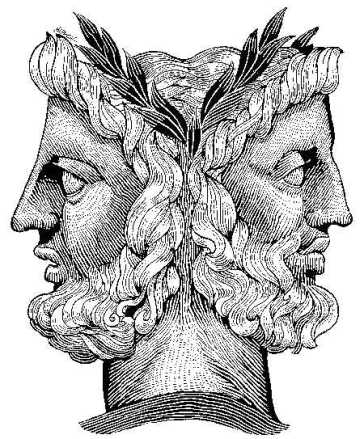
***ACT 1 Scene 1 Analysis:***

This scene is the very first one in the play. In this opening scene, Antonio, the title merchant, confesses to two Venetian gentlemen and friends of his, Salarino and Solanio, that he has felt unaccountably depressed lately. The two suggest that he is probably worried about his investments, notably the safety of his merchant ships, and more generally the psychological pressure that his business puts upon him. They also suggest that he might be in love. But Antonio dismisses both explanations, and Salarino somewhat jokingly concludes that he must simply be of a moody disposition, as is inherent to many men, if not to the human condition. At this point, three more friends, Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Graziano, enter the stage, and the latter playfully chides Antonio for having become such a glum character.

This scene is the opening of the play, and it performs some of its expository functions conventionally associated to such incipits, for instance by introducing one of the two main settings, some of the main themes and the main stakes of the plot, as well as some of the main protagonists. And yet, while the scene immediately plays upon the aura of Venetian culture among the Elizabethans, the prestige of the city-state’s gentlemanly society as well as the thrill generated by its commercial power and audacity, what is striking about the start of this comedy is the surprisingly, inexplicable sadness that emanates from its main protagonist. Antonio’s paradoxical mood will not be an isolated case: Shylock – Antonio’s nemesis – will prove to be of an equally sombre disposition, and even Portia will turn out to be a more ambivalent character than may seem. Most of all, this mood exemplifies the generic ambiguity of the play itself. While presenting us with a complex, multifaceted title character, whose mysterious melancholy opens a wide array of possible interpretations, the scene also initiates a pattern of paradox and polysemy in the play, challenging the readers and audience’s powers of interpretations, their expectations and assumptions, and illustrating Shakespeare’s ambiguous, reversible worldview and theatrical aesthetics, not unlike the “two-headed Janus” (I.50) that Solanio here evokes most adequately.



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**Antonio’s characterization as *the* merchant of Venice**

Janus was the Roman god of beginnings and transitions, his image (two heads) was meant to remind people that human beings often have no center for their thoughts, and in turn, are incapable of knowing or understanding themselves. Janus is the Roman God of beginning and transition. These two phases are symbolic of the varied nature of the people. For instance , there also are two types of people living in our World , one type of people who are lively , happy and sanguine and other type of people who are melancholic and sad. Antonio was of melancholic nature. Whereas Gratiano was a talkative person and was not melancholic. This is the meaning of two-headed Janus where , each head shows different types of personalities .

As the play begins, Shakespeare uses the devices both of monologue (especially in Antonio’s very first words) and of dialogue to present the title character to us, as well as to hint at the main themes that will emanate from him in the rest of the play. In the first and longest dialogue (down to line 56), Solanio and Salarino do interact with Antonio but, as will often be the case when these two somewhat interchangeable characters intervene in the play, they function above all like a comic chorus, narrating past events and/or incidents that have occurred off the stage between two scenes, and offering the audience background information about the other characters. Both Solanio and Salarino banter constantly, and this does not allow readers and audiences to precisely interpret the nature of their relationships with Antonio. Conversely, the exchanges that follow when Bassanio, Lorenzo and Graziano come on stage are more intense from a dramatic perspective, they are more loaded emotionally and offer more subtle clues as to Antonio’s status among them.

Indeed, what they confirm is Antonio’s importance within this group of Venetian gentlemen, both personally and socially. Through the emphasis on his wealth, the scope of his business, but also the respect all the other characters show him, Antonio comes out as the embodiment of Venice itself: he is represented not just as « a merchant of Venice » (as he is designated in the « Persons of the play ») but as *the* merchant of Venice.

The scene probably takes place in a public area in the city, possibly the Rialto area, the heart of Venice’s business life. The polite exchanges between Antonio and his friends, especially Solanio and Salarino, their knowledge of the commercial affairs of the city, make it clear that they are part of its elite. Most of all, Solanio and Salarino’s highly poeticized  evocation of his investments overseas emphasizes what an renowned, audacious businessman Antonio is, an adventurer, a visionary, something of an unofficial monarch in a city-state without real monarch.

The two gentlemen’s speeches also emphasize the exoticism of Antonio’s business, which would be likely to galvanize images within Elizabethan audiences about Venice as a cosmopolitan port, the centre of a glorious empire, in-between East and West, but also stir their fascination with faraway voyages and explorations. (Bear in mind that the play coincided with the rising power of Britain’s fleet, the birth of its empire, and there was great demand among readers and audiences for narratives about such perilous journeys, commercial exploits and exotic discoveries.)

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Solanio and Salarino are particularly eloquent about the perils of the seas, conjuring up, as it were, a “pageant of the sea” (I.11) of their own through the rich lexical field of sight (Il. 24, 27, 30), as well as a pun between the words “see” and “sea” (Il. 24-25). Salarino’s evocation of the pageants in question – those water ceremonies that Venice was reputed for and that the Elizabethans were so keen on – even sounds like a nod to the playful, self-reflexive, even parodic nature of his own speech. This parodic dimension is perceptible in the bombastic characteristics of his style, from the deliberately hackneyed metaphor running from line 27 down to line 34 between Antonio’s ships at sea and a lost bride, to the personification of the “roaring waters” (34) – with their /r/ alliteration – assimilating the natural forces of the ocean to wild animals threatening to devour the ships.

But while Solanio and Salarino’s speeches are meant to be mock-dramatic, they are ominous nonetheless. Shakespeare places two sobering images in his characters’ mouths. The first is Salarino’s evocation of the metaphor of the “sandy hour-glass” (I.25), a classical Renaissance metaphor for the passing of time and the ineluctability of death, which was also a common *memento mori* in *vanitas* paintings. The second is the running metaphor of human life as a theatre that Antonio and Graziano discuss at the end of the scene (Il.78-79), another quintessential Shakespearean metaphor (and a favorite one of the Elizabethans’ in general) which Jacques, another  melancholy hero, most famously formulates in *As You Like It*. [[1]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/" \l "_ftn1)

**Antonio’s unsettlingly polysemous depression**

Far from emphasizing the sense of strength and triumph that audiences and readers might have expected from such a powerful, influential man, the play opens on Antonio pondering the cause of his inexplicable “sadness”. (I.1) From the poignantly simple confession he makes about it in the very first line, Antonio is immediately characterized as a brooding character whose inward-driven, philosophizing penchant (I.7) is reminiscent of the old Greek injunction inscribed in the temple of Apollo in Delphi – “Know thyself” – a motto that became the motto of humanist wisdom.

Rather than a man of action, Antonio comes out as an a pensive, existential Hamletian figure, whose melancholy is alternately represented like a disease (a common Shakespearean metaphor for evil, corruption and/or self-destruction) he “caught” (I.3) without knowing when or how, and a spell which, according to Graziano, appears to have changed him “marvellously” (I.76), i.e., not just extraordinarily but supernaturally.

Antonio’s style itself – relying heavily on indirect interrogative sentences – reflects the sense of incompletion that his character is suffering from, and it contrast sharply with the assertiveness and flamboyant playfulness of the other characters surrounding him. Likewise, the soft, regular monosyllabic rhythm of the iambic pentameters, the repetitions and parallelisms add to the morose quality of his voice. Antonio is a man of few words, while his friends, notably Solanio and Salarino, are a talkative bunch who inundate him with speech: out of the first 56 lines where he and they are together on stage, Antonio has a mere 13 lines.

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Thus, paradoxically, while he finds himself surrounded with Venice’s best, happiest and most dashing young men, Antonio radiates a strong sense of *gravitas*, but also isolation and separateness. This impression only grows in the last third of the scene, when Bassanio, Lorenzo and Graziano come on stage. They too are younger gentlemen, who are *not* merchants and – contrary to him – are concerned above all with merrymaking, and who, as Graziano, the jokester of the lot, puts it, do not have too much respect upon the world. (I.74)

*In Michael Radford’s 2004 adaptation, Antonio is played by an emaciated, weary-eyed Jeremy Irons, who also happens to be much older than the actors playing Bassanio, Graziano and Lorenzo. This will also emphasize the father-son, protector-protégé relationship between Antonio and Bassanio (played by Joseph Fiennes).*

*In the clip below, John Barton, the co-founder and former director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, discusses the various possible ways to approach the character of Antonio and the play’s first scene with actors David Suchet and Ian McKellen.*

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While Antonio and his friends, at this stage, fail to offer a definitive explanation for his sadness, they however incite readers and audiences to join in an interpretative process, launching a quest for signs, symbols, implicit hints and meanings. Is Antonio’s melancholy to be put down solely to an ominous foreboding that he has of some approaching disaster? Does it hint at Antonio’s dissatisfaction with his life, be it the genius for trade that his friends worship him for, but which he appears to take no glory from, or the hedonistic ethos that, according to Graziano, he used to share with them? Such interpretations might be substantiated by the sense of renunciation that his words give off, especially when he evokes his business. Some critics have gone even further by underlining the metaphysical subtext already perceptible in this scene, the analogy already drawn between Antonio and the Christ figure, for instance in the possible double entendre in Antonio’s self-description as somebody whose “estate” is not limited to the present (I.42) or his insistence that the world is but transitory – “I hold the world but as the world”. (l.77) [[2]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/#_ftn1)

As the rest of the scene unfolds, more psychological intepretations will emerge, notably the possibility that Antonio’s sadness may have to do with his knowledge that he is soon to lose the companionship of Bassanio, who is about to embark on a “secret pilgrimage” to woo the beautiful and wealthy Portia. In these opening lines, Solanio already hints that Antonio may be in love – a suggestion which Antonio dismisses with tell-tale annoyance (l.46) – and when Bassanio actually arrives, Solanio and Salarino know they should leave the two men together. Only Graziano is slow to go, being too foolish to realize that he is intruding. (Revealingly, as soon as he departs, the tone and direction of the dialogue will switch from formal banter to a far more intimate mood between Antonio and Bassanio.) [[3]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/#_ftn1)

Whatever interpretation one opts for, the scene is pervaded with a strange uncertain tone, wavering between the comic and the tragic. The term “strange” itself is used by Solanio to refer to the paradox of the human condition, and the division of the human kind between those that are irrepressibly merry even under the most tragic circumstances and those that are forever gloomy, even when laughter is in order. (Il.51-56) Thus, not only does the term « strange » capture well the complexity of Antonio’s character, but also the play’s approach to psychology and its aesthetics, which is not unlike the “two-headed Janus”(l.50) mentioned by Solanio, with one face smiling and the other frowning.

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With the final exchange between Antonio and Graziano on the theatricality of human behaviour, and the suggestion that the former was fated to act as a sad character while the latter is happy to « play the fool » (ll-78-79), Shakespeare even introduces a self-reflexive, metafictional dimension to this theme of reversibility.

*And what better way to conclude on this theme of reversibility than to enjoy a sample of Ian McKellen’s protean brilliance…*

[[1]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/#_ftn1) « 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… » (As You Like It, Act II Scene 7)

[[2]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/#_ftn1) Antonio’s name recalls St Anthony the Great (a.k.a., St Anthony of Egypt or St Anthony the Hermit), who lived from 250 to 356, and was a frequent subject in Medieval and Renaissance art. He is remembered as an ascetic who distributed his wealth among the poor, struggled against various evil demons,  and offered himself as victim for martyrdom. Another saint, St Anthony of Padua, who lived from 1195 to 1231, is the patron of lost property, the apostle of charity, but also the patron of lovers and marriage.

[[3]](https://kmanglaiscondorcet.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/enter-antonio/#_ftn1) Male bonds of homosociality are common in Shakespeare’s plays and his poetry (notably in the 126 sonnets addressed to the « Fair Youth »). Whether Antonio’s love for Bassanio is the kind of male friendship idealised by Plato and Renaissance humanists, or should actually be considered as homosexual is a matter of interpretation. (Many modern productions, notably productions by the RSC since 1987, have thus explicitly represented Antonio and Bassani as a homosexual – or bisexual – couple.) At any rate, Antonio is not at all interested in women, and Portia in fact comes out as a rival in Bassanio’s heart; it is hardly a coincidence that he should be the one responsible for Bassanio yielding his ring, and breaking his promise to Portia (in Act IV Scene 1, ll. 445-47). Eventually, the happy conclusion of the three married couples will leave him as the odd man out, excluded from the world of love and marriage, alone and melancholy, just as he was at the beginning of the play.