

Act 1 The Agreement

Scene 1 A street in Venice

[Antonio, Salerio and Solanio enter.]

ANTONIO [*unhappily*]: I don't know why I'm so sad. My sadness makes me tired – and you say that it makes *you* tired, too. I don't understand what's causing it. It makes me feel so stupid that I don't recognize myself.

SALERIO: Your mind is on the ocean. There, your ships sail like kings past other merchant boats, flying across the water with their wind-filled sails.

SOLANIO: Believe me, sir, if I had ships on such an adventure, all *my* thoughts would be with them, too. I'd be picking grass to test the wind and studying maps for ports and roads. And every doubt and fear would make *me* sad, just like you.

SALERIO: Every time I blew on my soup, I'd worry about the harm that a wind could do at sea. I couldn't look at dust on a table without thinking of my ship hitting sand in shallow water. Every time I saw a stone church, I'd think of dangerous rocks damaging my gentle ship and filling the sea with everything that she carries. One minute you're rich, the next you have nothing. I'm not surprised that you're nervous when you think about it.

ANTONIO: Believe me, that's not true. My fortune isn't all on one ship travelling to one place. One unlucky year in business can't destroy me, so I'm not worried about that.

SOLANIO [*smiling playfully*]: So you must be in love.

ANTONIO [*shocked*]: Of course not!

SOLANIO [*confused*]: Not in love either? [*shaking his head wisely*] Nature has made some strange people. Some are born to laugh

at everything, but others can never smile at all. [Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano enter.] Here comes Bassanio, your great friend, with Gratiano and Lorenzo. Goodbye. We'll leave you now in better company.

SALERIO: I'd stay with you to amuse you, but better friends than I am now make that unnecessary.

ANTONIO [offended, to Salerio and Solanio]: You're my very dear friends. I hope you're only leaving because you have other, more important business.

SALERIO [to Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano]: Good morning, my lords.

BASSANIO [surprised that Salerio and Solanio are leaving]: Sirs, when can we enjoy your company? Why are you being so unfriendly?

SALERIO: We'll meet some other time.

[Salerio and Solanio leave.]

LORENZO [to Bassanio]: Bassanio, as you've found Antonio, we'll leave you. But don't forget where we're meeting for dinner.

BASSANIO: I'll be there.

GRATIANO [to Antonio]: You don't look well, Antonio. You think about the world too seriously.

ANTONIO: The world is just the world, Gratiano — a stage where every man must play his part. And mine's a sad one.

GRATIANO: Let me play the fool. Let old age come with fun and happiness. Let my heart grow hot with wine, not cold with sadness. Why should a warm-blooded man sit like a grandfather made of stone? Why should he sleep when he's awake? Why should he sink into bad-tempered old age? I love you, Antonio, and it's my love that speaks. There are some men whose faces are like silent pools. They say nothing, believing that other men will think them wise. But I'm sure that, if they spoke, they'd show themselves as fools. [pausing, realising that he has been talking too much] I'll tell you more of this another time. But if you want me to stop giving you my foolish opinions, you have to stop looking

so sad. [to Lorenzo] Come, good Lorenzo. [to Antonio] Goodbye for now. I'll finish your lessons in happiness after dinner.

LORENZO [to Antonio]: Well, we'll leave you until dinner-time. I must be one of these silent, wise men, because Gratiano never lets me speak.

ANTONIO [smiling to Gratiano]: You'll soon make a talker of me.

GRATIANO: That's welcome news. Silence is only good in the dried tongue of a cow, or in a young woman with no hope of marriage.

[Gratiano and Lorenzo leave.]

ANTONIO [to Bassanio]: What was all that about?

BASSANIO: Gratiano speaks a lot about nothing, more than any man in Venice. His reasons are like two small seeds hidden in a pile of rubbish. You can look for them all day, but when you find them, you realize that the search was a waste of time.

ANTONIO: Well, tell me now. Who's the lady that you're planning to visit in secret? You promised to tell me about her today.

BASSANIO: You must know, Antonio, that my lifestyle costs more than I can afford. In my young life I've been careless, and I'm a prisoner of my debts. To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love, so I have a duty to share with you my plans to clear my debts.

ANTONIO: Good Bassanio, tell me. If the plans are as good as the man who makes them, I'll help you as much as I can.

BASSANIO [nervously]: In my schooldays, if I threw a ball and lost it, I'd throw another in the same direction. When I did that, I often found both balls next to each other. I'm telling you this story because my situation now is very similar. I owe you a lot but, like a selfish child, I've lost everything that I owe. Please, throw another ball in the same direction as the first. If you do, I have no doubt that I'll be able to repay all my debts.

ANTONIO: You know me well, but spend too much time on these unimportant details. I'd prefer you to waste all my money than

offend me with your doubts. Tell me what you want, and it will be done. I'm ready; so speak.

BASSANIO: In Belmont there's a lady who's been left a great fortune. She's beautiful and, more important, a woman of wonderful character. Sometimes I receive lovely, wordless messages from her eyes. Her name's Portia, and she's famous all around the world. From many countries, lords and princes come to ask her to marry them. Oh, Antonio, if I had the money that they have, I'd be successful without a doubt.

ANTONIO [*shaking his head and smiling sadly*]: You know that all my fortune is at sea. I have no money at this moment, and nothing to sell. [*more positively*] But see what my good name can bring you in Venice. Borrow as much as you can — it will pay for your journey to Belmont, to lovely Portia.

[*They leave.*]

Scene 2 Belmont — a large bedroom in Portia's house.

There are large, open windows with a view of a big, sunlit garden.

[*Portia enters with her servant, Nerissa.*]

PORTIA [*looking at herself in a large mirror and shaking her head with a tired look on her face*]: Nerissa, my little body is so tired of this great world.

NERISSA: That would be true, sweet madam, if your problems were as great as your good fortune. It seems to me that people with too much are as sick as people who have too little. I'm happy, therefore, to be seated in the middle. Too much money turns the hair white too soon. People with a little less live longer.

PORTIA [*turning away from the mirror and smiling bravely*]: Those are good sentences, and well said.

NERISSA [*seriously, like a mother to a silly child*]: My advice would be better if it were taken.

PORTIA: If actions were as easy as words, poor men's homes would be princes' palaces. It's easier to teach than to follow your own advice. The brain may give us wise advice, but its voice is not as loud as our emotions. [*Shaking her head sadly, she turns away and looks out of the window.*] But thoughts like these won't help me choose a husband — if 'choose' is the right word! I can't choose who I like or refuse who I dislike. That's what happens when a living daughter must obey the wishes of her dead father. [*turning suddenly to Nerissa*] Don't you agree, Nerissa, that it's a difficult situation for me?

NERISSA [*patiently*]: Your father was a good man, and good men at their death have good intentions. He planned this test, these three boxes of gold, silver and lead, for a reason. Your future husband must be able to guess your father's intentions. He may need luck to choose correctly, but if he understands your father's meaning, he'll truly deserve your love. [*more cheerfully*] But what warmth is there in your heart for the princely men who have already come?

PORTIA: Tell me their names, and I'll give you their description.

NERISSA: First there's the prince from Naples.

PORTIA [*smiling unkindly*]: He only talks about his horses. He's very proud of his ability to shoe them himself. I wouldn't be surprised if his mother's lover earned his living making horseshoes!

NERISSA: Then there's Lord Palatine.

PORTIA: He never smiles. If he's so sad and serious now, what will he be like when he's old? [*angrily*] I'd rather marry a dead man than either of these. God defend me from these two!

NERISSA: What do you think of the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?

PORTIA [*thinking hard for a moment*]: He has a better horse than the prince from Naples, and a more serious face than Lord Palatine. He changes his behaviour according to the situation. He's a shadow of a man with no character of his own. If I married him, I'd marry twenty different husbands. If he hated me, I'd forgive him. But if he loved me madly, I could never satisfy him.

NERISSA: And what about Falconbridge, the young lord from England?

PORTIA: I can't understand him, and he can't understand me. I have little English and he can't speak Latin, French or Italian. He's a handsome gentleman, but what can you say to a man who can't speak? And what strange clothes he wears! I think he bought his shirt in Italy, his shoes in France, his hat in Germany and his behaviour from everywhere!

NERISSA: What's your opinion of the Scottish lord, his friend?

PORTIA: He's a very generous man. The Englishman hit him and he promised to repay him when he had the chance.

NERISSA: How do you like the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew?

PORTIA: I hate him in the morning, but I hate him even more in the afternoon when he's drunk. At his best, he's not much worse than human; at his worst, he's not much better than an animal. If he was the last man alive in the world, I'd still run away from him.

NERISSA: What would you do if he decided to choose a box, and he chose the right one? If you refused to accept him, you would disobey your father's wishes.

PORTIA: If you put a large glass of German wine on the wrong box, I'm sure he'd choose *that*. [*argently*] I'd do anything, Nerissa, not to marry a man with more wine in his body than blood.

NERISSA [*smiling*]: You needn't worry about any of these lords, my lady. They've told me their plans. Unless you decide to choose your husband in another way, they've all decided to return home.

PORTIA: Even if I live to be a hundred years old, I'll die unmarried unless somebody chooses the right box. But I'm glad this group of admirers are so thoughtful. I'm grateful for their absence, but I wish them a safe journey.

NERISSA: Do you remember, my lady, in your father's time, a young man from Venice — a student and a soldier?

PORTIA [*smiling excitedly*]: Yes, yes. His name was Bassanio, I think.

NERISSA: True, madam. He was, in my foolish opinion, the man who most deserved a beautiful lady.

PORTIA: I remember him well, and your good opinion of him. [*A servant enters*.] Yes? What news?

SERVANT: Your guests, madam, are waiting to say goodbye. There is also a messenger from the Prince of Morocco, who says that the Prince will be here tonight.

PORTIA: If I could welcome the next visitor as happily as I say goodbye to the last, I'd be glad of his arrival. [*unhappily to Nerissa*] Come, Nerissa. While we shut the gate on one admirer, another knocks at the door.

[*They leave*.]

Scene 3 *The Rialto, a public square in Venice*

[*Bassanio enters with Shylock the Jew*.]

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats*, you say?

BASSANIO: Yes, sir, for three months.

SHYLOCK [*thinking*]: For three months? Mm.

BASSANIO: As I have told you, the loan will be in Antonio's name.

SHYLOCK [*still thinking*]: In Antonio's name? Mm.

BASSANIO [*nervously*]: Will you help me or not? What do you say?

SHYLOCK [*still thinking*]: Three thousand ducats for three months, and in Antonio's name?

BASSANIO: And your answer to that?

SHYLOCK: Antonio is a good man.

BASSANIO [*surprised*]: Why should anyone believe differently?

SHYLOCK [*laughing*]: No, no, no! I mean his *money* is good. [*Shaking his head seriously*] But his fortune is not safe. He has a ship sailing to Tripoli, another to India; I have also heard that he has a third sailing to Mexico and a fourth to England. But ships are only

*ducat: a gold coin used in Venice at that time

wood, sailors are only men. Just as there are land rats and water rats, there are thieves on the water as well as on the land. There is also the danger of water, winds and rocks. [smiling at Bassanio] But the man's name is good. Three thousand ducats? I think I can reach an agreement with him. [thoughtfully] And agreements must be guaranteed. I will think about how. Can I speak to Antonio?

BASSANIO: Let me invite you to dinner with us.

SHYLOCK: [offended]: To smell the meat of a pig? To eat impure food? I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you. But I will not eat with you, drink with you or speak to your God. [looking around the square] Who is this coming?

[Antonio enters.]

BASSANIO: This is Antonio.

SHYLOCK [narrowing his eyes at Antonio and speaking bitterly to himself]: Look at him! He reminds me of an ordinary tax-collector. I hate him because he is a Christian. But more important, I hate him because he charges no interest on his loans, so he brings down the profits of money-lending for us in Venice. But I will have my revenge on him. He hates our religion. And he complains about me in public to all the other merchants, just because I make a profit on my loans. I will never forgive him.

BASSANIO: Shylock, did you hear me?

SHYLOCK: I was thinking about the money. I do not think I have three thousand ducats at the moment. But Tubal, a Jew like me, will help me. [suddenly smiling at Antonio] How are you, good sir? We were just talking about you.

ANTONIO: Shylock, I never usually charge or pay interest on lent or borrowed money, but this time, to help a friend, I will break my habit. [to Bassanio] Have you told him yet how much you need?

SHYLOCK: Yes, yes, three thousand ducats.

ANTONIO [to Shylock]: And for three months.

SHYLOCK [pretending to be surprised]: I had forgotten – three months.

He did tell me. But now, let us think about the guarantee. I heard you say that you do not charge or pay interest on loans.

ANTONIO: That is correct.

SHYLOCK [looking thoughtfully at Antonio]: Three thousand ducats is a lot of money.

ANTONIO [impatiently]: Well, Shylock, shall we be in your debt?

SHYLOCK: Sir, I have heard you many times in this square complaining about me and my business. I have listened patiently to your insults, because all Jews have to have patience. You insult my religion, you call me a dog, and you make fun of my traditional clothes. But now it seems that you need my help. You come to me and say, 'Shylock, we need money.' You feel that you are so much better than a dog like me, and then you come to me for money! What should I say to you? Should I not say, 'Does a dog have money? Can a dog lend you three thousand ducats?' Or shall I bend low and whisper politely, 'Dear sir, you laughed at me last Wednesday and you called me a dog. For this friendly behaviour, of course I will lend you the money?'

ANTONIO [angrily]: I will not change my opinion of you. If you lend this money, lend it not to a friend but to an enemy. In this way, if I break the agreement, you can punish me more easily.

SHYLOCK: Why are you so angry? I would prefer to be friends with you and have your love. I would rather forget the insults that you have thrown at me. I would like to help you and not accept a single coin from you in interest. This is a kind offer.

BASSANIO [confused]: This would be kindness.

SHYLOCK [with false friendliness]: I will prove my kindness. Go with me to the legal clerk's office, and sign this agreement for me: if you fail to repay me on time, a pound of flesh will be cut from the part of your body of my choice.

ANTONIO: I will put my signature to it, and say there is much kindness in the Jew.



'If you fail to repay me on time, a pound of flesh will be cut from the part of your body of my choice.'

BASSANIO [*shocked and upset*]: You mustn't sign such an agreement for me. I'd rather have no money than that.

ANTONIO: Don't worry, it will never happen. In two months' time, before this agreement ends, I expect the return of three times the value of the loan.

SHYLOCK [*seemingly to speak quietly to himself, but loud enough for the others to hear*]: What fools these Christians are. Their own business methods make them distrust the thoughts of others! [*to Bassanio*] Tell me this: how would a pound of a man's flesh profit me? It is of less value than a pound of a sheep's or cow's flesh. I make this offer as a friend. If he accepts it, good. If not, goodbye. And in return for my love, I ask you not to be unkind to me.

ANTONIO: Yes, Shylock, I will sign this agreement.

SHYLOCK: Then go to the legal clerk's office and give him the details. I will fetch the ducats immediately and will be with you soon.

[*He leaves.*]

ANTONIO: The gentle Jew will soon become a Christian, he's so kind. BASSANIO [*seriously*]: I don't trust friendly offers from villains.

ANTONIO [*cheerfully*]: Don't worry. Everything will end happily. My ships come home a month before the loan has to be repaid.

[*They leave.*]