

Bassanio's Name and Nature

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CRITICS OF *THE Merchant of Venice* are sharply divided on the question of Bassanio's character. C. R. Baskervill, G. Wilson Knight, J. R. Brown, and Bernard Grebanier, among others, take a sympathetic view of Bassanio; Quiller-Couch, M. R. Ridley, Arthur Sewell, and Harold Goddard condemn him (with varying degrees of emphasis) as a dishonest fortune-hunter.¹ Alfred Harbage will have it both ways: Bassanio is a fortune-hunter, but he has "in some subtle way . . . lost [his] acquisitiveness," and he is "honest with Portia as well as truly in love."² Although Bassanio's name has nothing in common with that of the corresponding figures in Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone* or Anthony Munday's *Zelauto*, few critics on either side make any effort to relate Bassanio's character to his name. Among the pro-Bassanians only G. Wilson Knight suggests that the name indicates "a certain weight and dignity," that it recalls the name of Bassianus, "the good prince in *Titus Andronicus*," and that Bassanio's crucial choice encourages the association of his name with Greek *basanos*, touchstone.³ No anti-Bassanian, so far as I am aware, has advanced comparably ingenious hypotheses to strengthen the case for Bassanio as fortune-hunter; nor has a possible connection with that casket of "base lead" much attracted the attention of this group. In any event, the purpose of this note is to suggest that, while Shakespeare may in some degree have been motivated to choose just this name for its associations with music (in social as well as linguistic contexts), he may also have considered the

¹ C. R. Baskervill, "Bassanio as an Ideal Lover," *Manly Anniversary Studies* (Chicago, 1923), 90-103; G. Wilson Knight, *The Sovereign Flower* (New York, 1958), 176-178; *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. J. R. Brown (London, 1959), xlvii-xlviii; Bernard Grebanier, *The Truth About Shylock* (New York, 1962), 220-226, *passim*; A. Quiller-Couch, *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (London, 1918), 99-101; M. R. Ridley, *Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1957), 92-93; Arthur Sewell, *Character and Society in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1951), 42-43; Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1951), 85-86.

² Alfred Harbage, *As They Liked It: An Essay on Shakespeare and Morality* (New York, 1947), p. 192.

³ Knight, *op. cit.* Knight does not remark on the fact that "bass," in Shakespeare's time, might also signify "a kiss"; cf. Spenser's *Basciante* (*FQ*, III.i. 45). Nor does he allude to Italian *basano* ("dirty"). My colleague, Edward LeComte, suggests that the name may echo that of the hill-town, Bassano, some 40 miles northwest from Venice.

name ironically apt for a character who, however graceful and agreeable, "hath no music in himself." Bassanio's comment on the caskets applies equally to himself, at last: "So may the outward shows be least themselves."

Among sixteenth-century significations of the term "bass," the OED gives "the lowest part in harmonized musical composition," notices that it is prefixed to names of musical instruments "to indicate that they are of the lowest pitch," and cites Thomas Morley's use of the word (in choral contexts) to mean "the base or lowest part." While the term is not often encountered in Shakespeare's work, in these senses, he does so employ it from time to time. Allowing for spelling variations, there seem to be just four instances. Two are illusions to musical instruments: "a base-viol in a case of leather" (*CE*, IV.iii.23), and Prince Hal's remark in *Henry IV, Part 1*, "I have sounded the very base-string of humility" (II.iv.5-6). Interestingly, the other uses of the term in this general sense carry connotations pejorative or ominous. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia rebukes Lucetta, "The mean is drown'd with your unruly bass" (I.ii.93); in *The Tempest*, guilt-ridden Alonso cries,

the thunder,
That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounc'd
The name of Prosper; it did base my trespass.
(III.iii.97-99)⁴

It is worth remark that the word "base" (including derivatives such as "basely," "baser," "baseness") occurs more than 200 times in Shakespeare's work, and that by far the greater number of these pejoratively signify lowness in the social or the moral scale.⁵ Given the common pronunciation of the word in its various spellings and senses (not to mention Shakespeare's fondness for puns), it is hard to resist the suspicion that the poet's uses of "bass" or "base" in a musical context subtly reflect the emphases of those much more numerous uses of the term in social or moral contexts. The instances cited above, at least, would seem to give some color to that view. It follows that a certain ambivalence may possibly attach also to the name "Bassanio."

⁴ This passage and others from Shakespeare's plays quoted in this note follow the text of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston, 1974).

⁵ Nine or ten signify "foundation" or "ground-work"; two refer to the game of "prisoner's base." A few others have the primary sense of "the lower part of an object or building"; but most of these clearly include a pejorative moral or social sense as well. *Cf.* the allusions in *Richard II* to "the base court."

Leaving this for a moment, to consider the matter of Bassanio's name from another aspect, we may recall that A. L. Rowse has recently drawn attention to the Bassano family of Elizabethan musicians, in connection with his claim to have identified Shakespeare's Dark Lady as Emilia Bassano Lanier.⁶ Let it be clearly understood that I am not here concerned to counter or support Rowse's controversial "identification," which in fact (to quote George Steiner) remains no more than "a beguiling possibility."⁷ One's opinion of the conjectures advanced by Rowse need not obscure the fact that the Bassanos were prominent on the Elizabethan musical scene throughout the period of Shakespeare's career as actor and playwright. Percy M. Young some years ago observed, in his *History of British Music*, that "in the reign of Elizabeth several families who were to exercise a considerable and beneficial influence on the development of British music came into prominence. There were, for example, the Bassanos, the Ferraboscos, the Laniers, and the Lupos. The Bassanos were chiefly known as instrumentalists." "They were a notorious family," Young adds, noting that in 1584 "Arthur Bassano was committed to custody by the Recorder of London for his 'insolence and opprobrious language,' while a year later Mark Anthony Bassano was nearly killed by soldiers on the point of departing for Flanders who mistook him for a Spaniard and took exception to his language."⁸ More immediately to the point is the fact that Bassanos are conspicuously represented in the rosters of "the King's Musick" (i.e., the establishment of instrumentalists and singers continuously attendant on the sovereign) over the whole period from 1540 to 1640. The rosters for 1570, 1590, and 1603 show that the recorder section was the particular responsibility of the Bassano family, whose members also played sackbuts, flutes, and cornets; Andrea Bassano was the senior instrument-maker of the group from the 1590's until 1626.⁹ That the Bassanos were much more than a set of raffish entertainers is clear: if their salaries did not match those of such virtuosos as Nicholas Lanier or Alfonso Ferrabosco, neither were their rates of pay, as a rule, below the average annual stipend of £ 46.10.10. When examinations were held to fill vacant places in the Waits of London (at least in 1601, the only instance in which their names are known), "the

⁶ A. L. Rowse, *Shakespeare the Man* (New York, 1973), Chapter 6; *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved* (New York, 1973), xxvii-xlv.

⁷ "Portrait of A Lady," *The New Yorker*, March 18, 1974; 142-150.

⁸ Percy M. Young, *A History of British Music* (London, 1967), p. 123.

⁹ Walter Woodfill, *Musicians in English Society from Elizabeth to Charles I* (Princeton, N. J., 1953), Chapter 8 and Appendix E. Cf. also *The King's Musick: A transcript of records relating to music and musicians 1460-1700*, ed. H. C. de Lafontaine (London, 1909), *passim*.

examiners . . . were three members of the . . . family of Bassano, all Queen Elizabeth's musicians." And at least three of the clan were engaged in the export trade (of leather) on a fairly substantial scale in the years between 1593 and 1605.¹⁰ Further, it is of interest that the spelling "Bassano" is not consistently adopted before the roster of 1590. Early rosters, such as that of 1540, give "de Basson," "de Basam," and "Bassanie," while the roster for 1570 (which included seven members of the family) gives only "Bassany" or "Bassanye."¹¹ It would appear, then, that in the years between 1570 and 1590 (and no doubt to some extent also later), members of the family might equally be known as "Bassano" or "Bassanye."

Supposing for a moment that Shakespeare may have had the Bassano-Bassanye family in mind when he named Portia's suitor (whose choice is made to the accompaniment of music and a song, not to mention Portia's comments just preceding the song), could the playwright have been glancing at a particular member of the clan? Rowse, presumably, would respond with an emphatic affirmative, in behalf of Emilia Bassano Lanier; one must say, "presumably," since (although Rowse notices that the play is "full of music")¹² there is, very curiously, not a single allusion to Bassanio or to the possible connection between his name and that of the Bassano-Bassanye family in either *Shakespeare the Man* or *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved*. Certainly, in the present state of our knowledge, no real case of this kind can be made for any other of the Bassanos. The thought occurs, for instance, that Shakespeare might have been thinking of one of the musicians hired by the company. Woodfill observes that members of the King's Musick "at times . . . needed supplementary sources of income because their salaries were in arrears."¹³ In theory, an out-of-pocket Bassano could have hired out his services, at one time or another, to the Shakespearean company. But given the relatively well-established situation of the Bassanos in the last decade of the century, this does not seem likely. Nor do the lists of musicians attached to the Shakespearean company given by T. W. Baldwin and John H. Long include any Bassanos or Bassanyes.¹⁴ For that matter, simply to

¹⁰ Woodfill, 179-180, 42-43; Young, p. 116.

¹¹ Woodfill, 297-300, 183-184.

¹² *Shakespeare the Man*, p. 252. Rowse somewhat obscures the point, however, by adding, "as so many appropriately are." Cf. also p. 156: "Here [i.e., in *The Merchant of Venice*], as everywhere, there is his passionate love of music. . ." [italics mine].

¹³ Woodfill, p. 183.

¹⁴ T. W. Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, N. J., 1927), 75-80, 120-123; John B. Long, *Shakespeare's Use of Music: A Study of the Music and Its Performance in the Original Production of Seven Comedies* (Gainesville, Fla., 1955), 30-34.

distinguish among individual members of the family is a formidable task: the Bassanos, according to one authority, "were so numerous and their names were entered so carelessly in court records that it is impossible to establish a genealogy for them."¹⁵

One is therefore obliged to return to a more general hypothesis: that Shakespeare, regularly alert to musical metaphor, and well aware of the Bassano-Bassanye family's musical connections (yet still also alert to the pejorative moral connotations attached to the root-term of the name), may on these counts have determined that Bassanio should bear the name he does, in this play in which action and character are often keyed to music actual or figurative.¹⁶ If so much may be granted, what is the consequence for a reading of Bassanio's character?

The evidence, such as it is, permits of two quite different interpretations. One may argue that Bassanio's name, recalling that of a family which held an important place in contemporary musical circles, and also suggesting (by linguistic association) the individual's harmonious contribution to that larger consort (musical or social) of which he makes part, supports the view of those who feel that Bassanio cuts "a quite beautiful figure," and that his "superiority as a human being" is fully demonstrated by the action of the play.¹⁷

It may be so. Still, it is not as a rule Shakespeare's habit to present the young Italian gentlemen who people his comedies in quite this way. In fact, those courtly youths who take their gentility for granted, and who parade their loyalty to orthodox social codes, are typically somewhat vapid and self-indulgent; pressed by circumstance, they reveal their weakness or brutality. The two Veronese "gentlemen," Valentine and Proteus, are of this ilk; not to mention pallid Claudio in *Much Ado*, and Duke Orsino, whose mind is a very opal. Petruchio, Orlando, and Benedick are "gentle" too; but these are the thoughtful rebels, committed (in various contexts) to the challenging of social orthodoxies, and thereby to the exploration of what it means to be truly a gentleman. Bassanio has not much in common with these latter figures; and if he is

¹⁵ *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Fifth Edition, ed. E. Blom, 9 vols. (London, 1954), I, p. 482.

¹⁶ Cf. especially III.iii.43-72; V.i.69-88, 97-109; II.v.29-30.

¹⁷ B. Grebanier, *op. cit.*, pp. 226, 259. To accept the argument advanced by Rowse is, of course, almost inevitably to conclude also that Shakespeare's disenchantment with Emilia Bassano Lanier bears significantly on Bassanio's character and name; Portia's suitor, by that reading, is no more than a charming but untrustworthy adventurer. But since Rowse presents no hard evidence to support his identification of Emilia as the Dark Lady, and since he nowhere refers to Bassanio in this connection, there is not much reason to pursue the matter on these lines.

not obviously weak or brutal, his appeal to the Duke in Act IV provides a telling indication of his easy way with principle, when circumstances force a choice:

I beseech you,
Wrest once the law to your authority:
To do a great right, do a little wrong,
And curb this cruel devil of his will.
(IV.i.214-217)

Does the text of this play, where so many “outward shows” are “least themselves,” provide support for the view that Bassanio’s name (like the man himself) is not quite what it seems? Lorenzo’s speech in Act V is to the point.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.
(V.i.83-88)

The play is full of music, to be sure; but it is all associated, in the first instance, with Portia and her household. Bassanio’s choice follows after the song in III.ii, a song accompanied by Portia’s musicians. Lorenzo can deliver that brief ode to music’s power, it appears, by consequence of the fact that these same musicians play as he speaks: the youth who lusted after Jessica and her father’s jewels now describes his own case.

. . . nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.
(V.ii.81-82)

Portia’s lyrical account of music’s empire (III.ii.43-53) is familiar; her remarks to Nerissa at V.i.97-108 are striking too, for they reveal her sensitive recognition that every kind of music must take its appropriate place in a larger natural harmony. “‘The touches of sweet harmony’ in the household of Belmont,” as F. W. Sternfeld has said, “are in vivid contrast to the mercenary wrangles of Shylock’s surroundings, so

utterly devoid of music."¹⁸ Shylock certainly damns "the drum / And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife" (II.v.29-30); but the others (Lorenzo at Belmont excepted) give no indication that they are any more receptive to music than he is. They neither refer to music nor speak in musical metaphors. One would expect this of Antonio,¹⁹ light Jessica, gross Gratiano; that it is also true of Bassanio, to whom Portia commits "her gentle spirit . . . to be directed," is surely remarkable. His speeches, in fact, contain not a single figure drawn from music.

Further in this vein, one should consider the tone of Bassanio's meditation on the casket. Just prior to the song, Portia has spoken with passionate eloquence of the flourish set by music on loss and triumph alike: on death, political order, love and marriage. Music, so to speak, celebrates and confirms a principle of harmony that unites the great variety of human experience. Bassanio's musings are altogether contrary in mode and viewpoint. Where Portia had imaginatively reached past experience to find unifying principle, Bassanio justifies his choice by an empirical demonstration of the *dis harmony* that, in a fallen world, regularly divides appearance from reality. He has no idea of looking through experience for an informing principle; his thoughts are low. They are, in fact, base. This "Hercules" (as Portia terms him) knows only "valor's excrement"; if her world is one of redemption and sacrifice, his is a fearful maze of traps, dangerous seas, skulls. Although he has listened closely to the song, there is not the slightest indication that the music has changed his nature, even "for the time."²⁰ The images he employs are utterly unmusical: legal pleas are "tainted and corrupt," religion full of "damned error" and "grossness," beauty itself "purchas'd by the weight." Bassanio, for whom life seems largely to consist in keeping up appearances, regards his fellows with dark suspicion. Experience shows him chiefly that, in "cunning times," it profits rather to be shrewd than wise. By these lights he makes his choice. It is the "right" one; and it is a choice with which Shakespeare's audience would presumably have been content. Yet the thoughtful reader may well feel uneasily that it has been made for all the wrong reasons; and even that Bassanio will never plumb the true quality of his Portia.

¹⁸ F. W. Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1963), p. 106.

¹⁹ Anne Barton observes, "both [Shylock's and Antonio's] are voices somehow missing in the final chord" (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. cit., p. 253).

²⁰ It is probably significant that Lorenzo's last speech in the play implicitly acknowledges the quality "past all expressing" that distinguishes Portia and her household; Bassanio, at the last, is thinking of bed.

The sum is this: Shakespeare appears to have chosen a name that glances at the varied harmonies of an Elizabethan consort, while subtly hinting also at contradictory and disturbing elements; and wittily to have assigned it to a figure whose character may be thought to counter and belie his pleasing show.

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