

Shylock's introduction – Act 1, scene 3

This is the first scene in which we meet Shylock. It is important to analyse the scene to decide what we think of him as a character and to explore the way Bassanio and Antonio, who we have already met, interact with him. This should give us clues as to how Shakespeare wanted us to see him. Remember you can have your own opinion about Shylock, as long as you can back up your views with evidence from the play.

Look at Shylock's conversation with Bassanio:

Shylock: Three thousand ducats, well.

Bassanio: Ay, sir, for three months.

Shylock: For three months, well.

Bassanio: For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

Shylock: Antonio shall become bound, well.

Bassanio: May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?

Shylock: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.

Bassanio: Your answer to that?

Shylock: Antonio is a good man –

Bassanio: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

Shylock: Ho no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover upon the Rialto he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land rats, and water rats, water thieves and land thieves – I mean pirates – and then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. The man is not withstanding sufficient. Three thousand ducats: I think I may take his bond.

Note the lack of any introductory information; it is as if we have stumbled upon the conversation. It is all about business from the outset, the money. Is Shakespeare giving us a big clue that these two are not friends?

Why this repetition of 'well'? Does it show us that Shylock is considering the loan? Does the comment give him time to think?

Is Bassanio waiting patiently for an answer or is he irritated by Shylock's apparent hesitation? Does he have the right to be annoyed or is his behavior offensive? Remember: he is asking Shylock to lend him money.

What do Bassanio's questions suggest about his manner or tone?

Does Shylock really think this? What does the dash signify? A pause? His intention to go on with 'but'?

Is Shylock amused, shocked, scornful, thoughtful or some other emotion?

What does this word suggest about Shylock's opinion of Antonio's business transactions?

Is Shylock pleased that Antonio will 'owe' him? Is this an opportunity to exact some sort of revenge for something? Look at later comments in the scene for possible evidence.

Shylock's questioning of Antonio's means to repay the loan can be seen as either the proper course of action because he is a professional money-lender or as a greedy knowledge that this might be a way to make a bigger profit if his ships are lost. Again think about the tone in which Shylock delivers the lines.

Shylock lists the many ways in which Antonio might lose his ships: do you think he is trusting, foolish or even sympathetic to lend the money after this or do you think he does it in the hope that one of these events will befall Antonio's capital?