

Celebrating Shakespeare's Portia: A Tribute to Aristotle's Ethos, Pathos and Logos, in *The Merchant of Venice*

Mitashree Tripathy *

Abstract: Ethos, pathos and logos frame effective rhetoric. The three basic ingredients together offer an intertwined thread in communicating emotion that is stronger and worthier than any other individual thread. Aristotle views *ethos* as a morally virtuous activity that reflects quality of one's character. He understands *pathos* as feelings, emotions that can be positive or negative and thus the impact and the response. By *logos* Aristotle counterparts with an analysis of an object through a structured principle that is rational and comprehensible. Employing ethos, pathos and logos during communication does not make people believe what is wrong or right; rather provides strong arguments when argued unfairly so that one can make confutation. Clear contents and supportive views often lead to arguments that are always easy to prove. Shakespeare is very passionate about the art and skill of delivery of speech. His fascination towards eloquence is widely found in his plays. Shakespeare as a classic dramatist sequesters and explores the rhetorical practice, its nature in Portia who is believed to have the command to stir emotions among the audiences. This paper exhibits the concept of ethos, pathos, and logos as demonstrated by Portia through various acts and scenes that are not only critical in their sense but also a composition of boundless multiplicity of combination of ethics, emotions and logic expressing the real state of an appeal to ethos, pathos and logos in the play.

Keywords: ethos, pathos, logos, Portia, character, sympathy, intelligence, logic

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle conferred the art of persuasion that serves a practical purpose through the artistic devices by which the communicator offers an argument supported by ethos, pathos and logos. It is difficult to trick an audience however, if the speaker has a character, provides logical reasoning for an argument and has strong and positive emotions, the

* Mitashree Tripathy (✉)

Birla Global University, Bhubaneswar, India
e-mail: mitashreetripathy84@gmail.com

speaker can succeed in persuading an audience. Aristotle describes in order to deliver a successful persuasion one cannot apply one of the devices and exclude the other two. Only the blend of the three principles defines persuasion. As a communication process “persuasion is a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, belief or behavior of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message” (Bettinghaus & Cody 1987, 3). However, many authors and researchers view persuasion as “the most difficult and the most challenging” (Steinberg 1999, 263). The reason is obvious as persuasion demands a thorough comprehension of the behavior, beliefs, attitudes and values of an audience. After all this is what the communicator is likely to challenge rather of the audience himself/ herself. As a technique, persuasion or rhetoric is known to be one among “the oldest surviving systematic disciplines in the world: its original insights and techniques remain largely valid, and it has survived precisely because of its capacity to adapt to ideological and social change” (Cockcroft & Cockcroft 1992, 3). On similar contexts many authors also provide considerable argument that “persuasion can only be successful if *ethos* and *pathos* are supported by *logos*” (Oesterreich and Sloane 1999, 175). This suggests that logical reasoning is required for argumentation supported by evidence, clear and true enough for an appropriate persuasion.

Rhetoric has been in other ways observed as the obtainable means of persuasion and in the views of Mark DeForrest (2009) “persuasion is a necessary skill for legal advocates”. On the contrary Krista McCormack proposes Aristotelian rhetoric on *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* should be supported and should be employed by the trial attorneys, however, when employed must ensure that every one in a society is benefitted. McCormack (2014, 134) determines “while the value of these skills to an orator, politician, or lobbyist may seem obvious, their value, as well as their applicability, has been the topic of much debate among theorists when applied to persuasion in the courtroom”.

Rhetoric in Elizabethan age presents itself as an enormous subject with implications to the tactical discursive strategies that very much existed in an illicit pattern. Daniel Keller describes the Elizabethan dramatists especially Shakespeare “showed more cogently than anybody else in the period ... and that there was an established sense that a sound knowledge of rhetoric and eloquence was the one imperative prerequisite of any kind of career” (Keller 2009, 16). Shakespeare’s plays are profoundly rhetoric. The editor Samuel

Johnson with all praises for the dramatist explains "that he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies, by reading human sentiments in human language; by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions" (see Shakespeare 1863, v). Harrison's view on William Shakespeare as he says "apart from the Bible, no written works have attracted to themselves such a mass of literature as the plays of Shakespeare ..., more talk of Shakespeare than read him" (Harrison 1924, 44). Walker defines Shakespeare's plays as emotional stirrers. He cites Madame de Stael's letters of praise for Shakespeare where she has confessed "he makes us feel that dreadful emotion which chills the blood of him who in the full enjoyment of life and health learns that death awaits him" (Walker 2019, 3).

Hermann Ulrici (1876, vii) critically examines Shakespeare's drama as he directs his attention towards "the determination of the form, the construction of every drama as one independent whole, i.e., to the connection of the several parts, and to the unity which binds and holds them all together: not only the action and the movements of its development, but also the characters, relations, and conditions of the dramatic personages, the diction and versification, scenery, and modes of representation". Piotr Sadowski had been very decisive with the criticism of the Shakespearean characters as he discusses "since its beginnings Shakespearean criticism has been practically synonymous with character analysis, critical approach based on the perception now regarded as unfashionable that Shakespeare's dramatic personae, although fictitious, are not unlike real people as we know them from real life experience" (Sadowski 2003, 13).

Speech reveals more than expression and Shakespearean plays are good examples of it. It may be because Shakespeare's obsession with rhetoric restlessly arouse and satisfy "in his representations of influence; because he represents human action, not through painted form, but through enacted speech" (Crider 2009, 2). Mostly the women characters who although are not provided with a broad range of roles in comparison to the men characters, however, the women characters were provided with persuasion techniques in their speech that made them extremely good performers. What made them rather more admirable is that with limited constraints that the woman characters faced in the Elizabethan age, there was a continual progression in the

female roles with some of the best speeches. It would be apt here to bring the attention of the readers to the fact that this paper does not intend to study those parts of the play that demonstrate the eloquence of Portia in various acts and scenes because most of the research has already been done on the same, rather it studies the rhetoric skills she possesses through her portrayal of *ethos* (ethics), *pathos* (emotions) and *logos* (logic). Hence, this paper proposes to study on limited scenes that concentrate on the three appeals to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, and excludes other important aspects of the play.

SHAKESPEARE'S PORTIA

Elizabethan Age was an extremely hierarchical society and much of the rules and conventions were clearly demonstrated in Shakespearean drama. Women were the second gender, weak and passive. Although, Shakespeare's plays reflect the Elizabethan image of woman, he manages to put their representations into question and revises them. Shakespeare is seen challenging, contesting and resisting the patriarchal ideology that "stereotypes, distorts, ignores or represses that experience, misrepresenting how women feel, think and act" (Gibson 2016, 27). Shakespeare's Portia is considered "particularly an empowered heroine" (Cieślak 2019, 51). Empowered because of her cleverness in the use of words judiciously and the way she manages to outperform her limited rights through her intelligence in order to make it work in her favor. Although Portia is a daunting and obedient daughter and could not go against the will of her father, however, like a traditional daughter Portia agreed upon taking a risk and abiding by the instructions of her father she welcomed every suitor who comes to beseech her. Portia compares men with moths who are attracted to the dazzling lights only to get burned by them:

PORTIA: Thus hath the candle singed the moth. O these deliberate fools! When they do choose, They have the wisdom by their wit to lose.

Portia is seen mocking at Arragon by calling her a 'deliberate fool' who believe that they are wise to deliberate but in the end their excessive deliberation ultimately defeats them. The use of animal images in the play *The Merchant of Venice* Portia attracts considerable attention; however most of the animal imageries are used both in a positive and negative manner. In the above excerpt, Portia uses 'moth' that is not so negative rather gentle ones as Ray (2005, 135) affirms "these are negative images but there is no violence or disgust in them".

The messenger alerts of a young Venetian with all good manners and greetings and who has with him has brought all niceties and expensive gifts. This young Venetian in the words of the messenger seemed like an ambassador of love who is "so ripe and replete with the burgeoning promise of impending fruitfulness" (Pearce 2010, 7) that clearly suggests a prognostication of the one who would not only overshadow the nostalgia of the former precursors unworthy and monotonous but also a prediction of good hopes for Portia. Although Portia herself is very excited to know and see who this gentleman is, she still asks the messenger to stop praising this young man so much as if he is his cousin in Act 2 Scene 9. She says

PORTIA: No more, I pray thee. I am half afeard Thou wilt say anon he is some kin to thee, Thou spend'st such high-day in praising him.

The Elizabethan audience is well aware of the fact that a messenger's cousin holds no status to marry a princess; but still Portia uses wit and humor to present her thoughts that eventually will lead to the love tryst of Portia and the young man as according to Harold Bloom (2006) "This swift fillip, stirring up the courtship plot, is genially and very effectively tossed off". In the next scene the young man is identified as Bassanio who Portia really likes but due to the societal conventions she is unable to keep her feelings straight to him. Portia insists Bassanio to spend some time with her so that she does not feel sad should he leave if he made a wrong choice. However, she tries to control her temptation in not helping Bassanio know the right casket as in Act 3 Scene 3 she says

PORTIA: I could teach you How to choose right, but I am then forsworn. So will I never be.

This scene demonstrates both her ardent love and respect towards the promise she made to her father and her morality to achieve her love towards Bassanio in a genuine way. Many authors suggest that Portia's eagerness for Bassanio's efforts to win her hand is in true spirit a comedy by Shakespeare as she achieves her choice despite the terms and conditions of her father who would not have agreed to her choice. Portia identifies the significance of the harsh observations to law that later on emerges to be the legal instrument that is her father's will. Although tired of this world and her inability to make proper decisions with a rich mix of unhappiness towards the prospects of her marriage, Portia "over the course of the scene she comes to appreciate the will's ability to shield her from unworthy suitors who are unwilling to risk

everything they possess” (Beecher et al. 2015, 82). She remains ethical to her father’s will and bond.

Soon after the casket scene where Bassanio chose the right casket and ultimately wins Portia, the audience witnesses a shocking scene where Antonio, Bassanio’s dearest friend has sent him a letter that describes his financial loss in all his business ventures thereby giving him a mental pain. And also there is Shylock, a Jew who is typically compared with an animal; whose greed for money can’t just be satisfied; who cannot be merciful enough to vindicate Antonio’s loan and provide justice. Bassanio considers Antonio as the kindest person, cordial and a typical paradigm of ancient Roman honor alive in Italy. As soon as Portia listens to the dilapidated state of Antonio, she offers to pay the loan to the Jew around twelve times the original sum as she says in Act 3 Scene 2

PORTIA: What, is that it? Pay him six thousand ducats and scrap the agreement! Double six thousand, and triple it before allowing such a close friend to lose even a hair on account of Bassanio

Portia is enriched with generosity as she pays 6000 ducats to Bassanio to be further offered to Shylock to save Antonio’s life. This makes her the most sympathetic and thus an admirable character of all the heroines of Shakespeare. As a capable lady Portia shows generosity purely out of love with Bassanio and also because she is generous with her money. The rare and harmonious unification of love, generosity and emotions in her refined character places her infinitely as the most celebrated and glorious character of Shakespeare. In Act 3 Scene 4, when Portia is seen missing her husband Lorenzo praises Portia for her kindness towards a gentleman who although a close friend to her husband but unacquainted to her.

LORENZO: But if you knew to whom you show this honor, How true a gentleman you send relief, How dear a lover of my lord your husband, I know you would be prouder of the work Than customary bounty can enforce you.

What makes her even truly an honest and noble soul is that she never regrets doing the good for a cause. Also her heart is as clear as crystal where unlike Lady Macbeth who speaks something and means something, Portia speaks exactly what she intends to. In Act 3 Scene 4, Portia shows her sense of clarity towards relationships. For her Antonio must be a good person because he shares a close relationship with Bassanio who is genuinely a good person and because both of

them share time, are good mannered individuals both of them must be sharing equal qualities as well.

Portia's initial state of being weary, confused and in plight to chose a suitable suitor but later on a transformed personality to save a life from death, to save a friendship and to gain confidence from Bassanio that would make their marriage sustain is an amazing flexibility that Shakespeare unfolds gradually.

Act 4 Scene 1 happens to be the most dramatic, and the most famous trial scene not only in the play rather in the history of theatre. Portia disguised as Balthazar comes to rescue Antonio from the cruel hands of Shylock. Trained in law, Portia knows exactly and enough to cleverly save her husband's dear friend as she has already conceived a plan. Calderwood (1987, 36) views "Portia's transformation into the lawyer Balthazar endows her at the trial with the masculine power over life and death- a power she carries back into womanhood and Belmont where as the possessor of secret knowledge she can rescue Bassanio from dishonor and infidelity and can revivify Antonio with news of his ships".

Shylock has already discarded the offer of six thousand ducats by Bassanio and still in continuation to demand a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast instead. In Act 4 Scene 1, Portia urges Shylock to be merciful and excuse Antonio as she absolves the famous mercy plea:

PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strained It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice bless It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes The thronèd monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings, But mercy is above this sceptered sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings. It is an attribute to God himself. And earthly power doth then show likest God's When mercy seasons justice.

Portia is seen both as an eloquent and humble person using rhetorical factors of mercy as a plea to Shylock and where Shylock is seen to repeatedly scorn her plea. With the most beautiful lines Shakespeare has ever quoted and Portia's personalized opinion on mercy comes with the idea of deliverance in Christianity. Portia, who is well-versed, expressive and rhetoric conveys Shylock and also the audience in a way that mercy is a subtle feeling that is an individual's trait, gentle and soft just like the showers of rain which when touch the surface of the earth nurtures it from within. Mercy is considered to be

the most powerful thing. It is mightier than the kings who hold their crown symbolizing worldly powers to impress their subjects and instill deep rooted reverence among the neighbors. However, while power is one of the qualities of a king, mercy happens to be the trait of God. And when the king harmoniously amalgamates the heavenly trait of mercy with the power to administer justice it results in the power that approaches nearest to that of God. Portia's well-ordered mind led her to true wisdom. Richard G. Moulton (1885; cited in William Archer 1886, 131) believes that Portia's speech on mercy "is one of the noblest in literature, a gem of purest truth in a setting of richest music." In Act 4 Scene 1,

PORTIA: Tarry a little. There is something else. This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood. The words expressly are "a pound of flesh." Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh, But in the cutting it if thou dost shed One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods Are by the laws of Venice confiscate Unto the state of Venice.

The above scene shows one of the finest qualities of Portia. She is fine-tuned with the art of rhetoric. The trial scene indeed brings the best of her, her divinity that lets her shine. The scene not only demonstrates her wit, her lofty sense of religion, her decent yet highly applauded principles but also her thoroughly picked feelings as a woman. William Baker and Brian Vickers (2005, 48) profess "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". How cleverly and craftily Portia avoids the tension created through her finest logical abilities. Just a pound of flesh and not a single drop of Christian blood which is both impossible and plausible and thus unavoidable. Portia not only saved Antonio's life from Shylock but also made him refuse to accept thrice the sum of money that was offered to him earlier. Rather, in addition as per the law, because he had attempted to take a Christian's life being a Jew, the victim that is Antonio now would take half of his goods and that his life is now in the hands of the Duke. Portia not only overturned slavery but also turned the scale in favor of Antonio. The scene "locates in Portia a power to destabilize the system of masculine dominance through her intercessory influence" (Espinosa 2016, 66). Portia's verbal and equivocation capacity makes her a crucial figure in the masculine world. Although being recognized as a life savior, when she was

offered money, her rejection to three thousand ducats not only makes her a grounded character in the whole play but also shows how pragmatic she is for not taking credit of her own achievements.

CONCLUSION

Aristotle expounds the principles of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* as instruments for persuasive language. The kind of rhetoric Portia projected in the play lets her mastery in the battle of the sexes on how a woman can outsmart a whole courtroom full of men. The reputation of the drama largely depends on the attributes of Portia where she is been portrayed in diverse identities, each being different and outsmarting the other. The fervent appeal she makes to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* during the casket scene, the first time when she gave the ring to Bassanio, and logically winning over Shylock encode a complete woman who, through her eloquence and formidable and sharp wit, is a genuine representation of Elizabethan woman according to Shakespeare. The shifts in her speech from one scene to another and with the change of the receiver, every time creates fresh and carefully stated condition. She demands to be the cynosure of all eyes through everything she does. The chunks of rhetoric she delivers are free from all pedantries. She is ethical, empathetic and compassionate, and also logical. Such an approach certainly throws a challenge: how to keep intact all the three threads into one. The overarching theory that denotes such broader contexts gets subtly identified by the characters and also the audience through careful implementation of redolent and proper usage of words to communicate. These qualities make her the most celebrated heroine of Shakespeare.

REFERENCES:

- Archer, W. 1886. "Criticism as an inductive science". *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, Vol. 44, No.1: 125-133.
- Baker, W., & B. Vickers. (Eds.). 2005. *Shakespeare, the Critical Tradition: The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Thoemmes Continuum.
- Beecher, D., A. Wallace, G. Williams, T. DeCook, and B. Cormack (Eds.). 2015. *Taking exception to the law: materializing injustice in early modern English literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bettinghaus, E. P., & M. J. Cody. 1987. *Persuasive communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Bloom, H. 2006. "An Essay by Harold Bloom". In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Annotated Shakespeare. Edited by Burton Raffel. Yale University Press.
- Calderwood, J. L. 1987. *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Cieślak, M. 2019. *Screening Gender in Shakespeare's Comedies*. Lexington Books.
- Cockcroft, R., & Cockcroft, S. M. (1992). *Persuading People: An Introduction to Rhetoric*. The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Crider, S. F. 2009. *With What Persuasion: An Essay on Shakespeare and the Ethics of Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang.
- DeForrest, M. 2009. "Introducing Persuasive Legal Argument via the *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail*". *The Journal of the Legal Writing Institute*, Vol. 15: 109–164.
- Espinosa, R. 2016. *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gibson, R. 2016. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, G. B. 1924. *The Story of Elizabethan Drama*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Keller, S. D. 2009. *The Development of Shakespeare's Rhetoric: A Study of Nine Plays*. Tübingen: Francke Verlag.
- McCormack, K. C. 2014. "Ethos, Pathos, and Logos: The Benefits of Aristotelian Rhetoric in the Courtroom". *Washington University Jurisprudence Review*, 7(1): 130–155.
- Oesterreich, P. L., and T. O. Sloane (Eds.). 1999. *Rhetorica Movet: Studies in Historical and Modern Rhetoric in Honour of Heinrich F. Plett*. Leiden: Brill.
- Pearce, J. 2010. *Through Shakespeare's Eyes*. Ignatius Press.
- Ray, R. 2005. William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- Sadowski, P. 2003. *Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Shakespeare, W. 1863. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Halifax: Milner and Sowerby.
- Steinberg, S. 1999. *Persuasive Communication Skills: Public Speaking*. Kenwyn: Juta.
- Ulrici, H. 1876. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*. London: G. Bell and sons.
- Walker, W. 2019. *Engagements with Shakespearean Drama*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wells, S. 1999. *Shakespeare Survey*. Cambridge University Press.