



DOI: 10.2478/genst-2013-0002

**WHO IS THE REAL EVIL?: THE FEMALE CHALLENGING THE
MALE IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND *MEASURE FOR
MEASURE***

E.SEDA AĞLAYAN MAZANOĞLU

Hacettepe University

Beytepe, Ankara, Turkey

caglayan_seda@hotmail.com

***Abstract:** Portia in The Merchant of Venice and Isabella in Measure for Measure challenge the savage male mind through disguise and deception. The roles of female and male are subverted in both plays as the female mind becomes stronger while the male body is abused and victimised. Both Portia and Isabella occupy centre stage and stand out through their subtlety.*

***Keywords:** deception, disguise, female intellect, female superiority*

1. Introduction

The concept of the savage male mind and broken female body is reversed in two of Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) and *Measure for Measure* (1603), as Portia in the former and Isabella in the latter challenge the brute male mind through disguise and deception. These two tools thus turn out to be powerful weapons which the fragile female body uses to gain power over the savage male mind. In this respect, Portia confronts merciless Shylock and spiteful Antonio in *The Merchant of*

Venice while Isabella challenges cruel, lustful Angelo in *Measure for Measure*. Accordingly, at the end of both plays, the roles of female and male are subverted as the female mind becomes stronger; whereas the male body is abused and victimised. In this regard, the major aim of this article is to demonstrate that Portia and Isabella act as rivals to the male characters in terms of evil as they manipulate the course of events through disguise and deception, and in both plays the female characters stand out by their subtlety. In other words, these two female characters do not remain on the margin of the action; on the contrary, they place themselves in the limelight through their artful schemes. Accordingly, although Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* are presented as villainous from the very beginning, Portia and Isabella both maintain control over events and characters as they slyly subvert the savage male mind and abandon the fragile female body. We will also be commenting on each female character's use of stratagems, as Portia cross-dresses as a means of disguise while Isabella uses Mariana's sexuality to conceal her own identity.

2. Portia

In *The Merchant of Venice* the conflict between Shylock and Antonio, stemming from a mutual hatred due to racial and economic considerations, turns out into a feud which targets Shylock as the evildoer and positions Antonio as the victim. Shylock manifests his grudge, which eventually exhausts his wealth and honour, against Antonio when he says, "You call me disbeliever, cut-throat dog,/ And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine" (I,iii,106-7). Yet Antonio responds to Shylock's accusations more harshly and remorselessly as follows: "I am as like to call thee so

again,/ To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (I,iii,125-26). Then the relentless animosity between the Jew and the Christian which is implied at the beginning of the play hardens when Shylock takes the opportunity of achieving financial superiority over Antonio and seeking revenge by agreeing to grant Bassanio a loan whose guarantor is Antonio himself. From this point of view, the play seems to be about the relations between two vengeful male characters until Portia’s artful intervention in the course of events. What Portia does is to become involved in the blood feud between the Jew and the Christian, both of whom are yearning for revenge and the destruction of the other party. However, she relinquishes her female body by disguising herself as a man in the trial scene. In addition, she engages in various deceptions, starting from the casket scene and developing through her manipulation of the laws of Venice in the trial scene, as will be explained in detail below.

Though Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is presented as a rich heiress waiting to see which of her suitors will choose the correct casket in order to be able to marry her, she in fact functions as a fundamental character who shapes not only the course of the play but also the fates of other characters, notably those of the males. As Karen Newman (1987:29) has stated, “she becomes an unruly woman”, and her non-conformist character is presented even at the very beginning of the play as she vigorously objects to having to marry according to the principles her father had settled before he died when she says, “I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father: is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (I,ii,22-26). Thus Portia shows her emancipatory spirit through her rebellious attitude to her deceased father’s wishes. In Alice N.

Benston's (1979:371) words, "[c]learly Portia is feeling discontent; with youthful passion she would like to abrogate the contract as written by her father. But she cannot, as she says, reason her way to freedom of choice; she would have to rebel." Therefore, taking into consideration Portia's statements in the casket scene, it may be argued that she uncovers her rebellious nature and savage mind even before she encounters Shylock and Antonio in the trial scene and the ring trick episode.

However, Portia first acts in accordance with her unsubmitive spirit by assuming a disguise when she decides to take action to help Bassanio, her new husband, and his beloved Antonio, who is about to be pitilessly punished by Shylock. Though Portia does not personally know Shylock or Antonio, the comments of particularly Salerio and Jessica on Shylock's evilness and Antonio's plight persuade Portia of the necessity of saving Antonio and punishing Shylock. Salerio defines Shylock as a beast when he says, "[...] never did I know/ A creature that did bear the shape of man/ So keen and greedy to confound a man" (III,ii,273-75), while Jessica emphasises Antonio's desperate situation (if the laws do not save him) as follows: "[...] and I know my lord,/ If law, authority, and power deny not,/ It will go hard with poor Antonio" (III,ii,287-89). Thus, it may be argued that Portia's opinion in regard to identifying the savage male mind is influenced by the prejudiced impressions of people who either hate Shylock for being Jewish, like Salerio, or have escaped from him due to his repressive attitudes, as has Jessica. In A.D. Moody's (1991:79) words, "[s]ince the moment in Act III when Antonio was known to be forfeit to Shylock, everything has been shaping towards the trial. Antonio's friends, under Portia, have been rallying to him, while Shylock has been shown hardening his heart." Accordingly, Portia poses as a doctor of law with

Nerissa accompanying her in the scheme disguised as her assistant, since she has decided to take action to shape the world of the male characters. When Nerissa asks, "Shall they see us?" (III,iv,59), Portia's response obviously expresses her desire to avoid the image of broken female body, and to overcome the savage male mind that she sees as represented by Shylock: "They shall, Nerissa: but in such a habit,/ That they shall think we are accomplished/ With that we lack" (III,iv,60-62). Therefore, as indicated in these lines, Portia finds strength in male disguise and is certain of victory as she uses her intellect against the savage male mind. What is ironical in Portia's disguise as a man is that she leaves the female broken body behind and finds the means of salvation through mind in a male body. In other words, she cannot act subtly by depending on her mind in her female aspect, yet she succeeds in defeating both Shylock, who is striving to injure Antonio and cause his death, and also Antonio, who is competing with Portia for Bassanio's love.

Portia's disguise, though different in nature, functions like that of Isabella to punish a male who is labelled as unjust and cruel (here Shylock) in his behaviour towards a defenceless and victimised character (here Antonio). Portia, in the garb of a young male clerk, asks such cunning questions in court and steers the conversation with Shylock so successfully that she easily manages to achieve an outcome which punishes Shylock and saves Antonio's life. As Thomas C. Bilello (2004:23) has pointed out, "[b]y obscuring her gender, Portia perpetrates the first lie, an ironic and necessary step to her entry into the exclusively male court. Of course, her disguise remains in place throughout the trial, which provides her the credibility with the litigants and the Duke required to defeat Shylock." It may therefore be argued that Portia uses both the male body and the male savage mind to

build up trust in herself not only in Shylock but also in the authorities charged with applying the laws of Venice. In court, Portia first asks Shylock clever questions and maintains a stance that appears to side with Shylock, thus gaining his trust in her as a man of law. She supports the inviolability of the bond between Shylock and Antonio when she says, “[...] there is no power in Venice/ Can alter a decree established” (IV,i,214-15). Next, she declares the possibility of the execution of the punishment of Antonio if Shylock will not accept the money instead of flesh: “And lawfully by this the Jew may claim/ A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off/ Nearest the merchant’s heart” (IV,i,227-29). Accordingly, she wins Shylock’s respect and admiration, and he praises this young lawyer who defends the rights of the Jew against the Christian when he says, “O wise young judge” (IV,i,220), and “O noble judge! O excellent young man!” (IV,i,242). All these positive developments for Shylock in the course of the trial make the reader curious about Portia’s next move. Yet Shylock’s admiration of Portia and her support of Shylock do not last long, for Portia soon executes the final step in her scheme. After giving Shylock permission to cut the flesh from Antonio’s breast, she reminds him not to shed any blood in making the cut, as the law does not allow this. She says: “Tarry a little; there is something else,-/ This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood” (IV,i,301-02). Shylock is thus rendered helpless before the laws of Venice by Portia’s savage female mind. Though he now declares himself ready to accept compensation for his debt, Portia, as the lawyer, shows no leniency towards Shylock but takes revenge on behalf of her husband and his beloved friend as she directs the state of Venice to confiscate Shylock’s property. Portia not only prevents Shylock from exacting the punishment but also exerts psychological pressure on him as she continues, “Why doth the Jew pause?”

take thy forfeiture” (IV,i,331), and “He hath refus’d it in the open court,/ He shall have merely justice and his bond” (IV,i,334-35). However, with the final move Portia makes in court, Shylock falls into disgrace and is condemned to live in penury for the rest of his life, a true life sentence for the Jew. She suggests:

The law hath yet another hold on you.
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,-
If it be proved against an alien,
That by direct, or indirect attempts
He seeks the life of any citizen,
The party ’gainst the which he doth contrive,
Shall seize one half of his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state, (IV,i,343-50)

As indicated in these lines, Portia dispossesses Shylock, which means total destruction for the Jewish moneylender. She uses the laws of Venice as her weapon to defeat Shylock as she succeeds in interpreting them in a cunning and intellectual way. In Bilello’s words (2004:12-13), “[t]o that extent, Portia succeeds brilliantly: she obtains Antonio’s release from the bond, thereby relieving Bassanio from his moral debt and, by requiring Shylock’s conversion to Christianity, ensures his elimination from the usury market.” Thus Portia is the character who determines the future of each of the male characters at the end of the play. In line with her actions in the casket scene, she first displays her determination to shape her own life by disguising herself as a man and entering the male world, and then she shapes the lives of male characters with a clever and highly artful approach to the laws of Venice.

However, Portia's savage mind scheme is not only directed at Shylock. She also deceives Bassanio and Gratiano by cooperating with Nerissa in the ring trick in male disguise, eliminating the broken female body. Portia and Nerissa both give rings to their husbands and exhort them to keep close watch over them, as Portia says: "I give them with this ring,/ Which when you part from, lose, or give away,/ Let it presage the ruin of your love" (III,ii,171-73). Thus the ring Portia consigns to Bassanio becomes the token of their love and commitment to each other. Yet Bassanio's deep affection for Antonio exceeds his love for Portia, which constitutes a threat to Portia that she must overcome with her savage female mind. Bassanio openly expresses the magnitude of his devotion to Antonio in the presence of Portia during the trial scene as follows: "Antonio, I am married to a wife/ Which is as dear to me as life itself,/ But life itself, my wife, and all the world,/ Are not with me esteem'd above thy life" (IV,i,278-81). In these lines Bassanio publicly makes a choice between Antonio, his dearest friend, and Portia, his beloved wife, and gives priority to his love for Antonio. Portia therefore makes up her mind to test Bassanio's love for her and to teach her husband an unforgettable lesson, and she manages to deceive Bassanio by her male disguise. When Bassanio wants to offer a gift to the young lawyer as a sign of his gratitude, Portia particularly asks for his ring: "[...] I'll take this ring from you,-/ Do not draw back your hand, I'll take no more" (IV,i,423-24). Though Bassanio fiercely refuses to give up his ring, which has been given to him by his beloved wife and is linked to a promise, Antonio insists that he give the ring to the man who has saved his life: "My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring,/ Let his deservings, and my love withal/ Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (IV,i,445-47), and the upshot is Bassanio's surrender of the ring to Portia in male disguise. Thus, in the ring

trick, the struggle between Portia and Antonio for both the love and the spiritual and sensual possession of Bassanio is revealed; yet Portia comes out victorious, which reveals how closely Bassanio is attached to her. In other words, Portia not only saves the beloved Antonio's body and ends up being a heroine in the eyes of Bassanio, but she also proves Bassanio's devotion to herself, as Bassanio confesses how deeply he regrets his actions: "Portia, forgive me this enforced wrong" (V,i,240). Thus, it may be argued that Antonio is reduced to holding a secondary position in Bassanio's life through Portia's intervention in a male body, yet by the use of a savage female mind.

3. Isabella

In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella presents a similar struggle with the savage male mind to Portia's, yet the way she uses the means of disguise is different from hers. Just like Portia, she uses both her mind and her body in her disguise, yet she does not abandon her broken female body and take to male disguise. Rather, she not only uses her own femininity but also uses the female body of another woman, Mariana. However, both her position as a woman and Mariana's body once rejected by Angelo gain strength through her deception, which she plans with the Duke, who is disguised as a member of the clergy. Kiernan Ryan (2002:134) explains the theme of the plays as follows: "The play's plot contrives a situation of corruption, confusion and crisis, which can only be resolved by the omniscient intervention of the patriarchal principle incarnate, who reclaims mastery over the instruments of state by regulating the sexual behaviour of his subjects through marriage." However, the controlling force in *Measure for Measure* turns out

to be a savage female mind rather than a savage male mind, and hence a woman who assumes the role of a man prevails over the course of events.

The brutality of the male mind is presented at the very beginning of the play before it is replaced by a savage female mind and a stronger body. When the Duke describes Angelo to Escalus he emphasises his propensity towards a cruel and strict kind of rule, necessary if social order, which has deteriorated, is to be restored: "What figure of us, think you, he will bear?/ For, you must know, we have with special soul/Elected him our absence to supply;/ Lent him our terror, drest him with our love" (Shakespeare, I,i,16-19). Thus the Duke asserts that he has deliberately chosen Angelo as his evilness of character suits his purpose of upholding the order of the community, something that he himself has not been able to achieve. Furthermore, Angelo describes his own depravity and how hard it is for an evil person to change into a moral being as follows: "Blood, thou art blood./ Let's write good angel on the devil's horn-/ 'Tis not the devil's crest" (II,iv,15-17). In this sense, it may be argued that it is hinted at the beginning of the play that what will be presented in the course of the action is the savage male mind - in other words, Angelo's baleful and domineering administration, which will victimise primarily Claudio, who is accused of fornication, and then any subjects who violate the laws. However, Isabella, as the savage female mind of the play, subverts the implied objective, as she plays the role of savage male mind while retaining and reinforcing her female body. Claudio gives clues to Isabella's character when he describes her appearance and personality to Lucio, and even here at the very beginning of the play he foreshadows her future cunning attitude:

I have great hope in that. For in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect

Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art
When she will play with reason and discourse,
And well she can persuade. (I,ii,172-76)

Thus, as indicated in the above lines, Isabella's femininity is praised, as her beauty and reason can influence people, especially men, and make them do whatever she wants. In other words, the qualities of beauty and reason, the body and the mind, are combined in the image of Isabella, and it is clearly stated that those features, as well as her morals, will be highlighted throughout the play. In addition, Isabella's power as an attractive and intellectual woman is expressed by Lucio, and it is indicated that she has sufficient ability to dominate not only the course of events but also the fates of other characters in the play. Though Isabella acts as if she is unaware of the power of her beauty and reason, as she says, "My power? Alas, I doubt" (I,iv,76) in response to Lucio's demand that she use her power, Lucio emphasises the possibility of change if Isabella fearlessly takes action:

[...] Go to Lord Angelo,
And let him learn to know, when maidens sue,
Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel,
All their petitions are as freely theirs
As they themselves would owe them. (I,iv,79-83)

Thus male characters such as Claudio and Lucio realise Isabella's potential to influence people and manipulate events even before Isabella herself does, and they both want her to use her ascendancy to save the life of Claudio, who is being victimised at the hands of Angelo just as Antonio was persecuted by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Likewise, the scene in which Isabella appeals to Angelo to save Claudio's life is of significance in

displaying Isabella's competence as a woman, as Angelo falls in love with her elegance and virtues: "If he had been as you, and you as he,/ You would have slipp'd like him, but he like you/ Would not have been so stern" (II,ii,64-66). In these lines Isabella courageously and openly challenges Angelo's decision to execute Claudio and explicitly expresses her conviction that Claudio would not punish him if it were Angelo who had committed such a crime. By so doing, she proves that she is not a passive character who will resign herself to her brother's death; instead, she tries to change Angelo's decision through effective and persistent rhetoric before she puts her scheme into effect. Isabella's attractiveness, which originates not only from her beauty but also from her wisdom, influences Angelo, who expresses the power of Isabella's femininity combined with reason: "From thee: even from thy virtue!/ What's this? What's this? Is that her fault, or mine?/ The tempter, or the tempted, who sins most, ha?" (II,ii,162-65). In this regard, it may be argued that Angelo cannot differentiate between his own evilness and that of Isabella, as she seems through her appearance and mind to be as sinful as he is.

Isabella's real intentions are revealed in her speech to the Duke, who is disguised as a cleric; and her immediate acceptance of what the Duke suggests demonstrates her readiness to assume the role of savage male mind despite her female body. The Duke counsels Isabella:

Go you to Angelo; answer his requiring with a plausible obedience; agree with his demands to the point. Only refer yourself to this advantage, [...] We shall advise this wronged maid to stand up your appointment, go in your place. If the encounter acknowledge itself hereafter, it may compel him to her recompense; and hear, by this is your brother saved, your honour untainted, the poor Mariana advantaged, and the corrupt deputy scaled. (III,i,243-56)

Thus, the idea of using Mariana's body as a tool to punish Angelo is first suggested by the Duke, yet Isabella submits to the proposal without questioning. Accordingly, Isabella's response, "[t]he image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection" (III,i,260-61), vividly displays the ironical fact that a woman who has strictly followed various moral codes is accepting the exploitation of the body of another woman and of her being used to fulfil her own desire for revenge. Anna Brownell Jameson (2001:78) highlights Isabella's power as a female character and her use of deception to achieve her goal when she says, "[...] though [Isabella] triumphs in the conclusion, her triumph is not produced in a pleasing manner. There are too many disguises and tricks [...]." In other words, like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Isabella resorts to fraudulent means to maintain control over the other characters and direct the course of events as she pleases. Moreover, Isabella's evil mind is revealed in another situation too, as she follows up the Duke's plan to display Angelo's crimes at the end of the play. When the Duke wants Isabella to accuse Angelo of proposing an act of fornication as the price for the saving of her brother's life, yet eventually killing him even though she had accepted his offer, Isabella's answer is of importance, as her cunning side is revealed once again in her words: "To speak so indirectly I am loth;/ I would say the truth, but to accuse him so/ That is your part; yet I am advis'd to do it,/ He says, to veil full purpose" (IV,vi,1-4). Though she claims that she is not doing this willingly, her expressions clearly reveal that her savage mind urges her to avenge herself on Angelo for her brother's death, and if her revenge necessitates lying, she can leave her morals aside without hesitation. She continues to lie as part of the plan, and tells the story in accordance with her plot with the Duke:

In brief, to set the needless process by-
 How I persuaded, how I pray'd and kneel'd,
 How he refell'd me, and how I replied
 (For this was of much length)-the vile conclusion
 I now begin with grief and shame to utter.
 He would not, but by gift of my chaste body
 To his concupiscible intemperate lust,
 Release my brother; and after much debatement,
 My sisterly remorse confutes mine honour
 And I did yield to him. But the next morn betimes,
 His purpose surfeiting, he sends a warrant
 For my poor brother's head. (V,i,95-106)

As indicated in the above lines, Angelo's malignity is laid bare in public, in the presence of all the characters of the play. Thus, on the basis of Isabella's confession, Angelo has no means of concealment, and his evilness is revealed in all its nakedness, just as Isabella has been plotting right from the beginning of the play. In other words, Isabella punishes Angelo for his cruel attitude towards Claudio and his licentious proposal to herself even though she was begging for mercy. Consequently, the ending of *Measure for Measure* does not bring happiness and reconciliation to Angelo even though it ends with his marriage to Mariana. In John Klause's words (2012:42), "[t]he conclusion of *Measure for Measure* brings with it no strong perfume of romance." The scene where the Duke reveals his true identity and Angelo's crimes are unraveled is of significance in that it displays Angelo's acceptance of defeat at the hands of Isabella. He remorsefully consents to suffer the death penalty as he pleads with the Duke to be released from his sins: "But let my trial be mine own confession./ Immediate sentence, then, and sequent death/ Is all the grace I beg" (V,i,370-72). Therefore, just like

Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Angelo, as a man who has lost influence and been dishonoured, has nothing left to do but to beg for his death, which will be an ultimate salvation for him. While Angelo feels ashamed, Isabella emerges as the saviour of the people who have been wronged. The Duke's proposal to Isabella at the end of the play very clearly demonstrates that Isabella is to be rewarded with a life of prosperity, as the Duke says: "I have a motion much imports your good;/ Where to if you'll a willing ear incline,/ What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (V,i,532-34). In other words, Angelo is finally presented as the evil character of the play while Isabella is cleared of all the intrigues she has planned throughout the action.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, Portia and Isabella challenge the savage male mind, and rather than being victims of the evil male they victimize the male body. In both plays, they assume control of events and other characters and determine how the play progresses and the characters evolve through various schemes and means such as disguise and deception. They not only subvert the roles of male characters but also maintain a savage male mind to either punish the merciless or take revenge on the evil male character. Both Portia and Isabella use deception to entrap the savage male mind, yet while Portia uses cross-dressing as a means of disguise, Isabella uses another woman's body to mask her identity. Accordingly, while the female characters become strong in terms of both body and mind, the male characters are weakened, as they turn into victims whose bodies are exploited.

References:

- Benston, Alice N. 1979. "Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30(3):367-385.
- Bilello, Thomas C. 2004. "Accomplished with What She Lacks: Law, Equity, and Portia's Con." *Law and Literature* 16(1):11-32.
- Jameson, Anna Brownell. 2001. "Isabella Compared to Portia." *Measure for Measure*. Ed. George L. Geckle. London: The Athlone Press, pp.74-80.
- Klauser, John. 2012. Introduction. *Measure for Measure*. By William Shakespeare. Boston: Macmillan, pp.27-47.
- Moody, A.D. 1991. "The Letter of the Law." *The Merchant of Venice: Critical Essays*. Ed. Thomas Wheeler. New York, London: Garland Publishing, pp.79-103.
- Newman, Karen. 1987. "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38(1):19-33.
- Ryan, Kiernan. 2002. *Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave.
- Shakespeare, William. 1985. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. John Russell Brown. London, New York: Methuen.
- . 1987. *Measure for Measure*. Ed. J.W.Lever. London, New York: Methuen.