

Winning bassanio

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Among the many and varied plotlines interwoven throughout Shakespeare's comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, the story of Bassanio's rivalled affections for his friend Antonio and for his eventual wife Portia is one of the more significant. Bassanio begins in the story firmly in the affections and influence of his friend, Antonio, the Venetian merchant who seems to overshadow all the action done in the play. His wooing of Portia is no more than an attempt to gain her wealth and he does not intend or desire to fall in love with her. This makes the story all the more fascinating as Shakespeare shows the subtle shift in Bassanio's affections from Antonio to his wife and the competition between the two as they attempt to gain, maintain, or reestablish his love. Antonio is firmly in control of Bassanio at the beginning of the play, but Portia triumphs in the end and wins her husband's devotion. Antonio is the first main character to be introduced. He is portrayed as more serious and morose than his companions: " He seems to be older than the friends who surround him, and detached from their thoughtless extravagance" (Muir 36). He only seems to cheer up when Bassanio appears. Antonio establishes himself as the most important figure in the play: " the play is rightly named for the merchant, who is its centre" (Evans 56). Everything moves around him. Bassanio's potential marriage is contingent on Antonio's approval and aid. The villain is bent on having his revenge on this particular merchant and no other. From early on, Portia has formidable competition in Antonio. When Bassanio is first brought into the play, he is coming to Antonio with his dilemma, establishing the fact that Antonio is both his friend and his mentor. Antonio has Bassanio's trust as his confidant, despite an apparent disparity in their ages. Bassanio has already told him

about his financial state of affairs: “ ‘ Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, / How much I have disabled mine estate” (Merchant of Venice, 1. 1. 121-122). He willingly tells Antonio his entire plan to win the hand of the beautiful Portia in order to secure her wealth. He wants Antonio’s approval as much as his aid. He already owes Antonio money, but as a friend, not as a business partner. Antonio obviously enjoys Bassanio’s friendship and his dependency: “ My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (MV 1. 1. 138-139). He does not fear Bassanio’s change in loyalties from friend to wife. Bassanio’s initial opinion of Portia as he describes her to Antonio is less than affectionate. He admires her greatly in appearance, but sees her more as a conquest and a means to attain financial security than as a woman to win the love of. He describes her as “ like a golden fleece / Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos’ strond, / And many Jasons come in quest of her” (MV 1. 1. 170-172). She is a prize to be won. The scene shifts to this golden fleece to be won and Portia is first introduced. She is portrayed in this scene as a woman with intelligence and opinions, but no freedom. She is trapped by her own late father’s edict to be married to whichever man can guess the correct casket containing her portrait. She has no choice in the matter and must bow to her father’s wishes in a world ruled by men: “ she may neither choose whom she would – her choice has already been hinted at – nor refuse whom she dislikes” (Parrott 141). She does show that she has a mind of her own and desires of her own. She and Nerissa make witty mockery of some of her potential suitors. She ends with a recollection of Bassanio: “ He, of all men that ever my / foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving” (MV 1. 2. 108-110). But despite her attraction to him, she

cannot choose him and is forced to watch other men vie for her hand. Both scenes establish the fact that Bassanio is well loved and two main characters greatly desire his affections. Antonio has the confidence that he controls the love of Bassanio as both friend and benefactor. Portia's situation is less secure. She cannot act upon her attraction to him because her father's will demands she wait upon the suitors. At this point in the beginning of the play, Bassanio's loyalties are firmly in the hands of Antonio, not Portia. It does not take long, however, for things to begin to change. Antonio has an easy chance to further ingratiate Bassanio to himself when Bassanio asks him for a loan of three thousand ducats to outfit himself for his courting expedition. Antonio is forced to borrow the money from the unprincipled Jew Shylock with the payment being the forfeiture of his own life. Bassanio does not like this situation: " You shall not seal to such a bond for me! / I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (MV 1. 3. 150-151). But Antonio makes the deal, agreeing to give a pound of his own flesh if he cannot make good on his loan at the appointed time. Bassanio is now even more in debt to his friend. If he wins Portia, he will have Antonio to thank for it. And if he does not succeed, he risks endangering Antonio, whose debt to Shylock may cost his life: " we must wish also that [Bassanio] win her and her gold for Antonio's sake" (Evans 57). Even the courtship of Portia is overshadowed by Antonio's situation. Bassanio leaves for Belmont to woo the lady. He is now away from Venice and has left Antonio behind. Portia has her chance to win her lord. Despite Bassanio's intentions, he does, in fact, appear to fall in love with the lady. Her money doubtless helps the situation, but he genuinely seems to love her. Portia is also completely in love. Now is her chance to take charge

and win the complete loyalty of Bassanio. This is the first significant instance in which she first begins to take control. There has been some disagreement as to whether or not the song Portia has played while Bassanio attempts to choose the correct casket is actually meant to be a clue or if it is simply a poetic accompaniment to his thoughts. Many scholars believe that Portia has too much honor to even give him an indication of which casket to choose: “Portia was a woman of her word. To imagine that she was forsworn would detract from her moral stature” (Wilson 100). However, whether this is true or not, Portia has found the man she wishes to marry and while she is not willing to outright tell him which casket to choose, she has come to the point where leaving her fate to chance seems to be an unnecessary risk. She has music played in which many of the words rhyme with “lead” and “Let us all ring fancy’s knell” (MV 3. 2. 70), warning him against selecting the fancier caskets. Bassanio gives some indication that he has understood the meaning of the song, repeating some of the rhyming words in his subsequent comments: “The echoes of these rhyme words clearly indicate that Bassanio has, indeed, heard Portia’s song and the important clues which it provides” (Rasmussen 12). There can be little question that Portia is clever enough to think of this way to help win her lord without truly going against her father’s commands. She is certainly of a manipulative mind, as is seen later in the play. Whether due to his own devices or Portia’s, Bassanio makes the right choice and he is permanently joined with his lady. She has her chance to truly begin winning his supreme love. At this point, Bassanio still considers Antonio his greatest friend, but he is being torn two ways now. Portia gives him her ring: “Which when you part from, lose, or give away, / Let it presage

the ruin of your love / And be my vantage to exclaim on you” (MV 3. 2. 172-174). She is giving Bassanio indication of her desire to claim his loyalty. Bassanio seems sincere when he swears to protect the ring, as symbol of his fidelity to her above all others: “ But when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence; / O then be bold to say Bassanio’s dead!” (MV 3. 2. 183-185). But it does not take long for Bassanio to remember his previous allegiance to Antonio. Bassanio discovers that Antonio’s investments have all failed. His attentions are immediately directed back to Antonio: “ the dearest friend to me, the kindest man, / The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies” (MV 3. 2. 292-294). Antonio writes to him and tells him of his woes and says: “ if your love do not / persuade you to come, let not my letter” (MV 3. 2. 320-321). He reminds Bassanio of his previous loyalties. Antonio still has a hold on Bassanio. Now that he is going to die giving his pound of flesh to Shylock, Bassanio will always be in his debt. In a way, this situation is to Antonio’s advantage in his play for Bassanio’s affection: “ He foresees that his sacrifice will forever cast Portia’s love for Bassanio into the shadow of his own greater love” (Hamill 232). However, Portia has begun to take more control of the situation: “ First go with me to church and call me wife, / And then away to Venice to your friend!” (MV 3. 2. 303-304). She plans to turn Antonio’s trial in her favor. Portia’s plan is shrewd on several levels. When Bassanio leaves as soon as he is married to Portia, she understands that his loyalty goes first and foremost to Antonio. She recognizes that in order to win the respect of Bassanio for herself over his friend, she must first win the respect of Antonio. She gives Bassanio more than enough money to repay the debt, which would certainly put not only

Bassanio more firmly in her affections, but would subordinate Antonio to her as well. When she makes plans to become “accoutered like young men” (MV 3. 363), she is essentially planning to infiltrate Antonio’s world and, by rescuing him, rise above him. In Venice, Portia will make her second attempt to win Bassanio. She appears at the trial and, in short, demonstrates keen intelligence and cunning when she outwits Shylock at his own game and exacts justice on the villainous Jew. Antonio is saved and nearly prostrates himself with gratitude to the young lawyer who has rescued him. Bassanio is equally thankful. Portia is not yet satisfied, however. During the trial, Bassanio makes it very clear which person he loves best when he says to Antonio: “Life itself, my wife, and all the world / Are not with me esteemed above thy life” (MV 4. 1. 282-283). Portia’s retort is cutting, although Bassanio does not recognize its full implication coming from an unknown doctor of law: “Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make offer” (286-287). Simply having the gratitude of Antonio and Bassanio is not enough for her. She devises a test for Bassanio. As a gift for her services, she requests the ring from Bassanio which she herself had given him and made him swear to protect as a symbol of his love for her. She demands it of him, hoping that he will not give it up and thus will prove his devotion to her. At first, he seems to pass the test: “this ring was given me by my wife, / And when she put it on she made me vow / That I should never sell nor give nor lose it” (MV 4. 1. 440-442). Portia is satisfied and takes her leave. However, Antonio here demonstrates that he still has sway over Bassanio, at least to some degree. He urges him to give up the ring: “Let his deservings, and my love withal, / Be valued ‘gainst your wife’s

commandement” (MV 4. 1. 448-449). To Portia’s dismay, Bassanio listens to his friend and gives up the ring. She has not yet established herself over Antonio. Antonio has been given a surprising second chance. While his rather poetic moment of self-sacrifice is now lost, due to Portia’s intervention, he still has Bassanio’s affection. But this will not last long. It is notable that when, in his gratitude, Antonio asked the still disguised Portia what she would have of him for her services, Portia demanded his gloves: “ Give me your gloves; I’ll wear them for your sake” (MV 4. 2. 424). Portia is taking over the position of an oblivious Antonio. She will become to Bassanio what Antonio used to be. Finally, the scene shifts back to Belmont, where Portia is in her element and she makes her third and final major play for Bassanio’s love. She arrives just before her husband and Antonio and prepares to receive them and execute the final act in her plans. She is very aware that Bassanio still holds Antonio’s devotion over hers, but she now wears Antonio’s gloves, figuratively as well as literally, and she has both men irrevocably in her debt: “ Portia gives more than Bassanio can ever reciprocate, first to him, then to Antonio” (Newman 26). She is ready to finish triumphantly. With the help of Nerissa, Portia brings Antonio to a state of abject terror and utter guilt at his giving up the ring. He sorely regrets it: “ Why, I were best to cut my left hand off / And swear I lost the ring defending it” (MV 5. 1. 177-178). Acting surprised, Portia’s wrath is righteous and eloquent. She reminds Bassanio of his vows and of his love for her: If you had known the virtue of the ring Or half her worthiness that gave the ring, Or your own honor to contain the ring, You would not then have parted with the ring. (MV 5. 1. 199-202) Antonio attempts to justify himself, using Antonio’s

trial as his excuse. Antonio is also reduced to begging for forgiveness from the indignant lady: “ I dare be bound again, / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly” (MV 5. 1. 251-253). He is willing to offer himself as forfeit to Portia, perhaps out of guilt, for his part in the situation. He seems to be beyond fighting for his hold on Bassanio’s loyalty: “ Antonio steps forward and finally yields his claim on Bassanio” (Boose 249). Portia makes it very clear that she is in control: “ Then you shall be his surety. Give him this, / And bid him keep it better than the other” (MV 5. 1. 254-255). She is letting Antonio know that she understands who influenced Bassanio to give up the ring before. Bassanio is being given another chance to hold onto the ring. Portia adds one more comment, almost as an aside to Antonio, telling him that his investments have indeed succeeded. How she has come to know this is a mystery which must, in the end, be ascribed to her new position as the dominant figure in the play. Antonio can only say: “ I am dumb!” (MV 5. 1. 279). Portia is finished in her quest. Portia has changed dramatically from the beginning of the play to the end: “ there was a crying incongruity between the siren’s first role and the part she plays as the deliverer of her husband’s friend” (Parrott 143). She takes up Antonio’s role as the central character through the three shifts of power demonstrated in the casket scene, the trial, and the ring game and eventually assumes complete control. It is worth noting that Antonio’s last words are to Portia when he says in helpless admiration: “ Sweet lady, you have given me life and living!” (MV 5. 1. 286). In the play for the affections of Bassanio, Portia is the clear victor in the game. Works Cited Boose, Lynda E. “ The Comic Contract and Portia’s Golden Ring.” *Shakespeare Studies*. 1998.

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