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Topic Three – Risk, Gender and Agency

Risk infects virtually every inch of William Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Risk inherently possesses the element of chance, as well as the possibility for the outcome to end negatively, with loss. However, the manner in which risk affects each gender in *The Merchant of Venice* differs significantly; while men are afforded the luxury of being able to choose their risks, Portia (initially) lacks choice in her participation of risk. As a result, Portia charges forward in the play as an individual searching for transformation in both gender identity (female to male) and levels of agency (no control to all controlling), ultimately succeeding in both endeavors. Watching men choose the role that risk plays in their lives causes Portia to want her own control, setting out on a journey to completely reshape her life in order to possess ultimate control over as much as possible.

In the beginning of the play, from the first time we see Portia, she appears powerless; she does not even have the power to choose her own husband. Portia understands her own lack of agency, which is apparent when she states “O me, the word ‘choose’! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike” (1.2.22-23). Rather than possessing the capacity to select her own lifelong partner, her suitors are subject to a test of worthiness that her father composed, while Portia watches helplessly. Despite the fact that her father is dead and cannot physically reprimand her, she is still under his spell, unable to defy him. Oldrieve agrees, stating “Portia is her father’s property: even from the grave he has the legal and moral right to decide the most intimate concerns of her life” (88). Even her deceased father possesses more agency than she does, highlighting the alarming difference in control that Portia has in relation to (even dead) men. Benston shares the same views, stating “Portia’s father controls her actions through his death-bed plan of caskets” (384). Portia partakes in the risk of having a husband that she does not relish, or even one that she despises. However, unlike her suitors who choose to participate in the casket risk of their own freewill, Portia does not choose to partake in risk, her father forces her to engage with risk regardless of her desire to gamble. The men in the play, contrarily, are consistently presented with risk and allowed to try their luck or neglect to participate. For example, in the beginning of the play, when Bassanio approaches his cousin Antonio for money, Bassanio knows that Antonio may choose to allow him to borrow money or reject his request, demonstrating agency. Shakespeare depicts Bassanio as understanding that Antonio would be taking a risk in lending him money when Bassanio says “as I will watch the aim, or to find both, or bring your latter hazard back again” (1.1.150-151) using the metaphor of shooting a second arrow in order to find the first arrow. Shakespeare carefully selects the word “hazard” to demonstrate the same underlying elements as risk: chance, danger and the potential for negative outcome. Even in nuanced manners, Shakespeare creates male characters that both acknowledge and understand one another’s agency and ability to partake in or avoid risk. Fortunately for Bassanio, Antonio agrees to help him on his quest for Portia. In borrowing money from Shylock in order to help Bassanio, Antonio willingly participates in a negotiation that reeks of risk. Nonetheless, Antonio firmly demonstrates his agency when saying “content, in faith. I’ll seal to such a bond,” (1.3.149) to Shylock, finalizing their agreement for one pound of flesh if the payment is late. However, Shakespeare uses repetition of this important negotiation to demonstrate that the male character, Antonio, is fully aware of the risk that he is entering into. “Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond,” (1.3.168) Antonio repeats boldly, confident that he will have ample funds by the time that payment is due. In borrowing money with such a risky penalty, Antonio illustrates his agency and ability to choose his risks. Antonio sharply juxtaposes Portia and her inability to even select someone as important as her husband, exemplifying her lack of capacity to choose her risks.

The casket test set up by Portia’s father demonstrates both Portia’s lack of agency in selecting risk and her male suitors’ ability to choose their participation in risk. Ironically, the casket test was installed by Portia’s father presumably to minimize the risk of an unworthy husband. However, in doing this, Portia’s father causes Portia to suffer from the ultimate risk of marrying someone that she does not love. Portia’s father, in stripping her of her agency, hopes to limit risk, but in fact does the opposite, leaving Portia as an involuntary participant in a risk that will change a large aspect of her life. Portia acknowledges this lack of agency when she states “besides, the lott’ry of my destiny bars me the right of voluntary choosing” (2.1.15-16). Shakespeare uses the word “lott’ry” to demonstrate that Portia does see the casket test as a risk, specifically one that has a large potential for failure (as lotteries do). Additionally, she understands the severity of the outcome, as seen when she states “destiny,” which insinuates a grander purpose. Furthermore, these lines contain even denser, specific wording, as Portia knows that she does not even have the “right” to the “voluntary choosing” of her husband. The word “right,” indicates a privilege that should, without debate, be given to all humans, yet Portia still lacks the ability to select a husband (as seen with the words “voluntary choosing”). To further depict Portia’s lack of agency, the play has a period, a definitive punctuation mark, directly after the word “choosing.” The period is a barring punctuation mark that indicates finality, mirroring Portia and her inability to even choose whether or not the casket test is an acceptable way to select a husband. Her father’s decision is final, like the punctuation mark. While the appearance of a period may initially seem insignificant, in this scene of the play Portia’s dialogue contains very few periods, making the appearance of one at the end of “voluntary choosing” so powerful. From the beginning of our experience with Portia, we understand her as a character that has her agency stripped, partaking in risks against her will and even being controlled by a man that is no longer alive.

Sharply contrasting Portia and her lack of ability to choose whether or not to participate in the casket test, the Prince of Morocco willingly accepts the challenge set forth by Portia’s father. Therefore, he understands the risk of a lifetime of remaining unmarried (as well as never being able to reveal what box he chose and having to leave immediately). Within his analysis of the three caskets lies an interesting perspective on the concept of risk. Morocco reads the inscription on the lead casket, which states “who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.16). Within this warning we note the element of risk or “hazard” that comes with choosing this (correct) casket. However, what is particularly insightful is Morocco’s interpretation of the words; he exclaims “hazard for lead? This casket threatens; men that hazard all do it in hope of fair advantages” (2.7.17-19). Morocco believes that the only reason that people partake in risk is because they believe there to be a chance of gaining from potential rewards. Morocco analyzes the lead casket as unworthy of his participation in risk, that it does not present the opportunity for significant enough gain for his liking. However, in deciding to remove the lead casket from the equation, he demonstrates his own ability, yet again, to choose which risks he participates in. His interaction with the lead casket serves as a metaphor for the larger agency of men in *The Merchant of Venice*. Morocco, like all men in the play, has the ability to make carefully calculated risks, weighing the worth of the reward and then deciding whether or not to engage with the risk. Inversely, we observe Portia, who understands the severity of the risk that she has no choice in partaking in. However, regardless of Portia’s willful participation, we also see that she lacks the benefit that Morocco believes to be so important to weighing the worth of risk: Portia does not know what (or rather, who) her reward is. While Morocco can tangibly see the lead casket and determine its value, Portia suffers from an ever-changing variable as a “reward” (if we are to deem her future husband as a reward, as he may be more of an unwanted shadow, becoming unchangeably attached to her despite her feelings toward him). Morocco is not the only man who deems the lead casket unworthy of risk. Arragon also rejects the casket, stating “you shall look fairer ere I give or hazard” (2.9.21), demonstrating the same principles that Morocco possesses: the reward must appear worth the risk. Again, a man is allowed to choose his participation in risk, knowing the reward. Ultimately, we see the men in the play as being able to not only choose which risks to partake in, but as also being able to comprehend their potential rewards; while Portia is seen as lacking the choice to partake in risk and simultaneously suffering from a slippery, variable reward.

While the beginning of the play shows Portia as having no agency and being unable to choose her participation in risk, she evolves over the course of the play into an indisputably different character. After she is engaged to Bassanio, she is free from her father’s wishes, possessing the potential for mobility. Her newly found freedom, fueled by past experience with lack of agency, causes her to strive to become her previous opposite; she lusts after control, agency, and ability to eliminate risk. One of the places that we see this agency is in her transformation into a lawyer, more specifically, one who has control over an enormous decision that determines life or death. In order to gain this agency, she undergoes a literal transformation into a man. In the play, as Portia has observed, men possess agency and the ability to choose their risks; as a result, Portia changes into a man, not only in frame of mind, but also physically, as seen in her disguised persona, Balthazar. Paired with the gender of a man and the inherent power of a lawyer, Portia gains the power that she has been deprived of for so long. As Balthazar, she possesses the ability to determine risk for others, and in some instances, she does to Shylock what she experienced in her lack of agency. We can see Portia as inflicting justice on men who have had many privileges that she has not. We see her obsession with justice when she warns Shylock that he may draw no blood and must cut exactly one pound of flesh, saying “but just a 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” (4.1.325-327) that Shylock will lose virtually everything valuable to him. Portia toys with the double meaning of the word “just.” First she uses it in the context that Shylock may merely take “just” a pound of flesh, meaning no more or less. The second use, “a just pound,” with the words “a” and “just” switched, reveals another meaning: a fair pound of flesh. With these words reversed, the implication is that no flesh is the correct amount of flesh (as any incision will draw blood). Here Portia has the ultimate agency: the ability to not only control her own life, but to impact others and decide the outcomes of individuals’ fates. She gets her justice on men through punishing Shylock and presenting him with the same type of impossible risk that she had no choice to partake in. This justice manifests itself in her diction. Portia does not allow Shylock to retrace his steps and accept money, she places him in an uncomfortable no-win situation, where he must merely accept that he no longer has control of his life; Shylock is stripped of his ability to detach himself from risk, much like Portia had no choice but to accept her father’s casket test (including the outcome of the test). In becoming a male (Balthazar), we see Portia gain tremendous amounts of agency, finally possessing control and inflicting justice upon Shylock, trapping him in an impossible situation and allowing him to understand the powerlessness (especially in the ability to escape participation in risk) that she felt for so long.

Although Portia physically becomes a man in playing Balthazar, she also transforms into the male gender in other manners. Even in relation to Bassanio, whom she is fond of, Portia longs to gain power over him in order to eliminate further potential risks from her life. At the end of the play, she presents Bassanio with a lose-lose situation, asking (as Balthazar) him for the ring that she previously (as herself) told him to guard and hold sacred. In one outcome he will disrespect Balthazar, who saved his dear friend Antonio, and in another outcome he will betray and hurt Portia. Again, Portia inflicts risk on others (Bassanio risks an inevitable negative result in either decision) as a result of her previous experiences with involuntary participation in risk. In essentially forcing Bassanio to give up her ring, she gains power, as she will always have something to hold over his head, winning any argument, moving forward in their relationship. Essentially, she will always be able to maintain control and, therefore, minimize risk within their relationship. Portia demonstrates through repetition of the word “the ring” (when speaking to Bassanio about the importance of the ring while scolding him) five times at the end of lines 5.1.199-202 and 5.1.208, that she will use the ring repeatedly as a controlling mechanism. The word “the ring” in her speech mimics the sound that a ring would make if it were audibly heard, being repeated over and over again, much like the way in which she will be able to hold Bassanio’s betrayal of her over him forever. Additionally, Portia demonstrates her newfound control of risk when stating “I’ll die for’t but some woman had the ring” (5.1.208). Although initially it may appear (especially to Bassanio) that Portia is making a bet, which inherently involves risk, about whom Bassanio gave the ring to, she is actually partaking in no risk. Portia knows with complete certainty that she (a woman) has the ring. Here we see Portia as not only exercising her male-like power to choose to partake in risk, but also as being able to entirely know the outcome of the risk/bet (which juxtaposes the lack of certainty she possessed about who would become her husband). At the end of the play, Portia has completed her transformation into identifying with the male gender (specifically in terms of agency); she is no longer an individual that lacks agency and inability to possess control pertaining to risk. Portia has overcome the problem of risk (at least in terms of her relationship to Bassanio) by causing Bassanio to falter in such a significant manner that she will always be able to have control over him by simply reminding him of his wrongdoing in giving away her ring. As the play finishes, we see Portia as a powerful, risk-free, male-identifying individual with agency, entirely different from her past self.

Many individuals in *The Merchant of Venice* encounter risk throughout the entirety of the play. However, the male characters are presented with far different privileges in terms of risk, being able to decide whether or not to partake in it based off of the worthiness of reward (as seen in the casket scenes). Contrarily, in the beginning of the play, Portia possesses no choice in her participation in risk, lacking agency entirely and allowing her deceased father to control her life. However, at the end of the play we see Portia as entirely transformed: an individual who holds ample agency, one who controls risk and one who has overcome the obstacle of her femininity and finally identifies with men and their power. Portia changes both physically (into a man) and mentally, fueled by her past lack of agency to grasp at as much power as she can in order to minimize further traumatizing experiences with helplessness and risk. By the end of the play, Portia is not the mere commodity that she initially appeared to be; she is not an object, incapable of action. On the contrary, the play ends with Portia as the character in possession of the most power, able to do the seemingly impossible and hold authority over even her husband, filling the male role in the relationship. Portia’s traumatizing and paralyzing experience with the inability to resist risk changes her, causing her to have an entirely new identity: male, powerful and filled with agency.

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