

## A Life in the Day of Wee Portia

A life in the day of her hunting will mean,  
When taken, wee Portia at last may appease  
Her hunger. A sizeable meal she has seen:  
Scytodes is waiting with patience to seize  
Its prey in the poisonous zig-zagging silk  
It spits from its fangs in long venomous jets.  
Scytodes and Portia are two of an ilk:  
They eat other spiders – a task that begets  
The threat that the hunter becomes then the prey.  
But Portia has neurons of some sixty thousand -  
A miniscule brain, to be sure, but 'twill sway  
The odds in her favour, allow her to browse and  
Adopt the best way to attack and to kill.  
Her eyes furthermore have remarkable vision  
With spacial acuity beating the skill  
Of pigeon or cat and she'll plot with precision  
The point where 'tis best to strike at her prey.  
Her brain three dimensional mapping will make  
To keep in her head as she works out a way  
To pounce on her victim whose life she will take.  
She creeps to the edge of the web so to scan  
Scytodes and see if its fangs hold a sac  
Protecting its eggs; for if so Portia can  
Entice her prey out so to mount an attack  
Before it can drop all the eggs and start spitting.  
No egg sac is held in Scytodes's fangs.  
A frontal approach is no good and it's sitting  
Just where to the rear in its web as it hangs  
No access is open to come from behind.  
So what can she do? Must she seek food elsewhere?  
Oh no, not wee Portia - a way she will find  
To get to Scytodes at rest in its lair.  
She scans the terrain as she builds up a map  
Of possible pathways across to her goal;  
She'll plan the best route, every path, every gap,  
As over the branches and rocks her eyes scroll.  
She turns and is gone with her prey left behind;  
She can't see Scytodes but knows where it lies.  
She follows the roadmap that's fixed in her mind  
And reaches an overhang; there she espies  
Scytodes below her. From here she lets out  
A dragline of silk which she slowly descends;  
Her mind is set firm, and she harbours no doubt  
She'll hover exactly just where she intends

To jump on her prey; and indeed it is so.

She springs and she strikes, keeping safely behind  
Its dangerous fangs; so she deals the death blow

As *her* deadly fangs with their target aligned  
Inject their own venom. So mission completed:

Wee Portia needs brainfood which she has obtained  
From one who would eat her but now lies defeated;

For brain over brute force has victory gained.



*Portia labiata*

(Enlarged – actual size: female 7 to 10 mm long; male 5 to 7.5 mm long)

Sources:

McCrone, John (27<sup>th</sup> May 2006), “Smarter than the average bug”, *New Scientist*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDtlvZGmHYk>

*Portia labiata* plays an important part in the Arthur C. Clarke award-winning book:

Tchaikovsky, Adrian (2015), “Children of Time”, Tor Books, ISBN 978-1-4472-7328-8

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