



The Conflict Between Friendship and Romance in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

Mr. Viplaw

Student,

Department of English,

Ranchi University.

viplawsingh137@gmail.com

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's comedies are celebrated for their romantic conclusions, usually ending in marriage. However, this focus on romance often hides a deeper, more complex theme: the strong bonds of same-sex friendship. Friendship and romantic love heavily conflict in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. The relationships between Antonio and Bassanio, as well as Beatrice and Hero, show that Shakespeare presents romance not as a perfect ideal, but as a disruptive force threatening established friendships. A comparative analysis of historical Renaissance philosophies of friendships, the weaponisation of isolation by the play's villains, and the final tests of loyalty in the climax of both plays reveals how romantic pursuits create conflicts of loyalty. Characters are repeatedly forced to choose between their friends and their lovers. While these plays end happily with marriages, selfless loyalty between friends is the real heart of the story.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Friendship, Romance, Homosocial Bonds, Loyalty, Renaissance Culture.

Introduction

In the study of English literature, William Shakespeare's comedies are almost always defined by their romantic plots. The traditional formula of a Shakespearean comedy is well known: lovers overcome misunderstandings, societal rules, or family objections to come together in marriage finally. Because these plays end with weddings, today readers naturally assume that romantic love is the highest ideal in Shakespeare's world. Nevertheless, reading these plays solely as love stories ignores a major element of Renaissance society, the extremely high value placed on friendships.

During Shakespeare's time, same-sex friendships were often considered superior to romantic love between a husband and wife. Marriages in the early modern period were largely economic and political arrangements. Friendship, by contrast, was a bond of choice and spiritual connection. In both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, romantic love acts as a disruptive force that threatens the strength of close friendships. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the bond between Antonio and Bassanio is tested by Bassanio's sudden desire to marry Portia. Similarly, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the loyal sisterhood between Beatrice and Hero is shattered by the romantic actions of the men around them. Comparing these two plays highlights the philosophical background of Renaissance friendship, the ways in which villains exploit these bonds, and how in the climax characters are forced to make impossible choices between friends and spouses. Shakespeare suggests that while romance drives the plot forward, the sacrificial nature of friendship saves the characters from disaster.

The Historical Background of Friendship

To fully understand why friendship is such a powerful force in these plays, we must examine how people thought about friendship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare and his audience were deeply influenced by classical Greek and Roman writers who placed friendship above almost all other human emotions. The most important text on this subject was Marcus Tullius Cicero's *Laelius de Amicitia (On Friendship)*. Cicero argued that "Friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection" (Cicero 131). For Renaissance thinkers who read Cicero, true friendship was like the merging of two souls that could only exist between good, honorable men.

This idea was carried forward by other Renaissance writers. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay about his own best friend, Étienne de La Boétie. Montaigne argued that true friendship is a spiritual bond that entirely surpasses the physical and legal nature of marriage (Montaigne 135). Marriage was seen as something functional for having children and sharing property, whereas friendship was seen as divine. This historical preference for male friendship over marriage is deeply rooted in the psychological complexities of patriarchal society. As Coppélia Kahn notes in *Man's Estate*, "Men originally learn their sexual identities by differentiating their masculinity from the femininity of their mothers but must as adults reunite with women in marriage to fulfill their roles in society. After a profound separation from women, they must enter into a profound union with them" (Kahn 17). This dynamic puts men in a highly dangerous position. Kahn continues, "Patriarchy presents a second problem, though it gives men control over women, it also makes them dependent on women indirectly and covertly for the validation of their manhood. Paradoxically, their power over women also makes them vulnerable to women" (Kahn 17). It is exactly this vulnerability that makes romantic love so terrifying and

destabilising to Shakespeare's male characters. They cling to the safe, unthreatening loyalty of same sex friendship because romance forces them into a state of emotional dependence they have been conditioned to fear.

Historian Alan Bray also points out in his book *The Friend* that male friendship in early modern England was not just a private feeling. According to him the "principal difference between the friendship of the modern world and the friendship I describe in this book is that, in the traditional culture that it explores, friendship was significant in a public sphere" (Bray 2). Rather than a hidden emotional bond, it possessed a "formal and objective character markedly different from friendship in modern society" (Bray 25), often cemented within "a customary social world constructed through binding oaths and ritual acts made before witnesses, human and divine" (Bray 40). Betraying a friend was considered one of the worst moral failures a person could commit. When reading Shakespeare's plays with this historical background in mind, the tension between friends and lovers becomes much more serious. The characters are not just choosing between two people; they are choosing between a sacred historical ideal (friendship) and a necessary social institution (marriage).

The Deep Friendship of Antonio and Bassanio

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the play opens not with romance, but with the emotional weight of friendship. The very first line of the play belongs to Antonio, the wealthy merchant, who says, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 1.1.1). His friends try to guess why he is depressed. They suggest he is worried about his merchant ships crashing at sea, or perhaps he is secretly in love; Antonio denies both. While the text itself leaves the exact cause of Antonio's sadness a mystery, his sadness directly coincides with Bassanio's impending courtship. To understand the threat this poses to their friendship, we must look at the structural purpose of

Renaissance marriage. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, “patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women, it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Sedgwick 25-26). Bassanio is preparing to enter this exact heterosexual economy. By seeking a wife, Bassanio is shifting his primary social allegiance, which fundamentally threatens the exclusive, purely homosocial devotion he currently shares with Antonio.

Despite this internal sadness, Antonio’s love for Bassanio remains very selfless. Bassanio is a young man who is very irresponsible with money. He has already wasted his own fortune by living a wealthy lifestyle he cannot afford. He comes to Antonio to ask for even more money so he can travel to Belmont to woo a rich heiress named Portia. Bassanio uses a childhood story to ask for the money, saying:

“In my school days, when I had lost one shaft,

I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight.

The selfsame way with more advised watch,

To find the other forth; and by adventuring both, I oft found both” (Shakespeare,

Merchant 1.1.147-150).

Bassanio is saying, “I lost your money before, but if you give me more, I promise I will get it all back this time”. This creates a serious financial risk, because Antonio’s wealth is tied to his ships at sea, he does not have any cash to help his friend. To get the money for his friend, Antonio goes to his enemy, the moneylender Shylock. Antonio makes a deadly deal; he promises a literal “pound of flesh” if he cannot repay the loan on time (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 1.3.160-161).

This deal highlights the depth of their bond; Antonio is willing to risk his life so Bassanio can marry. He tells Bassanio, “My purse, my person, my extremest means, Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 1.1.145-146). It means Antonio is giving Bassanio a blank check, offering his wealth and his body. As Harold Bloom writes, Antonio’s devotion to Bassanio is the absolute emotional core of the play, far stronger and more believable than Bassanio’s sudden romantic affection for Portia (Bloom 175). The friendship is established from the very beginning as pure, sacrificial, and foundational to the lives of both men.

The Close Bond Between Beatrice and Hero

While *The Merchant of Venice* gives us a great example of male friendship, *Much Ado About Nothing* shows a great example of female friendship. Beatrice and Hero are cousins, but because they live in the same house and share a bedroom, they are as close as sisters even though their personalities are completely opposite. Hero is the traditional ideal of a Renaissance woman; she is gentle and obedient to her father Leonato. Beatrice, on the other hand, is loud, witty, aggressively independent, and wholly opposed to the idea of marriage. She states that she would rather “hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 1.1.131-132). Despite these differences, their loyalty to each other is unbreakable. In a society run by men, where women had very little political or social power, female friendship was a necessary survival tool. Valerie Traub points out that in early modern England, women relied entirely on each other for emotional support in domestic spaces where men were usually not allowed (Traub 89). This deep intimacy is clear when Hero and Beatrice are alone. They prepare for Hero’s wedding together, share jokes, and wholly trust each other.

Beatrice acts as a shield for Hero, because Hero is too gentle to fight back against the harsh words of men, she uses her sharp tongue to protect her. Whenever Hero is unable to speak for

herself in public, Beatrice is there to defend her space. Unlike the men in the play, whose friendships are often based on public honour and military ranking, the bond between Beatrice and Hero is personal and domestic. They do not need to make grand, dramatic gestures like promising a pound of flesh; their friendship is shown through daily companionship. However, just like in *The Merchant of Venice*, this peaceful dynamic is about to be ruined by the arrival of romantic love.

The Military Brotherhood of the Soldiers

To fully understand the disruption in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the male friendships in the play must also be examined. Claudio, Benedick, and Don Pedro are soldiers returning from war. Their friendship is a “military brotherhood.” They are used to fighting together, living in camps together, and relying on each other for survival.

When Claudio decides he wants to marry Hero, he does not go to Hero and confess his love. Instead, he goes to his military commander, Don Pedro. Don Pedro offers to wear a mask at a party, pretend to be Claudio, and woo Hero on Claudio’s behalf. He tells Claudio, “I will assume thy part in some disguise. And tell fair Hero I am Claudio” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 1.1.321-322). Using a substitute to woo a woman is an unusual way to begin a romantic relationship. As Lorna Hutson explains, Renaissance society relied heavily on alliances, where the power of male friendship was cemented “in the creation of alliances through the exchange of women,” a practice recognised as “the supreme rule of the gift” (Hutson 79). By helping Claudio get a wife, Don Pedro is cementing his role as the generous leader of their group. However, this military style of romance is incredibly fragile. Because Claudio’s love for Hero is based on his friends’ approval rather than a real connection, it is very easy to destroy.

How Villains Attack These Friendships

It is no coincidence that the villains in both plays specifically target the bonds of friendship and romance to cause maximum pain. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* are both outsiders who are isolated from society. Because they have no friends, they hate those who do. Shylock's hatred for Antonio is not just about religion; he complains that Antonio "lends out money gratis" and brings down the rate of usance in Venice (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 1.3.44-45). Antonio lends money to his friends without charging interest out of pure Christian brotherhood. Shylock, who operates entirely on strict, legal contracts, views this emotional way of doing business as a threat. By demanding Antonio's flesh, Shylock is directly attacking the physical body of a man who values friendship over profit.

Similarly, Don John is the primary villain in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Because he is Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, he lacks the same social standing and loyal friends. When he sees the young, handsome Claudio being celebrated by Don Pedro, he decides to destroy him. Don John says, "If I can cross him anyway, I bless myself every way" (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 1.3.67-68). Don John does not attack Claudio with a sword. Instead, he attacks Claudio's romantic relationship. He tricks Claudio and Don Pedro into believing that Hero is cheating on Claudio the night before the wedding. The villain understands that the easiest way to destroy a man's happiness is to ruin his love and turn his friends against each other. In both plays, the villains weaponise isolation, trying to break the beautiful bonds that the main characters share.

Love as a Destructive Force

In both plays, the introduction of love brings chaos; it is not presented as a cure but as a massive complication. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio's quest for Portia is the exact reason

Antonio ends up in a courtroom facing death. If Bassanio had not decided to seek a romantic partner, Antonio would have never made the terrible deal with Shylock. The pursuit of marriage literally puts Antonio's life at risk. Portia's intelligence also allows her to see that Antonio is her main rival for Bassanio's heart. When she learns about the danger Antonio is in, she immediately offers to pay the debt with her own wealth. However, it is not just out of the kindness of her heart. From a dramatic and psychological perspective, Portia strategically needs to save Antonio so she can clear Bassanio's debt and claim his loyalty completely for herself. If Antonio dies for Bassanio, Bassanio will spend the rest of his life mourning his friend, and Portia will never truly have her husband's full devotion.

Therefore, Portia dresses as a male lawyer named Balthasar to enter the male-dominated courtroom. By doing this, she takes over Antonio's role as Bassanio's protector. She steps into the male world and proves she is smarter and more capable than every man in the room. Suddenly, romance takes over where friendship used to be. *In Much Ado About Nothing*, the disruption caused by romance is even more violent. When Claudio is tricked by Don John into thinking Hero has been unfaithful, Claudio does not quietly cancel the wedding. He waits until they are standing at the altar in front of the priest, and he publicly humiliates her. He calls her a "rotten orange" and tells her father, "Give not this rotten orange to your friend" (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 4.1.32-33). Here we see the failure of male romantic love. Claudio's romantic feelings for Hero disappear the very second his male pride is threatened. He cares more about his public honour than he does about the woman he claimed to love. Even worse, the men in the play, including Hero's own father, Leonato, and Claudio's friend, Don Pedro, instantly believe the lie. Instead of asking Hero for her perspective, they instantly side with Claudio. The romantic structure completely collapses, leaving Hero devastated, fainting on the floor, and socially destroyed.

The Final Tests of Loyalty

Shakespeare brings the conflict between friendship and romance to an extreme point in the climax of both plays. In Act 4, characters are forced to choose between loyalty to a friend and loyalty to a spouse. The first test happens in the courtroom in *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio truly believes he is going to die. Shylock is sharpening his knife, and the law seems to be on his side. Antonio uses his final moments to declare his absolute love for Bassanio, telling him not to grieve and to speak well of him after he is dead. Bassanio, overwhelmed with grief and guilt, tells Antonio that he would sacrifice everything, including his new wife Portia, to save him. He shouts in the open court:

“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 above thy life” (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 4.1.294-297).

Disguised as the lawyer Balthasar, Portia listens as her new husband admits he would trade her life for his friend’s. This creates an immediate crisis of loyalty, which is exactly why Portia plays the famous “ring trick” at the end of the scene.

After she uses a legal loophole to save Antonio’s life, still completely in disguise, she asks Bassanio for payment. She asks for the ring she gave him as a wedding present, a ring he swore he would never take off until the day he died. At first, Bassanio rightly refuses, but Antonio begs him to give the ring away. Antonio says, “Let his deservings and my love withal. Be valued ‘gainst your wife’s commandment” (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 4.1.467-468). Faced with the ultimate test,

Bassanio must choose between his promise to his wife and his gratitude to his friend, ultimately choosing Antonio. He gives the ring to disguised Portia, proving that his loyalty to his friend is currently much stronger than his promise to his wife. Rather than simply punishing him for this, Portia uses the ring plot to redefine their relationship. As Marjorie Garber notes, Portia threatens that she will “have that doctor for my bedfellow,” which temporarily “seems to put the marriages in jeopardy” (Garber 292). In the end, Portia’s manoeuvre is designed to merge Bassanio’s two competing loyalties. Garber argues that through the ring trick, “Shakespeare’s play brings together two Renaissance ideals, marriage and friendship,” effectively “establishing the husbands and wives as also mutually indebted and admiring friends” (292-293). Portia forces Bassanio to realise that the homosocial bond of loyalty he shares with Antonio must now be applied to his heterosexual marriage.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the test of loyalty is even more intense and dangerous. After Hero is humiliated at the altar and the men storm out, everyone leaves except a small core group. Beatrice is crying in absolute rage. Benedick, who has just realised he is deeply in love with Beatrice, approaches her gently. He wants to comfort her and asks how he can prove his love. He says, “Come, bid me do anything for thee” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 4.1.303). Beatrice does not ask for poetry, a song, or a ring. She gives him a terrifying, two word command “Kill Claudio” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 4.1.304). This is arguably the most powerful moment in the play regarding loyalty. Beatrice knows in her soul that Hero is completely innocent. Her faith in her friend never wavers for a single second, unlike the men who abandoned Hero instantly. Because women in Renaissance society cannot fight in physical duels, Beatrice is trapped. She angrily cries, “O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 4.1.321-322). Because she cannot kill Claudio herself, she needs a man to defend Hero’s honour.

Benedick is Claudio's best friend and military brother; they have fought in wars together. Beatrice tells Benedick he must choose between her love and his friendship. Beatrice prioritizes her friendship with Hero over everything else, and she makes Benedick choose his love for her over his friendship with Claudio.

Ending and the Cost of Marriage

How does Shakespeare resolve this tension between friends and lovers? Because these plays belong to the comedy genre, they must end in marriage. A tragedy ends in death; a comedy ends in a wedding. These plays end with an uncomfortable feeling that friendship has been permanently ruined for romance. In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Portia reveals her trick with the ring, she makes Bassanio apologize for his mistake. She eventually forgives Bassanio, but only after Antonio steps in one last time. Antonio pledges his own soul as a guarantee that Bassanio will never break his wedding vows again. Antonio says, "I dare be bound again, My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord, Will never more break faith advisedly" (Shakespeare, *Merchant* 5.1.266-268). At the very end of the play, three romantic couples walk off the stage together into a happy future: Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa, and Lorenzo and Jessica. Antonio is left alone on stage with a letter. It confirms his ships have safely returned, restoring his wealth. However, socially and emotionally, he has lost everything. He has his life and his money back, but he has lost Bassanio to the institution of marriage. The friendship survives, but it has been permanently downgraded; romance won the battle for Bassanio's loyalty.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the resolution is similarly complex. The truth about Don John's evil trick is revealed by the local night watchmen; Hero's innocence is publicly proven. Claudio feels terrible guilt, and he is tricked into marrying Hero (whom he thinks is a different cousin) to make up for his crime. When she reveals her face, they are finally married. Benedick

and Beatrice also stop pretending to hate each other and agree to marry. Even though the story ends happily with music and dancing, the audience cannot forget what just happened. We cannot forget how easily and cruelly Claudio turned on Hero, and we cannot forget how quickly Benedick was willing to pull a sword and kill his best friend. The romantic couples are united, but the deep trust that formed the foundation of their friendships has been damaged. As Stephen Greenblatt observes regarding the limitations of these romantic resolutions, “The question here and elsewhere in the plays is the degree of intimacy that husbands and wives can achieve, and the answer Shakespeare repeatedly gives is very little” (Greenblatt 128). Claudio and Benedick’s friendship is forever changed, while Beatrice and Hero’s bond is forced to adapt to the harsh reality of male-dominated marriages.

Conclusion

When analysed with a focus on loyalty, these plays demonstrate that Shakespeare did not view romantic love as a perfect, harmless, or simple emotion. Instead, he consistently portrayed romance as an overwhelming, chaotic force that disrupts the selfless and sacred bonds of same sex friendship.

Antonio’s willingness to die for Bassanio, and Beatrice’s defense of Hero’s honor, show a pure kind of love that is rarely seen in the romantic couples. This reflects the ideas of writers like Cicero and Montaigne, who believed that true friendship was a spiritual merging of souls, far deeper than a standard marriage. In these plays, friendships rely on sacrifice and trust, while romantic relationships often involve tests, tricks, disguises, and public humiliation. While comedies require characters to marry at the end to restore order, Shakespeare makes us question the emotional cost of these marriages. The unbreakable friendship oath that historian Alan Bray described gets damaged before the wedding even happens. Relationships are tested, wedding rings

are given away to strangers, and death threats are made between best friends. The characters must trade their sacred friendship for the fragile reality of romantic love.

In the end, the plays suggest a very complex truth about human relationships. While love and marriage are necessary for society to continue and for families to grow, the unwavering loyalty of true friendship gets us through our darkest, most dangerous moments. By remembering this history of friendship and focusing on the loyal friends left behind, we gain a much richer appreciation for Shakespeare's understanding of the human heart.

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