

Portia's Guide to Gender-Bending Costume Play

Portia: They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit that they shall think we are accomplished with that we lack. I'll hold thee any wager, when we are both accoutered like young men I'll prove the prettier of the two, and wear my dagger with the braver grace, and speak between the change of man and boy with a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps into a manly stride, and speak of frays like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies, how honorable ladies sought my love, which I denying, they fell sick and died—I could not do withal! Then I'll repent, and wish, for all that, that I had not killed them; and twenty of these puny lies I'll tell, that men shall swear I have discontinued school above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind a thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks, which I will practice. (3.4.63-78)

In detailing her plan for how to successfully pass for the opposite gender, Portia's speech to her servant Nerissa in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* contrasts stereotypes and social expectations between two genders, but also serves as a cleverly disguised way for Portia to describe her own character. Nearly every attribute that Portia lists in this passage as befitting a male, and therefore presumably the opposite of what one should expect from a female according to this context, is in fact a trait that she herself displays throughout the play. While purporting to explain distinctions between men and women, Portia is actually demonstrating to Nerissa and the audience that there are many more similarities than differences, and implicitly challenging the value of existing social rules that dictate a gender-based separation of roles and privileges.

Portia's premise that cross-dressing will make the women appear to be "accomplished with that we lack," aside from a phallic allusion that mirrors "wear my dagger" a few lines later, references the political and social power that the women will "wear" when they present themselves as men. Dressed as men, they will be able to speak and be taken seriously at the trial, a right that they lack as women, seemingly barred from having a legal voice at all. In this aspect of gender distinctions, there is unfortunately no clever undermining or reversal, and this inequality is ultimately the target of Portia's remarks.

To pull off this necessary ruse, Portia mentions two physical aspects—changing her voice, and the way she walks—but the majority of her advice on how to present as male focuses on what to say. According to Portia, bragging about fights and lying about exaggerated lady conquests are sure-fire ways to socially code oneself as masculine. She reiterates that men lie, that they play "tricks", and that they are "bragging," and says that she will pull further inspiration from mimicking the behavior of men and boys she has observed.

Implied throughout her assertions of masculinity are that femininity is the opposite; if men brag, women are humble, men lie but women are truthful, men fight but women avoid conflict, men have dozens of lovers pining after them but women pine after that one man. These implied "opposites" that define womanhood are in fact opposite of Portia's character. She brags about herself in this very passage, saying she will "prove the prettier," and later scripts Nerissa to introduce her alter-ego with no less than a paragraph of obsequious compliments (4.1.150-164). Far from being a paragon of honesty, Portia is the most duplicitous character in the entire play, deceiving her husband with her disguise, tricking him into giving away his sacred ring, trapping Shylock in a legal web of unsatisfactory options, and arguably duping her unwanted suitors into choosing the wrong caskets. And while she never enters a physical altercation, she certainly doesn't avoid conflict either, as evidenced by the very reason for her cross-dressing in the first place, to intercede in the trial and confront the vengeful Shylock.

The sample lie that a man is likely to tell about unintentionally slaying women by breaking their hearts with unrequited love is especially ironic, given Portia's actual situation with the suitors and her father's will. But where her projected male persona exclaims, "I could not withal!" meaning, "I couldn't help it," Portia, who might realistically say about her love life that she "can't help it," instead takes an active role in engaging and subtly engineering the removal of her unwanted suitors, and never "repents" that she has "killed" their hopes and future prospects.

As for her concluding statement that she will model her masculine alter-ego on the "thousand raw tricks" that she has witnessed from "these bragging Jacks," the truly accurate description of her inspiration should be the first part of this last sentence, "I have in my mind," for Portia's scheme and deft handling of the law are more original and creative than any of the male characters. In truth, it is not some fictitious man but Portia who is a "bragging youth", who tells clever lies, who is humorously beleaguered by a plethora of pining suitors, who doesn't need to copy someone else's behavior.

In the end, the only thing Portia truly "lacks" to carry out her gender-bending disguise is an element not mentioned in this exchange, but in passing to another servant a few lines earlier: to borrow male garments from her cousin Bellario. She can otherwise continue to act entirely as herself, although perhaps now with a "manly stride" and "reed voice." Thus, proving that distinctions between men and women rely on superficial physical appearances, Portia challenges Nerissa and the audience to reconsider the value of a social structure that denies a person with these qualities political power simply because she is a woman.