William Shakespeare, widely regarded as the world’s greatest playwright, has revolutionized the world of English literature with his plays. Some of these plays are clear-cut comedies and tragedies, while others are more ambiguous. The Merchant of Venice is a play that falls under the latter type, and it has been hotly contested whether this literary work should be classified a comedy or a tragedy. However, since the majority of the characters received a happy ending, the abundance of comic relief scenes and characters, and lightheartedness of the plot relative to other Shakespearean works leads me to conclude that The Merchant of Venice is indeed a comedy.

            One of the characteristics of a comedy is that it usually contains a happy resolution of conflict, and this was definitely reflected in the conclusion of The Merchant of Venice. “Happy endings” usually pertain to the protagonists or the main characters surviving or outlasting misfortune. Antonio being spared and cleared of any debt he owed Shylock by the Venetian courts (Act IV, scene i) is a prime example of the protagonist receiving satisfactory closure. In the drama building up to the court scene, Antonio’s best friend, Bassanio, had cut a deal with the devil as he borrowed money from the shrewd Shylock, with the stipulation that repayment would either be in ducats or a pound of Antonio’s flesh (Act I, scene iii). When Antonio’s business enterprise came crashing down abruptly, he had no means by which to repay Shylock, thus setting up the major conflict of The Merchant of Venice. Antonio’s ending is undoubtedly a happy one for his character, since his life was spared and he was cleared of any charges. Another example of a character with a favorable conclusion is Portia. Recently, her father had been pushing her toward marriage, and because of her many biases, she found it near impossible to find a suitable suitor (Act II, scene i). At the end of the play, she does, in fact, end up with the only man that’s ever caught her eye, Bassanio. These happy endings for primary characters are typical of Shakespearean comedies.

            The Merchant of Venice is abounding with other typical Shakespearean comedy techniques like comic relief; humor that manifests itself in both situations and characters. The overall hilarity of the play is an ample reason to classify it as a comedy rather than a tragedy. Shakespeare inserts comic relief scenes at opportune times in this play to relieve tension, and Jessica and Launcelot’s banter in Act III, scene v is an excellent example of this. In the preceding scenes, Shylock has just hauled Antonio off to jail while Portia and Nerissa attempted to devise a scheme to rescue their future husbands’ friend – two very action-packed and intense developments in the story. However, immediately following these two scenes, Launcelot and Jessica are seen having a playful discussion about the correlation of Jewish refusal to consume pork and the rising prices of bacon, a conversation so wacky and out of place that it manages to diffuse much of the thickening tension. Comic relief is a literary device that extends to characters as well. The interactions between Launcelot and his father, Old Gobbo, are one of the more humorous moments of the play (Act II, scene ii), where Old Gobbo fails to recognize Launcelot as his son because of his ailing senses. Shakespeare utilized plenty of jokes that would have appealed to the audiences of his time here to rouse laughter. At its very root, a comedy is a drama with a humorous or satirical tone, and The Merchant of Venice’s comic relief scenes and characters provide the audience with this humorous air.

            When compared to many of Shakespeare’s other dramatic works, The Merchant of Venice’s storyline is much more lighthearted and tame. This play turned out more like an episode of Beverly Hills, 90210 than something as grave and solemn as Macbeth or Othello. There are many attributes which corroborate this theory. For starters, cross dressing is used as a motif in The Merchant of Venice. When placed alongside a different play like Macbeth, where the motifs are critical matters like bad omens, borrowed robes, and façades, The Merchant of Venice does seem less serious. Also, the magnitude of its plot is definitely much less significant than a lot of Shakespeare’s other plays. The Merchant of Venice is primarily concerned with the interactions of Italian suitors and heiresses. On the other hand, plays like Julius Caesar revolve around recanting the epic downfalls of tyrannical politicians. Though not to undermine its literary significance, I am convinced that The Merchant of Venice is a less serious, more whimsical play than some of Shakespeare’s other works – a feel that comedies are supposed to have.

            Plays can be like characters in that their real nature can be very ambiguous. The Merchant of Venice is heralded as a fine example of a comedy by some, while asserted to be a tragedy by others. This play can be clearly categorized as a comedy, because the majority of the characters received favorable conclusions, comic relief is in abundance, and the lighthearted, quirky nature of the plot.