



## Bated breath

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**Shylock:**

Go to then, you come to me, and you say,  
"Shylock, we would have moneys," you say so. . . .  
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,  
With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,  
Say this:  
"Fair sir, you spet on me Wednesday last,  
You spurn'd me such a day, another time  
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies  
I'll lend you thus much moneys"?

*The Merchant Of Venice Act 1, scene 3, 115–116, 123–129*

The Venetian merchant Antonio and his friends take a dim view of Shylock, the Jewish usurer, and his practice of charging interest on loans. For his "un-Christian" behavior, the Christians spit on Shylock, call him a cur, and kick him around the streets of Venice. In this speech—delivered when, as was inevitable, Antonio calls on Shylock for a loan—the usurer turns Antonio's words and actions against him.

Shylock asks whether, after the treatment he's received, he should now servilely bow, whisper like a "bondman" (slave), and put himself at Antonio's disposal. He mocks the idea that he ought to respond "with bated breath"—a much misunderstood phrase. "To bate," like "to abate," means to diminish, reduce, or blunt. "With bated breath," therefore, means "in a hushed voice," with reduced "breath" (force of speech). We've adopted the phrase to mean, most often, "with one's breath held."

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