

Portia's true character

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Portia's True Character In this play of deceptive appearances, is Portia suspect of not being altogether what she appears to be? Critics have debated this question over the centuries-some with greater enthusiasm than others. One such critic is Anna Jameson. Jameson's allegations are valid concerning Portia's undoubted wealth, beauty, and intelligence, but she fails to recognize that she is not all that she appears to be (141). Jameson's review gives much praise to Portia. According to Jameson, " Many critics are so dazzled and engrossed by the amazing character of Shylock, that Portia has received less than justice at their hands" (141). Shylock has taken away much of the spotlight from Portia; therefore she is consistently overlooked by critics. Jameson's opinion on Shylock and Portia's relationship in the play can be described as " She hangs beside the terrible, inexorable Jew, the brilliant lights of her character set off by the shadowy power of his, like a magnificent beauty-breathing Titian by the side of a gorgeous Rembrandt" (141). Jameson later gives Portia qualities that portray her as sweet and gentle which are attributes that distinguish a beautiful female (141). If these statements are in fact true regarding Portia's character, then how was she able to pull off the task of acting like a young man at the courthouse in Venice? It would create much difficulty for a woman with so many feministic qualities to convince the courtroom full men that she is in fact a man. Essential evidence that invalidates Jameson's accusations is Portia's manipulative mindset when the topic of who she will marry comes into the scene. Instead of following her father's will which accepted fate as the deciding factor on who she will marry; she wants to independently choose a man to marry. Portia never actually performs any acts that go against her

father's will, but she gives hints to ideas of scheming her way in an effort to finding the right suitor. When Portia speaks to Nerissa about the Duke of Saxony's nephew, who has come to Belmont in hopes to marry her, she says, " Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket; for if the devil be within and that temptation without, I know he will choose it. I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge! " Portia is begging for Nerissa to help her design a plan to get her out of a marriage entirely based on fate. Portia will do anything to satisfy her desires, which can be seen when Bassanio first enters her Belmont mansion. Portia begs Bassanio to hold off his decision for a while so they can spend time together in case he chooses incorrectly. Portia does this in an attempt to give Bassanio hints on what casket is the correct one. Portia plays a song during his decision making process in an effort to provide him with a hint to which casket holds the key to their marriage. The first few lines of the music that is played while Bassanio is making his choice serve as a clue because the last word in each line rhymes with led. This shows significance because the led casket is the correct choice; therefore fate played no role in the marriage of Portia and Bassanio. This evidence completely discredits Jameson's accusations that depict Portia as a woman who shows great dignity. This simple hint suggests that Portia completely defied her father's will in order to sustain her own desires. According to Hall " The Morocco scene is only the most obvious example of the exclusionary values of Belmont. Portia derides all other suitors for their national shortcomings, reserving her praise for her country-man, Bassanio" (297). Hall suggests that Portia has been brought up in a society where

intermarriage between races is frowned upon therefore giving the Prince of Morocco no chance in choosing the correct casket. Her neglecting attitude toward him suggests that she is not as gentle and caring as Jameson characterizes her to be. According to critic Harold Goddard, the only time when we see the "Innocent, unsophisticated Portia" is immediately after Bassanio chooses the correct casket. She speaks of herself as "an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed (101). And even then we are being somewhat deceived because that unlessoned, unschooled girl has, in Goddard's opinion, actually grown up to be the "darling of a sophisticated society which has nurtured in her anything but unself-consciousness"(101). Goddard believes that "Shakespeare leaves us with no doubt concerning Portia's exterior; to the eye she is nothing if not golden, and she does nothing if she does not shine. The play showers her with praise" (101). Anna Jameson's depiction differs significantly from that of Goddard, but both acknowledge Portia's intelligence. During this time period marriage was a sacred bond between a man and a woman. Portia hides her emotions of jealousy when she figures out just how strong the bond between Bassanio and Antonio is. Bassanio and Antonio hold a very unique, almost homosexual bond. Even though there is no direct evidence in the play, Portia is jealous of their exclusive relationship. Portia had no prior knowledge of this relationship before she saw her husband's dreadfully shocking reaction to the letter from Venice describing Antonio's fate. "There are some shrewd contents in yond same paper. That steals the color from Bassanio's cheek" (46). Portia's immediate reaction is a sign of her jealousy. Her plot to disguise herself as a lawyer was originated when she first realizes how powerful Antonio and

Bassanio's relationship is. Portia is impatient to see Antonio upon her immediate arrival to the courthouse in Venice. Portia sees Antonio as a threat to their marriage because she believes Antonio might take away Bassanio's loyalty and devotion toward her. Jameson's luminous qualities given to Portia are invalidated throughout scenes in the play. The sacrifice Antonio is willing to suffer for is proof for how strong their friendship must be; therefore Portia was eager to see the man who continuously illustrates infinite affection toward her husband. Evidence that describes Portia's character can be found throughout the play. Portia keeps insisting that the law is on Shylock's side which allows him a pound of Antonio's flesh. " Why then, thus it is: You must prepare your bosom for his knife. O noble judge, O excellent young man! "(60). Portia even gets Shylock to praise her for her fair judgment, as if she is almost teasing him into believing the contract is strong enough to be upheld. Portia's intelligence can be seen in this part of the play because she is able to figure out a loop hole in the contract. If a drop of blood is lost from Antonio while the cutting his flesh, then Shylock will be convicted and tried by Venice courts for attempted murder. It almost seems as if Portia intentionally leads Shylock into believing the contract must be upheld. " Thyself shalt see the act. For as thou urgest justice, be assured. Thou shalt have justice more than thou desires" (62). Portia foreshadows her plot to further ruin Shylock's in a manner that suggests she will find extreme pleasure while taking Shylock down. Finding pleasure in someone's despair does not reflect the qualities of " sweetness" that Jameson gives Portia in her review. Even after Shylock's hopes of cutting Antonio's flesh perish, she finds evidence to penalize him in a way that makes one believe her efforts were

out of pure enjoyment. Even when Shylock's contract was shunned away by Portia, she continuously makes the situation worse for him. "The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive, Shall seize one half his goods; the other half, Comes to the privy coffer of the state" (63). Portia puts Shylock in much trouble by the courts for creating a contract like this. She gets the state to take away half his land and wealth, and the other half must go to the Antonio because he was the victim of the contract. Jameson refers to Portia in the trial scene as showing "honorable principles" (143). If Jameson's accusations were valid then Portia wouldn't have wasted her time destroying Shylock when the case was already won. There must have been other motives involved because Portia wouldn't have delayed the case by misleading Shylock if she was everything she appeared to be. Portia would have been eager to get the trial over with in an effort to return to Belmont as soon as possible. The Merchant of Venice exhibits much debate concerning the character of Portia. Shakespeare does a great job in providing evidence that would support each type of critic when analyzing Portia's true character. Readers and critics must reread and think long and hard when confronted with the task of evaluating a character like Portia. One would agree that there is significant evidence that portrays Portia negatively throughout the play; therefore critics such as Goddard and Hall are commended for discrediting Jameson's analysis of Portia. Work Cited Hall, Kim F. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." *The Merchant of Venice*. Leah S. Marcus, ed. Norton, 2006. Jameson, Anna. "Portia". *The Merchant of Venice*. Leah S. Marcus, ed. Norton, 2006. Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Leah S. Marcus, ed. Norton, 2006.