List of characters

Venice

**Christians**
- THE DUKE OF VENICE
- BASSANIO  a lord
- ANTONIO  a merchant
- SOLANIO
- SALARINO
- GRATIANO
- SALERIO
- LORENZO
- LANCELOT GOBBO  servant first to Shylock, then to Bassanio
- GOBBO  his father
- STEPHANO  a messenger
- JAILER
- LEONARDO  servant of Bassanio
- SERVINGMAN  employed by Antonio
- MAGNIFICOES OF VENICE
- COURT OFFICIALS

**Friends of Antonio and Bassanio**

**Jews**
- SHYLOCK  a rich money-lender
- JESSICA  his daughter
- TUBAL  his friend

Belmont

**Portia's household**
- PORTIA  a rich heiress
- NERISSA  her lady-in-waiting
- BALTHAZAR  her servant
- SERVINGMAN
- MESSENGER

**Portia's suitors**
- THE PRINCE OF MOROCCO
- THE PRINCE OF ARRAGON

The action of the play takes place in Venice and Belmont.
Antonio says he does not know what causes his sadness. Salarino and Solanio suggest that he is worried about the safety of his ships, in which he has invested so much money.

Characters
Focus on Antonio – why is he so sad?
The opening line of the play quickly establishes that Antonio, the Merchant of Venice, is in a melancholy mood. He goes on to explain how weary it makes him and how he is losing sight of who he really is. But he is also puzzled by why he is sad.

- As the first scene unfolds, compile a list of possible reasons for his sadness. At the end of the scene, the whole class pools its ideas. Start a Character file on Antonio and write down what you feel are the most interesting possibilities; amend and qualify them as the play unfolds. Link the points you make to quotations and other evidence from the script.

Stagecraft
Where do they meet? Set the scene (in pairs)
At the beginning of each scene a location is given (here it is simply ‘Venice’). But in Shakespeare’s theatre the action took place on a bare stage, with little or no scenery (see the illustration on p. 189). Since Shakespeare’s day, each director of a stage production has had to make decisions about whether they will indicate precise locations.

- Try your hand at scene-setting. Decide on a suitable place in Venice for the three friends’ meeting. Perhaps they meet in a house or an office, or in a public place such as a bar, a café or the Venetian Stock Exchange. Select your favourite suggestions.
- Then imagine that you are preparing to direct a performance of The Merchant of Venice. Start your own Director’s Journal and write down your ideas under the heading ‘Scene-setting’. Use your journal to record further ideas about stagecraft as you go through the play.
The Merchant of Venice

Act 1 Scene 1

Venice

Enter ANTONIO, SALARINO, and SOLANIO

ANTONIO In sooth I know not why I am so sad. It wearies me, you say it wearies you; But how I caught it, found it, or came by it, What stuff ’tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn.
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me, That I have much ado to know myself.

SALARINO Your mind is tossing on the ocean, There where your argosies with portly sail Like signors and rich burghers on the flood, Or as it were the pageants of the sea, Do overpeer the petty traffickers That curtsey to them, do them reverence, As they fly by them with their woven wings.

SOLANIO Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth, The better part of my affections would Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind, Piring in maps for ports, and piers, and roads; And every object that might make me fear Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt Would make me sad.
Antonio says he is not worried about business matters. He has invested his money in several ships. That is much safer than relying on only one. He's not in love either!

Write about it

Disasters at sea

Salarino says that if he were in Antonio’s situation, everything he did or saw would constantly remind him of all the disasters that might happen to his ships as they transported their valuable cargoes across the ocean.

- Blowing his soup to cool it would make him think of the dangers of violent tempests (lines 22–4).
- Watching the sand pass through an hourglass would remind him of a beached ship (lines 25–8).
- Gazing at the stone walls of a church would make him imagine them as rocks on which the vessel might founder (lines 29–36).

Take each of these sections of the script in turn. Write advice for an actor about how to deliver the lines and about what gestures (or ‘stage business’) to add as he speaks his words. Add this advice to a new section in your Director’s Journal.

1 I’m not in love (by yourself)

When Solanio implies that Antonio’s sadness is caused by being in love (line 46), Antonio is quick to deny it (‘Fie, fie!’).

- Experiment with different ways of delivering these two words in order to bring out exactly how you think Antonio feels. For example, what might the brevity of his response suggest about his attitude to love – and to women? Show your favourite version to others in your class.

2 Janus: facing two ways (in pairs)

The play contains many references to figures from classical mythology. Here, Solanio alludes to Janus, a Roman god who faced in two opposite directions at the same time. Solanio uses this reference to demonstrate his belief that all humans have the capacity to be happy and sad simultaneously.

a First, have a go at drawing an image of Janus. Then talk together about what your drawing suggests about the world of Venetian males that Shakespeare creates at the start of the play.

b Summarise your thinking in one written sentence, ready to share with other pairs.
SALARINO

My wind cooling my broth
Would blow me to an ague when I thought
What harm a wind too great might do at sea.
I should not see the sandy hourglass run
But I should think of shallows and of flats,
And see my wealthy Andrew docked in sand,
Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
To kiss her burial. Should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,
Which touching but my gentle vessel's side
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks,
And (in a word) but even now worth this,
And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought
To think on this, and shall I lack the thought
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?
But tell not me: I know Antonio
Is sad to think upon his merchandise.

ANTONIO

Believe me, no. I thank my fortune for it,
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

SOLANIO

Why then, you are in love.

ANTONIO

Fie, fie!

SOLANIO

Not in love neither? Then let us say you are sad
Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy
For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry
Because you are not sad. Now by two-headed Janus,
Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time:
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes,
And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper;
And other of such vinegar aspect,
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile
Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.
More friends arrive. One of them, Gratiano, comments on how careworn Antonio has become. He recommends laughter over misery and warns against false seriousness.

1 True friends? (in fours)
The entrance of Bassanio and two friends, Lorenzo and Gratiano, can be used to change the mood of the scene. There are now six men on stage, but Salarino and Solanio quickly decide to leave when the others arrive. What prompts their departure? Are there tensions between these two groups of friends? Or do you think their departure is entirely natural?

• Take parts and read aloud lines 57–68. First, make the words friendly and polite; then play them in a manner that suggests some unpleasantness and mistrust. Decide which version you think is more effective and show it to the other groups in the class for comment.

Write about it
Thoughts about Antonio (in pairs)
What have Solanio and Salarino made of Antonio’s behaviour in the first part of the scene? Write their thoughts on taking their leave of him as a scripted conversation between the two men. Use modern English.

Themes
Appearance and reality: all the world’s a stage
Antonio’s lines 77–9 echo well-known words from Act 2 Scene 7 of Shakespeare’s As You Like It:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts

Although Antonio views the part he currently has to play as ‘a sad one’, Gratiano makes it clear that he wants to ‘play the Fool’ (line 79). Both men acknowledge that they live in a world where false actions and feelings are prominent. Gratiano’s long speech satirises (makes fun of) the ways in which many Elizabethan men pretend to be what they are not.

• Read lines 88–99 and write an explanation for a younger student of exactly what Gratiano is saying. Add a paragraph discussing what the lines suggest about Gratiano’s character, his attitudes and his values.
Enter BASSANIO, LORENZO, and GRATIANO

Here comes Bassanio, your most noble kinsman, Gratiano, and Lorenzo. Fare ye well; We leave you now with better company.

SALARINO I would have stayed till I had made you merry, If worthier friends had not prevented me.

ANTONIO Your worth is very dear in my regard. I take it your own business calls on you, And you embrace th’occasion to depart.

SALARINO Good morrow, my good lords.

BASSANIO Good signors both, when shall we laugh? Say, when? You grow exceeding strange; must it be so?

SALARINO We’ll make our leisures to attend on yours.

Exeunt Salarino and Solanio

LORENZO My Lord Bassanio, since you have found Antonio We two will leave you, but at dinner time I pray you have in mind where we must meet.

BASSANIO I will not fail you.

GRATIANO You look not well, Signor Antonio. You have too much respect upon the world: They lose it that do buy it with much care. Believe me, you are marvellously changed.

ANTONIO I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano: A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one.

GRATIANO Let me play the Fool. With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come, And let my liver rather heat with wine Than my heart cool with mortifying groans. Why should a man whose blood is warm within Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster? Sleep when he wakes? And creep into the jaundice By being peevish? I tell thee what, Antonio – I love thee, and it is my love that speaks – There are a sort of men whose visages Do cream and mantle like a standing pond, And do a wilful stillness entertain, With purpose to be dressed in an opinion Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit, As who should say, 'I am Sir Oracle, And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!'
Gratiano advises Antonio against using sadness to gain a reputation for wisdom. Antonio asks Bassanio whom he loves. Bassanio begins by explaining his plans to pay off his debts.

That therefore ... nothing whose silence gains them a reputation for wisdom
damn ... fools cause those listening to call them fools
fish ... opinion don't use your sadness as bait to catch this stupid fish called reputation
exhortation strongly offered advice
moe more
gear advice (or business)
neat's tongue dried cured ox tongue (with a secondary meaning of 'sexually impotent old man')
vendible desirable

Characters
First impressions of Bassanio (in small groups)

a Bassanio's first words in the play are a mocking put-down of his 'friend' Gratiano. Talk together about whether you think Gratiano deserves Bassanio's scornful judgement. Why, or why not?

b When he is invited by Antonio to speak about the 'lady' he's in love with, Bassanio answers by talking extensively about his debts. He has spent all his money and owes a great deal. One person reads aloud lines 121–33. The others echo every word that is connected with money or financial transactions. Afterwards, talk together about:
- what the 'echoing' activity and the lines suggest about Bassanio's attitude to wealth
- your response to Bassanio's lines suggesting that his 'secret pilgrimage' is simply a ploy to 'get clear of all the debts I owe'.

c On your own, write a few sentences giving your initial assessment of Bassanio's character. Display your evaluation of Bassanio on a large sheet of paper and add to it as you read on.
O my Antonio, I do know of these
That therefore only are reputed wise
For saying nothing; when I am very sure
If they should speak, would almost damn those ears
Which, hearing them, would call their brothers fools.
I'll tell thee more of this another time.
But fish not with this melancholy bait
For this fool gudgeon, this opinion.
Come, good Lorenzo. Fare ye well awhile;
I'll end my exhortation after dinner.

LORENZO

Well, we will leave you then till dinner time.
I must be one of these same dumb wise men,
For Gratiano never lets me speak.

GRATIANO

Well, keep me company but two years more,
Thou shalt not know the sound of thine own tongue.

ANTONIO

Farewell; I'll grow a talker for this gear.

GRATIANO

Thanks, 'faith, for silence is only commendable
In a neat's tongue dried, and a maid not vendible.

Exeunt [Gratiano and Lorenzo]

ANTONIO

It is that anything now.

BASSANIO

Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any
man in all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two
bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when
you have them they are not worth the search.

ANTONIO

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage
That you today promised to tell me of.

BASSANIO

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance.
Nor do I now make moan to be abridged
From such a noble rate, but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time, something too prodigal,
Hath left me gaged. 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.
Antonio is ready to help Bassanio, whatever the circumstances. Bassanio explains that he wishes to marry Portia, a wealthy heiress. Rich and famous men from all over the world come to woo her.

1 Antonio: reckless devotion? (in pairs)

In lines 134–8, Antonio offers to do everything in his power to help his friend Bassanio.

a Take it in turns to read the lines aloud. Then discuss whether Antonio is being foolish in offering to bail out his friend again, after the way Bassanio has wasted Antonio’s money before. Does Bassanio’s honest admission that he has behaved like a ‘wilful youth’ really excuse his previous mistakes?

b One of you is Antonio, the other a friend he goes to for advice. Improvise a conversation in which you discuss Bassanio’s situation and his requests for further credit.

Characters

First impressions of Portia (in small groups, then by yourself)

In lines 160–71, the audience first hears of Portia. Bassanio uses stories of ancient Greece and Rome to praise her. He compares her (line 165) to Portia, the daughter of Cato, a famous Roman politician, and the wife of Brutus, the ‘honourable man’ who was one of Julius Caesar’s assassins. Bassanio also sees her as a rich prize (see ‘Characters’, p. 177, on the position of women in Elizabethan society), like the Golden Fleece the Greek hero Jason sought in Colchis (see ‘The language of The Merchant of Venice’, p. 181). These references suggest that Bassanio is an educated man and that Portia is a lady of high social status.

a Read aloud lines 160–71. Each person reads up to a punctuation mark, then hands on to the next. Emphasise all the words and phrases Bassanio uses to praise Portia.

b Working on your own:

• Use Bassanio’s description to write a paragraph giving your own impressions of Portia. Include a comment about the impact of Bassanio’s use of classical references in describing her.

• Suggest at least two possible reasons why Shakespeare chose to have Bassanio begin the description of Portia by explaining that she is a ‘lady richly left’.

• Finally, write a sentence explaining why you think Shakespeare has Bassanio describe Portia at this point, even though she is not introduced into the play until the following scene.