
D. Joseph Hurson
Plaintiff, relying on defendant's proposal of marriage, trained a replacement for her job, placed her home for sale, sold her furniture, and incurred normal expenses incidental to a future union. One month before the date of marriage, defendant informed plaintiff he would not fulfill his promise of marriage; she subsequently became ill, repurchased her home furnishings, and cancelled all wedding plans. Plaintiff brought suit for breach of promise to marry, seeking damages for (1) direct pecuniary losses; (2) pain, impairment to health, humiliation, embarrassment; and (3) loss of the expected financial security of marriage. The superior court dismissed the complaint for failure to state a claim upon which relief could be granted.

In a seven to two decision, the Washington Supreme Court reversed and remanded for trial, modifying the remedy of the cause of action to exclude damages for loss of future financial security. Stanard v. Bolin, 88 Wn. 2d 614, 565 P.2d 94 (1977).

Breach of promise to marry is a common law action that originated in an era in which the contractual exchange of mutual promises to marry was the product of serious family negotiations concerning the
financial implications of the union. Consistent with this emphasis on the property and bargaining aspects of the contract to marry, courts had awarded damages for breach of an engagement based upon loss of the bargain—the expected financial value of the marriage. With property concerns largely incidental to the modern marriage formation, the outmoded justification for such damages has come under attack. Changes in the perception of marriage as well as extensive criticism concerning abuses of breach of promise suits have prompted legislatures in eighteen states to modify or abolish the cause of action by enacting “anti-heartbalm statutes.”

This note contends that the Stanard court’s elimination of one element of damages fails adequately to redress abuses inherent in breach of promise actions. It also argues that this archaic method of compensation for a broken engagement should be legislatively eliminated. After examining Stanard and developing an alternative rationale available to the court, this note will discuss such remedial legislation.

I. REASONING OF THE STANARD COURT

Because the cause of action for breach of promise to marry originated in common law and has not been addressed by the Washington legislature, the Stanard court had the power to test the “continued via-

6. The contractual basis of breach of promise to marry is to be distinguished from the common law tort actions of alienation of affections (wrongful interference with the marital relationship), see, e.g., Swearingen v. Vik, 51 Wn. 2d 843, 322 P.2d 876 (1958); criminal conversation (adultery), see, e.g., Lankford v. Tombari, 35 Wn. 2d 412, 213 P.2d 627 (1950); and seduction (enticement to have sexual intercourse). see, e.g., Opitz v. Hayden, 17 Wn. 2d 347, 135 P.2d 819 (1943).
10. See Stanard v. Bolin, 88 Wn. 2d at 618 n.1, 565 P.2d at 96 n.1, for a listing of the statutes. The term “anti-heartbalm” describes legislation countering the use of breach of promise suits to soothe the aching heart of the aggrieved party. If a statute specifically abolishes actions on breach of promise, it is generally held to likewise bar suits to recover damages for fraudulent promises to marry. See note 45 and accompanying text infra.
11. Prior to Stanard, the most recent breach of promise to marry suit to reach the Washington Supreme Court was Armitage v. Hogan, 25 Wn. 2d 672, 171 P.2d 830 (1946) (action sought only the return of money and gifts given).
12. No court has abolished this cause of action, but the Stanard court indicated it had the power to do so. See note 13 and accompanying text infra.
bility in the light of present-day society” of the cause of action. The court identified five criticisms of the cause of action: 1) it can be used for blackmail; 2) it can unduly inhibit what is meant to be a trial period; 3) it is particularly subject to abuse by sympathetic juries; 4) it is essentially tortious and penal in nature but allowed under the guise of a contract action; 5) damage awards unjustly allow recovery for loss of expected economic and social position.

The majority opinion dismissed the first three criticisms as
insufficient to justify abolishing the action. In an attempt to reconcile the conflicting contract and tort theories behind breach of promise suits, the Stanard court simply classified the action as "quasi-contract, quasi-tort." The court accepted the final argument, objecting to compensation for loss of expected financial advantage, but only to the extent of limiting recoverable damages. The court reasoned that because the primary motivation to marry is love rather than financial gain, nonexistent economic expectations should not be recoverable.

In its decision to retain the modified cause of action, the court was guided by an overriding concern that a deserving plaintiff should be provided legal protection as long as objections to the cause of action could be minimized.

II. AN ALTERNATIVE REASONING PROCESS

Although the Stanard court's "quasi-contract, quasi-tort" treatment of breach of promise actions can be reconciled with the characterization of several commentators, a better analysis would rely exclusively on contract theory. The double "quasi" labeling of the action creates confusion because "quasi-contract" is improperly used, and because the label is an unnecessary mixing of contract and tort law.
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Injuries could be adequately compensated under consequential and reliance contract damages. This analysis would be more consistent with the contractual basis of the cause of action—the exchange of mutual promises to marry.\(^{26}\) In addition, the jury's appraisal of damages in a contract case is subject to greater judicial scrutiny than in a tort suit.\(^{27}\) This closer supervision would help quell the criticism of excessive jury awards in breach of promise suits.\(^{28}\)

A strictly contractual approach can adequately compensate a breach of promise plaintiff. Personal injuries in breach of promise actions, such as humiliation or loss of health, have traditionally been compensable under principles of tort law\(^{29}\) despite the contractual basis of the action. Contractual analysis need not foreclose such damages, because humiliation or loss of sleep can reasonably be contemplated as consequential damages flowing from a refusal to fulfill a promise to marry.\(^{30}\) Indeed, the foreseeability of such consequential

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\(^{26}\) Treatment of breach of promise suits under contract law would also be compatible with the characterization of marriage as contractual. See Rieke, The Dissolution Act of 1973: From Status to Contract?, 49 WASH. L. REV. 375 (1974).

\(^{27}\) Courts reviewing the appropriateness of damage awards are more deferential toward the jury's determination in tort cases than in contract cases. A tort damage award will not be disturbed on appeal unless it is the result of passion or prejudice on the part of the jury, or if the amount of the award shocks the sense of justice of the appellate court. See, e.g., Hogenson v. Service Armament Co., 77 Wn. 2d 209, 217–18, 461 P.2d 311, 316 (1969); Kramer v. Portland-Seattle Auto Freight, Inc., 43 Wn. 2d 386, 395–96, 261 P.2d 692, 697–98 (1953). This has also been the review standard in breach of promise suits in Washington. Bundy v. Dickinson, 108 Wash. 52, 56, 182 P. 947, 949 (1919). A consequential damage award in a contract action, which would include emotional and physical harm in a breach of promise suit, will be upheld if it was both reasonably foreseeable, Wilkins v. Grays Harbor Com. Hosp., 71 Wn. 2d 178, 186, 427 P.2d 716, 721 (1967), and supported by sufficient evidence to afford a reasonable basis for estimating the damage, Prier v. Refrigeration Eng'r Co., 74 Wn. 2d 25, 31, 442 P.2d 621, 625 (1968). Professor McCormick stated that in actions for breach of contract, as opposed to tort, "legal rules furnish standards of compensation which can be applied with more definiteness, and the trial judge can properly require a closer conformity in the verdict to his own belief as to the proper amount to be arrived at from an application of the standard to the facts." C. McCormick, supra note 3, § 18, at 72.

\(^{28}\) See note 17 and accompanying text supra.

\(^{29}\) See Rieger v. Abrams, 98 Wash. 72, 77, 167 P, 76, 78 (1917) (damages in breach of promise actions are governed by principles which apply to actions for personal torts).

\(^{30}\) As a general rule, damages for mental suffering are not allowable in actions for breach of contract, but an exception has been recognized when the benefit contracted for is a nonpecuniary interest. C. McCormick, supra note 3, at § 145. When the subject matter of a contract directly affects the feelings, happiness, or personal welfare of one of the parties, recovery may be had for mental suffering proximately caused by its breach. Id. The exception is narrowly construed, but its rationale does include breach of promise to marry, even under a contractual treatment of damages. Id.; S. Williston, Contracts § 1341 (3d ed. 1968).
damages is heightened by the emotions and intimacies of the surrounding circumstances. Generally, expenses incurred in preparing to perform a contract are recoverable as damages for its breach.\textsuperscript{31} Wedding expenses subsequent to the exchange of mutual promises to marry clearly fall within this category of reliance damages. Since the injuries which concerned the \textit{Stanard} majority are fully compensable by recovering consequential and reliance contract damages, no advantage can be derived from the use of the "quasi-contract, quasi-tort" classification.

The \textit{Stanard} court recognized both the existence of reliance damages and the foreseeability of certain personal injuries,\textsuperscript{32} yet failed to confine the cause of action to contract law. Nevertheless, continued retention of breach of promise, even under the alternative contractual analysis, preserves the blackmail potential and inhibits the engagement trial period. A legislative remedy is preferable to this outmoded cause of action.

\section*{III. ABOLISHING BREACH OF PROMISE ACTIONS}

\subsection*{A. Modern Domestic Relations Policy}

In 1973, Washington's domestic relations policy underwent a dramatic change with the adoption of the "no-fault" Dissolution of Marriage Act.\textsuperscript{33} In contrast to the adversarial framework of the prior divorce statute,\textsuperscript{34} the present act attempts to establish ground rules whereby the parties can dispense with accusations and part amica-

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\item \textsuperscript{31} See, e.g., Lloyd v. American Can Co., 128 Wash. 298, 222 P. 876 (1924). \textit{cited with approval in} Paduano v. Boespflug Constr. Co., 66 Wn. 2d 527, 532, 403 P.2d 841, 845 (1965) ("It is well established that actual expenditures to the date of a breach of contract are compensable in damages.").
\item \textsuperscript{32} 88 Wn. 2d at 619, 565 P.2d at 96-97.
\item \textsuperscript{33} WASH. REV. CODE ch. 26.09 (1976). The \textit{Stanard} majority failed to consider the general policy implications behind this Act, an omission fatal to an internally consistent body of domestic relations law. Both the dissent and the trial judge properly considered the dissolution act. \textit{See} 88 Wn. 2d at 623, 565 P.2d at 98-99 (Utter, J., dissenting); \textit{Stanard} v. Bolin, No. 229654 at 4-5 (Wash. Super. Ct., Spokane County, Mar. 17, 1976) (memorandum decision on motion to dismiss).
\end{itemize}
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bly.\textsuperscript{35} Legislative recognition of the inherent problems of the "fault" system and the consequent adoption of the dissolution act indicate a preference for private resolution rather than state intervention in the area of domestic relations.\textsuperscript{36}

The legislative "hands off" policy towards dissolution of the marital relationship would seem broad enough to encompass the formation process. It would be anomalous to prompt a reluctant party to perform an unconsidered promise to marry through the threat of a civil suit for failure to consummate that promise, and then to offer a lenient statutory escape through the dissolution act.\textsuperscript{37} It is incongruous to award fault-based damages following a broken engagement when they have been specifically eliminated from dissolutions of marriage.\textsuperscript{38} A rational system would extend the preference for private solutions exemplified in the dissolution act to the breach of promise situation.

Another recent expression of the policy of nonintervention in the area of marital relations is provided in \textit{Wyman v. Wallace,}\textsuperscript{39} a progressive 1976 decision of the Washington Court of Appeals.\textsuperscript{40} The

\textsuperscript{35} Rieke, \textit{supra} note 26, at 378. The fault determination under the old statute regulated the ability to obtain a divorce as well as ancillary relief. By stressing compensation rather than penalization under the new dissolution act, the possibility of reconciliation is no longer hindered by an accusatory process. See Holman, \textit{A Law in the Spirit of Conciliation and Understanding: Washington's Marriage Dissolution Act, 9 GonZ. L. Rev.} 39, 39 (1973).

\textsuperscript{36} See Rieke, \textit{supra} note 26, at 394–99. In effect, the marriage is terminable at will because the mere allegation by one party that the marriage is "irretrievably broken" is sufficient to grant dissolution under the Washington Act. \textit{Wash. Rev. Code} § 26.09.030 (1976). When a private solution cannot be reached, the disposition of property is determined upon consideration of the nature and extent of community and separate property, the duration of marriage, and the economic circumstances of each spouse rather than upon a basis of fault. \textit{Id.} § 26.09.080. Under the Act, maintenance orders are also granted "without regard to marital misconduct." \textit{Id.} § 26.09.090 (1). See also Glendon, \textit{Marriage and the State: The Withering Away of Marriage,} 62 Va. L. Rev. 663, 665 (1976).

\textsuperscript{37} Marital turnover is hardly desirable, but theoretically could be promoted by the existing law. For example, two days before the marriage ceremony, \(X\) decides not to marry \(Z\), and is concerned about financial repercussions. Conceivably, the least costly route would be to perform the marriage, then immediately initiate dissolution proceedings. The cost might include a maintenance award mutually agreed upon or judicially determined. In light of the short duration of the marriage, however, a small award would be likely. Benefits of this tactic would include avoiding a breach of promise suit and its potential abuses (e.g., embarrassing trial, coerced out-of-court settlement, and large jury award).

\textsuperscript{38} See note 36 \textit{supra}.


\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{Wyman} court's action contrasts with that of other courts which have allowed the legislature to determine whether to abolish actions for alienation of affec-
court concluded that the common law tort action of alienation of spousal affections should be abolished, basing its decision on essentially the same criticisms identified by the Stanard majority. The continuing precedential value of Wyman is questionable because, immediately prior to the Stanard decision, the Washington Supreme Court granted a petition to review. A reversal of Wyman would represent further judicial divergence from Washington's "hands off" domestic relations policy concerning marital matters and accentuate even more the need for remedial legislation.

B. Considerations in Drafting an Anti-Heartbalm Statute

Adoption of an anti-heartbalm statute in Washington would remove this coercive and penal cause of action, but such a statute
should take into account the interests of both parties. Gifts between engaged persons and expenses in anticipation of marriage are potentially troublesome, because abolition of breach of promise suits should not inadvertently condone the unjust enrichment of one party. A damage suit for fraud would circumvent the purpose of an anti-heartbalm statute by allowing essentially the same cause of action under a different name. Permitting a quasi-contractual suit seeking restitution, however, would be statutorily consistent and prevent unjust enrichment.

The return of engagement gifts has generally been restricted to situations in which the gifts were conditioned on the performance of marriage and were given by the nonbreaching party. Many courts have narrowly construed the category of "gifts made in anticipation of

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47. Gikas v. Nicholis, 96 N.H. 117, 71 A.2d 785 (1950) (the policy of unjust enrichment allowed the return of a ring given under the implied condition that marriage would follow, but other gifts were characterized as incidental to the marital request and hence not recoverable); Pavlicic v. Vogtsberger, 390 Pa. 502, 136 A.2d 127 (1957).

48. Beberman v. Segal, 6 N.J. Super. 472, 69 A.2d 587 (1949). For a lengthy listing of other cases, see Annot., 46 A.L.R.3d 578, at § 3 (1972). This qualification is made in jurisdictions with and without anti-heartbalm statutes. Id. Contra, Gadon v. Gaden, 29 N.Y.2d 80, 272 N.E.2d 471, 323 N.Y.S.2d 955 (1971) (fault irrelevant in restitution of gifts). Great Britain has abolished breach of promise as a cause of action and dispensed with consideration of fault in recovery of conditional gifts. Engagement rings are placed in the separate category of absolute gifts, however, "so as to preserve the right of the wronged woman to throw the ring into the river rather than return it to her former fiancé." 33 Mod. L. Rev. 534, 536 (1970).
marriage” to limit recovery to engagement rings, a result which fails fully to prevent unjust enrichment. A preferable approach, followed in New York, recognizes a rebuttable but “strong presumption of law that any gifts made during an engagement period are given solely in consideration of marriage, and are recoverable if the marriage does not materialize.” The purposes of restitution and the avoidance of publicizing private matters are also defeated by conditioning the return of gifts upon a determination of fault.

Upon failure of an engagement, expenses in preparation for marriage have customarily fallen on the woman. An extension of no-fault and quasi-contractual principles to this area would treat the couple as a partnership, equally bearing the economic burden of their unsuccessful endeavor. In allocating the expense of aborted wedding plans, gifts given during the engagement period between the parties

50. Friedman v. Geller, 368 N.Y.S.2d 980, 981 (Civ. Ct. N.Y. 1975). The presumption is based on N.Y. CIV. RIGHTS LAW § 80–b (McKinney 1976), which states that the statutory abolition of breach of promise suits should not be construed to bar a cause of action for the recovery of a gift given in contemplation of marriage. The Friedman court granted summary judgment for the return of a ring and joint banking deposit to avoid turning the courtroom into a “grotesque marketplace” of private matters which the anti-heartbalm statute sought to end. 368 N.Y.S.2d at 983. The presumption of recovery is rebuttable by clear and convincing evidence. Id. at 982.

Gifts between engaged parties, however, are not reclaimable upon termination of an engagement when both parties were aware at the time of engagement that one of them was married. Adams v. Jensen-Thomas, 18 Wn. App. 757, 757 P.2d 958 (1977). This common law rule remains sound. Such gifts could not be conditioned on the parties' future marriage, because such contracts would be in "violation of the [pre-existing] marital duty and are contrary to morality and public policy." Id. at 761. 757 P.2d at 960 (citing with approval Jones v. Allen, 14 Wn. 2d 111, 119, 127 P.2d 265, 269 (1942).

51. In addressing the application of N.Y. CIV. RIGHTS LAW § 80–b (McKinney 1976) (gifts made in contemplation of marriage), the New York courts embarked on a desirable path:

To require a determination of fault in order to entitle one to recover engagement gifts would simply condone [breach of promise to marry as a cause of action] in yet another form: . . .

. . . Just as the question of fault or guilt has become largely irrelevant to modern divorce proceedings . . ., so should it also be deemed irrelevant to the breaking of the engagement.


52. If parties mutually benefit from the engagement period, the allocation of expenses in a recovery should be equal. As in the restitution of gifts, fault should not be a consideration because a breaching party may in good faith realize the marriage would be unsuccessful.

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could be claimed as a setoff, provided that the arrangement is mutually agreeable.\textsuperscript{53}

Protecting a partner from nonpecuniary injuries resulting from a wedding cancellation, such as humiliation and embarrassment, may be an area in which compensation is not socially desirable. In the realm of personal relationships such as marriage and engagement, it seems preferable to dispense with legal intervention and to allow social customs and values to control the accepted norms of conduct.\textsuperscript{54}

IV. CONCLUSION

The \textit{Stanard} court, in its commitment to compensate an aggrieved plaintiff, resurrected a little-used, archaic cause of action. The court's modification of recoverable damages removed one onerous aspect of breach of promise suits, but other problems remain. Legislative abolition offers the best solution. Such legislation, however, should explicitly preserve quasi-contractual remedies to ensure protection of reliance on marital promises, to secure restitution of gifts given during an engagement, and to provide an equitable division of wedding expenses.

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\textsuperscript{53} Requiring an agreement would prevent a donee from retaining a donor's family heirloom given during engagement by claiming it as a setoff against wedding expenses. Imposing an undesired gift upon the donee as a setoff measure would also be avoided.

\textsuperscript{54} The Marriage Dissolution Act shows a preference toward private solutions. See notes 33–38 and accompanying text \textit{supra}. The termination of an engagement is not so different that it should require state intrusion to regulate conduct.