***The Merchant of Venice* Discussion Questions** (modified from Signet Classics Ed.)

**Instructions:** Answer the questions for each scene after each day’s reading. Some are basic plot questions while others ask for some serious analysis. Dig deep into the language for those, and be generous in your responses!

**Act 1, Scene 1 (1.1)**

1. Antonio seems to have it all. Why, then is he so sad? Why doesn’t he know the cause of his sadness? What guesses do Solanio and Salerio have about the cause of 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 these 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 for the last loan? Would you lend money to him? Why/why not?
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 gain from his relationship with Bassanio?

**Act 1, Scene 2 (1.2)**

1. Shakespeare often juxtaposes (placing seeming opposites near one another) scenes (and therefore characters, settings, ideas) for a purpose. Read 1.2 carefully, and note what **effects** placing these scenes next to one another creates.
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 does Portia’s mood compare and contrast to Antonio’s when we first meet him?
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 Portia’s last lines in this scene. What specific phrase does she use to describe the Prince of Morocco? What does her language (her semantics) reveal about her attitude? Are you shocked? Why or why not?

**Act 1, Scene 3 (1.3)**

1. Again, Shakespeare places a scene in Belmont against one in Venice. What contrasts do we see in these locations? What are the main concerns/issues of importance in Belmont? Look for repeated word choices in this scene. How does their language reveal their values/beliefs?
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” (line 11-ish, depending on your edition)? How does Bassanio take his meaning? What distinction does this show in terms of their priorities or states of mind?
4. Shylock does a risk analysis of Antonio’s ability to repay the loan in lines 13-26(-ish). 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 and analysis?
7. Examine Shylock’s speech patterns. 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 Shylocks 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 ‘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 lines 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” (1.142). 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). 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 2, Scene 1 (2.1)**

1. Examine Morocco’s opening lines. What issues does he address?
2. Look at the language he uses in lines 1-12 and 22-38. How does the imagery in his speech reflect the Elizabethan perception of Moors?
3. What is Portia’s reaction to Morocco? Based on her previous comments to Nerissa, do you believe her? Why or why not?
4. Notice how careful Portia is with her words. Why do you think this is? What does her it indicate about her?
5. Why do you think there is no Biblical imagery, only mythological imagery, in this scene?

**Act 2, Scene 2 (2.2)**

1. What is Launcelot’s debate about?
2. When Old Gobbo enters and Launcelot recognizes him, why doesn’t Launcelot reveal himself to his father? What is the purpose in hiding his identity, if even briefly?
3. What purpose does the scene between Launcelot and Old Gobbo have?
4. Why does Launcelot want to leave Shylock’s service? How do his comments affect our perceptions about Shylock?
5. Why does Bassanio accept Launcelot as his servant so quickly? Can he afford a servant?
6. Why does Gratiano want to go with Bassanio to Belmont?
7. What terms does Bassanio give him in order to go? Under what terms does Gratiano agree?

**Act 2, Scene 3 (2.3)**

1. What does Jessica give Launcelot?
2. What clues from 1.3, 2.2, and this scene would indicate that Shylock’s house is “hell”?
3. What “compliment” is Launcelot trying to give Jessica? What is ironic about Launcelot’s speech in lines 10-13?
4. Why is Jessica so ashamed to be a Jew?
5. How much of her running away is related to her oppressive father, and how much is related to her faith? What evidence do you have for your argument?
6. What similarities are there between Launcelot and Gobbo’s relationship and Jessica and Shylock’s? What are the differences you can see this far?

**Act 2, Scene 4 (2.4)**

1. Why would torchbearers be considered vile?
2. What does Jessica’s letter say?
3. What is her plan?

**Act 2, Scene 5 (2.5)**

1. What does the word *gormandize* mean?
2. What is Shylock’s initial reaction to Launcelot’s leaving his service?
3. Why does Shylock say he will accept Bassanio’s invitation?
4. How is Launcelot’s “misused” word actually accurate?
5. Why does Shylock say at the end of the scene that he is glad Launcelot is leaving?
6. How does Shylock perceive himself as a master and a father? Give evidence from the text to support your answer.
7. This is the first time Launcelot and Jessica are together with Shylock onstage. How accurate were Launcelot’s and Jessica’s descriptions of Shylock’s household? How does this further develop our understanding of Shylock’s character?

**Act 2, Scene 6 (2.6)**

1. Why are Gratiano and Salerio anxious?
2. What do the two men say about the nature of love? What view of love does Gratiano take? What kind of boyfriend do you think he would be?
3. Gratiano swears by his “hood” that Jessica is “gentle, and no Jew” (51). What is the nature of his pun? How do his words reflect the Elizabethan values system? What do they say about Gratiano’s character?
4. Review Bassanio’s speech in 1.1.161-176. How is Lorenzo’s love for Jessica different from Bassanio’s love for Portia? How are they the same?
5. Do you think Jessica will be happy with Lorenzo? Why or why not?

**Act 2, Scene 7 (2.7)**

1. How does Morocco’s mind work, that is, what do his words say about who he is? Based on his reasoning, what is his opinion of Portia? Where do his priorities lie?
2. How does death represent “what many men desire” (37)?
3. Do you think Morocco would have been a good match for Portia? Why or why not?
4. Is Portia racist? Give evidence for your claim.

**Act 2, Scene 8 (2.8)**

1. What does Solanio report that he heard Shylock say?
2. Do you think Solanio is an accurate reporter? Why or why not?
3. If he is accurate, what new insights do you have about Shylock? What does he value more, his money or his lost daughter? Give evidence from the text to support your opinion.
4. Solanio reports that Shylock calls out for “Justice! The law” (17), and Salerio acknowledges that the Duke knows about Jessica’s running off with Lorenzo. What benefit could arise from the involvement of the law in this situation?
5. What reaction do the Venetians have towards Shylock’s grief?
6. What impact will Jessica’s running away with the Christian Lorenzo have on Shylock and his bond with Antonio? Why?
7. What rumor does Salerio hear about Antonio’s ships?
8. What impression do you get about Antonio’s and Bassanio’s relationship based on Salerio’s description of their parting?

**Act 2, Scene 9 (2.9)**

1. What can you tell about Portia’s attitude towards Aragon? What text clues support your claim?
2. What is Aragon’s logic in selecting the silver casket? How does his logic reveal his character? How is his thinking different from Morocco’s?
3. What does Portia mean in her response to Aragon’s questions?
4. What does Nerissa’s comment mean (81-2)? What do you make of her character thus far?
5. Why is the messenger so favorable in his description of Bassanio?
6. What is Portia’s response to the messenger?

**Act 3, Scene 1 (3.1)**

1. How are minor characters such as Salerio and Solanio designed to reflect Venetian society at large?
2. Why is it such a crisis for Shylock that his daughter converted and married a Christian?
3. Why does Shylock channel his grief over Jessica’s leaving into anger at Antonio?
4. According to this scene, were Salerio and Solanio’s report about Shylock’s reaction to Jessica’s escape correct? How has this affected your opinion of those two characters? How has the reaction you actually see from Shylock affected your opinion of him?
5. Which does Shylock miss more: Jessica or his money? How would his grief and anger affect the way he talks about the losses?
6. Based on how Shylock has been treated by Christians, is it wrong for him to want revenge? If positions were reversed, would Antonio demand fulfillment of the bond according to the terms that were set?
7. Why is the loss of the ring even more agonizing to Shylock?
8. Is Shylock a villain or a victim of persecution?

**Act 3, Scene 2 (3.2)**

1. How is Portia’s demeanor with Bassanio different from that with her other suitors? What new side of Portia are we seeing? Give support for your answer from the text.
2. Why the new emphasis on music (43)?
3. Examine the end rhymes of Portia’s song as well as the images it includes. What might she be doing? Prove it.
4. Look at the circumstances under which Bassanio has come to court Portia. Is he the type of man Portia’s father would have chosen for her? Does he have an unfair advantage in her hints?
5. Compare Bassanio’s logic in selection with Morocco’s and Aragon’s. How does his elimination process differ from theirs? How does his description of the world also describe himself? Would he have been able to choose without Portia’s hints or encouragement? Why or why not?
6. Portia gives Bassanio the ring with a warning, and Bassanio accepts the ring with his own pledge. How does this contract or bond compare and contrast with the one made in Venice? What significance did rings have in Elizabethan England? Do they have the same significance today?
7. What news do Gratiano and Nerissa have? What bet do they make with Bassanio and Portia?
8. Look at the “welcome” given to Jessica (218 and 237). How does she try to fit into Belmont Society? What will life be like for her?
9. Bassanio comes clean about his financial status (250-271). What effect does that have on Portia?
10. How does the news from Venice change the language used in Belmont?
11. What does Antonio’s letter indicate about his feelings for Bassanio?

**Act 3, Scene 3 (3.3)**

1. Why does Shylock insist on the punishment for forfeiting the bond?
2. Why does Solanio think the Duke will forgive the forfeiture? Why doesn’t Antonio?
3. Much of this play has to do with Christian vs. Jewish standards of morality. What takes precedence in Venetian law where commerce is king?

**Act 3, Scene 4 (3.4)**

1. Why would Portia even consider helping Antonio?
2. What does she tell Lorenzo that she and Nerissa will do? What is their actual plan?
3. What does Portia’s speech about their disguises say about her opinion of men?
4. How is she equipped to portray a man?
5. What does Jessica’s cross-dressing have in common with Portia and Nerissa’s?
6. What disadvantages do you see with Portia, coming from Belmont to Venice? What advantages does she have?

**Act 3, Scene 5 (3.5)**

1. Antonio quips that the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose. How does the scriptural debate between Launcelot and Jessica serve each character’s purpose? This debate has the potential to explode the harmony of Belmont. How does Shakespeare diffuse this situation?
2. How has the relationship between Jessica and Launcelot changed since Launcelot has become Bassanio’s servant and not Shylock’s? Has the change in master changed his personality? Explain.
3. Why does Launcelot use wordplay as humor? What effect does his humor have?
4. What do Jessica and Lorenzo think of Portia? Why is their opinion significant enough for Shakespeare to show?

**Act 4, Scene 1 (4.1)**

1. What is Antonio’s mood going into the trial? How does this compare with his mood in 1.1? Why do you think this is?
2. What comparisons does Antonio make concerning Bassanio’s arguing with Shylock?
3. How is others’ treatment of their slaves comparable to Shylock’s treatment of his ‘pound of flesh’, according to Shylock? How does this argument test Venetian law?
4. If the courts do not uphold Shylock’s claim, what does that mean for the laws of Venice?
5. How do those in the courtroom react to Shylock? How would you describe their behavior? How does their behavior compare and contrast to behavior towards him in the streets of Venice? Find evidence from the text for your comparison.
6. What appeals does Portia make in petitioning Shylock to have mercy? What effect do these appeals have on Shylock?
7. Why is Shylock so adamant about the law and in his refusal to grant mercy, despite the offer of double and triple repayment? What is greater to him than his religion and his love of money?
8. Does it surprise you that Portia upholds the law instead of bending it in this case? Why or why not?
9. What does it mean for Shylock to call Portia a “Daniel”?
10. Why does Shylock refuse to get a doctor to attend Antonio?
11. What effect do Bassanio’s pleas have?
12. What is Antonio’s reaction to the trial?
13. How does Gratiano respond to the proceedings?
14. How does Portia save Antonio’s life?
15. What is the legal punishment for conspiring against a Venetian’s life?
16. What mercy does the Duke show? Before he gives his punishment, the Duke tells Shylock that he will “see the difference of our spirit.” What is this spirit of the Venetians, and by extension, Christians? Does it ring true? Why or why not?
17. What about Antonio’s mercy? What are his conditions?
18. How does Shylock feel about the outcome of the trial? How do you feel about it?
19. Was this a fair trial? Explain.
20. What do the Venetians gain from Shylock’s conversion to Christianity? Why would this punishment be viewed as a virtuous one?
21. What new insights do Portia and Nerissa have into their husbands’ natures as a result of this trial?
22. Shakespeare called this play a comedy. What characteristics determined if a play was classified as a comedy in the Elizabethan era? Do any aspects of the play uphold that classification? How does the outcome of this trial help the play qualify? Looking through a 21st century lens, would you call this play a comedy? Why/why not?
23. Why would Portia ask Bassanio for the ring he had promised not to give away? What does this request say about her character?
24. What excuse does Bassanio give the disguised Portia for not initially giving her his wedding ring?
25. How easy is it for Antonio to change Bassanio’s mind? What does Antonio say Bassanio should value more than the ring?

**Act 4, Scene 2 (4.2)**

1. What does the fact that both Bassanio and Gratiano give their rings away say about relationships between men and relationships between men and women?
2. How serious will the consequences of giving the rings away be? How do you know?
3. What is the effect of Shakespeare’s bringing in the plotline here? What purpose does it serve?

**Act 5, Scene 1 (5.1)**

1. How does the dramatic shift in setting affect the tone of the play at this point?
2. Why does Shakespeare return us to Lorenzo and Jessica? What can we glean about their relationship? Are they a good match? Explain.
3. What effect does music have on the characters specifically, and on the scene in general?
4. Examine the argument about the ring. What is the tone of that argument? How do you know this? How has Shakespeare molded the language to convey his tone?
5. How is this scene the comic inverse of the courtroom scene from 4.1?
6. How is Portia’s intelligence an asset to her marriage? How is it a hindrance?
7. Not the language play in this scene. How does it reflect the emotional tone of the scene?
8. The act starts in moonlight and ends as morning comes. Why?
9. Does this play have a “happily ever after” ending? Why or why not? What contributes to that feeling? What detracts from it?