

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

Reviewed by: Kartikeya Krishna, 15

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

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Antonio is a young Venetian man and one of the most successful merchants of Venice, known for being kind and generous. His friend Bassanio wishes to travel to the city of Belmont to woo Portia, one of the most beautiful women in the world left with an amazing amount of money left after the death of her father. Bassanio asks Antonio if he can fund his trip to Belmont and Antonio, who is poor as of the moment as his ships are at sail, agrees as long as Bassanio can find a loaner, who turns out to be Shylock. Shylock hates Antonio because his racist attitude towards Jews, shown by Shylock being insulted and spat on by Antonio for being a Jew. Shylock decrees that if Antonio is unable to repay his loan before a specific date, he may take a pound of flesh from any part of Antonio's body that he chooses. Antonio accepts the offer on account of being "surprised by Shylock's generosity." Bassanio leaves towards Belmont with his friend Gratiano.

In Belmont, Portia's father's will is refraining her from marrying, stating that each of her suitors must choose correctly from one of three caskets -- gold, silver, and lead -- and if they choose correctly, they get Portia. If they are incorrect, they must leave and never marry. The first suitor chooses the gold casket because the casket says "Choose me and get what most men desire", which must be Portia, as what all men desire is Portia. His answer is incorrect and he leaves a disgraced man. The second chooses silver as the silver casket states "Choose Me And Get What You Deserve", which he imagines must be something great (Portia) like himself. He also is incorrect and leaves disgraced. The last suitor, Bassanio, chooses the lead casket, the correct choice. Meanwhile in Venice Antonio's ships are lost at sea, leaving him insolvent. Shylock becomes even angrier when his daughter Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio. Shylock blames all Christians (Lorenzo is a Christian) and has Antonio arrested and put on trial.

At Belmont, Portia and Bassanio marry and Bassanio, learning of Antonio's plight, leaves with money for Antonio. Shylock refuses Bassanio's offer of 6,000 ducats, twice the amount of the loan, demanding his pound of flesh. At this moment a doctor and a law clerk enter declaring that they have a letter from the learned lawyer Bellario of Padua. They say that Shylock may take his pound of flesh but must be very careful not to take any blood, as if he takes even a drop of blood then he has broken his own contract and should be put on trial himself. Defeated, Shylock accepts Bassanio's money, which the doctor refutes as Shylock had already refused to accept the money in an open court. The Doctor then quotes a law under which Shylock, a Jew and an "alien" has relieved his property (half to the government and half to Antonio) as he conspired to take the life of a citizen. With Shylock's life at the mercy of the Duke, the Duke pardons him. Antonio asks that his half be kept until the death of Shylock, when it would be given to Lorenzo and Jessica. The Duke agrees to levy the state's half but Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity and state in his will that his estate will go to Lorenzo and Jessica. Back at Belmont it is revealed that Portia was the doctor and the law clerk was the soon to be wife of Gratiano three of his Antonio's ships have returned safely.

One of my favorite Shakespearean plays, *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragic comedies. The speech Shylock gives his speech ("Hath not a Jew eyes...") forms the basis of many anti-racism speeches and demonstrations. This play combines classic Shakespearean humor – the caskets and the zany personalities of the first two suitors and

Gratiano – as well Shakespearean tragedy, the easily perceptible hatred towards Jews as well as the “miserly Jew” stereotype. This play is a difficult play to comprehend whilst reading therefore I would not recommend this to anyone younger than 14 (freshman year in high school). Other than that the limitations on this book are practically none. This book has a universal appeal to both tragedy, comedy, and humor.