

The sudden plan which she forms for the release of her husband's friend, her disguise, and her department, as the young and learned doctor, would appear forced and improbable in any other woman; but in Portia are the simple and natural result of her character.* The quickness with which she perceives the legal advantage which may be taken of the circumstances; the spirit of adventure with which she engages in the masquerading; and the decision, firmness, and intelligence with which she executes her generous purpose, are all in perfect keeping; and nothing appears forced; nothing as introduced merely for theatrical effect.

But all the finest parts of Portia's character are brought to bear in the trial scene. There she shines forth all her divine self. Her intellectual powers, her elevated sense of religion, her high honourable principles, her best feelings as a woman, are all displayed. She maintains at first a calm self-command, as one sure of carrying her point in the end; yet the painful heart-thrilling uncertainty in which she keeps the whole court, until suspense verges upon agony, is not contrived for effect merely; it is necessary and inevitable. She has two objects in view; to deliver her husband's friend, and to maintain her husband's honour by the discharge of his just debt, though paid out of her own wealth ten times over. It is evident that she would rather owe the safety of Antonio to anything, rather than the legal quibble with which our cousin Bellario has armed her, and which she reserves as a last resource. Thus all the speeches addressed to Shylock in the first instance are either direct or indirect experiments on his temper and feelings. She must be understood from the beginning to the end, as examining with intense anxiety the effect of her own words on his mind and countenance; as watching for that relenting spirit, which she hopes to awaken either by reason or persuasion. She begins by an appeal to his mercy, in that matchless piece of eloquence which, with an irresistible and solemn pathos, falls upon the heart like "gentle dew from heaven:" but in vain; for that blessed dew drops not more fruitless and unfelt on the parched sand of the desert than do these heavenly words upon the ear of Shylock. She next attacks his avarice:

Shylock, there's *thrice* thy money offered thee!

Then she appeals, in the same breath, both to his avarice and his pity:

Be merciful!

Take *thrice* thy money. Bid me tear the bond.

All that she says afterwards—her strong expressions, which are calculated to strike a shuddering horror through the nerves—the reflections she interposes—her delays and circumlocution, to give time for any latent feeling of commiseration to display itself—all, all are

* In that age, delicate points of law were not determined by the ordinary judges of the provinces, but by doctors of law, who were called from Bologna, Padua, and other places celebrated for their legal colleges.

premeditated, and tend in the same manner to the object she has in view. Thus—

You must prepare your bosom for his knife.
Therefore lay bare your bosom!

These two speeches, though addressed apparently to Antonio, are spoken *at* Shylock, and are evidently intended to penetrate *his* bosom. In the same spirit, she asks for the balance to weigh the pound of flesh; and entreats of Shylock to have a surgeon ready—

Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge,
To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death!

SHYLOCK.—Is it so nominated in the bond?

PORTIA.—It is not so expressed—but what of that?
'Twere good you do so much, for *charity*!

So unwilling is her sanguine and generous spirit to resign all hope, or to believe that humanity is absolutely extinct in the bosom of the Jew, that she calls on Antonio, as a last resource, to speak for himself. His gentle, yet manly resignation—the deep pathos of his farewell, and the affectionate allusion to herself in his last address to Bassanio—

Commend me to your honourable wife;
Say how I lov'd you, speak me fair in death, &c.

are well calculated to swell that emotion, which through the whole scene must have been labouring suppressed within her heart.

At length the crisis arrives, for patience and womanhood can endure no longer; and when Shylock, carrying his savage bent "to the last hour of act," springs on his victim—"A sentence! come, prepare!" then the smothered scorn, indignation, and disgust, burst forth with an impetuosity which interferes with the judicial solemnity she had at first affected;—particularly in the speech—

Therefore, prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood; nor cut thou less, nor more
But just the pound of flesh: if thou tak'st more,
Or less, than a just pound,—be it but so much
As makes it light, or heavy, in the substance,
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple; nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,—
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

But she afterwards recovers her propriety, and triumphs with a cooler scorn and a more self-possessed exultation.

It is clear that, to feel the full force and dramatic beauty of this marvellous scene, we must go along with Portia as well as with Shylock; we must understand her concealed purpose, keep in mind her noble motives, and pursue in our fancy the under current of feeling, working in her mind throughout. The terror and the power of Shylock's character,—his deadly and inexorable malice,—would be too oppressive; the pain and pity too intolerable, and the horror of the possible issue too overwhelming, but for the intellectual relief afforded by this double source of interest and contemplation.

I come now to that capacity for warm and generous affection, that tenderness of heart which renders Portia not less loveable as a woman than admirable for her mental endowments. What an exquisite stroke of judgment in the poet, to make the mutual passion of Portia and Bassanio, though unacknowledged to each other, anterior to the opening of the