

**A character sketch of Bassanio in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant Of Venice'.**

**(B.A.English Subsidiary, Part-1.Paper-1)**

**Bassanio** is the hero of the casket story. A young Venetian of noble rank, his friends hold him in high esteem. But critics see him in different light. His first impression is definitely bad. He comes out to be a rash, selfish and an extravagant fellow. His friendship with Antonio is sincere but it is based on selfishness. The prime reason of his going to Belmont to marry Portia is to become wealthy so that he can pay back his debts. But as the play moves forward, this bad impression about him lessens, and he comes out to be a sincere friend, lover and husband. He proves to be caring and selfless in the trial scene.

Though he is noble and kind, he has no great thought to utter, nor does he perform any bold action to compare with Portia's impersonation of a lawyer in the court. We are indeed informed that he is a soldier, but we do not find him acting in that capacity.

Bassanio is portrayed in his two-fold aspect as Antonio's friend and Portia's suitor. He is true to his friend and sincere and faithful to his wife Portia. He is portrayed as a careless and adventurous young man. He goes to Belmont in search of a bride and a fortune. Wealth is the object of his wooing of Portia. It is only in the casket scene that he displays his sound judgement and emotion. After choosing the right casket, he yields the stage to Portia. But he does not become an insignificant character. His gentlemanly conduct at the court and his anxiety to get the release of his friend Antonio from the cruel clutches of Shylock win our sympathy. His truthfulness in the ring-episode is praiseworthy.

He approaches Portia as a real lover. The caskets are meant to test the truthfulness and sincerity of the man who will marry Portia. He is not deceived by the glitter of the gold casket and the silver casket. He chooses the lead casket and wins the hand of Portia in marriage. The right choice of the casket shows that he is a sincere lover.

Bassanio is practical and worldly-wise. He is concerned about the welfare of his friend Antonio. When Antonio is ready to sign the dangerous bond with Shylock, he asks him not to sign the bond because it contains the penalty of a pound of flesh. When Antonio assures him that he will be able to return the loan before the appointed date, only then does he allow him to sign the bond.

Bassanio's character is more fully drawn than Antonio's, but it does not possess the powerful individuality that Shakespeare gives to his portraits of Portia and Shylock. First off, when one begins considering Bassanio, one should dismiss all the critics who condemn him for his financial habits. Bassanio's request to Antonio for more money is perfectly natural for him. He is young; he is in love; and he is, by nature, impulsive and romantic. Young men in love have often gone into debt; thus Bassanio has always borrowed money and, furthermore, no moral stigma should be involved. Shakespeare needs just such a character in this play for his plot.

If Bassanio is not a powerful hero, he is certainly a sympathetic one. First, he has some of the most memorable verse in the play — language which has music, richness, and dignity. Second, he shows us his immediate, uncalculated generosity and love; this is especially obvious when Bassanio, who has just won Portia, receives the letter telling him of Antonio's danger. Bassanio is immediately and extremely concerned over the fate of Antonio and is anxious to do whatever is possible for his friend. Here, the situation is melodramatic and calls for a romantic, seemingly impossible, rescue mission.

When at last Bassanio and Portia are reunited, he speaks forthrightly and truthfully to her. He refuses to implicate Antonio, even though it was at Antonio's urging that he gave away his wedding ring to the judge who cleverly saved Antonio's life: "If you did know," he tells Portia, "for what I gave

the ring / And how unwillingly I left the ring . . . You would abate the strength of your displeasure." No matter how powerful the circumstances, he admits that he was wrong to part with the ring because he had given his oath to Portia to keep it. As the play ends, Bassanio's impetuous nature is once more stage-center. Speaking to his wife, he vows: "Portia, forgive me this enforced wrong; . . . and by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee." Of course, he will; this, however, is part of Bassanio's charm. He means it with all his heart when he swears to Portia, but when the next opportunity arises and he is called on to rashly undertake some adventure full of dash and daring, he'll be off. Portia knows this also and loves him deeply, despite this minor flaw.

Bassanio is generally reckless, both with his own money and the money of others. On the surface, he is largely selfish and extravagant, initially wanting to marry Portia for her money, but eventually, we see his instead a more charming youthful enthusiasm and growing love for Portia beyond her financial means. Maybe Bassanio isn't such a bad person, but rather, he just needs to mature more. Bassanio is the central instigator of all the follows and he not the most steady young man in Venice. He has considerable bad qualities but he also has considerable good qualities, although the good ones may not be of a nature that they can counterbalance the bad.

Bassanio has squandered his money and asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel to Belmont to win Portia's hand in



marriage. Portia is a wealthy heiress who is bound to her father's will. Many suitors from around the world travel to Belmont in hopes of marrying Portia. Bassanio understands that he will need money to outfit ships, buy various gifts that will impress Portia, and compete with the other suitors. Unfortunately, he does not have the money to do so which is why he asks his close friend, Antonio, for a loan. Antonio is a wealthy merchant who agrees to finance Bassanio's journey to Belmont. Antonio is a gracious, loving friend who selflessly loans Bassanio money, even though his investments are tied up overseas. Antonio then borrows money from Shylock to give to Bassanio. The conflict is created when Antonio's investments do not return on time and he is forced to forfeit on Shylock's loan. Unfortunately, Antonio agreed to give a pound of flesh to Shylock if he was not able to pay back the loan. Shylock and Antonio end up going to court over the forfeiture and Antonio fortunately wins the case. First, Bassanio is a reckless youth with no wisdom or thought for the future. He has spent whatever fortune he had instead of living within the scope of his financial means. He hasn't learned from anything that has transpired before the play opens that may have contributed to the loss of all his financial resources. We know this because he is staking his chance of recouping his lost fortune on a gamble that he will be the one to choose the right casket (a small chest or box for valuables) that will win the hand of the heiress Portia in a strange matrimonial test set up by her late father.

In these dire straits--no money; in love with a rich girl who is guarded in marriage by a casket-selecting contest--he pleads with his devoted friend Antonio to loan him money with which he can put on a show, a pretence, of wealth to impress the fair Portia. There is nothing reckless in turning to ask a friend for help, but when the friend is in tight financial straits himself it does appear reckless to press the point of a loan. To cap the picture of recklessness with an added image of arrogant audacity or blind impetuosity, Bassanio stands by while Antonio unrealistically agrees to impossible terms on a loan that is secured on a wish and a prayer instead of on material reality--as far he knows, Antonio's ship has a 50/50 percent chance of getting safely back into harbour.

What about Bassanio's good qualities? He has the energy and enthusiasm of youth. He is devoted in his admiration for Portia. He is a staunch and loyal friend. His friendship for Antonio goes beyond loyalty when he offers to take Antonio's place in the court hearing over the unfulfilled repayment of the loan taken from Shylock. Bassanio offers his own hand, head or heart in place of the pound of flesh that is due to Shylock to be cut from Antonio.

So in opposition to his bad qualities, Bassanio offers true friendship; true loyalty; true love; true devotion. It is debatable as to whether these highly laudable qualities counterbalance impetuosity, imprudence, immoderation; extravagance of idea and living; and frivolity. If these bad traits are nothing more

than the scourge of youth, Bassanio has the makings of an admirable man. If, on the other hand, these qualities are character and personality traits, then pity Portia and Antonio (who isn't all that wise himself)

Bassanio is not the main character of the play, but he still plays an important role. Even though his actions do not have a large impact on the play, he is responsible for the driving force behind the plot.

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