Cato's Daughter, Brutus's Wife: Portia *Agonistes*

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Abstract
From a handful of references in the classical authors, Portia, daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus, became, in the Renaissance, a powerful symbol for dramatists and lyric poets. But what exactly did she symbolise? The classical authors had between them ascribed to her two self-inflicted wounds: one made with a sword, the other (fatal) with burning coals. Did these indicate strength, a woman brave enough to embrace pain, or weakness, the recourse of one who found the strain of the Civil War too much for her? Was she victim, heroine or virago? This paper will consider some representations of Portia and her relationship with Brutus, focusing on William Alexander's and William Shakespeare's tragedies of Julius Caesar – with some early reworkings of Shakespeare's play, where the authors reach different conclusions on what to do when a woman describes a wound in her thigh.

Key-words: Portia, Plutarch, Shakespeare.

Cato the Younger – Cato of Utica, that tragic embodiment of stern, unbending *romanitas* – left a child, who self-consciously inherited his name and his moral legacy. We know this because, according to the rather sparse accounts, this child died proclaiming Cato's name – died suitably, in battle at Philippi, where the Republic took its last stand. "I am," he cried, "the son of Marcus Cato!" Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Brutus* fits him in very briefly near the end of his narrative (49.10)[1] – as William Shakespeare also does, near the end of his play (*Julius Caesar*, V.iv.4). But no one remembers about him today; and it seems from the classical sources that no one cared much then, either. For of course we are also told that

[1] Unless specified, all quotations from Plutarch will be taken from the Loeb translations by Bernadotte Perrin. All other unattributed translations are mine.

Cato had *another* child – the one in whom everyone is interested: his daughter, the *female* version of that proud *virtus* which is so closely bound up to its etymology: *vir*, man. *Porcia Catonis*, "Cato's Daughter", is a paradox: that is what brings her death, and thus an after-life. In this essay, I shall discuss further paradoxes in the figure of Portia (to use the spelling more familiar in English) besides this originating one: the testimony about her that has come down from the ancient world, the surprising discrepancies it reveals, and the effects these have had on what one might call the "Portia tradition" in early modern drama. Much the best-known of these dramatic Portias is Shakespeare's; fine essays by Cynthia Marshall, Gail Kern Paster and many others have considered her as a symbol and a victim of Roman *virtus*. I hope here to extend some of their ideas beyond the limits of Shakespeare's play.

Plutarch's account of Portia in the *Brutus* is the longest to come down to us from the ancient world – and the best-known of the ancient accounts today, thanks to Shakespeare. Plutarch's is not, however, the first; the earliest, apart from mentions in surviving letters from Brutus and Cicero (of which more, briefly, later), comes from the anthologist Valerius Maximus in the early first century CE, who tells just two stories about her – both times introducing her as "Cato's daughter". The first, which he classifies as "*fortitudo*", courage, tells the story of her self-wounding. It is brief enough to quote in full:

> [Cato's] daughter was of no womanish spirit [*minime muliebris animi*]. Learning of her husband Brutus' design to kill Caesar, on the night before the day of that foul deed, Brutus having left the bedroom, she asked for a barber's knife to trim her nails and wounded herself with it, pretending that it had slipped by accident. Called back to the bedroom by the cries of the maidservants, Brutus started to scold her for forestalling the barber's function. Portia said to him in private: "What I did was no accident; in the plight we are in it was the surest token of my love for you. I wanted to try out how coolly I could kill myself with steel if your plan did not turn out as you hope." (*Memorable Doings and Sayings*, III.2.15)

The second he classifies as "*amor conjugalis*":

> Your chaste fires too, Porcia M. Cato's daughter, all ages shall attend with the admiration they deserve. When you learned that your husband

Brutus had been defeated and killed at Philippi, you did not hesitate to take burning coals into your mouth, steel being withheld, imitating your father's manly end with a woman's spirit. But perhaps more bravely than he, because Cato perished by a normal form of death, you by a novel one. (IV.6.5)

Valerius is unsure whether she is unwomanlike or more-than-manlike; certainly she is heroic – Cato's true daughter. These are the only two stories he tells about her, and it is clear from the rather sketchy way he tells them that the point he wants to make is moral, not historical. *How* Portia knew these things – the plan; the defeat – is not revealed: only her heroic self-violence in response to them.

Valerius Maximus sets the conversation about Portia. After him, the second of those stories will never disappear – even when, as in Appian, every other story about her has (*every* other story – Appian, uniquely, makes her not Cato's daughter but his sister: an idea which has found almost no adherents over the last 2,000 years)[2]. The poet Martial wrote two epigrams about her: one is flippant and obscene; the other is the one that has an influence, emphasising the painfulness of her death, and giving Portia a voice, for the first time since her death. Here it is, in the translation by Richard Lovelace – a casualty of the English Civil War commemorating a casualty of a Roman one:

When *Portia* her dear Lord's sad fate did hear,
And noble grief sought arms were hid from her,
Know you not yet no hinderance of death is,
Cato I thought enough had taught you this,
So said, her thirsty lips drink flaming coales,
Go now deny me steel officious fools.
(Lovelace, "Mart. Epi. XLIII Lib. I", p. 101)

These Portia stories are, of course, selective. It might come as a surprise, to anyone meeting her through Valerius and Martial, that Portia was a widow when she married Brutus, and had adult children, one of whom fought alongside his stepfather and his uncle

[2] A notable exception is the great nineteenth-century classical scholar, Theodor Mommsen, who argued for Appian's view in *Hermes* 15 (1880), 99ff. The theory seems to have no modern adherents.

at Philippi. There is no room for such complications in the legend of single-minded, self-wounding Portia; and it was to be a legend that caught on. St Jerome, indeed, praises her as the ideal of a one-man woman: in *Against Jovinian*, she stars as the next best thing to a perpetual virgin:

> Porcia, whom Brutus took to wife, was a virgin; Cato's wife, Marcia, was not a virgin; but Marcia went to and fro between Hortensius and Cato, and was quite content to live without Cato; while Porcia could not live without Brutus; for women attach themselves closely to particular men, and to keep to one is a strong link in the chain of affection. (Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, ch. 46, p. 382)

This misconception (connected, in some way, with a lost work by Seneca)[3] explains, perhaps, why Benvenutus Imolensis, one of Dante's fourteenth-century commentators, considered that Dante *should* have put Portia, rather than Marcia, in his list of virtuous pagans in Limbo[4]. (The fact that he left her out may perhaps be explained by the more famous fact that he had put her husband into the very worst bit of Hell – even though her father had been promoted to the post of Guardian of Mount Purgatory.) On the whole, medieval commentators seem to have taken the classical authors' word for it that her behaviour was admirable; the Valerian tradition passes pure into Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer. This, even though most medieval authors deplored the assassination of Caesar that had led to her death. But then, Valerius had deplored it too, without feeling, apparently, that it reflected badly on her. Christine de Pizan (*Le Trésor de la cité des dames*, II.25), unusually, claimed that Portia wounded herself in order not to persuade Brutus of her support but to *dissuade* him from going ahead with

[3] This passage has been traced to the now-lost work "De Matrimonio" by Seneca and is included among his fragments by (among others) Winfried Trillitzsch; it is unlikely, however, that Seneca would have made such a claim about Porcia. See Hanna and Lawler (eds) 2014: 27-8.

[4] Benvenutus de Imola 1890: 166: "Ista Marcia fuit honestissima, qualis conveniebat viro honestissimo Catoni […]. Tamen forte autor melius posuisset Portiam filiam Catonis eiusdem, quae audita morte viri sui Bruti, quaerens ferrum quo se occideret, nec inveniens, recurrit ad ignem, et prunas accensas immisit in os suum, et sic se necavit inaudito genere mortis".

the assassination plan: here we can plainly see how easy it was to detach the moment from any sort of contextual reality.

Thus the picture of Portia familiar at the beginning of the sixteenth century seems to have been a positive one. Although she is often listed with the Roman Lucretia, there is no equivalent, in her case, of St Augustine's Christian criticism of Lucretia's suicide. Occasionally, where the subject is Christian martyrdom, and pagan suicide is distinguished from it as second class, Portia receives a mild rebuke[5]; occasionally she is compared to some contemporary Christian widow, who will go one better by *living*, rather than dying, for her husband – see, for example, Pietro Gravina on Vittoria Colonna, imitated by Juan de Mal Lara (Hershberg 1970: 23-4); for the most part, however, references to Portia are laudatory. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mentions of, and references to, Portia are generally restricted to the two events Valerius had picked out – the wound and the blow. Of them, the second is the more popular: to many poets, it suggested an attractive opportunity for the conceit of the flames of love. Sor Juana de la Cruz offers a fine example, urging Portia not to swallow the coals because "Fire is not equal to the fire of your love"[6]. The same holds true for the visual tradition, which seems to begin with illustrations to Boccaccio: according to Creighton Gilbert all of these show either the suicide, or the razor, or both[7].

The visual artists, however, had to make a decision the literary world could avoid: that is, *where*, exactly, Portia wounded herself. Valerius Maximus did not say; and the artists responded with a range of ideas, from the foot (a popular choice, most famously expressed in the beautiful painting by Ercole de' Roberti), to the

[5] See Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger, *The Virgin Martyr* (1622), V.i; James Shirley, *The Humorous Courtier* (1640), II.i: in both, Portia, along with other admired pagan suicides, is compared to her disadvantage with non-suicidal Christian martyrs.

[6] McInnis (1997: 771): "Sor Juana suggests that material flames will not extinguish Portia's pain". The lines are: "porque si bien de tu pasión si infiere, / mal morirá a las brasas materiales / quien a las llamas del amor no muere".

[7] Of the ten manuscripts that illustrate her, he says, "eight show only the suicide with the coal and one combines both events, as does the woodcut in the richly illustrated Ulm edition of 1473. The 10th does not show a scene but a half-length portrait of the heroine, as usual in this MS. She is shown holding the razor" (Gilbert 2002: 189).

arm, to the breast. The story of the wounding, and indeed the whole story of Portia the Heroine, was complicated by another, rather later ancient source, which took longer to make an impact on the post-Classical world: Plutarch, the author with whom we began, who provided the longest account of Portia in his *Life of Marcus Brutus*. Outside the *Brutus*, Plutarch's mentions of Portia are brief and seem straightforwardly admiring: she appears at the very end of the *Life of Cato*, her father, reduced to a couple of sentences:

> still more is it true that the daughter of Cato was deficient neither in prudence nor courage. She was the wife of the Brutus who slew Caesar, was privy to the conspiracy itself, and gave up her life in a manner worthy of her noble birth and her lofty character, as is told in the Life of Brutus. (Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, 73.4)

But in that *Life*, Portia seems not quite so lofty. She makes four appearances altogether: the first one and the last are versions of the two episodes in Valerius Maximus: the self-wounding and the self-killing; but both come out rather differently. Here is the wounding, in the translation by Sir Thomas North, familiar to Shakespeare:

> bicause she woulde not aske her husbande what he ayled before she had made some proofe by her selfe, she tooke a litle rasor suche as barbers occupie to pare mens nayles, and causinge all her mayds and women to goe out of her chamber, gave her selfe a greate gashe withall in her thigh, that she was straight all of a gore bloode, and incontinentlie after, a vehement fever tooke her, by reason of the payne of her wounde. Then perceiving her husbande was marvelouslie out of quiet, and that he coulde take no rest: even in her greatest payne of all, she spake. (qtd in Bullough 1964: 98)

We are now told that the wound actually makes her ill; we are also given a powerful image of her wounded body, "all of a gore bloode" (compare Valerius: "she wounded herself"). Her reason for doing it has also changed. Valerius says that she knew about the conspiracy against Caesar – how, he does not say; in Plutarch's account, she wounds herself in order to persuade Brutus to tell her. She explains to him that she wanted to prove that she could keep a secret, which she clearly thinks will need some proving; "I confesse," she says, "that a womans wit commonly is too weake to keep a secret safely". As if to underline the sexual politics of this, Plutarch supplies the

information Valerius had left out: she wounds herself, he says *in the thigh* – a detail that adds a new, disturbingly erotic aspect to the story.

Brutus's apparent lack of faith in her discretion seems to some extent justified by the second scene Plutarch gives her. On the morning of the Ides itself, the day appointed for the assassination, she has worked herself into such a panic that she falls sick again – so sick that Brutus hears she has actually died. He, by contrast, manifests public-spiritedness and self-control by not going home but continuing with the assassination. Plutarch's third Portia-scene takes place in the aftermath of this: it shows her parting from Brutus when he leaves Italy for the last time. "[S]he did what she could to dissemble the griefe and sorow she felt at her hart" (qtd in Bullough 1964: 107), says Plutarch, but was reduced repeatedly to tears by a picture of Andromache parting from Hector (23.1 ff.). Finally, at the very end of the *Life* – the final sentences – we reach her suicide: and this Plutarch treats in a very strange way. First he gives the version as Valerius gives it – crediting it to Valerius: that Portia killed herself on receiving news that Brutus was dead. And then, immediately afterwards, he contradicts it. Actually, he says, she killed herself *before* Brutus, as is proved by a letter from him reproaching her servants for not stopping her from doing it.

This letter does not survive, but we do have another, from Cicero to Brutus, consoling him apparently for her death – so this order of things seems to be correct, historically[8]; in Plutarch's telling, it produces a story that looks very different from the *exemplum* of married loyalty given by Valerius. Why should Portia kill herself *before* Brutus's death? Brutus's lost letter, as summarised by Plutarch, supplies the answer: she was overwhelmed by *nosos* and *pathos* – sickness and suffering. In fact, as we have seen, these two qualities characterise her throughout Plutarch's account. From being a woman *minime muliebris animi*, "of no womanish spirit", she has become a figure of suffering and vulnerability – not so much *Cato's* daughter as Cato's *daughter*. It is not – let me quickly add

[8] See Clarke (1981: 58-9): "At the end of the letter to Atticus in which he gave his views on Cicero Brutus referred to the illness of his wife Porcia. The illness proved fatal. […] These are the facts about the death of Porcia. The legend is different". The letter is *Ad Brutum* I.9.

– that she is simply a weakling. Plutarch emphasises her courage, and Brutus himself pays tribute to it, in the Andromache scene. But we are made to feel the cost of it, more even than its value. Note here the effect of locating that wound: to make it much more of a physical reality. She "wounded herself", says Valerius, and it sounds the sort of thing a heroine might do: we can assess it morally; we cannot visualise it. But it is impossible *not* to visualise a wound *in the thigh*. That is something harder simply to approve.

What effect, then, does this more complicated Portia have on the later tradition, which we have seen apparently so simple and laudatory? The place to look for her, I think, is the drama. Recent scholarship has traced the reawakened interest in the *Lives* to Florentine humanists of the late fourteenth century (Humble 2010); by the time of the first surviving play on the subject of Caesar's fall, the *Lives* were all available in published form, in Latin (from 1470 – with some apocryphal extras) and in the original Greek (*editio princeps*: 1517). The first play devoted to Portia – indeed, probably the first play to include her as a character – is Robert Garnier's *Porcie* (1568), which explicitly acknowledges Plutarch in his preface. By the time he did so, Jacques Amyot had published his great French translation of the *Lives*; they were launched on their vernacular career. To the writers of the new secular drama, they were a marvellous gift. As Francis Bacon put it in 1605, distinguishing between biography and other kinds of history,

> For HISTORY OF TIMES representeth the magnitude of Actions, and the publique faces and deportments of persons […]. But *Lives* if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent, in whom actions both greater and smaller, publique and private have a commixture; must of necessity containe a more true, native, and lively representation. (Bacon 1605: bk 2, p. 11)

In Plutarch, the individuals caught up in the last struggles of the Roman Republic became something more than their actions and their public faces. Even those for whom he expressed most approval – Brutus himself, for example – are shown hesitating, troubled, physically sick. And, as we have seen, this is especially true in the case of Brutus's wife.

The complexity of Garnier's picture of Porcie is clear if we look at other French depictions of her from the same sort of time – for

example, Joachim Blanchon, in 1583, sums her up in two approving lines: her honour will "never be silenced" for her fidelity to Brutus (Blanchon, *Premières* œuvres *poétiques*, p. 239, XVIII.3-4)[9]. This approval is expressed on the grand scale sixty years later by Pierre Le Moyne in his *Gallerie des femmes fortes*. The moment represented in the "picture" is the moment of her death-by-charcoal: Le Moyne's point throughout is her stoical calm:

> This noble woman did not learn of this loss with cries and faintings; she did not attack her cheeks or her hair; she did not accuse Heaven, or reproach Fortune. One might say that the news of Brutus's death found Brutus victorious and alive in Porcia. (Le Moyne, *Gallerie*, p. 239)[10]

She looks for the most convenient way to kill herself, not regarding the pain; she finds the brazier in the next room, and three little Amours offer the coals to her. Whether through *Amour* or *Philosophie*, she is calm throughout; her death, concludes Le Moyne (*Gallerie*, p. 243), will be equalled to those of Cato and Brutus[11].

Garnier's Porcie could hardly be more different. The title page gives the reader fair warning:

> *Porcie*, French tragedy representing the cruel and bloody season of the Roman Civil Wars: suitable and appropriate for showing the calamity of this age. (Garnier, *Porcie*, sig. [A1])[12]

The play is set in the aftermath of the assassination of Caesar. Porcie herself, who is on stage for about half the play, is a figure of calamity: calamity such as Garnier recognised in contemporary France, torn by religious strife, and in ancient Rome. Several modern critics have remarked that Rome itself seems to be a character, if not the heroine,

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[9] "Et de Porcie aussi l'honneur ne sera tu / Pour sa fidélité à Brute présentée".

[10] "Cette genereuse femme n'a pas appris cette perte, avec des cris et des defaillances: elle ne s'en est pas pris à ses iouës ny à ses cheveux: elle n'en a pas accusé le Ciel, ny fait des reproches à la Fortune: Et l'on peut dire, que la nouvelle de la mort de Brutus a trouvé Brutus victorieux et vivant en Porcie".

[11] "cette Mort sera égalée à celles de Caton et de Brutus".

[12] "*Porcie*, tragedie françoise representant la cruelle et sanglante saison des guerres Civiles de Rome: propre et convenable pour y voir depeincte la calamité de ce temps".

of the play, and Porcie represents her city[13]. She enters lamenting – "Miserable Porcie!" (II.i.211); she quickly addresses her dead father, but does so not in pride but in despair: why did you not order me to follow you in death?[14] In Act IV, news arrives that Brutus is dead; Porcie is overwhelmed by grief, and her Nurse, acting (like so many dramatic nurses) as a *confidante*, tries to bring her to a more Stoical state of mind:

PORCIE O gods!
I cannot go on, I am dying, Nurse, hold me,
Alas, my heart is gone.
NURSE Now leave this emotional state,
My mistress, leave it, and let the constancy
Which already adorned your childhood years
Not fail you today.
PORCIE That will not happen,
I am, I am constant in running to my death. (IV.i.1664-73)[15]

The ambiguity in Porcie's penultimate line there – what "will not happen", exactly? – sums up the dilemma that Plutarch had sketched out for her: she wants to be strong, but the only way she can express it is by giving in to weakness.

Porcie dies, of course, in the expected way, between Acts IV and V: the Nurse describes it, and in doing so takes over the *rôle* previously taken by her mistress. The play ends with women only on the stage – the Nurse, a Chorus of Roman women – and between them they play out a range of ideas suggested to the ancient world by forceful female emotion: the Chorus is described at length as

[13] See Gillian Jondorf (1969: 136): "Rome is the central character in *Porcie*", echoed by Margaret McGowan (1988: 26). Line numbers for the play supplied by me. Her apostrophe "Miserable Porcie!" anticipates Garnier's play *Cornélie*, which begins Act IV with Cassius's exclamation "Miserable Cité".

[14] "O genereux Caton, que ne commandois-tu / Que ta fille Porcie ensuivist ta vertu, / T'accompagnant là bas sur le sombre rivage, / Où descendit ton ame evitant le servage?"

[15] "PORCIE. O Dieux! / Ie n'en puis plus, ie meurs, Nourrice, tenez-moy, / Helas le coeur me faut. LA NOURRICE. Laissez donc cest esmoy, / Ma Maistresse, laissez-le, et que ceste constance / Qui redoroit desia les ans de vostre enfance, / Ne vous manque auiourd'huy. PORCIE. Cela n'adviendra pas, /Ie suis ie suis constant à courir au trespas".

behaving like Maenads (we might think of Virgil's Dido, deserted by Aeneas), and the Nurse commits suicide by stabbing herself on the stage (we might think of Dido again)[16]. She has already explained (following Valerius, at a considerable distance) that Porcie was forced to her expedient by the removal of more usual methods from her reach; thus, by stabbing herself, the Nurse seems to be acting *for* her. Stabbing oneself, though there are female precedents, is a heroic, male type of suicide, which might restore some of that old Catonic fortitude to the image of Porcie; but the whole play has expressed grief, weakness and frustration. The old paradox of the masculine woman is brought to dramatic, tragic life as internal struggle.

Garnier told the story of Portia's end: the second of the two crucial points of her legend. British dramatists would give more attention to the first point. Sir William Alexander, first Earl of Stirling, wrote a set of *Monarchicke Tragedies*, which culminated historically in *The Tragedie of Julius Caesar*, first published in 1607: not (probably) the first English play of that title to be written, but the first to be printed. This all takes place before the assassination, and a long scene is dedicated to Portia's conversation with Brutus, and its revelation of the wound. In III.ii, she enters, and she and her husband have a long, emotionally heightened exchange. Alexander here plays up the idea of conjugal love; in the three editions he published of the play, we can see this increasing in minor revisions[17]. "Why," she reproaches Brutus: "Why should'st thou so from me thy thoughts conceale? / From thine own soule between whose breasts thou sleep'st" (Alexander, *Julius Caesar*, III.ii.1417-8)[18] – a decidedly erotic revision of her earlier, more abstract locution: "From thine owne soule that in thy bosome sleepes"[19]. Brutus replies in kind;

[16] For Dido as Maenad, see Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV.300-2.

[17] Domenico Lovascio (2015: 190) rightly points out that the differences are linguistic, not structural, and of little interest beyond that; however, I would argue that a few of the changes in the Portia scene do indicate a developing conception of the relationship.

[18] Alexander's *Julius Caesar* was first published in his collection *Monarchicke Tragedies* in 1607. An intermediate version was published in 1616 in the second edition of *Monarchicke Tragedies*. The tragedy was reprinted in revised form in his volume *Recreations with the Muses* (1637). Line numbers supplied by me.

[19] So in 1607. 1616 revises "that" to "who".

indeed, and unusually, he begins the conversation by asking why *she* is pale, rather than the other way round. She answers that he is responsible for her pallor, whereupon he tries to put her off:

Deare, to their wonted course thy cares inure,
I may have matters which import the State,
Whose op'ning up might my disgrace procure,
Whose weight for femall thoughts would be too great. (III.ii.1441-5) [20]

In response to this, she displays the famous wound:

For first to try how that I could comport
With sterne afflictions sprit-enfeebling blows,
Ere I would seek to vex thee in this sort,
To whom my soule a dutious reverence owes.
Loe, here a wound which makes me not to smart,
No, I rejoyce that thus my strength is knowne[21]:
Since thy distresse strikes deeper in my heart,
Thy griefe (lifes joy) makes me neglect mine owne. (III.ii.1473-80)

Alexander benefits from the non-theatrical nature of his play: he has no need to specify the wound's location. "Here", of course, is frustrating to a reader, and Brutus gives no hint, in his reply, as to where he is directed to look. This description of it is decidedly more muted than Plutarch's "all of a gore bloode"; its effect, however, is unusually powerful, as Brutus reveals his plans there and then to her on stage, a speech that no classical author includes. She responds vigorously and adds that, if all goes wrong, she is prepared:

My Father hath me taught what way to dye,
By which if hindred from encountring death,
Some other meanes, I (though more strange) must try[22]:
For, after *Brutus* none shall see me breathe. (III.ii.1585-8)

[20] "Whose weight would for thy weaknesse be too great" (1607). Alexander was perhaps trying to soften that in his revision.
[21] "Though by my selfe being made, to make me knowne" (1607): a slightly different emphasis. (There are other small variations in this passage, but nothing of significance.)
[22] "Another meanes (though farre more strange) Ile trie" (1607).

Thus she hints at her famous death – evoking stately protests from Brutus:

> But ah! of all thy words those grieve me most,
> Which bragge me with the dating of thy dayes. (III.ii.1597-8)[23]

Only at the very end of the scene does she express grief at the prospect of failure; Brutus's last lines to her are an injunction to "pacifie thy brest", in case grief is a bad omen. Then the scene is over, and the Chorus declaims on liberty, with no reference to what has just taken place.

Alexander dramatises his Portia as a perfect helpmeet to Brutus: eloquently devoted and determinedly brave. And yet there is no further mention of her in the play at all. This is especially surprising given the preface, which had described another Plutarchan scene:

> The Conspirators […] had many terrors amongst others, *Portia* the wife of *Marcus Brutus*, although she had insinuated herselfe in her husbands secret, by a notable proofe of extraordinarie magnanimitie, yet on the day dedicated for the execution of their designe, through the apprehension of his danger she fainted divers times, whereof *Brutus* was advertised, yet shrinked not, but went forward with his confederats to the appointed place, where they accomplished their purpose, every one of them giving *Caesar* a wound, and me a ground whereupon to build this present Tragedie (Alexander, *Recreations with the Muses*, pp. 185-6).

This apprehensive, fainting Portia – a terror for her husband and his allies – looks very different from the resolute figure in the play. Perhaps Alexander felt this himself, and therefore omitted any mention of her panic when the conspirators, in IV.i, worry that their secret may be out. He found himself, it seems, unable to use all the complex indications he had from Plutarch.

Over the next two hundred years or so, Portia would become quite a popular dramatic character, especially in France. At least two more French plays would be named after her: Guérin de Bouscal's *La Mort de Brute et de Porcie* (1637) and Claude Boyer's *La Porcie Romaine* (1646); others would give her a hardly less significant *rôle*

[23] "That bost me with th'abridgement of thy dayes" (1607) – not much of an improvement.

– Georges de Scudéry's *La Mort de César* (1635) and Marie Anne Barbier's play by the same name (1710). In general, we see a more emotional, vulnerable Portia here than in the lyrical tradition, content as it was with Valerius's and Martial's stories. Invariably, dramatic Portias will declaim on their responsibilities as Cato's daughter; they will also, however, lament at length to a *confidante* about the difficulty of living up to them. Garnier's heroine is exceptional in the extent of her lamentations (Brutus does not appear in the play, so she has no one *but* a *confidante* to talk to); her successors, though they put on a brave face in public, all show their softer side as soon as they get a chance. "Let us banish this womanish impulse," de Bouscal's Porcie orders herself (de Bouscal, *La Mort de Brute et de Porcie*, p. 24); "Is a heart human if it loves him and does not fear?" demands Boyer's Porcie, as soon as Brute is off the scene (Boyer, *La Porcie Romaine*, p. 27)[24].

One effect of Neoclassical ideas, however, is that most sixteenth- to eighteenth-century plays – indeed all those in French and Italian – limit themselves temporally as Garnier and Alexander do, so that they include only one of the two traditional high points of Portia's story: the interview with Brutus *before* Caesar is assassinated and her suicide *after* Brutus has left Italy. As a result, we find her in two distinct kinds of scenario: Death-of-Caesar plays, like Alexander's, which generally *end with* the assassination, and Death-of-Brutus plays, like Garnier's, which *begin after* it. This means that we do not see the pattern of behaviour that Plutarch establishes: we see, in fact, *either* the scene of her appeal to Brutus – the self-wounding scene – *or* the suicide. And curiously enough, although these dramatic Portias take their cue from Plutarch in their general emotionalism, they depart significantly from him in both of these key events. Death-of-Caesar plays that include Portia never, with one exception, locate the wound in her thigh. For whatever reason – squeamishness, or a sense of dignity – they resort to a range of evasive techniques: Scudéry has Portia appeal to Brutus in what is almost a translation of Plutarch's speech, but she never mentions the wound; Alexander's Portia, as we have seen, gestures but does not locate it at all; playwrights who do locate it are as inconsistent as

[24] "[B]anissons ce mouvement de femme"; "Un coeur est-il humain, s'il l'aime, & ne craint pas?"

their medieval pictorial forebears, choosing the hand, like Orlando Pescetti (*Il Cesare*, 1594), or the arm (the choice of the Duke of Buckingham, for one – of whom more below). Death-of-Brutus plays, which include Portia's own death, depart from Plutarch in a still more striking way: almost without exception, they make her survive him. Garnier sets the pattern here. She grieves volubly beforehand; then she rallies and kills herself in order to join him, or at least because she has no wish to live without him: an act that inspires the admiration of friend and foe alike[25].

To sum up, briefly, on these dramatic Portias: they are, in a word, complex, as their lyrical and homilectic forebears had not been. Like Plutarch himself, the dramatists display in her both extreme emotionalism and a courage that struggles to transcend it; but they seem to shy away from the full picture Plutarch presents – one of weakness that finally wins out; of the female body triumphing over the masculine will.

Two paragraphs ago, I mentioned, twice, that there was an exception to this shying away. At the end of the sixteenth century – after Garnier but (probably) before Alexander – one playwright chose to include the thigh wound, and locate it; he also chose to follow Plutarch's order at the end. This exception, of course, is Shakespeare[26]. He gives Portia two scenes: the one Alexander gives in his play and the one he mentions in his Argument. The interview between Portia and Brutus here takes only 76 lines – less than one-third of Alexander's scene; Portia speaks 61 of them, and with the last four she displays the wound:

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? (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II.i.299-302)

Recent scholars and directors have made much of this moment: since 1994, when Cynthia Marshall suggested it, Portia has often not just gestured to her thigh but boldly defied the tense of the verb

[25] For a discussion of all three French Portia plays, see Doiron 2005.
[26] Two fine articles on Shakespeare's Portia and her importance in his imagination are Velz 1977 and Mueller 1991.

by wounding herself then and there before the audience (Marshall 2002: 185)[27].

Shakespeare follows Plutarch in his portrayal of Portia, and he follows him more closely than any dramatist had done before. Unlike Alexander, he shows her in a state of panic while Brutus is en route to the Senate (II.iv); in this scene – almost ignored by critics, and often cut in performance – she appeals for constancy and laments "how weak a thing / The heart of woman is!" (II.iv.39-40). Her weakness, however, has no effect on the plot: whereas Plutarch says he heard of her collapse, which "grieved him, as it is to be supposed", but was not deterred from "care of his contrie and common wealth", Shakespeare's Brutus is unaware of it, and indeed Portia seems to have faded, at this point, from his consciousness. There is no equivalent in the play to their final farewell; but Shakespeare returns to Plutarch for the end of the story, with strange and complex effect.

Plutarch, as we saw, tells the story of Portia's death twice: first citing Valerius and then correcting him. In his second version, he explains that Portia died not after Brutus but before him. Shakespeare, unlike any other dramatist, followed him in this, and the news of her death is reported, in the one substantive text of the play, both to Brutus and by him. In a speech which seems to have no equivalent in any other telling of the Portia story, Brutus himself relates that tale of her fiery death:

> 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. (IV.iii.152-6)[28]

The paradox of Portia's manly courage, her *minime muliebris* but still somehow *muliebris animus*, here becomes an internal crisis, which kills her. She dies, not out of grief for her husband's death (an

[27] See also the new on-line Variorum edition of the play, ed. Michael L. Stapleton, http://www.nvsjc.org/, note on TLN 942.

[28] The play, of course, makes Brutus taste of Portia's death twice: a controversial subject we may avoid here, noting only that the doubleness, which seems like an odd reflection of Plutarch's own two versions, has the effect of driving home the fact and the strangeness of Portia's death.

idea that, as we have seen, is easily presented as a simple, admirable example of marital devotion) but out of sickness and panic – Plutarch's *nosos* and *pathos*. Shakespeare, indeed, goes further – takes the final step that Plutarch had not quite taken: Portia, in this account, is "distract" – the word used for the desperate Titus Andronicus, Ophelia and King Lear: crazy[29].

This Portia, falling "distract", is about as far as we can get from Valerius Maximus's determined heroine. Indeed, it seems to be further than later dramatists *wanted* to get: we find that even those who are adapting, translating or otherwise using Shakespeare tend to shift Portia back in what one might call a Valerian direction. When the Duke of Buckingham rewrote Shakespeare's play (dividing it into two), he not only moved the wound to the arm (in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*), but made explicit (in *The Death of Marcus Brutus*) that Portia *thought* Brutus was dead when she swallowed her coals: thus keeping the idea of heroic *suttee* even while respecting Shakespeare's chronology. Wolfgang von Dalberg, translating the play into German, cut Brutus's account of her death, and made Cinna report it to him, with an heroic punchline: "Her last word was: 'A Roman woman must not outlive this day!'" (von Dalberg, *Julius Cäsar oder Verschwöring des Brutus*, p. 100)[30].

That Shakespeare's Portia is described as "distract" by the end is something earlier critics seem to have avoided hearing: Anna Jameson, in 1833, speaks of her "stately disposition", and H.N. Hudson, in 1872, of her "manly fortitude". For the last fifty years or so, scholars have been less sure about it, finding in the act signs of gender-based confusion, or outright neurosis.[31] But

[29] In a fine recent essay, Natalie Roulon (2016: 142) argues that Brutus "silences" Portia by imposing this explanation on her suicide – "Although she behaves heroically, she is denied a noble Roman death". Against this, I would argue that Plutarch, from whom this chronology comes, does not indicate that this is an heroic act.

[30] "Ihr letztes Wort war: 'Eine Römerinn darf diesen Tag nicht überleben!'". For a discussion of this version, see McNamee 1959. Von Dalberg also inserted a long scene drawn from *Coriolanus* in which Portia pleads with Brutus (vainly, but spiritedly) not to plunge Rome into a Civil War.

[31] See the new on-line Variorum, *ad loc*. The least sympathetic comment is that of M.D. Faber (1965: 115), who finds her behaviour masochistic, displaying "tormented dependency needs".

ambivalence towards the "Stoical" Portia has developed alongside more complicated responses to the men in the play, too – in particular Caesar, the other figure prominently wounded, whose disfigurement and exposure has also become a focus of concern in gender criticism[32]. So perhaps dethroning Portia as an emblem of constant fortitude only makes her more central to modern ideas of what Shakespeare's play is about – and indeed of how far we now admire, or even believe in, those self-repressive qualities she yearned to possess[33].

I began this essay by gesturing towards Marcus Cato *fils*: Portia's forgotten brother. Portia has eclipsed him, in the eyes of history and of drama; she has also eclipsed every other woman and is almost the only one to appear in the stories of Brutus and Caesar. The only other woman to play much of a *rôle* in Plutarch's relevant *Lives* is Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, who is limited to ineffective dreaming: the playwrights who include her give her nothing else to do, except sometimes lamentation[34]. Other women are merely mentioned by the ancient sources and do not make it into any plays at all – for example Junia Tertia, wife of Cassius and sister to Brutus: an intriguing position and one that might have provided some piquant scenes. But a legend formed in antiquity gave Portia a special *rôle* in the story, a special kind of agency – a paradoxical kind, which offered dramatists rich possibilities for interpretation. Cato's daughter, Brutus's wife: she defines herself, always, by a pattern into which she never entirely fits. Her famous reminder to Brutus, turned by Shakespeare to a rhetorical question, may stand as an uneasy epitaph for her:

Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
Being so father'd, and so husbanded? (II.i.296-7)

[32] See, for some very influential work along these lines, Marshall 2002; Paster 1989. The seminal essay is Knight 1931; rev. edn 1965.

[33] As obligatory Latin fades into the past and ancient Rome becomes more and more attractive to non-professionals, we can expect more appearances by Portia in the form of historical novels. One of her latest fictional appearances is in the *Masters of Rome* sequence by Colleen McCullough: here she is an hysterical liability, doomed to and by her *rôle* as Cato's daughter. Cato, in McCullough, is a neurotic too; so far have we come from confidence in, or admiration for, the Stoic *virtus*.

[34] Alexander gives her the last speech in his play, mourning for her lost husband.

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