

great favourite of his; a confession quite worthy of him, who avers his predilection for servant-maids, and his preference of the Fannys and the Pamelas over the Clementinas and Clarissas.* Schlegel, who has given several pages to a rapturous eulogy on the Merchant of Venice, simply designates Portia as a "rich, beautiful, clever heiress:" whether the fault lie in the writer or translator, I do protest against the word clever. Portia *clever!* what an epithet to apply to this heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom, beauty, and gentleness! Now would it not be well, if this common and comprehensive word were more accurately defined, or at least, more accurately used? It signifies properly, not so much the possession of high powers, as dexterity in the adaptation of certain faculties (not necessarily of a high order) to a certain end or aim—not always the worthiest. It implies something common-place, inasmuch as it speaks the presence of the *active* and *perceptive*, with a deficiency of the *feeling* and *reflective* powers: and, applied to a woman, does it not almost invariably suggest the idea of something we should distrust or shrink from, if not allied to a higher nature? The profligate French women, who ruled the councils of Europe in the middle of the last century, were clever women; and that philosopheress Madame Du Chatelet, who managed at one and the same moment the thread of an intrigue, her cards at piquet, and a calculation in algebra, was a very clever woman! If Portia had been created as a mere instrument to bring about a dramatic catastrophe—if she had merely detected the flaw in Antonio's bond, and used it as a means to baffle the Jew, she might have been pronounced a clever woman. But what Portia does is forgotten in what she *is*. The rare and harmonious blending of energy, reflection, and feeling, in her fine character, makes the epithet *clever* sound like a discord as applied to her, and places her infinitely beyond the slight praise of Richardson and Schlegel, neither of whom appears to have fully comprehended her.

These and other critics have been apparently so dazzled and engrossed by the amazing character of Shylock, that Portia has received less than justice at their hands: while the fact is, that Shylock is not a finer or more finished character in his way than Portia in hers. These two splendid figures are worthy of each other; worthy of being placed together within the same rich frame-work of enchanting poetry, and glorious and graceful forms. She hangs beside the terrible, the 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.

Portia is endued with her own share of those delightful qualities which Shakspeare has lavished on many of his female characters; but, besides the dignity, the sweetness, and tenderness, which should distinguish her sex gene-

rally, she is individualized by qualities peculiar to herself: by her high mental powers, her enthusiasm of temperament, her decision of purpose, and her buoyancy of spirit. These are innate: she has other distinguishing qualities more external, and which are the result of the circumstances in which she is placed. Thus she is the heiress of a princely name and countless wealth; a train of obedient pleasures has ever waited round her; and from infancy she has breathed an atmosphere redolent of perfume and blandishment. Accordingly, there is a commanding grace, a high bred, airy elegance, a spirit of magnificence in all that she does and says, as one to whom splendour had been familiar from her very birth. She treads as though her footsteps had been among marble palaces, beneath roofs of fretted gold, o'er cedar floors and pavements of jasper and porphyry—amid gardens full of statues, and fountains, and haunting music. She is full of penetrative wisdom, and genuine tenderness, and lively wit; but as she has never known want, or grief, or fear, or disappointment, her wisdom is without a touch of the sombre or the sad; her affections are all mixed up with faith, hope, and joy; and her wit has not a particle of malevolence or causticity.

It is well known that the Merchant of Venice is founded on two different tales; and in weaving together his double plot in so masterly a manner, Shakspeare has rejected altogether the character of the astutious lady of Belmont with her magic potions, who figures in the Italian novel. With yet more refinement, he has thrown out all the licentious part of the story, which some of his cotemporary dramatists would have seized on with avidity, and made the best or the worst of it possible; and he has substituted the trial of the caskets from another source.* We are not told expressly where Belmont is situated; but as Bassanio takes ship to go thither from Venice, and as we find them afterwards ordering horses from Belmont to Padua, we will imagine Portia's hereditary palace as standing on some lovely promontory between Venice and Trieste, overlooking the blue Adriatic, with the Frinli mountains or the Euganean hills for its background, such as we often see in one of Claude's or Poussin's elysian landscapes. In a scene, in a home like this, Shakspeare, having first exorcised the original possessor, has placed his Portia; and so endowed her, that all the wild, strange, and moving circumstances of the story become natural, probable, and necessary in connection with her. That such a woman should be chosen by the solving of an enigma is not surprising: herself and all around her, the scene, the country, the age in which she is placed, breathe of poetry, romance, and enchantment.

From the four quarters of the earth they come
To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint.
The Hyrcanian deserts, and the vasty wilds
Of wide Arabia, are as thoroughfares now,
For princes to come view fair Portia;
The watery kingdom, whose ambitious head
Spits in the face of heaven, is no bar
To stop the foreign spirits; but they come
As o'er a brook to see fair Portia.

* In the "Mercatante di Venezia" of Ser. Giovanni, we have the whole story of Antonio and Bassanio, and part of the story, but not the character, of Portia. The incident of the caskets is from the Gesta Romanorum.

* See preceding note.