

# How does shakespeare present the relationship

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Prior to this scene Shakespeare had revealed a very different side to the character of Portia. The audience to this point have come to recognize her as a woman filled with spirit and intellect albeit controlled by a man through "the will of her dead father". However in this scene, with the over-run of men in Belmont, a very different personality emerges. Portia appears to dedicate herself to being a dutiful wife, completely submissive to her husband. She flatters Bassanio, and later claims that to be worthy of him she would need to be "a thousand times more fair".

She says that she is a "unlessoned school girl", giving a very modest description of herself, as we know her to be very clever. Even though this is her expected role in the 16th century, it seems strange to us today that even her character and intelligence seem to be adjusted for him. In the scene, though Bassanio's successful choice of caskets is inevitable, we are still surprised by his low-key reaction to the winning of Portia. This suggests that Portia was something highly desirable, but now he has her, he wants something else.

Shakespeare's use of rhyme as he reads the scroll makes his response all too similar to that of the other suitors. It is therefore surprising when he is supposed to have won a "prize" of true love. His speech is far too perfect and is not spontaneous, making it appear practiced and not very genuine. Shakespeare seems to be reminding us that Bassanio set out to win Portia's hand in marriage purely for financial gain, even asking Antonio for an "investment" and that his intentions have been far from honourable. This is the beginning of the relationship.

And although they do eventually do come to love one and another, our first sight of them together is awkward and their exchanges seem very forced though they speak of true love. Portia's step down from her role as "queen" of Belmont and Bassanio's coronation as "lord, governor and king" continues as even more men step into the formerly female dominated world of Belmont. In lines 219-224 their guests are welcomed by Bassanio not Portia, who simply says, "So am I" when Bassanio speaks of his pleasure at their arrival.

The men are dominant in most of this scene just as Bassanio becomes more and more controlling of Portia. The male guests bring bad news of Bassanio's friend Antonio, and the previously idyllic setting of Belmont is ruined by the announcement. At once Bassanio's language becomes real and genuine as he talks of his "dear" friend Antonio and the loan. It is clear that in Shakespeare's time male friendship was viewed as the highest sort of relationship between people, and Portia recognizes that even that of man and wife cannot rival it.

This again reminds us that Venice and now Belmont are very male dominated societies, and it appears that even Portia accepts this. When she does speak it is only to back up Bassanio or to remind him that "she is half of him" and that he must do anything he can to help Antonio. She doesn't offer an opinion as we expect her to do and speaks only to Bassanio, when voicing her sympathies. However in line 298 the audience begins to restore its faith in the female lead as she orders Bassanio to pay Antonio "six

thousand ducats" and then to " double it and treble that" until Shylock is satisfied.

Portia at this point appears to be re-gaining control and making it known that though a man must as usual control her, she still has priorities. She will not submit completely to all the demands of her role as a dutiful wife. It is clear that though she may have to be controlled by Bassanio, she hasn't completely lost her confidence and character as we thought she had before. She is still able to give orders and use her " gold" to take complete control of the situation, perhaps foreshadowing that she will play an even greater role in the future.

We begin to recognize a possible ulterior motive, as she no longer talks of love; rather the fact that the marriage is a " business" and she urges Bassanio to leave and " be gone" as soon as possible, even though it is their wedding night. Perhaps she is trying to appear demure and sensitive so Bassanio will not recognize her as the " learned doctor". Before leaving, Portia gives Bassanio a ring symbolizing his loyalty to her. She is subtly manipulating him and giving her the power to later lecture him on her priorities.

Keeping in mind the attitudes of the time, Bassanio's reaction at this point is not entirely surprising. It may have been perfectly acceptable that he has not recognized her change in attitude. He simply does as she says: " making haste" to Antonio. He does not seem surprised that Portia has completely taken control, making orders and telling him what to do like a man, instead of being obedient and sensitive. This perhaps suggests that he is relatively

unperceptive and uninterested in her as a person, though he could be simply be deeply concerned about Antonio.

This is still however putting his male friend before his new wife who he is supposedly in love with. The relationship is perhaps more recognizable to a 21st century audience as a fairy-tale with a twist. Though 16th century attitudes were different and perhaps you couldn't separate courtship from wealth, especially if you occupied a position in society similar to that of Bassanio's. In Shakespeare's time it was very difficult for any women of social standing to live independently from men, as women were dependent, as Portia was, first on their fathers and then on their husbands.

The law gave women no other option, as they were not allowed to own property or have wealth in their own name. As Portia knows the law, a 16th century audience would have been satisfied with the fact that though she must be a well-trained wife, she has found in Bassanio someone who will not completely abuse her rights. To them Bassanio was probably a perfectly acceptable romantic "lead" even though he moves in a complex not and less then admirable society.

In the 21st century we are less as willing to accept this and perhaps wish Portia had more control. We recognize that Bassanio has set out to win Portia purely for financial gain. Though this may have been common in Shakespearean times it appears wrong to us today. In our world Bassanio and Portia probably would not have be compatible. In that sense I felt the relationship between Bassanio and Portia to be slightly disappointing as the supposed romantic "fairy tale" ending doesn't leave us quite satisfied.

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