better challenge than Shylock. The most controversial of Shakespearean villains (especially regarded so since World War II and the events of Holocaust), Shylock the Jew is certainly a complex character: he is greedy, yes, and merciless, but he is also—at least to some extent—justified in his demands. Unlike Iago or Don John, he has no interest in evil for its own sake. Nor, unlike Claudius or Macbeth, is he fueled by unscrupulous ambition. His insistence on his pound of flesh is not merely a bloodthirsty ploy; it is also, in a larger sense, retribution for all the wrongs he has suffered at the hands of Christians. All his life he has been persecuted against by just such men as Antonio. He expresses his view in a concise yet memorable speech, reminding Antonio that:

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spet upon my Jewish gabardine, [...]
You that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold. (I.iii. 111-112, 117-119)

After years of enduring the "suff'rance" which "is the badge of all our tribe," when Shylock at last has the opportunity to lawfully best a Christian, it is no wonder that he insists that the bond be paid (I.iii. 110).

In light of all this, some critics have labeled Shylock as the wronged party and thus the true hero of *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet however sympathetic and justified he might be, Shylock remains restricted to the role of antagonist. Shakespeare structures the play as a comedy; good always trumps evil in comedies; since Shylock is ultimately defeated, he must be on the side of evil. (Since 1945, of course, this issue has become much more problematic for critics and Shakespearean scholars. Nevertheless, however sympathetic a *character* Shylock may be, his *role* remains nonetheless confined to that of antagonist.) Still, were it not for Portia, the play might have ended very differently.

By rescuing Antonio from the bold blade of Judaic justice, Portia triumphs twice over: not only does she prove herself more heroic than Antonio; she also confronts and defeats Shylock. In the immediate sense, she fights for Antonio's life, but in a larger view, she fights for the role of the play's protagonist. If Shylock had won, he has enough sympathetic clout to become a defensible—albeit unlikely, given the sentiment toward Jews in Shakespeare's time—hero. But he does not win; Portia does.

To the delight of all present (except, of course, Shylock himself), Portia uses the very bond with which he is so taken to outwit him: because said document speaks only of flesh, she orders him to “shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more / But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more [...] Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate” (IV.i. 337-338, 344). But Portia doesn't stop there. In the exultation of victory, she pushes further to destroy Shylock completely:

If it be proved against an alien
That by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst which he doth contrive
Shall seize half his goods; the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state;
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice.
In which predicament I say though stand'st.
(IV.i. 363-370)

Thus, not only does Shylock lose his 3000 ducats, his daughter, and his chance for revenge; he is also robbed of his income, his entire estate, and his religion (Antonio later stipulates that he must convert to Christianity), all in one fell swoop. By this feat of wit and merciless judgment, Portia permanently establishes

Shylock as the scoundrel and herself as the hero.

The third and final applicant for the role of *Merchant's* protagonist is the Venetian nobleman Bassanio. Even more than Antonio, he appears as a likely possibility: he is young, handsome, optimistic, and blue-blooded—all promising heroic qualities. Too, he embarks on an archetypal hero's quest, to win his lady-love and replenish his impoverished estate. In the end, he even achieves both these goals. However, if one reads between the lines, one soon realizes that Bassanio's actions are anything but heroic.

Unfortunately, Bassanio's good qualities are all superficial. His nobility means nothing, because he has squandered all his wealth. He uses his youth and good looks to manipulate others, namely Antonio, into giving him what he wants—in most cases, he wants money. His behavior, too, is consistently selfish, guided by greed and a cheerful willingness to sacrifice others for the purpose of furthering his own designs. Although he appears to hold some genuine regard for Antonio, this regard hardly matches the degree of devotion which Antonio willingly offers in return. Bassanio's regard, the play reveals, is mostly empty promises, as his actions reveal. When Antonio's life is endangered—as a result of extending a favor for Bassanio's sake, remember—Bassanio's only offer of aid is money (not his own, naturally), and, when that fails, useless bleats of protest against Shylock's cruelty. In the same vein, his marriage to Portia, while he vehemently declares his love as the cause, is primarily motivated by, again, his greed: his primary praise of her is that she is “a lady richly left” (I.i. 165).

If the outcome of the play were left in Bassanio's hands, doubtless Antonio would be sacrificed to Shylock's knife, the Jew would come away with the law on his side, and Bassanio's marriage would be forever tainted by the death of his most loyal friend. Contrary to all superficial considerations, Bassanio lacks the true essence of a hero. Fortunately for all concerned, his fiancée is cleverer than he.

And yet, one could argue, Bassanio cannot be totally incompetent, or he would not have chosen the correct casket and passed the test to win Portia's hand. Closer examination, however, will reveal that Bassanio's choice has less to do with his own wisdom than Portia's. His moral compass, as already established, is hopelessly skewed. His natural inclinations, if left untrammelled, would have directed him to the gold or silver casket; because both would logically appeal to his fancy for the superficial and his insa-

tiable greed. Portia, however, has different ideas. For all her refusal to be “forsworn,” she nevertheless works hard to ensure that Bassanio will choose correctly (II.ii. 11). Cleverly, she peppers her speech with double meanings which, though not definite enough to convict her of undermining her father’s challenge, are distinctly suggestive to the observant ear. For example, in the guise of a classical analogy, she tells Bassanio, “I stand for sacrifice,” (II.ii. 59), which, though innocuous enough in context, also clearly alludes to the lead casket if construed as, “I advocate, I demand, sacrifice, expecting you to give and hazard all you have” (Berger 156).

She gives an even more obvious hint in the song which is sung while Bassanio examines the caskets. The first three lines are particularly telling:

*Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?*

It does not take a superior intellect to realize that the last syllable of each line rhymes with *lead*, the material of the prize casket. Even if Bassanio fails to recognize overtly the significance of the song—and given his track record, this is a distinct possibility—the power of suggestion succeeds in penetrating his subconscious, and he chooses correctly. Thus, Portia draws him into her power even before Bassanio realizes it.

Later, Portia establishes a definite and unshakable hold over Bassanio. As her husband, he may believe he holds sway over his beautiful wife and her rich estate of Belmont, but Portia quickly disillusiones him of these notions. Not only does she slay the metaphorical—and in this case Jewish—dragon, a task which Bassanio should have completed himself, but she also manipulates him into a corner over the ostensibly trivial matter of a piece of jewelry.

The matter of the ring is Portia’s final move in her bid for protagonist. She has already outmaneuvered Antonio and Shylock; now she moves in on Bassanio. Her task this time is slightly different than with the previous two: whereas she displaced Antonio into the lesser role of loyal friend and Shylock into that of the villain, she turns Bassanio into the play’s dupe—that is, she outwits him as much for her own amusement as to establish her superior authority in their marriage.

Ironically enough, Portia first gives Bassanio the ring as a symbol of her subservience to her husband:

This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord. I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (III.ii. 173-177)

Thus, Portia effectively balances her lord-and-master assurances—themselves a well-timed sop to Bassanio’s ego—with a warning that such demure allegiances will be void if he loses the ring. Sure enough, Bassanio falls for the trap at the first opportunity, to his own dismay and—no doubt—Portia’s secret delight.

Masquerading as Balthasar, Portia tricks Bassanio into giving her the ring as payment for saving Antonio’s life. Then, the moment he appears at Belmont, she confronts him in feigned rage. She hurls a flood of harsh invective at her husband: she accuses him of giving the ring away to a prostitute, and threatens to “ne’er come in your bed / Until I see the ring!” (V.i. 204-205). His protests that he gave away the ring out of gratitude, not unfaithfulness, are in vain. Portia scathingly addresses him:

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.
(V.i. 215-218)

Not until Bassanio is nearly writhing in agony and pleading for forgiveness does Portia relent. Eventually, she unveils her part in the trial, returns the ring, and extracts from him a binding oath: “Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee” Bassanio declares fervently (V.i. 266-267). Thus, by revealing her identity as Balthasar and explaining the plot behind the ring, she forever places Bassanio in her debt—and, more importantly, in her power.

It is worth noting, at this point, that Shakespeare does not clarify anywhere in *Merchant* whether Portia realizes the falsity of Bassanio’s character or that his claims of “love” are a flowery front for what amounts to shameless gold-digging. Given Portia’s astute nature, however, one can safely assume that if she did not realize his ambitions beforehand, she grasps his intentions quickly enough to realize that if she intends to keep control of her finances, she must establish her power early on. Thus, she conceives “using her ring-fiction to teach the laws of love,” and Bassanio plays directly into her hands (Hamill 232). Bassanio will now be forced to tread lightly where Portia’s fortune is con-

cerned—and given her reaction to the loss of one ring, one can only imagine how she would view the loss of substantial amounts of money. Bassanio would do well, in the future, to rein in his spendthrift nature.

Thus, Portia faces each important male character throughout the play—Antonio, Shylock, Bassanio—each a possible protagonist. And each time, she defeats them: she is more practical than Antonio, cleverer than Shylock, wiser than Bassanio. Through cunning, guile, and sheer determination, she overcomes her male counterparts and triumphs as the real hero—proving once and for all that the heiress of Belmont is indeed the most creditable protagonist of *The Merchant of Venice*.

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