The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare
Summary

Act 1: The Agreement

Scene 1:
Antonio is talking with two of his friends on the streets of Venice when Bassanio came to him for help. Bassanio told his good friend about a lovely lady in Belmont, who was left a great fortune by her decease father, named Portia. Bassanio believes that if he is as rich as her other suitors, he can win her heart. He asks Antonio to lend him some money, but all of his money is currently invested in merchant ships away at sea. Antonio, however, does not want to see his dear friend lose this opportunity at love. He suggests that Bassanio should borrow money in his name because his reputation is good.

Scene 2:
In Belmont, Portia is annoyed with her countless admirers, who are all wealthy but incredibly boring. She wants to choose her husband freely instead of following her dead father’s requirements for an eligible suitor. Her maid, Nerissa, reminds her that Bassanio might be the perfect husband.

Scene 3:
Bassanio tries to persuade Shylock, an old and greedy Jew, to loan him three thousand ducats for three months in Antonio’s name. Shylock despises Antonio because Antonio always poorly of him for making profits on his loans. Shylock knows Antonio’s business is pretty risky, so he makes an agreement with Antonio. The agreement states that if Antonio fails to repay the loan in three months that Shylock will be granted the right to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio’s body. Bassanio does not like the agreement, but Antonio agrees so that his friend will have an opportunity to marry Portia.
Act 2: The Three Boxes

Scene 1:
Back in Belmont, Portia brings the prince of Morocco into a room with three boxes where he will face her father’s test.

Scene 2:
In the meantime, Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock’s servant, decides to run. He encounters his blind father and teases him. As Launcelot is telling his father about what a villain Shylock is, Bassanio shows up. It is not long before Launcelot accepts Bassiano’s offer to be his servant. After, they meet up with Gratiano, and Bassano reminds him to mind his manners in Belmont.

Scene 3:
In Shylock’s house, Jessica says farewell to Launcelot, and she asks him to pass on a letter to her lover, Lorenzo. She is different from her father because she is kindhearted, and she does not despise Christians.

Scene 4:
Lorenzo is talking with his friends about the evenings masquerade, and Launcelot enters with the letter from Jessica. After reading it, he tells his friends that Jessica will run away with him tonight, and she will be disguised as a boy. Also, she plans to take some of her father’s money and jewels.

Scene 5:
Shylock is complaining about the dinner he was invited to, and he is displeased that Lancelot quit. He gives Jessica his keys, and he tells her to lock up. He does not want the sounds and the influence of the Christian party to enter his house. After Shylock leaves, Jessica prepares to run away.

Scene 6:
Lorenzo and his friends gather in front of Shylock’s house, and he calls for Jessica. She drops a box. Then, she appears with boys clothing on, and she is a bit embarrassed. Bassanio and Gratiano go to Belmont.

Scene 7:
In Belmont, Portia takes the Prince to a room where there are three boxes on a table, and she asks him to choose one. If he chooses the right box, then she will be
his. The Prince picks the golden box. The box contains a skull with a message in its eyes. Realizing he has failed, he says a quick good-bye and leaves.

**Scene 8:**

Salerio and Solanio are making fun of the way that Shylock shouts about his ducats and his daughter in the streets. Salerio says that a ship has sunk at sea between England and France. They are worried about Antonio’s agreement with Shylock. They know that Shylock will definitely hold Antonio to the terms of their contract.

**Scene 9:**

The Prince of Arragon arrives at Portia’s house, and she anxiously shows him the three boxes. To her delight, he chooses the silver one. Inside the box there is a picture of an ugly man, and he knows that he has failed. Soon after the Prince of Arragon leaves, a messenger enters to announce another pursuer’s arrival.

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**Act 3: Bad News**

**Scene 1:**

Salerio hears that Antonio has lost another ship between England and France, and he tells Solanio about it. They are both worried about Antonio, and he hopes that Antonio will not lose another ship. Shylock arrives, and he declares that he would gladly take Antonio’s flesh, regardless of profit loss.

**Scene 2:**

Portia takes Bassanio to the room with the three boxes, and Bassanio chooses the box of lead. He finds a picture of Portia. Her happiness is beyond words, and Portia gives him a ring. She makes him promise that the ring will never leave his finger. While Portia and Bassanio are enjoying their new found love, Gratiano announces that he is in love with Nerissa, and they will marry.

Then, Salerio enters with Jessica and Lorenzo, and he hands Bassanio a letter from Antonio. The letter informs Bassiano that three of Antonio’s ships have sunk at sea, and he will be unable to repay his loan from Shylock.

**Scene 3:**

Antonio is locked up in the prison. Shylock comes to see him, and he makes it clear that he intends to honor the agreement between them.
Scene 4:  
Portia decides to go to Venice and help Antonio. Nerissa goes, too. They are both disguised.

Scene 5:  
Launcelot is chatting with Jessica about the crimes of her father. Lorenzo is not pleased with Launcelot’s attitude.

Act 4: The Judgment

Scene 1:  
The Duke does his best to persuade Shylock not to take revenge, but Shylock refuses. Bassanio offers the Jew six thousand ducats to release Antonio. Shylock, however, would rather have Antonio’s flesh than ducats. Portia and Nerissa enter the Venetian Court disguised as a doctor of law and a clerk. Portia, disguised as the doctor of law, agrees that Shylock should be permitted to cut out Antonio’s flesh, but she rules that it must be done without blood being drawn.

In the end, Shylock is charged with a crime because he had planned to take Antonio’s life. Instead of pursuing charges against Shylock, Antonio spares him, but he is required to give half of his fortune to the court and the other half to his daughter’s husband, Lorenzo, upon his death.

Bassanio is very grateful for doctor’s help, and he tells him that he will give him anything he wants. The doctor asks for his ring, and he succumbs. The clerk asks the same of Gratiano, and Gratiano gives it to her, too.

Act 5: The Rings

Scene 1:  
In Belmont, Lorenzo orders the musicians to play some music to welcome Portia home. She has asked Lorenzo and Jessica to keep their absence a secret. Soon after the women’s arrival, Bassanio, Antonio, and Gratiano return from Venice. Nerissa questions Gratiano about his ring, and Portia plays along with their joke, too. Then, they return the rings to the men, and they reveal their secret mission to the Venetian Court. Bassanio and Grantiano swear never to let the rings leave their fingers again.
Characters

Antonio is a Venetian merchant, and he is friends with Bassanio. He is kind-hearted and generous, and he agrees to borrow money from an unfriendly moneylender to help out his friend. He is loved by everyone with the exception of Shylock.

Bassanio is friends with Antonio, and he is deeply in love with Portia. He wins the lady’s heart by passing her deceased father’s test, thus he becomes Portia’s husband. He is not rich, but he treats people with a good heart.

Gratiano is friends with Antonio and Bassanio, and he marries Portia’s servant, Nerissa.

Lorenzo is in love with Jessica, and he runs away with her to Belmont. Their intention is to be away from Jessica’s terrible father, Shylock.

Shylock, a Jewish money lender, seeks profits from his loans, and he despises Antonio for insulting him. He is greedy and selfish. He makes an agreement with Antonio to seek his revenge.

Jessica is Shylock’s only daughter, and she is in love with Lorenzo. She runs away to marry him, and she steals some of her father’s fortune.

Launcelot Gobbo is a servant. He leaves Shylock to work for Bassanio because he despises his treatment.

Portia, the Lady of Belmont, is wealthy, and she is looking for a suitor. She becomes Bassanio’s wife, and she helps him to save his friend, Antonio, from Shylock.

Nerissa is Portia’s servant, and she falls in love with Gratiano. She is Portia’s friend, and she is like a mother to her.
Afterthoughts

There are many themes in this book that Shakespeare hopes the readers can grasp. One of the main underlying themes is friendship. For instance, the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio shows us a bond in which one man is willing to die for another’s happiness. Another underlying theme, which is no less important, is the idea that good always prevails over evil. This can be seen at the end when Shylock ends up poor and lonely, and Antonio has his wealth restored.

This story has a happy ending, but I think that Shakespeare’s characterization is vague. In an analysis of Antonio, the reader is made to believe that he is kind-hearted and generous. Moreover, Shylock’s motivation of seeking revenge resulted from Antonio’s endless insults. If you strike a man, should he not stand up and fight for his dignity and pride? Does it make him an entirely bad person? In my opinion, Antonio is not exactly a figure who represents pure goodness.

I feel that none of this would have happened if Antonio had treated Shylock with respect. The issues between them may have been resolved more easily if Antonio gave Shylock the same respect as other characters within the play. Often, harsh words can do more damage than blades.