

List of characters

Venice

Christians

THE DUKE OF VENICE

BASSANIO a lord

ANTONIO a merchant

SOLANIO

SALARINO

GRATIANO

SALERIO

LORENZO

} Friends of Antonio
and Bassanio

LANCELOT GOBBO servant first to Shylock, then to Bassanio

GOBBO his father

STEPHANO a messenger

JAILER

LEONARDO servant of Bassanio

SERVINGMAN employed by Antonio

MAGNIFICOS OF VENICE

COURT OFFICIALS

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

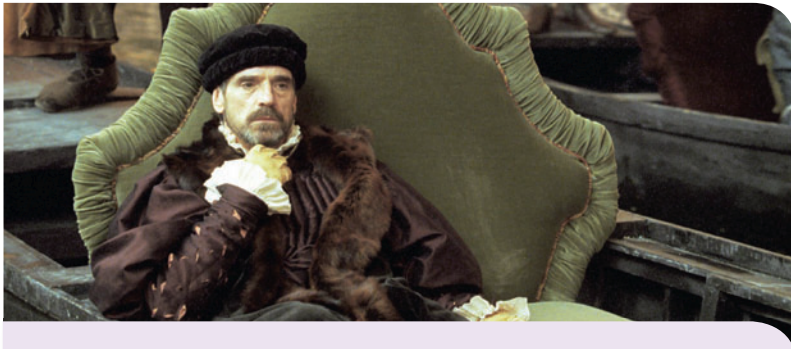
THE PRINCE OF MOROCCO

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.

sooth truth

to learn ignorant

And ... myself sadness has made me so absent-minded that I hardly know who I am

argosies merchant ships

portly stately

signors gentlemen

burghers important citizens

pageants processions

Do ... traffickers look down on small boats

do them reverence

show them respect

venture forth trade ships at sea

The better ... affections

most of my concern

still forever

Plucking ... wind throwing grass in the air to find the direction of the wind

Piring in looking closely at

roads anchorages

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.	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, 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.	10
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.	15 20



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.

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

wind breath

blow ... ague give me a fever

wealthy Andrew the *San Andrés* (St Andrew), a valuable Spanish ship captured by the English in 1596

Vailing ... top bowing down her mainmast

ribs the timber frame of the hull

holy ... stone the font

Enrobe ... silks dressing the raging sea with my cargo of silk

but even now a moment ago

bottom ship

Janus a Roman god who faced in two opposite directions

framed made

peep ... eyes squint through their eyes (because they have been narrowed by laughing)

laugh like parrots ... bagpiper laugh inappropriately (i.e. parrots making laughing noises when they hear sad music)

vinegar aspect sour looks

Nestor a Greek king, famed for his seriousness



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.

prevented me beaten me to it

Your ... regard
 you're a good friend

embrace th'occasion
 take the opportunity

laugh meet up and have some fun
strange unfriendly

We'll ... yours our time is yours

You ... world you care too much
 about what people think

They lose ... care those who
 take life too seriously lose the ability
 to enjoy it

And ... groans I'd rather
 cheer myself up with drink than
 weaken my heart with sighs and
 being miserable

Sit ... alabaster be like his
 grandfather's statue in the cemetery

creep ... jaundice become a
 victim of disease

visages faces

Do cream and mantle become
 still and covered over

do a wilful ... wisdom
 remain stubbornly silent in order
 to appear wise

Oracle someone of
 infinite wisdom

when ... bark let no inferior
 person dare interrupt me

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*
- LORENZO My Lord Bassanio, since you have found Antonio 70
 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. 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. 80
 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 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!'



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.



▲ Gratiano, Bassanio and Antonio pictured together in the opening scene. Identify each of the three characters and justify your decision by linking it to evidence from the script. What do you make of the relationship between the three Christians that is presented in this image? Write a couple of sentences in response.

Characters

First impressions of Bassanio (in small groups)

- 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?
- 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'.
- 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.

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

secret pilgrimage journey of love

disabled mine estate

overspent my fortune

By something ... continuance

by enjoying a standard of living I could not afford


Nor ... rate I don't complain about having to economise

prodigal wasteful

gaged owing

from ... purposes because of our friendship I owe you an explanation

	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.	
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.	
	<i>Exeunt [Gratiano and Lorenzo]</i>	
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	115
	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 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.

- 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?
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.

And if ... honour and if it's honourable, as you are

My purse ... occasions everything I have is at your disposal

shaft arrow

his fellow ... flight an identical arrow

advised careful

proof experience

like a wilful ... lost like a stupid boy, I've lost every penny I've borrowed from you

hazard risk

To wind ... circumstance to make use of my love for you in a roundabout way

In ... uttermost by doubting my limitless help

prest unto forced into

a lady richly left a rich heiress

Renowned suitors famous men who want to marry her