



Portia

(Wife of Brutus)

JULIUS CAESAR, ACT 2, SC. 4.

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"For the picture of this woman is so tender," says Campbell, "human nature, with its moral faith, are indebted;" it is almost impossible to imagine Shakespeare's married people, in which one of the characters has departed, the wife is not less the wife, but the wife of her husband:



PORTIA.

THIS lady, daughter of Cato, and wife of Marcus Brutus, is introduced with grateful effect in the tragedy of *Julius Caesar*, affording relief, by her truly feminine presence, to that painful record of "treason, stratagems," and foul conspiracy.

Portia is the just impersonation of a matron "after the high Roman fashion,"—carefully finished, and severely classic in its lightest touches. Full of sensibility, tenderness, and all the timid flutterings of her sex, she yet entertains lofty ideas of the heroic fortitude, severe virtues, and unflinching nerve that become "Cato's daughter," and "the woman that Lord Brutus took to wife;" and in her unavailing self-discipline to attain those stoical perfections, she presents one more example of the ineffectuality of the "schools" to divert the natural bent of the female character.

"For the picture of this wedded couple, at once august and tender," says Campbell, "human nature, and the dignity of conjugal faith, are indebted;" it is almost the only instance, among all of Shakspeare's married people, in which, long after the honeymoon has departed, the wife is neither the *master*, slave, nor pretty toy of her husband:

Bru. Portia, what mean you? Wherefore rise you now?
It is not for your health, thus to commit
Your weak condition to the raw-cold morning.

Por. Nor for yours neither. You have ungently, Brutus,
Stole from my bed. And yesternight, at supper,
You suddenly arose, and walked about,
Musing, and sighing, with your arms across;
And when I ask'd you what the matter was,
You star'd upon me with ungentle looks.
I urged you further; then you scratch'd your head,
And too impatiently stamp'd with your foot;
Yet I insisted, yet you answer'd not—
But, with an angry wafture of your hand,
Gave sign for me to leave you: So I did.

* * * * * Dear my lord,
Make me acquainted with your cause of grief.

Bru. I am not well in health, and that is all.

Por. Brutus is wise; and, were he not in health,
He would embrace the means to come by it.

Bru. Why, so I do.—Good Portia, go to bed.

* * * * *
* * * * * No, my Brutus;

You have some sick offence within your mind,
Which, by the right and virtue of my place,
I ought to know of: And, upon my knees,
I charm you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
Why you are heavy. * * * *

* * * * *
Bru. Kneel not, gentle Portia.

Por. I should not need, if you were gentle Brutus.
Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
Is it excepted I should know no secrets
That appertain to you? Am I yourself
But, as it were, in sort, or limitation—
To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,

Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.

Bru. You are my true and honorable wife,
As dear to me as are the ruddy drops
That visit my sad heart.

Por. If this were true, then should I know this secret.
I grant I am a woman—but, withal,
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife;
I grant I am a woman—but, withal,
A woman well reputed—Cato's daughter.
Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
Being so father'd, and so husbanded?
Tell me your counsels—I will not disclose them:
I have made strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound,
Here, in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience,
And not my husband's secrets?

Bru. O ye gods,
Render me worthy of this noble wife!—
Hark! hark! one knocks: Portia, go in awhile;
And by and by thy bosom shall partake
The secrets of my heart.
All my engagements I will construe to thee.

The scene where Portia, aware of the plot to kill Cæsar in the capitol, sends her page thither to gather tidings for her agonized suspense; is full of spirit; the natural excitability and weak tremors of the woman are portrayed to the life, and prove the worthlessness of her boasted philosophy to keep her heart down, when it starts up alarmed for her husband's safety:

Por. I prythee, boy, run to the senate-house;
Stay not to answer me, but get thee gone—
Why dost thou stay?

Luc. To know my errand, madam.

Por. I would have had thee there, and here again,
Ere I can tell thee what thou should'st do there.—
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!—
* * * * *

Bring we word, boy, if thy lord look well,
For he went sickly forth. And take good note
What Caesar doth, what suitors press to him.
Hark, boy! what noise is that?

* * * * *
* * * Ah me! how weak a thing

The heart of woman is! O Brutus!
The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise!
Sure, the boy heard me:—Brutus hath a suit
That Caesar will not grant.—O, I grow faint:—
Run, Lucius, and commend me to my lord;
Say I am merry. Come to me again,
And bring me word what he doth say to thee.

But alas for this gentle lady of "a man's mind, but a woman's might!" these alternations of hope, fear, suspense, and heroic efforts at self-command, are too much for her delicate organization; in a fit of wild distraction she puts an end to her life. Her husband thus communicates the grievous tidings to his friend Cassius:

Bru. O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs.

Cas. Of your philosophy you make no use,
If you give place to accidental evils.

Bru. No man bears sorrow better:—Portia is dead.

Cas. Ha! Portia?

Bru. She is dead.

Cas. How scap'd I killing, when I cross'd you so?
O insupportable and touching loss!—

Upon what sickness?

Bru. Impatient of my absence,
And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony
Have made themselves so strong;—for with her death
That tidings came. With this she fell distract;
And, her attendants absent, swallow'd fire.

Cas. And died so?

Bru. Even so.

Cas. O ye immortal gods!