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The Letter as Intertext: An Explication of Antonio's Letter to Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, 3. 2 [1]

by
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Letters as dramatic devices are nothing new. What has been largely neglected is the interesting role the letter plays as a dramatic persona. The very presence of a letter often, though not necessarily, presupposes the absence of its writer; but he is also *present* when his letter is read on stage.[2] Then again, his presence is mediated by the reader of his letter. And not only is he "interpreted" by the reader, but once the letter is read– no matter *how* it is read– its writer has to keep silent. As David M. Bergeron points out in "Deadly Letters in *King Lear*," "a letter can only offer indirect, mediated discourse– signs, not reality":

> It exists on the paradoxical boundary between confrontation and report:

> in and of itself, for example, it offers no possibility of immediate correction, should it be misunderstood. It is, and we must make the best of it, reading between its lines in order to grasp the tone.[3]

Unlike a "real" character on stage, he cannot carry out a proper "dialogue" and interact in person with the other characters.[4] The letter, and indeed its writer, thus become a text subject to the interpretation of its reader. But, as we shall see, this *absence* is not always disadvantageous to him.

Letters appear in most of the plays by Shakespeare,[5] and feature importantly in such plays as *King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, Twelfth Night,* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But Antonio's letter in *The Merchant of Venice* stands out because of the way it is interpreted on the stage; it also functions in such a way that it forms an intertextaul relationship, as it were, with the rest of the play text. In itself the letter is rather simple and straightforward:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.
>
> (3.2.315-22)[6]

Essentially, it contains two messages: one, that Antonio's bond is forfeit and so is his life as a consequence; two, that before he dies he yearns to see Bassanio, although he doesn't want this wish to interfere with the latter's love affair.

As to the first message, the theater audience by this time already knows the plight of Antonio from the previous scene (3.1). And the stage audience cannot miss the ominous prospect from Bassanio's facial expression as he peruses the letter. Indeed, even before Bassanio starts to read it, those on stage should be

able to guess at the seriousness of Antonio's situation from Salerios's crisp, ominously riddling words about the "royal merchant":

> Not sick, my lord, unless it be in mind.
> Nor well, unless in mind. His letter there
> Will show you his estate.

(3.2.232-36)

The word *estate* emphasizes the material concerns of the Venetian merchants; they are less aware of Antonio's sense of loss regarding his relationship with Bassanio. When Gratiano gloatingly declares his and Bassanio's success– "We are the Jasons; we have won the fleece"– Salerio's response is less than enthusiastic: "I would you had won the fleece that he [Antonio] hath lost" (241-42). At the same time, Portia, closely observing the letter-reader, remarks:

> There are some shrewd contents in yond same paper
> That steals the color from Bassanio's cheek–
> Some dear friend dead, else nothing in the world
> Could turn so much the constitution
> Of any constant man. What, worse and worse?

Thereupon she demands to know more. "With leave, Bassanio," she pleads; "I am half yourself,"

> And I must freely have the half of anything
> That this same paper brings you.

(243-50)

At this Bassanio confesses to his being "worse than nothing" financially, and reveals, to Portia for the first time, his close relationship with Antonio. "I have engaged myself to a dear friend," he begins,

> Engaged my friend to his mere enemy,

To feed my means. Here is a letter, lady,
The paper as the body of my friend,
And every word in it a gasping wound
Issuing lifeblood.

(261-66)

What Bassanio holds in his hands, then, is not just a piece of paper; it is no less than Antonio's body, dripping blood. The letter-writer has a corporeal presence on stage: Antonio is right there. The alliteration of *word/wound* calls attention to Bassanio's reading or interpretation of the letter. Salerio and Jessica further confirm the bad news about Antonio– that he has lost "all his ventures" and that Shylock has been designing against his life (271-90). Portia's response to this is as generous and noble as it is quick and resolute. She proposes to ransom Antonio at all cost and almost immediately: "First go with me to the church and call me wife, / And then away to Venice to your friend" (303-4), adding, perhaps with tongue in cheek,

Bid your friends welcome, show a merry cheer;
Since you are dear bought, I'll love you dear.

(312-13)

If the purpose of Antonio's letter is to summon Bassanio to his side before his death, that purpose has been achieved. And since Portia has already made the decision to let Bassanio go immediately, is it not perfunctory, one wonders, to have her demand the reading of the letter on stage (314)? M. M. Mahood, in the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, points out that the two lines quoted above "[sound] like a concluding couplet," and suggests that "[p]erhaps Shakespeare only decided at a later stage to let Portia and the audience hear Antonio's letter," which is probably why Bassanio, "as reader," fails to get a

speech heading in Q1-2.[7]

The reason for this insertion– if insertion it be– is worth looking into. At this point let us go back to the letter and take another, closer look:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I *if I might but see you at my death.* Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. *If your love do not persuade you to come,* let not my letter. (emphasis added)

On the surface, the brief letter shows the nobility and magnanimity of the royal merchant: he is willing to void all Bassanio's debts to him, which we know are much more than the three thousand ducats at issue here;[8] and, as a true friend, he would exonerate Bassanio even if Bassanio does not grant him his last wish– to see him at his death. On her part Portia shows nobility and magnanimity by granting the request even *before* it is asked– because she has not heard the written content of the letter– in much the same way that Isabelle, in *Measure for Measure,* forgives Angelo *before* she is given to know that her brother Claudio, reported to be dead, is in fact still alive. The reading of the letter sheds a favorable light on Portia.

But the letter sheds at least as much light on Antonio and his relationship with Bassanio– especially for Portia. It must be pointed out that Antonio's magnanimity is *conditional,* as the two "if" clauses make clear. What *if* the first condition is not met? Would the debts between the two good friends still be cleared? Very likely, but we do not know. True, Antonio indicates that he does not want to force Bassanio to hurry back to Venice: "Notwithstanding use your *pleasure,*" he says. In so saying, however, he also sets up a striking contrast between Bassanio's supposed blissful state with his own disastrous one. The

second "if" clause, too, can be interpreted in a number of ways. "If your love do not persuade you to come"– this can sound like a severe chastisement from an utterly miserable and despondent friend. How does Bassanio value his love for Antonio? How else can Bassanio respond? In any case, Antonio is *not* there to give and take. The last sentence in the letter therefore puts a firm hold over Bassanio. All in all, the letter leaves Bassanio no choice but to hurry back to Antonio's side. Then there is also the ambiguity of the word "love." What or who is "your love" in that same last sentence? It certainly can mean Bassanio's love for Antonio, but it can also mean Portia, Bassanio's new love. And that seems to be Portia's understanding of the phrase, for as soon as she hears it, she exclaims,

> O love, dispatch all business, and begone!
>
> (323)

where love clearly means Bassanio the person. The letter thus also has a hold over Portia. And since "my letter" is the bodily presence of Antonio, just as "your love" refers to Portia the person, Antonio very clearly sets himself up as a contender for Bassanio's love, which can only strengthen Portia's resolve to go to Venice in person for an investigation into the matter.

Antonio's provisions, whether consciously or unconsciously imposed, square well with the rest of the play, in which almost all the incidents and personal relationships are based on contracts and bonds with various kinds of stipulations that bind either side of the agreements; even the Christian mercy, which Portia so movingly compares to "the gentle rains from heaven" (4.1.183), does not drop of itself but is attached to by many strings.

More important, the letter also alerts Portia to the special "bond" between her future husband and another man– a bond that could stand in the way of her

conjugal relationship with Bassanio. "I have engaged myself to a dear friend, / Engaged my friend to his mere enemy" (261-62), Portia has heard Bassanio say of the depth of his friendship with Antonio, and now there is this talk of "your love" in a letter that contains a desperate plea. It would be reasonable, I submit, to suppose Portia a little suspicious about or even alarmed by this revelation of the relationship between the two men. Nor have their Venetian friends lost sight of the fact that Bassanio is dearly beloved of Antonio, who is the first to admit his own melancholy shortly before his appointment with Bassanio to discuss how to finance the latter's journey in search of a lady. The play begins with him saying "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." It has been suggested that the root of his melancholy is Bassanio's proposed departure in pursuit of Portia. Salerio describes the parting between the two in this way:

> Bassanio told him he would make some speed
> Of his return; he [Antonio] answered, "Do not so.
> Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
> But stay the very riping of the time;
> And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,
> Let it not enter in your mind of love.
> Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts
> To courtship and such fair ostents of love
> As shall conveniently become you there."
> And even there, his eye being big with tears,
> Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
> And with affection wondrous sensible,
> He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.

On this Solanio comments:

I think he [Antonio] only loves the world for him [Bassanio].

(2.8.37-50)

Without broaching the subject of Antonio's sexual preference, we can see how Portia could perceive the fast bond between him and Bassanio as threatening.[9] To put it mildly, Portia has to "[teach] Bassanio and Antonio that the marital relationship involves unique responsibilities and that those responsibilities impose limits on munificence."[10]

And this she loses no time in doing. Mahood suggests that the letter "could be interpolated 'second thoughts,' by which Shakespeare strengthens Portia's motives for her intervention in the trial."[11] Mahood does not specify the motives, but subsequent developments point to Portia's central motive: to safeguard her marriage.

What she sees and hears in the court further gives Portia ample cause to be concerned about her future relationship with Bassanio. When asked in the court by Portia, now disguised as Balthasar, the law doctor, what he has to say, Antonio turns to Bassanio:

Commend me to your honorable wife.
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(4.1.271-75)

The juxtaposition of wife and friend clearly shows Antonio's perception of Portia as a rival of love. And Bassanio returns with these words:

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 esteemed as thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(4.1.280-85)

Bassanio, whose marriage is yet to be consummated, is not ready to give up his old love, Antonio, for his new love, Portia. The professed love between the two men prompts Portia to remark: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that, / If she were by to hear you make the offer" (286-87). The same generous gesture is repeated by Gratiano, and again it meets with Nerissa's "'Tis well you offer it behind her back; / The wish would make else an unquiet house" (291-92). The scene has been hailed as a deeply moving show of "selfless friendship,"[12] which indeed in a sense it is. But such friendship among men can alarm their wives, as it most certainly does Portia and Nerissa here. Portia's worst suspicion about the relationship between her husband and Antonio is all but confirmed.

Hence the ring trick. Once again Antonio involves himself in Bassanio's love affair when he entreats, after the successful (for the Christian merchants) conclusion of the pound-of-flesh plot,

My lord Bassanio, let him [Portia/Balthasar] have the ring.
Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

(4.1.447-49)

"My love" versus "your wife's commandment": the rivalry continues. Sure enough, Antonio subsequently becomes "th' unhappy subject" of the quarrels in the unquiet house once the victorious Christian merchants return to Belmont. And in the end he has to offer himself, voluntarily, as surety for Bassanio's

faithfulness toward Portia, as he "once did lend [his] body for [Bassanio's] wealth":

> I dare be bound again,
> My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
> Will nevermore break faith advisedly.
>
> (5.1.249, 251-53)

In so doing, Antonio yields both his body and soul to Bassanio, which is a show of great love indeed. Ironically, Antonio is probably unaware that in so doing he also yields to Portia his claim to Bassanio as his "love." Belmont's lady of "wondrous virtues" (1.1.163) makes sure that all the parties concerned know that the bond between husband and wife is stronger than that between friends. Having humbled Shylock the Jew and saved Antonio, she now succeeds in eliminating Antonio from contention for Bassanio's love.

Questions have been raised as to the necessity of the play's last Act. Why not conclude the play, for instance, at the end of the climactic trial scene at the court, where the Venetian Christians score a complete victory over the Jew? It may be answered of course that *The Merchant of Venice* is composed largely of three strands of plots: the choosing of a husband, the pound-of-flesh, and the ring trick, all of which can be found in *Il Pecorone*, believed to be Shakespeare's main source for the play, and that therefore Shakespeare is merely following his source. From the preceding paragraphs it should be clear that the last act is indispensable because Shakespeare wants his Portia to put an end to the unusual bond between Antonio and her husband Bassanio. And Antonio's letter to Bassanio plays a crucial part in her decision. The apparently perfunctory reading of Antonio's letter thus has great impact on the development of the play and links the three important strands of the play's major plots.

Notes

[1] This paper grows out of the writer's project "The Letter as a Dramatic Device in Shakespeare," generously sponsored by the National Science Council (Project No. 882411H002044).

[2] "An Epistle . . . or letter is nothing else, but a declaration, by Writing of the Mindes of such as be absent, one of them to another, even as though they were present," writes William Fulwood in his *The enemy of Idlenesse* (1621), pp. 1-2, qtd. in Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), p. 249.

[3] David M Bergeron, "Deadly Letters in *King Lear*," *Philological Quarterly* 72 (1993), p. 160.

[4] We recall, for instance, in *The Twelfth Night* Malvolio's letter of protest was literally shouted out by the fool until Olivia designates a different reader (5.1.289-31). Related studies include Julian Hilton, "Reading Letters in Plays: Short Courses in Practical Epistemology?" *Reading Plays: Interpretation and Reception*, eds. Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 140-60; Stephen Orgel, "The Comedian as the Character C," *English Comedy*, eds. Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 36-54; Mark Taylor, "Letters and Readers in *Macbeth, King Lear,* and *Twelfth Night*," *Philological Quarterly* 690 (1990), p. 31-53; and Ching-Hsi Perng, "Shi-lun Ma-ke-bai han Ha-mu-lei juzhong shuxin de xiju yiyi" [The dramatic significance of the letters in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*"], *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 25.3 (August 1996), p.273-89.

[5] My calculation based on *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works on CD-ROM* (Abingdon, England; Alameda, CA, U.S.A.: Andromeda Interactive, 1994) shows that

they appear in at least 28 plays.

[6] Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from the play are from David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th ed., by William Shakespeare (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).

[7] M. M. Mahood, ed., *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 172.

[8] Even before he lays out his plan to become one of those "many Jasons" in pursuit of Portia, Bassanio admits to his great indebtedness to Antonio:

> To you, Antonio,
> I owe the most, in money and in love,
> And from your love I have a warranty
> To unburden all my plots and purposes
> How to get clear of all the debts I owe.
>
> (1.1.130-34)

[9] Professor Anthony Barthelemy, in his paper "Luxury, Sodomy and Miscegenation: English Perceptions of Venice in *The Merchant of Venice*," makes the brilliant point that Antonio, by losing the forfeit, would beat Portia in bleeding for Bassanio since the newlyweds have yet to consummate their marriage.

[10] Katherine Eisaman Maus, Introduction, *The Merchant of Venice*; *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (NY: Norton, 1997), p. 1088.

[11] Mahood, note to ll. [313-20], op. cit., p. 125.

[12] Kenneth Myrick, ed., *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Sylvan Barnet (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 604.