Of Daughters and Lovers: A Study of Shakespeare's Daughters in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*

Maumita Dhar (Dey)
Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
Narasinha Dutt College, Howrah
maumitadey73@gmail.com

Shakespeare's female leads, especially in his comedies, were invariably smart and attractive, sometimes more than their male counterparts. It appears that most of them were modelled on the reigning queen Elizabeth I who was undoubtedly a very intelligent and powerful monarch, and an independent woman, not requiring a partner. However, if we look deeper into the lives and roles of these female characters, we find that Shakespeare ultimately makes them subservient to the male partner/guardian and fit into conventionally accepted social roles dictated by patriarchy.

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Elizabeth I came to the throne of England as a daughter, independent of a male partner or guardian. Henry VIII's will named her as successor to the throne only if his son Edward and elder daughter Mary died without a legitimate heir. Though Elizabeth did not forsake her desire to be monarch, yet she waited for her father's will to be carried out and finally ascended the throne in 1558, twelve years after her father's death. It is true that she did not have many supporters in the Tudor court for a bloody war of succession; but even when Mary's reign, marked by violence and bloodshed, made people think of her as a better alternative, Elizabeth waited for Mary's natural death, enduring distrust and imprisonment at her sister's hand.

Was then the Queen a model for Shakespeare when he created his greatest heroines? It does appear so; his women, especially in comedies, are educated, witty, intelligent, powerful, and more in control of their situations, as compared to their male counterparts. But many-a-times, they are ruled or controlled by their father's will and fate, a situation which they meekly accept too. In fact, almost all heroines in Shakespeare are presented in the context of their relationship with their fathers. Cordelia suffers because she displeases her father; Rosalind shares her father's fate; Jessica defies her father's dictates while Miranda follows her father's dictates; even Lady Macbeth is unable to murder Duncan as he resembles her father in his sleep. In this paper, I have attempted a discussion of two such heroines – Portia and Ophelia, torn by loyalties to their fathers and lovers.

Bassanio introduces Portia to the audience/readers in his conversation with Antonio, in Act I Sc i, of *The Merchant of Venice* –

> In Belmont is a lady richly left,
> And she is fair, and (fairer than that word),
> O wondrous virtues, - sometimes from her eyes
> I did receive speechless messages:
> Her name is Portia, nothing undervalu'd
> To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia,
> (lines 161-166, Shakespeare 7)

Portia is fair and virtuous, no doubt, but firstly she is a lady 'richly left' for whom many Jasons have ventured into Belmont. Bassanio, in spite of receiving 'speechless messages' from her eyes, appears to be one too. Later Portia expresses her feelings for Bassanio in Act III Sc ii, and confesses "One half of me is yours, the other half yours" (line 16, 48) but laments the inappropriateness of time-"O these naughty times/ Put bars between the owners and their rights!"(line 18, 48). As we know from Act I Sc ii, Portia's "time" is controlled by her dead father.

> O me the word "choose"! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father: is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, or refuse none?" (9)

Nerissa justifies Portia's father's decision thus:

> Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations,-therefore the lottery he hath devised in these three chests..... will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly. But one who shall rightly love." (lines 26-32, 9)

But Portia does not appear convinced by this logic. She is in constant fear of being chosen by the wrong suitor, and none of them are acceptable to her- the Neapolitan prince, County Palatine, Monsieur Le Bon, Falconbridge, the Scottish lord and the German Duke of Saxony's nephew. She even thinks of unlawful methods that can prevent them from choosing the right casket. Nerissa warns-"...you should refuse to perform your father's will, if you should refuse to accept him..." (line 89, 11) and Portia laments that she fears the worst. However, these first set of suitors leave without offering to choose and Portia is, for the time being, safe. But to her, the future appears bleak-

> If I live to be as old as Sybilla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will: I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence: and I pray God grant them a fair departure." (lines 105-110, 11)

Though more suitors enter immediately, like the prince of Morocco, the mention of Bassanio here, by Nerissa, as a suitor best deserving the fair lady seems to bear a kind of legitimacy because he had visited them in Portia's 'father's time'.

It is difficult, sometimes incredulous, to believe that Portia has been given Bassanio as husband. In his own words, Bassanio is someone who has "...disabled mine estate, /By something showing a more swelling port/Than my faint means would grant continuance :..."(I i, lines 123-125, 5). In the same conversation with Antonio, he adds that Portia is like the golden prize sought by all and that he wishes to hold a place among the suitors as his mind "presages me such thrift/ That I should questionless be fortunate." (lines 175-176, 7). Here "thrift" indicates "profit" in the mercenary sense. After Bassanio successfully selects the lead casket, Portia's words appear very uncharacteristic of the lady who later utters the 'mercy speech' in the Court Scene:

> You see me Lord Bassanio where I stand,
> Such as I am; though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish
> To wish myself much better, yet for you,
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,
> That only to stand high in your account,
> I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
> Exceed account: but the full sum of me
> Is sum of something: which to term in gross,

Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised,
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn: happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
.....
But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself: even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, - my lord's! ....

(III ii, lines 149-171, 52)

It is so strange that with a reigning female monarch, who remained unmarried in spite of repeated pressures created by the parliament, Shakespeare should choose to present such an intelligent heroine as Portia, not only ready to get married to someone who appears inferior and unworthy of her, but also ready to be 'schooled' by him. In fact, most of Shakespeare's heroines in his comedies are far superior to their male counterparts, but all of them accept happy matrimony and a subordinate role as wife at the end of the play, unlike the figure of the reigning Queen.

Jessica, another daughter in this play, is under the guardianship of her father, Shylock, who is universally hated. This daughter defies his orders, steals his money, changes her religion voluntarily and marries the Christian Lorenzo, for love. When Shylock advises her in Act II, Sc v-

....Hear you me Jessica,
Lock up my doors. And when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife
Clamber not you up to the casements then
Nor thrust you head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces:
(28-34, 31)

She keeps quiet, and later utters very flippantly, in Shylock's absence, "....and if my fortune be not crost/I have a father, you a daughter, lost." (55-56, 31). Shylock later, in Act III, Sc i, cannot hide his shock at Jessica's betrayal- "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" (32, 44). When he hears from Tubal that Jessica had squandered his wealth and given away his ring 'for a monkey', Shylock laments- " it was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys"(115-116,47). In the ring episode, these particular words of Shylock can be recalled in contrast to the behaviour of Christian husbands who give away their rings as souvenirs/ prizes. It seems that just because Shylock is a Jew, he is made to suffer as a father and face betrayal, whereas Portia's dead father, being a Christian, is given all due reverence.

Ophelia in *Hamlet* is just as removed from Portia as Hamlet himself from Bassanio. Ophelia is a young girl, brought to court by her father, whose youth and innocence attract Hamlet. She appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes; and the story of her life before she comes to court is obscure. Lee Edwards says "We can imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet"[1]. In fact, what we see of Ophelia after she comes to the "at once rude, magnificent, corrupted"[2] court circle can be summed up as a story of betrayal - she suffers betrayal at the hands of her father, her brother, her lover, the court and society. Polonius, her shrewd, pompous and garrulous father, advises her to be cautious of Hamlet's advances; he uses her as a decoy to unearth the secrets in Hamlet's mind ("loosing his daughter to him", II ii) and hence gain favour with Claudius. Ophelia reveals Hamlet's love for her to her father, but can never fathom nor express her love for him. When Polonius quizzes her regarding Hamlet's affection for her and asks her if she believes him, she says, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think". To this Polonius replies, "Marry, I'll teach you:" and later urges her to be cautious of the Prince's advances which are "springes to catch woodcocks". Polonius then instructs her: "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth/ Have you slander any moment's leisure/ As to give words or talk with Lord Hamlet", to which she replies, "I shall obey, my lord". Her brother Laertes, too warns her against Hamlet:

"For Hamlet and the trifling of this favour,
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting,
The perfume and the suppliance of a minute-
No more!"

Ophelia is incredulous- "No more but so?" Laertes concludes for her, "Think it no more", and cautions her that "...in the morn and liquid dew of youth/ Contagious blastments are most imminent". Ophelia promises-"I shall th' effect of this good counsel keep/ As watchman to my heart." Accordingly, she repels Hamlet's love letters and denies him access to her.

Ophelia, in surrendering to the dictates of her father and brother, stifles her own sense of reasoning. She is innocent but not mindless; she can understand Hamlet's warmth of feeling but cannot comprehend his requirements. For Hamlet, Ophelia represents in miniature, a world of lost beauty, crystalline purity and nobility, a world to which he had belonged before being plunged into the murky world of revenge and deceit. Hamlet is unable to reconcile the incongruities and contradictions in his life. Moreover, his tragedy is intensified by his loneliness. Ophelia is his "nymph in thy Orisons" but she fails to deliver. Her father and brother have tutored her to such an extent that she fails to answer him with sincerity-"How does your honour this many a day?" (III,i). Her polite meaningless words infuriate Hamlet and come as a confirmation of his earlier "Frailty, thy name is woman." Ophelia even offers to return his gifts. The lover is agonised and profoundly shocked where he had hoped and trusted most. His depth of love paradoxically inspires the degree of violence. Ophelia is torn asunder by Hamlet's coarse verbal tirade and speaks very little. Later in her soliloquy she says: "And I of ladies most deject and wretched,/ That suck'd the honey of his music vows". In remaining her father's dutiful daughter, Ophelia betrays her lover.

The murder of Polonius at the hands of Hamlet entangles her in a web of horrors from which she cannot extricate herself and the result is inevitable– she loses her sanity. Her bashful silence is replaced by meaningless babbling; impatient restlessness takes the place of her maidenly demeanour. She can say nothing in public terms defined by the court. Ophelia, ripped apart by conflicting loyalties to her father and her lover, is deprived of her thought, language and sexuality. Her madness can be taken as a revolt against the patriarchal order imposed on her.

Ophelia can be called a secondary tragic victim, caught up in the main tragic current and destroyed, as it were, in passing. Portia is a primary character in a comedy that pivots on her intelligence for the resolution of its conflicts. If Portia had occupied Ophelia's space, she would have perhaps studied Hamlet more and avoided the catastrophe. In *The Merchant of Venice*, if the fates were eventually found to turn against Portia, a dead father could only be successful in jeopardising his daughter's love life. In *Hamlet*, an interfering, dictating father successfully turns the fates against his innocent daughter Ophelia, resulting in the death of both.

Citations:

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