

The Merchant of Venice

Act 1, Scene 1 Comprehension Questions:

1. Antonio seems to have it all. Why, then, is Antonio so sad? Why doesn't *he* know the cause of his sadness? What guesses do Solanio and Salerio have about the causes of his depression? What lifts his depression?
2. What has Bassanio come to tell Antonio?
3. Why does Bassanio set his sights on Portia? What stands in his way? How does he plan to overcome those barriers?
4. Bassanio lives well beyond his means. Why, then, does Antonio continue to lend him money willingly, even though Bassanio has yet to pay him back? Would you lend money to him?
5. What plan does Bassanio have to pay Antonio back?
6. Although he has condemned usury in the past, Antonio doesn't need much convincing to go into debt for Bassanio. Why? What would he get out of granting him the loan?
7. What does Antonio get from his relationship with Bassanio?

Act 1, Scene 1 Journal Topic:

What favors have you asked of a friend? Is there one friend you repeatedly turn to for favors? Why do you turn to that friend so frequently? Or, conversely, do you have a friend for whom you continue to grant favors, even though you know they won't repay them? Why do you continue to do those favors?

Act 1, Scene 2 Comprehension Questions:

1. Shakespeare often juxtaposes (placing seeming opposites near one another) scenes (and therefore characters, settings, ideas) for a purpose. Consider what purpose Shakespeare had in placing 1.1 and 1.2 next to one another.
2. How does Venice differ from Belmont?
3. How does Portia and Nerissa's relationship differ from Antonio and Bassanio's? How is it similar? Look at the way they speak. How does Shakespeare show differences in their personalities and social stature through dialogue?
4. How is Portia's mood similar and different from Antonio's at the start of 1.1?
5. How does Portia feel about her deceased father's method of selecting a husband for her? So far, how successful has it been in eliminating inappropriate suitors?
6. Portia mocks each of her potential suitors in turn. What faults does she see in each one? How do those faults reflect the Elizabethan viewpoints of each of these cultures? What is different about her criticism of Morocco?
7. How does Portia first encounter Bassanio? What kind of social status does he have?
8. Reread lines 126-130. Does Portia's racism shock you?

Act 1, Scene 2 Journal Topics:

1. What advice have you given to someone else that you yourself find hard to follow?
2. What have your parents done that was "for your own good"? What was the end result of their actions? Was it indeed "for your own good"? Do you think that Portia's father's test seems like a good one? Why or why not?

Act 1, Scene 3 Comprehension Questions:

1. Again, Shakespeare places a scene in Belmont against one in Venice. What contrasts does he want us to see in these locations? What are the main concerns/issues of importance in Belmont? Look for repeated word choices in this scene. How does the language reflect this?
2. Bassanio contacts Shylock regarding the loan. What are the terms of the loan? What does it mean for Antonio to be “bound” to a loan?
3. What does it mean when Shylock says, “Antonio is a good man” (I.12)? How does Bassanio take his meaning? What distinction does this show between the two men in terms of their priorities or states of mind?
4. Shylock does a risk analysis of Antonio’s ability to repay the loan in II.13-26. What are the risks? What does Shylock say outweighs those risks for him? Would this be enough for you to lend him the money?
5. Bassanio invites Shylock to eat with Antonio and him, but Shylock refuses. What reasons does he give? Why does he seem so bitter all at once? What underlying rancor is there?
6. Once Antonio enters, Shylock’s aside gives us insight into why he dislikes Antonio. How would his feelings reflect the political position Jews held in Elizabethan society? How would his attitude towards the merchant influence his risk analysis?
7. Examine Shylock’s speech. What patterns do you notice? What figures of speech does he tend to use?
8. Describe Shylock. What stereotypical characteristics do you notice in the way Shakespeare’s words present Shylock’s character? What do you see that defies stereotypes?
9. Shylock’s love of money is undeniable. Why does Shylock tell the story of Jacob and Laban? How does Shylock interpret the story? How does Antonio? Review *Genesis 30* and determine if there is a distinctly “Christian” as opposed to a “Jewish” interpretation. Which does the play seem to support?
10. Why does Shylock drop the Biblical discussion as soon as Antonio challenges him? What does this say about Shylock’s place in Venetian society? How do Antonio’s words in II.93-98 reflect this Elizabethan perception of Jews?
11. Shylock directly confronts Antonio regarding the way Antonio has treated Shylock in the past. What wrongs has Antonio committed against Shylock?
12. How does Antonio react to the charges against him? How does he reconcile that apparent hypocrisy? Why does he say this is even more reason to grant the loan? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer.
13. What are Shylock’s terms of the loan? He says he grants it in terms of a “merry sport” (I.142). Is he joking or serious? How does Antonio take it? How does Bassanio? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer.
14. What is the difference between Bassanio’s and Antonio’s perceptions of the loan terms? What accounts for those differences? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer. Would Bassanio have done the same for Antonio?
15. How does Shylock’s loan to Antonio differ from Antonio’s loan to Bassanio?
16. Given this scene, what is important in Venice? Look for repeated word choices for evidence. How does the language reflect that values system?

Act 1, Scene 3 Journal Topic:

Write a journal as if you were Bassanio regarding the terms of the bond, including his reaction to the terms, quandaries about the terms, and reasons he lets Antonio accept the terms of the bond.