

## Summary of "The Merchant of Venice"

by William Shakespeare

### Introduction:

The play takes place in Venice, Italy and Belmont, Portia's home, during the fourteenth century.

The main characters are Antonio, Bassiano, and Shylock. Antonio is a merchant and fair money-lender, but he currently is overinvested. Bassiano is in debt. Both Antonio and Bassiano are Christians. Shylock is a Jewish money-lender. All of these characters are worried about money.

### Act I – The Agreement

Bassiano confesses his love for Portia to Antonio. He explains Antonio that he has been unwise with money throughout his life, and that he is in need of \$3,000 gold coins to win over Portia.

Bassiano tells Antonio about the fortune that was left to Portia upon her father's death. Antonio wants to help his friend, but he has invested his money in three trading ships that are still out at sea.

Antonio agrees to borrow money from a man he despises named Shylock for Bassiano's courtship of Portia. Shylock is a Jewish money-lender, and he is greatly despised by the Christians because he charges high interest rates on his loans. Shylock lends Antonio \$3,000 gold coins for three months with collateral of one pound of flesh.

### Act II – The Three Boxes

In Belmont, Portia greets potential husbands at her residence with a test designed by her father prior to his death. The test is a choice of one of three boxes: gold, silver, or lead. Each box contains

a short poem and an explanation of one's choice. All suitors have failed, and they have not been regarded as being suitable husbands by Portia as well.

Back in Venice, Shylock goes to dinner at Antonio's house. Shylock warns his daughter to not go to the Christian masquerade and to keep the house locked. Bassiano makes plans to go to Belmont to court Portia with his companion Gratiano. Gratiano, Salerio, and Lorenzo, Bassiano and Antonio's friends, go to Shylock's house wearing masks. They take Jessica, who has fallen in love with Lorenzo, away. She has disguised herself as a boy, and she has stolen money and jewels from Shylock. Shylock returns home and becomes terribly angry with his daughter's actions.

#### Act III – Bad News

In Venice, bad news is circulating about one of Antonio's ships being wrecked. Shylock finds comfort in this amongst his anguish about his daughter's departure.

In Belmont, Bassiano chooses the correct box, the lead one with the picture of Portia, and they are set to be married. Gratiano falls in love with Portia's servant Nerissa. Both Portia and Nerissa give their soon to be husbands rings, and both Bassiano and Gratiano swear they will never give the rings away as a display of their love for the women. Bassiano receives word from Venice about Antonio from Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio.

Back in Venice, Antonio is imprisoned for not paying his debt on time to Shylock. Shylock is set to take one pound of flesh from Antonio, and it is clear that he wants to make the Christian suffer more than having his money returned.

#### Act IV – The Judgment

In Venice, Antonio is imprisoned, and a judgment day is set. It will be presided over by the Duke of Venice. The Duke is under pressure to uphold the laws of Venice to keep foreign trade honest within Italy. Bassanio enters and offers Shylock twice the amount of the debt due, and it is refused.

Previously, the Duke sent for a Doctor of Law named Bellario. Nerissa enters, disguised as a man, and she produces a letter from Bellario. Bellario has fallen ill, so he has sent Balthasar, a younger Doctor of Law, in his place. Portia enters, disguised as the man Balthasar, and she states that the contract has been reviewed. Shylock shall have his one pound of flesh. The contract, however, does not permit Shylock to take blood from Antonio. Portia also finds that Shylock is guilty of conspiring to kill Antonio, and that he is required to give half of his wealth to Antonio and the other half to the Duke. Antonio gives Shylock's property back to him with the understanding that he will bequeath it to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death.

In their happiness, Bassanio and Gratiano offer money to Portia and Nerissa, but they refuse it.

After a bit of personal difficulty, they give up their rings to show their gratitude for helping out with Antonio's legal matter.

#### Act 5 – The Rings

Back in Belmont, Portia and Nerissa arrive just before Bassanio, Antonio, and Gratiano. Lorenzo and Jessica are outside listening to music. Portia and Nerissa ask to see the men's rings. Both Bassanio and Gratiano are hassled about their devotion to the women, and then the women admit their involvement at Antonio's judgment proceedings back in Venice. Antonio receives word that

all of his ships have returned safely to port, and Lorenzo and Jessica find out about their future inheritance.

### Questions for Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice"

1. Why does Bassiano want to borrow money from Antonio?

He needs money to court Portia.

2. Why can't Antonio lend Bassiano his own money?

Antonio has invested all of his money in three ships away at sea.

3. Why does Shylock despise Antonio?

He despises Antonio because he is a fair money-lender, a Christian, and often speaks badly of his business' practices to others.

4. Why does Shylock take a pound of flesh as collateral?

He wants to kill Antonio.

5. What test does Portia's father design before his death for her possible suitors?

They have to choose the correct box from one of three.

6. Why does Jessica leave her father's house?

She is in love with Lorenzo, and she despises her father's business' practices.

7. Why does Launcelot want to become Bassiano's servant?

He feels he is mistreated by Shylock and underfed.

8. Why doesn't Soliano go to Jessica's house?

He thinks it's a bad idea.

9. Why does Jessica steal money and jewels from her father?

She knows that his primary concern in life is his money, and that it will upset him.

10. According to Portia, what will happen if Bassiano loses the ring that he is given?

It will mean the end of their love.

11. Why is Antonio imprisoned?

His debt to Shylock is overdue.

12. Why won't Shylock accept double the money from Bassiano?

Shylock's wish is not to receive the money that he is owed by Antonio, but to see him killed by his own hand.

13. Why can't Shylock extract the pound of flesh?

The contract states that he may take a pound of flesh but not Antonio's blood, so it is an impossible task.

14. Why do Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men?

Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men because they are acting as a Doctor of Law and a legal clerk at Antonio's judgment hearing. They are there to help defeat Shylock and help their soon to be husbands.

15. Why isn't Shylock killed?

He asks the Duke for forgiveness, and it is granted.

16. Why does Antonio give back his portion of Shylocks property?

Antonio does not feel that it is rightfully his, and he is a generous person.

17. Why do Portia and Nerissa take the men's rings?

It is part of their overall plan as a test of love but also to tease the men.

18. What is the theme of Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice"?

The theme is that religion and people should value mercy and forgiveness over business dealings.

19. What is the main recurring motif within the play?

Law can be both good and bad. When exercised properly, it can bring justice to people in need.

20. How are the three boxes symbolic?

They represent the opportunities that are presented to men of various nations, ethnicities, and religions in Venice during the fourteenth century.