

THE MERCHANT OF
VENICE



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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE



ACT I, SCENE I

I.[1] *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,

Three characters in quiet conversation is a low-key opening, and gives the lie to the idea that the Elizabethan playhouse was a rowdy place where the groundlings' attention would have to be gained by a loud or active beginning. As the locale is not given in the dialogue, the action is just 'on the stage' – once painted scenery came into use, a Venetian street became the setting. The stock scenery of Macklin or Kemble would have been of little visual interest; Charles Kean was the first to provide an elaborate opening tableau of Venetian street life, a practice that continued well into the twentieth century, with Max Reinhardt and David Belasco (see pp. 32, 44–5).

For the modern-dress productions of more recent times, a variety of locations, mostly public places, are used. Richard Baldrige and Marti Maraden placed Antonio and his friends at an outdoor café, Jonathan Miller moved them indoors into Florian's and Trevor Nunn had a cabaret 'the morning after'. Jude Kelly started in a 1930s Venetian art gallery, 'with pricey looking bronzes standing about, and a portrait reminiscent of something by Jean Cocteau' (Wilcocks, *PP* 1994); David Thacker's 'City' showed Antonio and the Salads, 'all in white and tan modern business suits, talking in a high-tech two-tiered office complex' (Geckle, *SB* 1994).

Except for Bassanio, Gratiano and Lorenzo entering unannounced, there is no reason why Antonio cannot be at home, but Gordon Crosse, seeing Arthur Phillips's production in 1935, 'had a shock when the curtain rose on "A Room in Antonio's House" and saw the Sallies and afterwards Bassanio and the rest paying morning calls' (*Diaries*, vol. xv, p. 83). Michael Kahn's Antonio was already at dinner (disregarding lines 70–1) before a wall tapestry, with the Salads 'seated at the table, fawning shamelessly over Antonio at its head' (Mahon, *SN* 1999).

1 Tim Luscombe's *Merchant* began with a young couple dancing. Antonio spoke of his sadness after a 'yearning look after the nameless young man' (Biggs, *SB* 1991).

- What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn. 5
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, 10
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, 15
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 20
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt
Would make me sad.
- 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 25
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 sec the holy edifice of stone 30
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, 35
And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought
To think on this, and shall I lack the thought

8 Robert Brustein said of Peter Hall's production, 'the only thing that kept me sentient during this tiresome evening was admiring how English actors could add so many syllables to a simple word like "o-c-e-an"' (NR 12 1990).

29b-36a Although included in the 1774 Bell edition, these lines were omitted by actor-managers from Edmund Kean through to Henry Irving.

- That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?
 But tell not me: I know Antonio
 Is sad to think upon his merchandise. 40
- 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. 45
- 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, 50
 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 55
 Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.

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, 60
 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. 65
- 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

50b–6 Cut by Macready, Charles Kean.

57 Hall pointed to Bassanio's penury by having him enter with a clearly visible rent in his hose (Kliman, *SB* 1990); Scott Handy, in Doran's production, ran in, arriving 'late and half-drunk for an important meeting' (Smallwood, *SS* 1999).

58 Gold had Solanio call out 'Gratiano and Lorenzo!' as a loud, and very incongruous, greeting.

LORENZO My Lord Bassanio, since you have found Antonio
 We two will leave you, but at dinner time 70
 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. 75
 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, 80
 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 85
 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, 90
 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!'
 O my Antonio, I do know of these 95
 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. 100
 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.

79b Nunn's Gratiano, Richard Henders, very drunk from a night of carousing, said 'Let me play the Fool' into the cabaret microphone, as if to say, 'let me be a stand-up comic'. This tied in nicely with Lancelot's routine at the start of 2.6 (see p. 150).

LORENZO Well, we will leave you then till dinner time. 105
 I must be one of these same dumb wise men,
 For Gratiano never lets me speak.

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

ANTONIO Farewell; I'll grow a talker for this gear. 110

GRATIANO Thanks, i'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 115
 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. 120

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 125
 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, 130
 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 I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it,
 And if it stand as you yourself still do 135
 Within the eye of honour, be assured

112 Miller's Gratiano, as he was leaving Florian's, intercepted the waiter and took a glass of wine from his tray. He then looked at the bill, gasped in dismay and exited.

118–20 Jonathan Epstein, Serban's Antonio, enquired about his friend's 'secret pilgrimage' as if struggling to control his disappointment. In Alexander's production, John Carlisle, speaking 'with distaste', turned his back on Bassanio – Antonio and Bassanio were constantly placing their hands on one another in this sequence (Bulman, *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 126).

- My purse, my person, my extremest means
Lie all unlocked to your occasions.
- BASSANIO In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight 140
The selfsame way, with more advised watch
To find the other forth; and by adventuring both
I oft found both. I urge this childhood proof
Because what follows is pure innocence.
I owe you much, and like a wilful youth 145
That which I owe is lost; but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
As I will watch the aim, or to find both
Or bring your latter hazard back again 150
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.
- ANTONIO You know me well, and herein spend but time
To wind about my love with circumstance;
And out of doubt you do me now more wrong
In making question of my uttermost 155
Than if you had made waste of all I have.
Then do but say to me what I should do
That in your knowledge may by me be done,
And I am prest unto it: therefore speak.
- BASSANIO In Belmont is a lady richly left, 160

138 Sothern instructs that 'occasions' be 'pronounced with four syllables' (*pmt* Sothern¹).

140 For Barton in 1978, Antonio and Bassanio 'laughingly completed together the aphoristic line about finding your lost arrow by means of another' (Velz, *The Merchant*, p. 101).

160–75 Schenk's Bassanio, Folker Bohnet, rubbed his fingers together at the words 'richly left'. For Miller, Anthony Nicholls as Antonio took the information about Portia's wealth seriously, 'the gravity with which he listens to Bassanio's proposal for making a coup in the marriage market is as much due to absorption in money-making as to friendship' (Hobson, *ST 3* May 1970).

Some directors have revealed Portia at this moment. Komisarjevsky had music play while 'the Venice set, on two sliding stages, split in the middle and moved into the wings. Then, as the lighting on the cyclorama changed from apple green to deep pink, a lift carrying Belmont rose to stage level with Portia and Nerissa poised like Dresden china figures – a theatrical reinforcement of Bassanio's description of Portia's virtues' (Mennen, 'Theodore Komisarjevsky's Production', p. 90).

And she is fair, and – fairer than that word –
 Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
 I did receive fair speechless messages.
 Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
 To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia. 165
 Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth;
 For the four winds blow in from every coast
 Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
 Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
 Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand, 170
 And many Jasons come in quest of her.
 O my Antonio, had I but the means
 To hold a rival place with one of them,
 I have a mind presages me such thrift
 That I should questionless be fortunate. 175

ANTONIO Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
 Neither have I money nor commodity
 To raise a present sum; therefore go forth,
 Try what my credit can in Venice do,
 That shall be racked even to the uttermost 180
 To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.
 Go presently enquire, and so will I,
 Where money is, and I no question make
 To have it of my trust or for my sake.

Exeunt

Margaret Webster sought a similar effect, in a very different style of production, with 'the figure of Portia (Margaret Johnston) in a poetic attitude . . . dimly shadowed through the gauze – it lifts and we are happy in Belmont' (Matthews, *TW* 1956). For José Carlos Plaza in 1992, a canal bridge descended and upstage walls opened 'to illuminate Belmont's lady, as though she were being seen in his mind's eye' (Fischer, *SB* 1995).

- 181 Alexander's and Serban's Antonios made their sexual jealousy of Portia clear: Carlisle said 'fair Portia' as if spitting out bad wine (Bulman, *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 127), while Epstein picked up the empty wallet Bassanio had previously left on a bench, and angrily thrust it back at him.
- 183b–4 Nunn had Antonio speak the last line and a half as soliloquy – Bassanio having already departed, he was forced to pay everyone's bill at the cabaret; Antonio was also left 'to pick up the tab' in Barton's 1978 production (Wardle, *Times* 22 April 1981). Miller had Antonio leave first, and 'when the waiter who brings Bassanio his gloves extends his hand for a tip, Bassanio slaps the waiter's hand with his gloves and laughs nastily, then follows Antonio through the door' (Perret, 'Shakespeare and Anti-Semitism', p. 148).