

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIP IN "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

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ABSTRAK

Shakespeare adalah penulis unggul di zamannya dan hasil tulisannya masih kekal dikaji dan dinikmati sehingga ke hari ini. Bahasa yang digunakan di dalam drama "The Merchant of Venice" adalah indah sekali dan ada yang menjadi perbidalan sehingga ke hari ini. Kertas penyelidikan ini cuba mengutarakan satu aspek kehidupan yang sering dipamerkan oleh Shakespeare melalui watak dan perhubungan watak yang ditulisnya. Cinta, persahabatan dan perhubungan sesama manusia adalah salah satu elemen yang terdapat pada drama komedi ini. Watak Portia dan Bassanio bersama pasangan yang lainnya lebih diketengahkan pada kertas ini. Ini adalah kerana selalunya watak Shylock, seorang Yahudi yang kaya tetapi kedekut lebih diketengahkan di dalam mana-mana perbincangan mengenai drama ini. Penulis walau bagaimanapun lebih berminat untuk menyatakan peristiwa hubungan sesama manusia yang mungkin juga terdapat pada manusia sejagat.

Dramatis Personae:

The Prince of Morroco



suitors to Portia

The Prince of Amazon

Antonio, a merchant of Venice

Bassanio, his friend, suitor likewise to Portia

Salanio



friends to Antonio and Bassanio

Salario

Gratiano

Lorenzo, in love with Jessica

Shylock, a rich Jew

Portia, a rich heiress

Nerissa, her waiting maid

Jessica, daughter to Shylock

Almost all the comedies in Shakespeares' plays end with happy endings. So does "The Merchant of Venice," with its natural theme of love and relationship. The central figures of the love theme in this play are Bassanio and Portia. They are not alone however, because coming along with them are Antonio, Jessica and Lorenzo, and Gratiano and Nerissa, who put love above everything. All these characters illuminate the play and help to indicate the significance of the play in its own age by reflecting the Renaissance interest in such topics.

Sisk, in his article, "Bondage and Release in the Merchant of Venice," says that the couples are "bonded or held in bondage which later is released by love" (Sisk, 1969: 217). The author continues, saying that "in the true Aristotelian sense, the action of the play — to be released by love from all false and evil bonds to fulfillment of life and that true love and the full life are not possible to one held in bondage to the sensuous surface of experience" (Sisk, 1969: 218).

In the play, we can see how Antonio risks his fortune as well as his life out of love for Bassanio. It is almost unbelievable that one would risk and lose so much just for the sake of friendship. But in Shakespeare and in many of his comedy plays, love rules above everything, even money. Many contemporary critics have also taken a hint of Antonio's sadness in the passage of Act I Scene I "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad," as having a homosexual element. To that, one critic says that Bassanio has only felt that way because he is empty and unsatisfied even with so much in his hand (Bevington, 1980:260). There must be something more spiritual in life than material wealth. And this could lead to his sacrifice for friendship for his best friend Bassanio. Maybe this is the only way for him to feel the "pang" of life i.e. to give what he has. He has been a "taker" for so long. He has taken money, has received wealth and fortune. This could be the time for him to give, to feel that there is at least something that he could contribute out of life. And Bassanio happens to be the luckiest friend who deserves all the sacrifice that Antonio wants to give.

Bassanio, on the other hand, spends money extravagantly out of love for Portia. In Act I, line 180-185, Antonio says to Bassanio:

*Try what my credit can in Venice do;
That shall be rack'd even to the uttermost;
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.
Go, presently inquire, and so will I,
Where money is, and I no question make
To have it of my trust or for my sake.*

To prove his true love for Portia, Bassanio has chosen the lead casket, which is inscribed with who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath", in opposition to the other two caskets that offer a better appearance related to the fair Portia. Portia, who accepts Bassanio, knowing that his state "was less than nothing" is willing to pay Shylock eighteen thousand ducats to settle the bond (Bevington, 1986:279). This proves her love for Bassanio and in the context of the play, the fact that she will make him rich is completely subordinated to her beauty, her virtue, and her desirability as a person (Sisk, 1969:219).

She deserves the parting of her wealth but gains the love and responsibility of her ideal lover, Bassanio. She will be free of the bondage and in the release, finds a husband she can love and cherish all her life. And like Antonio, wealth would not give her what she wants out of life, and would not give her a "completeness" in living.

Portia, so far, has everything given to her. She is like a spoiled child with a fortune that comes together with her father's richness. But she is also generous. It is this excessive generosity which partly explains her offering herself all she has to the man she loves:

*Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted, But I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same my self
Are yours, my lord's. I give them this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it be presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.*

(Act III. Scene ii, 160-174)

Instead of receiving all her life, she is ready to give now.

She is also able to retain her independence of thought and action. The first thing she does after her marriage is to lay down her own plans for saving Antonio's life:

*Lorenzo, I commit into your hands
The husbandry, and manage of my house
Until my lord's return. For mine own part,
I have toward heaven breath'd a secret vow
To live in prayer and contemplation,
Only attended by Nerissa here,
Until my husband and her lord's return.*

(Act III. Scene iv, 24-30)

In one of his comments, Sisk says, "the play, like all comedy, is about the salvation of love" (Bevington, 1989:280). Shakespeare adds a small but also an important element to the play's contribution on the subject of love, i.e. Shylock's daughter Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo. Jessica's escape to love from the prison of her father's money anticipates the fact that "she takes some of his wealth with her only in the interest of loving and living, when she voluntarily cuts herself off from rich expectations" (Sisk, 1969:220). Another critic, however, suggests that it is very inconsiderate of her to betray her father, to whom she is the only daughter. The author says that "all the characters whom he intends for lovable have not only graces and charms, but natural feminine sensibilities with one exception there is, — which not even Shakespeare can make me like, — and that is the pert, disobedient hussy Jessica" (Sisk, 1969:219). I would say that her love for Lorenzo and her wanting to escape have blinded her and in a

way she does forget her duty towards her father however bad he is. On the day she elopes, she tells Lorenzo:

*I am glad 'this night, you do not look on me,
For I am much asham'd of my exchange.
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit,
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush
To see me thus transformed to a boy.*

(Act II. Scene vi, 34-39)

But another critic says, "there is not one line in the entire play in which Shylock directly expresses affection for his daughter " (Thurber, 1970:121). All he can say is "oh my daughter, oh my ducats".

A popular saying taken from Shakespeare, "all that glitters are not gold" is found in one of the passages of the casket scene. Here, the Prince of Morrocco equates love with gold. His terms of love or endearment are far below the surface. The lead casket which is inscribed with "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," does not mean anything to him and hence he is not truly in love with Portia. His love is for materials not involving spiritual feelings and sacrifice. He has only chosen the golden casket because it promises "what many men desire" i.e. the fair Portia (Bevington, 1980:121). I will say that he is also seeking personal gains and that is why the inscription appeals to the Prince of Morrocco most; together with the golden choice, gold being the most precious of the three metals that fits Portia figuratively speaking. Personally, I feel a beautiful, intelligent person, born with good breeding like Portia, should deserve a better man than her suitor. And thus only Bassanio is willing to face the fact that in order to win her, he has to sacrifice for her not in terms of wealth or gold but bravery and honesty. And only a man with those qualities should court her.

Prince of Arragon rejects the lead casket because it does not look fair enough. He rejects the gold casket with a caustic reference to "the fool multitude, that judge by show" and selects the silver casket whose inscription promises him as much as he deserves (Bevington, 1980:271). At this point of the play (111.ii), Shakespeare shifts the emphasis from appearance and reality to the comparative values of love, wealth, and friendship. As the casket story ends, both dialogue and action connect the values of this story with those previously employed in the bond story. Money, love, friendship - the greatest of these, according to Renaissance tradition, is friendship (Graham, 1976:149).

Standards of value are very much emphasized by Shakespeare in "The Merchant of Venice." As in the bond story the first value to be established is that of friendship. Antonio offering his purse, his person, his extremest means, values the friendship of Bassanio far more highly than material wealth. Antonio says to Bassanio:

*I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.
You cannot better be employed, Bassanio,
Than to live still and write mine epitaph.*

(Act IV, Scene I, 114-118)

Antonio is ready for Shylock to take his flesh at any part that pleases Shylock. This theme of giving oneself for a close friend is quite a familiar subject in Renaissance literature and in Shakespeares' plays (Bevington, 1980:285).

Graham comments that "the ring episode, which concludes the play, is primarily a comic treatment of love and friendship; besides the comparative values of appearance and reality" (Graham, 1976:146). In the ring episode, the value of friendship leads Bassanio first to leave his bride and then, at the urging of Antonio, apparently to lose her:

*Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.*

(Act IV, Scene I, 278-283)

In the ring story, Bassanio insists upon the civil doctor's accepting some remembrance, and thus leads Portia-Balthazar to ask for the ring.

In giving the ring earlier, she has emphasized that it represents his possession both of wealth and of love. Here Portia puts her lover to a test. What the choice means is not a willingness to forego all else for the sake of the loved object, but a willingness to give up that loved object itself. She is quite hard here, together with her witty maid, Nerissa who asks for the same thing from her husband, Gratiano. However, I think Portia knows what she is doing and it is clear that Bassanio's hard decision to give up the ring justifies his claims to it. Coolidge states that "the incident of the ring stands in much the same relation to the choice of the leaden casket" (Bevington, 1980:285). It illustrates what is meant in practice by the choice of the deathlike paleness of the lead:

*But when this ring parts from this finger
Then parts life from hence.
O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!*

(Act III, Scene II, 183-285)

On the other hand, Hyman takes this ring episode as a love triangle scene between three "lovers" i.e. Antonio, Bassanio and Portia. He says, "...but there is no critic, as far as I am aware, has seen the full metaphoric meaning of the bond as a link between Antonio and Bassanio" (Coolidge, 1976:243). He further suggests that, "in terms of the structure of the play Shylock is a minor character,

the main action of the play is centered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's love" (Hyman, 1970:109). The bond here thus represents Antonio's attempt to hold on to Bassanio's love. Hyman even goes to the extent of saying that Antonio feels rejected when he sees that his friend is determined to marry. As a reader, analyzing the passage written by Shakespeare, I do feel that Antonio's intention to help is sincere. He loves his friend enough to want Bassanio to win the lady who is referred to with such delights:

*And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalu'd*

(Act 1, Scene i, 161-164)

Hyman continues, "Antonio is offering his heart — figuratively but nevertheless with a vivid concreteness — as a means of counter-acting the love which he fears Portia will offer to Bassanio" (Hyman, 1970:112). And to Shylock's offer, Antonio unhesitatingly agrees to sign the bond:

*Content, i' faith
I'll seal to such a bond,
And say there is much kindness in the Jew*

(Act 1, Scene iii, 146-147)

The bond as signed, to Hyman, is legally and literally binding Antonio to Shylock but on a deeper level, it binds Antonio to Bassanio (Bevington, 1980:269). Hyman finally concludes that, "thematically, the final joke concerning the ring is a continuation of the rivalry between Antonio and Portia" (Hyman, 1970:112). Whatever it is, one fact remains that is, as far as Shakespeare's writings are concerned, the juxtaposition of money and love, blood and gold, daughter and ducats, as we may have noticed, run throughout the play.

The sacrifice that Antonio gives to Bassanio almost parallels what Valentine does to Proteus, (in "Two Gentlemen of Verona") his best friend, in letting go of Silvia for friendship's sake, though he too loves Silvia. In his book, Stevenson comments, "Valentine, as his name suggests, is the proper amorist, a man who seeks the sublime experience of love" (Hyman, 1970:111). He continues suggesting that, "in an effort to preserve the ideals of his unsubstantial world, Valentine goes so far as to offer Silvia to the repentent Proteus" (Stevenson, 1966:188). Whether or not Antonio and Portia are rivals, the fact remains that they both sacrifice for the sake of love. I would say that it is a kind of mutual understanding between them, when Portia saves Antonio's life (from Shylock) to somewhat repay Antonio's willingness to borrow money from Shylock in the first place, for Bassanio. Maybe Portia sees a little competition (a healthy one, not of envy) in Antonio. But she is a human being too; despite her intelligence and virtue, she is after all a human being. She is wise and independent and these qualities have given her some sense in realizing that she can never take away the love between Bassanio and Antonio. Hence, she can only do her best, to do what she has to do as a concerned wife. Her rescuing them both (when she

disguises as a doctor) tells us her strength and almost masculine character that triumphs over the case of Shylock at the court. Mrs. Fannie A. Kemble describes her as "a noble, humble, pure, true, dutiful, religious, and full of fun; delightful above all others, the woman of women" (Stevenson, 1966:189).

Antonio, is described by Thurber as a "good man — a man whom we love for his high integrity, his disinterested liberality and his devoted friendship" (Thurber, 1917:117). Antonio in the "ring" episode tries his best to rescue Bassanio from the "angry" Portia:

*I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried, I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.*

(Act V, Scene i, 248-252)

In line 238 of Act V.i., Antonio also admits that he is the unhappy subject of the quarrels." Danson, in his discussion of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship comments that the "love of Antonio and Bassanio is a textual fact; but a sexual competition between Antonio and Portia is not, and to invent one raises more problems of interpretation that it solves" (Bevington, 1980:290).

Stevenson also characterizes the romantic notion of Shakespeare's comedies as love-game comedies which reflect a quarrel of attitudes not found in the usual Elizabethan play, properly called "romantic". He says, "Everyone is in love with love, and the chief purpose of each character is to find someone upon whom to bestow his emotions (as in "Twelfth Night" and "Midsummer Night Dream"), or some means to overcome obstacle standing between him and the attainment of love (as in "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and "The Merchant of Venice") (Danson, 1978:40). Love in Shakespeare, does come to fruition when the characters have overcome a series of physical obstacles in the way. And as for Bassanio, a lack of money and the predicament it causes. I find the above statement very interesting in that it depicts the courtly love convention of many Shakespeare's comedies and also suggests the value of love in those times. As Stevenson further describes, each of the above mentioned plays is an "escape" literature because "it substitutes a satisfying aesthetic experience for the less ideal love, full of dissonance of reality, known and practiced by the members of the audience." The audience or the readers of a Shakespeare's work could probably experience different values of love watching a play. They would "escape" from the harsh reality of the modern day dilemma of the stereotypic romance to an enchanting and beautiful love episodes that are both pure and entertaining, as in the Shakespeare plots and settings.

Stevenson, from a psychological point of view, sums up that "the young men and women of these plays who quarrel about the function and value of love, only to accept it in the end, are dramatizing in terms of a particular play a

fundamental paradox in the nature of love itself." The comedies reflect the common despair to all love poetry written in the courtly or Petrarchan tradition. It is interesting to state down what a professor of English once said in his lecture. He said that love is an attitude. If you think you are in love, then you are, if you think you are not, then you are not. It is created by illusion and destroyed by delusion. I think the above statements are quite valid in defining love. It is both applicable to the past (especially during the Renaissance period) and also to the present day. Claudio, for example, thinks that he loves Hero and thus creates an illusion of love for her. Later, however, the influence of Don John destroys his love by the delusion that Hero is unfaithful to him.

There are many interpretations that have been derived from "The Merchant of Venice". The proper value of material wealth, the comparative worth of romantic love and friendship and of these values they provide at least a partial explanation for the fact that thoughtful readers and responsive audience — influenced by the standard of their own environment — have arrived at widely different conclusions about the central figures in the play. As in "The Merchant of Venice," we see all the couples reunite in a very happy ending. Love does it all in the Renaissance setting -Portia and Bassanio are the Renaissance man and woman who survive the Renaissance relationships.

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