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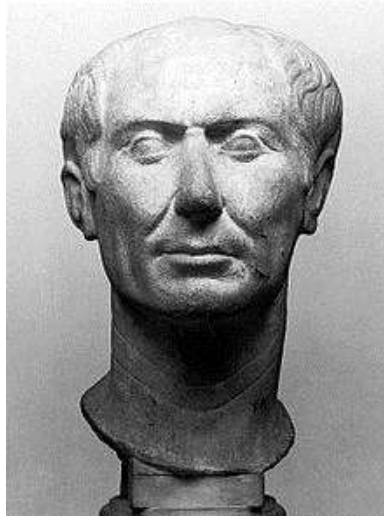
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Women in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

Iftikhar Hussain Lone



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Caesar

Nature herself was proud of his designs,
And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines,

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Which were richly spun and woven so fit
And, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit. (*On Shakespeare* –Ben Jonson)

Vividness and Spontaneity in Characterization

William Shakespeare's capital gift was to depict characters, both historical and imaginary, with a surpassing vividness and spontaneity. His characters differ in sex, age, state of life, virtues and vices but are all alike in being 'alive'. Whether good 'or' bad, moving among the realities of history 'or' among the most romantic happenings, his characters possess an unfailing humanity, and striking realism: Rosalind, Portia, Juliet, Cleopatra, Caesar, Brutus, Orlando, Shylock, Touchstone, not to mention the great tragic heroes – indeed the catalogue is endless.

Shakespeare – A Feminist?



William Shakespeare

Shakespeare, it is claimed by many modern critics, was a feminist. Shapiro, for example goes on to claim that Shakespeare was "the noblest feminist of them all". Though historically untrue, it can be put forth that 'patriarchy' is more at the centre of his tragedies. Msluskie believes: "Shakespeare wrote for male entertainment". William Shakespeare, because of his extraordinary genius for portraying human behavior, deftly depicted the

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condition of women within a patriarchal system, creating women characters, who, in their richness, transcend the limitations of his time.

Portia and Calphurnia in *Julius Caesar*

Though Elizabethan era was no exception to the tradition of looking at women as objects and chattels, Shakespeare however, portrays the characters of Portia and Calphurnia in *Julius Caesar* in positive light, ignoring the common stereotypes often associated with female characters. Both female characters are portrayed as the logical voice of reason, whose intellect and intuition are able to foreshadow Caesar's death. Their loyalty and devotion to their husbands and their ability to influence the most powerful men in Rome, demonstrate that Shakespeare intended to portray Portia and Calphurnia as women of great strength who supported their men. They themselves are strong women, but the men are unwilling to accept the reality and in the end become pathetic figures, and die tragic deaths.

Vital Female Characters

In *Julius Caesar*, the female characters of Calphurnia and Portia are vital to the play for their personal relationships with their husbands, Julius Caesar and Brutus. Despite their concern about their respective husbands' political careers, their opinions are ignored or pushed aside, because they represent feminine values and are grounded in the domestic sphere. Although they are used to emphasize the gender differences, these women are also needed in order to provide further insight into the characters of Caesar and Brutus. Their interactions serve to emphasize the "feminine" traits of the men and the ability of women to display "masculine" traits.

Brutus' interaction with Portia

Brutus' interaction with Portia, in Act 2, Scene 1, illustrates that women are isolated from politics. Although Portia proves that she is perceptive and intelligent, Brutus is reluctant to confide in her about his deep-rooted fears. This is based on the widespread belief that women were 'untrained in reason' and had no control over their

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affections.

Portia is portrayed as the traditional nagging wife who worries about her husband, asking 'Is Brutus sick?' Initially Brutus insists that he is 'not well in health, and that is all.' However, Portia uses a convincing argument to persuade Brutus that she is worthy of his confidence. Portia uses emotional blackmailing, begging Brutus to 'unfold to [her]' his secret because of his 'vows of love', saying that if he refuses then "Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife."

Once Portia begins to sway Brutus, she uses a rational argument, pointing to her father, Cato, and her husband as proof of her strength and reputation. Portia challenges Brutus, asking him "Think you I am no stronger than my sex. / Being so fathered, and so husbanded?" However, she is merely defined in each instance by her relationship to a man.

Strong Proof of Constancy

Finally, Portia provides 'strong proof of her constancy', a typical masculine trait, in the 'voluntary wound' in her thigh. The self-inflicted wound 'destabilizes the gendered concept of virtue' — that Portia can perform such an act proves that it is learned behavior, not a particular masculine trait. In response, Brutus promises that 'by and by thy bosom shall partake / the secrets of my heart.'

Brutus and Cassius

In comparison, Brutus' meeting with Cassius, in Act 1, Scene 2, takes place in the public domain, 'within earshot of a huge crowd, preceded and followed by a public procession.' Since it is a secretive conversation, this meeting lies on the 'border between public and private.' Whereas Cassius encourages Brutus to act upon male values in order to achieve political action, or a 'show / Of fire'. Portia represents Brutus' doubts or 'the "feminine" Other within him.' In particular, it is Brutus' reluctance to murder Caesar that is evidence of his feminine side. In these two separate scenes, Shakespeare overtly contrasts male and female values.

Women and Political Concerns

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If Act two, Scene one, provides evidence of Portia's constancy, this is reversed in Act two, Scene four:

O constancy, be strong upon my side,
Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!
I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
How hard it is for women to keep counsel! (*Julius Caesar, II, IV, 11.6-9*)

This scene proves that the women in Rome cannot cope with political concerns. Shakespeare portrays Portia as weak and vulnerable. Unlike Brutus' heroic suicide, Shakespeare plays down Portia's death by attributing it to female inconstancy. In Shakespeare's account, Brutus states that "she fell distract / And her attendants absent, swallowed fire." thus depriving Portia of some dignity. Anyway, 'distract' only connotes deep distress and not insanity like some critics seem to think. We can compare Plutarch's account, in his *Life of Marcus Brutus*, where he describes Portia's death as an honorable act.

Contradictions and Conflicts in the Male World

The male world of Rome, defined by Brutus and Caesar, is not as clear-cut as it appears. Brutus is defined by 'the contradictions embedded in his culture [which] are set at war.' Brutus is divided in terms of political alliances and gender definitions. Politically, he acts for the 'common good' as well as out of emulation of his hero, or rivalry. Similarly, Brutus' gender contradictions are highlighted - although his motives for murdering Caesar are 'masculinized', his doubts and fears are 'feminized'.

Julius Caesar and Calphurnia

Julius Caesar's interaction with Calphurnia follows Brutus' scene of interaction with Portia. Again, a wife's role is as one concerned about the safety of her husband, as Calphurnia exclaims, 'You shall not stir out of your house today.'

Calphurnia's belief in her dreams about Caesar's death portrays women as being superstitious, and we hear her claim that she 'never stood on ceremonies / Yet now they fright [her].' But, we do know that the Rome of those days was steeped in superstitions and

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fears of 'portends foretold.' Her dream images recall the theme of wife as a concerned life-partner, as she imagines herself to be 'A lioness [that] hath whelped in the streets'. In comparison, Caesar has boldly asserted that he does not fear 'death, a necessary end.' However, Calphurnia's fears about 'blood upon the Capitol' exist to emphasize the doubts that men hide under their assertions about constancy.

Although Caesar agrees to remain at home to please Calphurnia, as he states 'for thy humour I will stay at home', he would not have agreed unless he shared Calphurnia's fears. Caesar uses his wife as a convenient excuse when he tells Decius:

Calphurnia here, my wife, stays me at home.
She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which like a fountain with a hundred spouts
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans
Came smiling, and did bathe their hands in it. (*Julius Caesar, II, ii, 11.75-79*)

Have More Faith in Intuitive Warnings

When Decius mocks Caesar's obedience to his wife's whims, saying 'Break up the Senate till another time, / When Caesar's wife shall meet with better dreams', Caesar changes his mind. When his reputation is at stake Caesar exclaims 'How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia!'. However, the fulfillment of Calphurnia's prediction suggests that men should put more faith in the intuitive warnings of women.

Ambiguity in Caesar's Power

Throughout the play, Caesar's power has been ambiguous. Cassius feminizes Caesar in his description about the swimming contest, telling Brutus that Caesar cried "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!" Cassius also describes Caesar's fever in Spain, calling him 'a sick girl.' However, Cassius demonstrates that he fears the power Caesar would claim if crowned, comparing Caesar, to a 'Colossus' with everyone else as 'petty men'. Likewise, Calphurnia's dream of Caesar's wounded statue emphasizes the 'contradictory images of Caesar as both Colossus and sick girl, mighty in his triumph over Pompey, yet childless and deaf.' Caesar is

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ultimately brought down in his assassination – he is rendered powerless and silent, just like the women in the Roman political arena. Through his representation of womanhood, especially in the character of Portia and Calphurnia, Shakespeare indeed does transcend the stereotypes of his own time.

Shakespeare’s Brilliant Characterisation

Shakespeare has created in his genius, exquisitely charming, scintillatingly sensible, smart and excellent women like Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, clever and strong women like Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, beautiful and bold women like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, loving and sweet women like Cordelia in *King Lear*, romantic and deeply in love, as well as venturesome and courageous like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, magnificently royal, ruling a nation with a strong will, dynamic and determined like Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and other colourful heroines in his many plays.

There are a few in Shakespeare’s comedies that do not shine as much, but majority of his women characters are well and brilliantly drawn. You can witness his sympathy, his immense care, and creative talents in all the women characters – in his words they take shape and in his imagination they blossom and glow.

Many like Portia and Calphurnia in *Julius Caesar* do show feminine as well as masculine characteristics, and are none the worse for it. That only adds to their infinite charm, and the world admires them in spite of their weaknesses and faults. We can surely agree with Ben Jonson, ‘They are richly spun and woven so fit’.

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