

## The Merchant of Venice: Act 1 Scene 1

*"I have a warranty to unburden all my plots and purposes... How to get clear of all the debts I owe."*

The play begins with Antonio speaking to Solanio and Solarino about his mysterious sadness, which they explain away as anxiety over several ships he has at sea laden with pricey goods to trade. They are joined by Gratiano and Bassanio who is in love with a wealthy and beautiful heiress named Portia. Bassanio aspires to Portia's hand in marriage, but the problem is he's squandered all his money and can't fund a trip to the island of Belmont where she lives. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan so he can woo Portia and secure her inheritance. With all his assets tied up in his own business ventures, Antonio promises to find a moneylender and get credit for a 3000 ducat loan.

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### Knowledge Check

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. What is Antonio concerned about at the beginning of the play?**

- (a) His merchandise
- (b) His mother
- (c) His melancholy
- (d) A loan he just took out

**2. What does Salarino think Antonio's sadness is about?**

- (a) His mother's sickness
- (b) Worry over his ships
- (c) Love
- (d) Competition in the market

**3. Why is Antonio not worried about his wealth at the beginning of the play?**

- (a) All of his wares are insured
- (b) He cares not for money
- (c) His wares are on more than one ship
- (d) He has more than enough money

**4. What does Antonio compare life on this earth to?**

- (a) A book
- (b) A dream
- (c) A staged play
- (d) A living legend

**5. Complete this line: 'Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of...'**

- (a) Sense
- (b) Wisdom
- (c) Nothing
- (d) Rubbish

**6. How is Bassanio related to Antonio?**

- (a) Bassanio is his best friend
- (b) Bassanio is his uncle
- (c) Bassanio is his brother
- (d) Bassanio is his cousin

**7. What does Antonio ask Bassanio about when they are left alone at the beginning of the play?**

- (a) Who he loves
- (b) How his father has been
- (c) Where he is going
- (d) How long he will be in town

**8. Why does Bassanio need to borrow money from Antonio?**

- (a) To hide his identity
- (b) To save some time
- (c) To woo a woman
- (d) To reach his home

**9. Who is Bassanio in love with?**

- (a) Prenatia
- (b) Placius
- (c) Pattea
- (d) Portia

**10. Where does this person live?**

- (a) Belmont
- (b) Belfast
- (c) Belarus
- (d) Bellagio

## Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is Antonio feeling at the start of the play? Do we ever find out why? Are there any clues?
2. The characters in this scene are all men of business. How does this influence the language they use and the mindsets they seem to share?
3. What does Bassanio need money for? What has he done with all his money? Does the way he speaks about money reveal anything about what kind of man he might be?
4. How do the characters relate to each other? What kind of advice do they offer? Do you get a feeling that there are bonds between certain characters?
5. How does the scene end? What does Antonio promise Bassanio? How does the end of the scene create a modicum of tension? Can you predict or foreshadow any drama to come later in the play?

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### Discussion Point: *brotherly love*

*“I hold the world but as the world, a stage where every man must play his part, and mine a sad one.”*

The ambiguity of Antonio's sadness at the start of the play is never satisfactorily resolved. What does he have to be sad about? He's a successful businessman, investing in several ships which are still afloat and on-schedule. He has fine credit on the rialto, the public arena for trade and doing business on Venice. And he has the friendship of his Christina companions, several of whom show up to offer him support in this scene.

Yet maybe this last happiness contains the seed of his sadness too. Given the exceedingly close relationship between them, it has been suggested that Antonio suffers some kind of unrequited love for Bassanio. His emotional energy is certainly fixated on his young friend and, unlike many of the other principal characters, he has no romantic partner of the opposite sex. Does the play present evidence for this theory, or is Antonio simply offering the kind of brotherly or fatherly love you might expect from an older, wiser friend?

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### Important Setting: *Venice*

*The Merchant of Venice* opens on a street in Venice near the Rialto, a public venue for commerce, trade, finance, and business. At the time of writing *The Merchant of Venice*, the titular city was an important center of European trade; everything from silks to spices to exotic animals to gold passed through this flourishing port. Fortunes were made and lost by the signors and burghers of the city, who profited from the Duke's permissive tax laws, corruption and opportunities that trade presented.

The twin settings of the play, Venice and Belmont, are juxtaposed contrastingly: the world of Venice, usury, of the court, and commerce lies a ship's short journey from the world of Belmont and its music, candlelight, fairytale princesses, love-games, and romance. However, even from the very first scene Shakespeare complicates this picture by implying how commercial aspects of the Rialto are present in Belmont too. Portia is spoken of like the prize gem of this rich world, the lady of '*sunny locks*' which are compared to the '*golden fleece*'. Her riches, beauty and virtue are reported in deliberate sequence:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,  
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,  
Of wondrous virtues [...]

By including in Belmont symbolic elements from Venice, Shakespeare fuses two aspects of life, tangible and intangible, romantic and commercial. As in the real world, these are not separate, no matter how geographically distinct they might appear to be. The linkage of the two through the character of Bassanio implies the extent to which material thoughts dominate the world in which he lived and wrote.

## Quotation Bank

*If you only remember three lines, remember these...*

BASSANIO

In Belmont is a lady richly left,  
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,  
Of wondrous virtues [...] (1.1.161-163)

*The structure of this quotation is interesting, as it seems to place more importance on Portia's 'richly left' inheritance, then her 'fair' looks and finally her 'virtuous' character. This sequence reveals Bassanio's priorities when wooing Portia and suggests the minds of the characters in this play are dominated by thoughts of wealth and money over love and happiness.*

BASSANIO

Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued  
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.  
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,  
(1.1.165-167)

*When Bassanio talks about Portia it is clear her "value" derives from how much she is "worth" – in other words her money. When he later compares wooing her to Jason chasing the golden fleece we realise that his quest for Portia is a quest for money, not love.*

ANTONIO

You know me well, and herein spend but time  
To wind about my love with circumstance  
And out of doubt you now do me more  
wrong... (1.1.153-155)

*This interchange reveals a clue as to Antonio's melancholy. In Elizabethan times, friendship between two men was seen as something spiritual. Now Bassanio has set his sights on marriage, perhaps Antonio foresees the end of their relationship. His tetchiness at the way Bassanio needs to justify asking a favour hints at his unhappiness that their friendship may not continue unaltered in the future.*

***Based on your own reading of Act 1, Scene 1 and / or your classroom discussion, add another memorable line to this table, and provide an analysis comment:***