***The Merchant of Venice***

***Summary and Analysis:***

***Summary:***

A merchant in Venice, Antonio, voices his concern over his melancholy. Antonio cannot find a reason for it and his friends, Salarino and Solanio, tell him that it must be his concern over his ships that he has sailing to various ports. Antonio tells them that it is not his ships, as he does not have all his wealth placed on one ship alone. Losing one ship will not ruin him financially. The men decide that Antonio must be in love, but Antonio denies that he is lovesick.

Antonio, Salarino, and Solanio run into Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Bassanio. Bassanio is Antonio's cousin. After Salarino and Solanio exit, Gratiano points out that Antonio looks sad, but Antonio tells him that the people are just players on the world's stage, and he must play his sad part. Gratiano advises Antonio to not become curmudgeonly. Gratiano and Lorenzo then take their leave.

Antonio asks Bassanio about his new love. Bassanio tells Antonio of his poor finances and asks Antonio to borrow money from him to woo his love, Portia, who is a rich heiress. Antonio tells him that he cannot lend him the money directly, as it is all tied up in his shipping ventures, but he promises to guarantee any loan that Bassanio can find.

***Analysis:***

In the first scene of the play, we are introduced to the wealthy Christian class. The characters that begin the play show a class that has money and takes great pains to hide their concern over it. The audience sees in Antonio a Christian ethic in which caring for others takes precedence over his money. The audience also sees a bond between Bassanio and Antonio that goes deeper than money. Antonio truly cares for Bassanio as an elder brother figure. Antonio is willing to watch out for his friend and provide him with the financial means to woo the woman he loves.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

On a street in Venice, the merchant [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) tells his friends [Solanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and Salerio that he feels "so sad" (1.1.1) but doesn't know why. Salerio proposes, with Solanio's agreement, that Antonio must be worried about his ships at sea. But Antonio insists that he's confident his ships are safe. Then, Salerio guesses, Antonio must be in love. Antonio dismisses this possibility at once. Salerio concludes, jokingly, that if Antonio is neither worried about his investments, nor melancholy because of lovesickness, then he must simply be "sad because [he] is not merry" (1.1.47–8). Salerio advises him to shake off his bad mood because it would be just as easy "to say you are merry because you are not sad" (1.1.49–50).

***Analysis Part 1:***

By emphasizing that he doesn't know the cause of his sadness, Antonio creates mystery around his character—mystery that demands that other characters "interpret" what's wrong with him. Some critics feel that Antonio's forceful denial that his sadness has anything to do with love actually hints that it does have to do with love. Salerio's conclusion that Antonio's mood is simply a whim, which can be changed by changing perspective, further underscores how different interpretations can create vastly different outcomes.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio), a relative and close friend of [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio)'s, enters with his friends [Lorenzo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and [Gratiano](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters). After politely greeting the newcomers, [Solanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and [Salerio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) exit.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Polite manners cement friendly relationships between the noblemen of Venice.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Lorenzo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and [Gratiano](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) announce that they must depart, but will see [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) again at dinner. Before leaving, though, Lorenzo notes that Antonio looks unwell. Antonio responds that, on the "stage" of the world his part is to be "sad" (1.1.78–9). Gratiano interrupts that he would rather play the happy role of a "fool" (1.1.79) and teases Antonio, telling him to lighten up. Lorenzo reproaches Gratiano for talking too much and repeats that they will rejoin Bassanio for dinner. They exit.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Antonio's comment about the stage and that it is his "part" to be sad indicates that there is some mysterious aspect of his personality that ensures his sadness. Gratiano's crass jokes reveal him to be less sensitive—despite the fact that he's a noble Venetian. Throughout the play, his bad manners raise the question about who is civilized and who is not.

***Summary Part 4:***

Once alone, [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) apologizes for [Gratiano's](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) insensitivity and reveals why he's come to see [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio). He is in love with [Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia), a wealthy noblewoman, and hopes to seek her hand in marriage. However, he lacks the financial means to do so. He has many debts he must clear before he can woo her, including debts to Antonio.

***Analysis Part 4:***

That Bassanio needs cash to woo Portia introduces a connection between love and money that will persist throughout the play. That he already owes Antonio money hints that he is willing to use his friend for material purposes.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) replies that he will do anything for his friend and is happy to place both his "purse" and his "person" at [Bassanio's](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) disposal. Though Antonio has no cash available at the moment because he's invested everything in his ships currently at sea, he says that Bassanio can use his "credit" (Antonio's known wealth and good reputation) in order to get a loan from someone else in Venice.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Bassanio's ulterior motives contrast with the pure devotion and generosity of Antonio's friendship. In fact, Antonio acts so selflessly toward Bassanio that many critics argue that Antonio is actually in love with Bassanio. These critics think Antonio's sadness results from his unrequited love.

***Summary in detail:***

Walking along a street in Venice, Antonio (the "merchant" of the title) confesses to his friends Salarino and Salanio that lately he has felt unaccountably sad. They have noticed it, and they suggest that Antonio is probably worried about the safety of his merchant ships, which are exposed to storms at sea and attacks by pirates. Antonio denies this and also denies that he is in love, a possibility that both of his friends think might explain Antonio's pensiveness. Salarino concludes that Antonio's moodiness must be due simply to the fact that Antonio is of a naturally melancholy disposition. At this point, their friends Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano join them, and after an exchange of courtesies, Salarino and Salanio excuse themselves. Gratiano takes a long look at his old friend Antonio and playfully chides him for being so solemn and so unduly silent. Gratiano says that he himself never has "moods"; in contrast to Antonio, Gratiano is determined to always "play the fool." Lorenzo intimates that sometimes Gratiano is too much the fool — that is, he is too loquacious. He and Gratiano depart, promising to meet the others at dinner.

Left alone with Antonio, Bassanio assures him that he should not worry about Gratiano's critical remarks. Antonio then changes the subject abruptly; he asks Bassanio for more information, as promised, about the certain lady to whom Bassanio has sworn "a secret pilgrimage." Bassanio does not answer Antonio directly; he begins a new subject, and he rambles on about his "plots and purposes" and about the fact that he has become so prodigal about his debts that he feels "gag'd."

Antonio tells his friend to get to the point; he promises to help him if he can. Bassanio then reveals his love for the beautiful and virtuous Portia, an extremely wealthy young lady who lives in Belmont. He says that her beauty and her fortune are so well known, in fact, that she is being courted by "renowned suitors" from all parts of the world. Bassanio, however, is confident that if he could spend as much money as is necessary, he could be successful in his courtship. Antonio understands Bassanio's predicament, but Antonio has a problem of his own. Since all the capital which Antonio possesses has been invested in his ships, his cash flow is insufficient for any major investments at this time. As a solution, however, Antonio authorizes Bassanio to try to raise a loan using Antonio's good name as collateral for credit. Together, they will do their utmost and help Bassanio to go to Belmont in proper style.

***Analysis in Detail:***

The first task confronting any playwright in his opening scene is his "exposition" of that play — that is, he must identify the characters and explain their situation to the audience. Shakespeare accomplishes this task of informative exposition very subtly in the opening fifty-six lines of dialogue between Antonio, Salarino, and Salanio. We learn that Antonio is a wealthy merchant; that he is worried for some obscure reason which makes him melancholy; that he is a member of a group of friends who arrive later — Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano — who represent the lively, convivial life of Venice. And perhaps most important for the purposes of the plot, we are told that Antonio has many shipping "ventures" — mercantile risks — and although he is not worried about them now, the idea is subtly suggested to us that his business ventures on the high seas may miscarry. We should recall this matter when Antonio finally decides to indebt himself to Shylock on Bassanio's behalf.

In this opening scene, Shakespeare begins to sketch in some of the characters and some of the atmosphere of the play. Antonio, for example, is presented as being "sad," afflicted with a melancholy which he himself does not appear to understand. Critics have puzzled over this: is Antonio to be viewed as a normally melancholy character? Is his sadness caused by his knowledge that he may shortly lose the companionship of his old friend Bassanio, who has told him of embarking on a "secret pilgrimage" to woo a beautiful and wealthy woman in Belmont? Or is his mood to be put down simply to an ominous foreboding which he has of some approaching disaster? For all dramatic purposes, in this scene Antonio's gravity serves, foremost, as a contrast to the lightheartedness of his friends.

Despite its dark and threatening moments, one should always remember that The Merchant of Venice is a romantic comedy and, like most of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, it has a group of dashing, if not very profound, young men. For example, Salanio and Salarino are not terribly important. Their lines are interchangeable, and they are not really distinguishable from one another. They represent an element of youthful whimsy. Salarino begins, typically, with a flight of fancy in which Antonio's ships are described as being like "rich burghers on the flood" and like birds, flying "with their woven wings." He continues into a delightfully fantastic series of imaginings; on the stage, of course, all this would be accompanied with exaggerated gestures, intended to bring Antonio out of his depression.

Thus, through the presentation on the stage of the sober, withdrawn Antonio, surrounded by the frolicsome language and whimsy of the two young gallants, Shakespeare suggests in compressed form two of the elements of the play — the real dangers that the merchant of Venice will face and the world of youth and laughter which will be the background to the love stories of Bassanio and Portia, Lorenzo and Jessica, and Gratiano and Nerissa.

This same note of gentle raillery is carried on when we see the entrance of three more young courtiers — Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo. Again, Antonio's mood is remarked on. Here again, Shakespeare is using Antonio as a foil for the spirited byplay of the others. Gratiano, especially, is ebullient and talkative, yet he is quite aware of his effervescence; he announces that he will "play the fool"; Gratiano talks, Bassanio tells Antonio, "of nothing, more than any man in all Venice," and his willing accomplice is Lorenzo; significantly, both of these characters are more distinctly drawn than Salanio or Salarino, and they will play more major roles in the development of the romantic plot and subplot of the play — Gratiano with Nerissa, and Lorenzo with Jessica.

One of the major purposes of this opening scene is to introduce Bassanio and his courtship of Portia, which will constitute the major romantic plot and also set the "bond story" in motion. Antonio's question concerning Bassanio's courtship of Portia is turned aside by Bassanio; he goes directly to the question of money, in order that the basis for the bond story can be laid. Some critics have seen in Bassanio's speeches some evidence of a character who is extremely careless of his money and very casual about his obligations; he seems, furthermore, to have no scruples about making more requisitions of a friend who has already done much for him. Yet clearly Shakespeare does not intend us to level any harsh moral judgments at Bassanio. According to the Venetian (and Elizabethan) view, Bassanio is behaving as any young man of his station might be expected to behave; he is young, he is in love, and he is broke. The matter is that simple. Antonio's immediate reassurance to his old friend reminds us of the strong bond of friendship between the two men. Interestingly, neither of them seems to be unduly concerned about money at this point; one is a wealthy merchant and the other, a carefree young lover.

This is a quality which we shall notice throughout the play in connection with both Bassanio and Portia; both of them recognize the necessity of money, but neither of them considers money to be of any value in itself. In their world of romantic love and civilized cultivation, they feel that they don't need to be unduly concerned with money. Shakespeare is setting up this point of view to contrast later with Shylock's diametrical point of view. For Shylock the moneylender, money constitutes his only defense against his oppressors.

Considering again Bassanio's problem with money and Antonio's reaction to it, note that Bassanio is straightforward in this scene with Antonio. His request is made "in pure innocence," and we take it at its face value. Those critics who decry Bassanio read more into his frank confession of poverty and his attempt to borrow money than is really there. We must recall that when Shakespeare wants to make us aware of some defect in one of his characters, he is always able to do so. The absolute and unconditional friendship between Antonio and Bassanio is one of the assumptions of the play, and we must never question it.

***Important Quotations:***

***Quotation1:***

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. (1.1.1)

***Explanation 1:***

We don't yet know why Antonio is sad, but his mysterious proclamation sets him up as a generally melancholy character for the rest of the play. Furthermore, we learn that Antonio doesn't always have a rational explanation (at least one that he knows of) for how he feels.

***Quotation 2:***

ANTONIO  
I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it;  
And if it stand, as you yourself still do,  
Within the eye of honor, be assured  
My purse, my person, my extremest means  
Lie all unlocked to your occasions. (1.1.142-146)

***Explanation 2:***

Antonio is willing to do anything to help his friend, including loaning him the money to woo Portia. What's interesting is that Antonio says that it's not just his "purse" (wallet) that's "unlock'd" for Bassanio's use; he is also making his entire "person" available to his friend, which may suggest a strong relationship.

***Quotation 3:***

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? (1.1.126-128)

***Explanation 3:***

Bassanio's love life is the first thing Antonio brings up with Bassanio when they're alone together in the play. Maybe he's just one of those guys who likes to gossip, or maybe Bassanio has been on his mind. Bassanio's new courtship seems likely to be the source of Antonio's sadness, as it's at the forefront of his mind. Antonio clearly cares deeply about Bassanio as a friend, and he's facing the fact that he might lose him to this woman.

***Quotation 4:***

BASSANIO  
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. (1.1.137-141)

***Explanation 4:***

Bassanio says he's sharing with Antonio because they're friends, but he makes explicit that he owes Antonio the most in "money and love." (It turns out that Antonio has been very generous with Bassanio, who has a hard time keeping his finances in order.) This is our first hint that friendship might mean a different thing for Bassanio than it does for Antonio. Bassanio might just be working on Antonio's affection in order to keep his purse strings open.

***Quotation 5:***

BASSANIO  
In Belmont there is a lady richly left,  
[...]  
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.168, 179)

***Explanation 5:***

As we see here, Bassanio is interested in courting Portia because her father has left her a ton of dough. This would be great for Bassanio, who's completely broke. What's also interesting is the fact that Bassanio refers to Portia's suitors as a bunch of "Jasons" in "quest" of the Golden Fleece. (In Greek mythology, Jason and the Argonauts went after the golden fleece of a winged ram, which landed Jason the throne of Iolcus.) Bassanio's reference to the Greek myth turns his courtship of Portia into an exciting and lucrative conquest.

***Quotation 6:***

BASSANIO  
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued  
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia. (1.1.172-173)

***Explanation 6:***

This doesn't bode well as a comparison: Brutus' Portia was indeed a noble woman, but Brutus wasn't exactly the greatest husband. In Shakespeare's play [Julius Caesar](https://www.shmoop.com/julius-caesar/), Portia dies a fairly arbitrary death, and Brutus shakes it off pretty easily. Hmm.

***Quotation 7:***

ANTONIO  
Try what my credit can in Venice do;  
That shall be racked even to the uttermost  
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.  
Go presently inquire, and so will I,  
Where money is, and I no question make  
To have it of my trust, or for my sake. (1.1.187-192)

***Explanation 7:***

When Antonio gives Bassanio the financial assistance he needs to woo Portia in style, Portia becomes the medium through which Antonio can strengthen his relationship with Bassanio. Since Bassanio will be further indebted to Antonio, the two friends will become that much closer and Bassanio will reap the financial rewards of being married to Portia. In other words, marriage is less about the relationship between husband and wife than it is an opportunity for Antonio and Bassanio to strengthen their bonds.

***Quotation 8:***

SOLANIO  
Why then you are in love.  
ANTONIO  
Fie, fie! (1.1.47-48)

***Explanation 8:***

Antonio's "fie fie" is the Elizabethan equivalent of "Get off it, already." Interestingly, this doesn't explicitly deny that Antonio is in love, but if he's feeling any love at all, he sure isn't interested in talking about it with Solanio and Salerio.

***Quotation 9:***

BASSANIO  
In Belmont is a lady richly left,  
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,  
Of wondrous virtues [...] (1.1.168-170)

***Explanation 9:***

Oh, of course. Bassanio's going to get himself out of debt by going after a rich heiress who lives in Belmont (that would be Portia). Keep reading...

***Quotation 10:***

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. (1.1.129-141)

***Explanation 10:***

Uh, oh—looks like somebody is really bad at managing his expenses. Bassanio reveals that he's not just broke but in serious debt—he's living way beyond his means. When Bassanio says he owes Antonio "the most, in money and in love," we also learn that Bassanio has been more than happy to sponge off his wealthy merchant friend. But Bassanio's got a plan for getting himself out of the financial mess he's created. Gee, we wonder what that could be...

***Quotation 11:***

BASSANIO  
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued  
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.  
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,  
For the four winds blow in from every coast  
Renownèd suitors, and her sunny locks  
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,  
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,  
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.172-179)

***Explanation 11:***

When we read this passage, we can't help but notice that when Bassanio talks about wooing Portia, he tends to speak about her "worth," as if her only "value" comes from her money. When Bassanio compares Portia to Jason's Golden Fleece, he reinforces this notion. He seems to see his quest for Portia as a quest for fortune rather than love. Portia is reduced to the status of a meal ticket for her potential husband.

***Quotation 12:***

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  
To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia.  
Go, presently inquire, and so will I,  
Where money is, and I no question make  
To have it of my trust, or for my sake. (1.1.184-192)

***Explanation 12:***

Wow, the wealthy Antonio sure does love his BFF. Here he says he'd loan Bassanio the money he needs to woo Portia in style, but he can't because all his dough is tied up "at sea." As an alternative, Antonio says Bassanio can use his (Antonio's) good credit in order to secure a loan. (Basically, Antonio's going to be a kind of co-signer.) This is a really generous and risky offer for Antonio to make because, as we know, Bassanio is terrible at managing his money, which is why he's always sponging off his friend.