# Reflections:

## A Student Response Journal for…

# The Merchant of Venice

## by William Shakespeare

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# Act I

1.  Shakespeare's work has endured for hundreds of years. His plays are still being performed today.

    Which of our current artists (musicians, writers, or actors) do you think will be studied and appreciated for their work hundreds of years from now? In a short essay, explain which artists' work will endure and why those artists will be considered important.

2.  Although Shakespeare's words are sometimes difficult for us to understand, anyone who lived in England during Shakespeare's time could understand his language. In fact, Shakespeare incorporated the slang of his time into his work. Perhaps this made his plays easier for his audience to watch and understand.

    Make up a dictionary of 20 modern slang words. Include the words, their parts of speech, and their definitions. Remember that dictionary entries are always listed alphabetically.

3.  As you read *The Merchant of Venice*, keep a glossary of words you do not understand. List the word and your guess of its meaning. Some examples may be

    Anon – later
    Ere – before

4.  As you read *The Merchant of Venice*, you will find quotations that have become part of our lexicon. As you read, keep a list of these quotations.

    Bassanio tells us that Portia is
    Renowned (to) suitors: and her sunny locks
    Hang on her temples like a golden fleece
    Which makes her seat of Belmont Colcho's strond,
    And many Jasons come in quest of her.

5.    Do some brief research and write a short essay which explains what the following mean; they are allusions to Greek mythology:

Golden fleece
Many Jasons

6.    Bassanio loves Portia, but doesn't have the money to court her. At the end of the first scene of Act I, Antonio agrees to lend money to Bassanio so that Bassanio have the means to try to win Portia's hand in marriage.

7.    Antonio and Bassanio are such good friends that Antonio is willing to stake his life's earnings on Bassanio. Is there anyone, a friend or relative you would do the same for? Write a letter to that person, explaining why he or she is important and special to you and what you would risk for him or her.

8.    Antonio does not believe in demanding interest for the repayment of a financial debt, yet that is the norm in our own time. Write a letter to Antonio explaining the business benefits of adding interest to loans. If necessary, you may do some research to review how interest is accrued and used in modern business practices.

9.    Shakespeare was a master of *double entendres*, or the practice of using words and phrases that have two different meanings. A modern example is the word "hot." It can refer to both a temperature and the attractiveness of a person.

Make a list of as many *double entendres* as you can that are used in this play. You should keep the list on a separate sheet of paper and add to it as you notice another word or phrase that has various meanings.

10. As you read *The Merchant of Venice*, you may notice that Shakespeare includes many proverbs, or "words of wisdom." Many of these he created himself. Make a list of 10 well-known proverbs. Some examples are

    A penny saved is a penny earned
    A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
    After that is complete, try to make up a few on your own. You will see how difficult it is and, maybe, you'll appreciate Shakespeare's genius more.

11. Portia's feelings at the beginning of Act I, Scene II mirror those of Antonio at the beginning of Act I, Scene I. Write a short essay in which you compare and contrast Antonio's feelings in the first scene with Portia's feelings in the second scene.

12. In Scene II of this act, we meet Shylock, a character who is quite complex and who may be seen as both a villain and as a person who evokes sympathy.

    Shylock strikes a bargain with Antonio. Shylock says that he will lend Bassanio the money he needs to court Portia, using Antonio's money as a surety. If the money is not returned, however, Shylock will cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock's comment about this arrangement is "a pound of man's flesh taken from a man/ Is not so estimable, profitable neither,/ As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats." How much does Shylock value human life? Do you think modern people value human life more or less than this? What events currently taking place seem to support your statement? What personal experiences have you had that make you feel this way?

13. Using the previous prompt as a reference, answer the following opinion question: Which is more valuable, a human life or that of an animal? Make sure you back up your opinion; don't just write a short sentence. Include in your answer your opinion on whether animals should have the same rights as humans and if their lives are more or less important than the lives of humans are.

14. Write out a contract between Antonio and Shylock that formalizes the agreement they make in this scene. Include the terms of penalties and any others that need to be mentioned so the contract will be binding on both people. A good way to begin may be:

    This serves as a written agreement of loan between Shylock, moneylender, and Antonio, merchant and businessman, both of Venice, Italy. The amount of this loan shall be…

# Act II

15. Sometimes, in order to move the plot forward, Shakespeare has his characters dress in disguise.

    In a brief essay, explain the use of disguises in this play. Then, compare this play to another play, book, or film in which a character uses a disguise. What does the use of disguise do for the plot of these works?

16. Write an e-mail to a member of a study group, explaining why Jessica leaves her father's house and what the consequences of her actions might be.

    OR

    Write the first few paragraphs of a newspaper story explaining Jessica's disappearance.

17. Although Jessica does not want Lorenzo to see her when she is dressed as a boy, Lorenzo tells her he must see her because she is his "torch bearer."

    The phrase "holding a torch" or "bearing a torch" has become synonymous with loving someone from afar or loving someone after there is no hope of the relationship working. If a man "holds a torch" for a woman, he loves someone who can never love, or will not love, him in return.

    In a short essay, describe a time when you or someone you know "held a torch" for someone else. How was the situation resolved? You do not have to use real names of people if you do not want to.

18. By leaving, Jessica is going against her father's rules. She thinks his rule about her speaking to Christians is unfair.

    We all live by certain rules, whether they are at work, at school, or at home. What is one rule that you must obey that you think is unfair? In a short essay, discuss the rule you have chosen, why you think it is unfair, and what alternatives there are to it.

19. Write a missing person report for the police that includes all the necessary information about Jessica's disappearance.

20. As Portia, write a letter to a friend that explains how you feel about all of the suitors who come to take the casket challenge. You can use words and phrases from the text in your letter if you choose to.

21. The casket arrangement is meant to provide Portia with a suitable husband. Today, we may, instead, write a personal ad to look for love. Write an online personal ad for Portia so that she could find a worthy husband. Remember that all ads in newspapers charge by the number of letters and spaces in the ad, so use abbreviations; however, make sure that any you do use can be easily understood. For example, "Bl hair" might mean either black or blond, so be careful with abbreviations.