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Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

written by Lisa Burris

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ISBN-10 1-58049-828-0
ISBN-13 978-158049-828-9
Reorder No. 201300

The Merchant of Venice

To The Teacher

In order to allow the teacher maximum flexibility in his or her approach, we have grouped the prompts by sections. The teacher may, therefore, assign specific prompts or allow the students to select one or more prompts from each section

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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Reference Sheet

Date_____

[illegible]

The Merchant of Venice

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.

Response Journal

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.

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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.

Response Journal

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.

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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.

Response Journal

22. The inscription on the casket of gold reads, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.” If you had to name one thing that people universally desire, what would it be? In a short essay, choose an item, a feeling, or an achievement that everyone desires, and explain why that thing is so popular.

Act III

23. Shylock seems to be more concerned over the loss of his money than the loss of his daughter. Should he be more concerned about his money and jewels or about Jessica?

Write a letter to Shylock in which you explain the greater of his two losses.

24. We are never told exactly what Shylock looks like, although various actors and directors have offered their interpretations of him.

Write a short essay that explains what features you would give him. What sections of this Act make you think that Shylock looks the way you have depicted him?

25. Shylock and Jessica are Jewish. As such, what are the social and/or religious implications of Jessica’s running away with Lorenzo, who is a Christian? In a brief essay, explain why the difference in Jessica’s and Lorenzo’s religions is important to Shylock.

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26. Shylock's speech about the similarities between Jews and Christians ("Hath not a Jew eyes?/ Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?...") is very profound. In effect, he is claiming that all people are the same, regardless of their religion, race, or culture. Unfortunately, not everyone believes this, which frequently leads to prejudice and racism.

In your opinion, can all cultures and races exist without prejudice, racism, and social injustice? Write a short essay explaining why you feel this is plausible or not.

27. Briefly research the Jewish culture of the 1500s and 1600s. How accurate is Shakespeare's portrayal of the Jewish culture of his time? Write an essay explaining how accurate or inaccurate his ideas about Judaism in the play are.
28. When it is Bassanio's turn to select the casket that will allow him to marry Portia, he comments that "the world is still deceived with ornament." In other words, people are attracted to fancy material possessions.

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Are our heads turned by bright and fancy things, or are we more attracted to inner beauty? Write an essay in which you state your opinion about this subject. Be sure to use specific examples to support your opinion.

29. Bassanio thinks that outward appearance hides truth. Has there ever been a time when the physical appearance of someone or something deceived you? In a short essay, explain that experience.
30. Compare and contrast Lorenzo and Jessica's romance with that of Bassanio and Portia's.
31. The scroll in the casket that Bassanio selects reads: "You that choose not by view, Chance as fair, and choose as true." Explain this in writing to a classmate who just doesn't quite understand what Shakespeare meant by these words.

Response Journal

32. As Bassanio, write a letter back to Antonio, comforting him on his financial losses.
33. Write an e-mail to a classmate in which you discuss the implications the loss of Antonio's boats will have for Bassanio.

Act IV

34. The concept of disguise is a recurring element of this play, as it is in many of Shakespeare's works. Do you think there are ever times when disguising your identity or true feelings is necessary? In a brief essay, state your opinion. Use specific examples to support your ideas.
35. Make a list of all the positive and negative qualities of Shylock. Follow the format below.

Positive

Negative

36. Make a list of all the positive and negative qualities of Antonio. You may use the same organizational method as you used for the one directly above.
37. Shylock wants to claim the pound of Antonio's flesh not just because of their agreement, but also because he feels that Antonio has verbally abused him. Think of a time when you have been treated badly by someone verbally. What did you do to fix the situation? How does your experience compare with Shylock's? If you were Shylock, would you "forgive and forget," or would you, too, want your revenge?

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38. Antonio tells his friends, “Think you question with a Jew.” He is obviously basing his views of all Jewish people on the actions of just one Jew: Shylock. Do you think that any culture can be judged by the actions of just one member of that culture? Would you like your own culture, religion, or even family to be judged by the actions of just one member of the group? Explain how this would make you feel.
39. The Duke, arbitrating between Antonio and Shylock, asks Shylock, “How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?” In your opinion, does a person have to be merciful in order to receive mercy in return? Does a person have to be kind in order to receive kindness from others? Be sure to thoroughly explain your answer.
40. Part of the disagreement between Antonio and Shylock has to do with the difference between the letter of the law (that is, the law’s literal meaning), and the spirit of the law (its moral and ethical meaning). Can you think of any recent court cases that have addressed the same type of problem? Are there any laws that should not be followed too strictly?

OR

Pick a court case that you are familiar with. Explain the circumstances of the case and your feelings about the outcome of the case, or how you think it will turn out if it has not yet been decided.

41. Write a short skit in which a TV court reporter describes the scene when Antonio and Shylock argue their cases before the Duke. You may begin by saying something like

Good afternoon, I’m _____ reporting to you live from Venice, Italy where....

Response Journal

42. Portia says,
The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

In your opinion, are people who are kind and merciful “twice blest?” Do you expect or receive anything in return for helping others? Write a short essay defending your opinion, using examples from your own life, from the movies or television, or from something you have read.

43. Portia says, “in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation.” She means that if justice were served perfectly, everyone would be punished—no one is perfect, after all. If justice cannot be perfectly applied, what might the consequences be for our society? Relate this idea to capital punishment. Some people argue, for example, that if a murderer is condemned to die, no one—and certainly not the murder victim—benefits. Others argue, however, that justice is not served until the murderer’s life is taken as payment for his crime.

What are your views about the death penalty? Do you think it is just punishment, or is it vengeful? Do you think that anyone benefits from the death penalty? What are the benefits and drawbacks of capital punishment?

44. Although Bassanio loves his wife, he tells Antonio that he would give up everything—his wife, his life, and the world—if he could stop Shylock from killing Antonio. It is clear then, that Antonio and Bassanio are very close friends.

In a brief essay, explore the meaning of friendship. What does it mean to be someone’s friend? What are the qualities of a good friend? List at least five qualities you expect in a friend and the reasons each one is important to you. Your list might be presented like this:

QUALITY

WHY IMPORTANT

The Merchant of Venice

45. If you could choose one character in this play who represents good, which one would you choose, and why would you choose that character?
46. If you could choose one character in this play who represents evil, which one would you choose, and why would you choose that character?
47. As a result of the court ruling, Shylock is forced to become a Christian. If you were required by law to give up one of your most treasured beliefs, would you do so or would you refuse?

OR

Is it possible for a law to force someone to give up an idea or belief? Explain your answer.

48. Write a letter to Shylock, expressing your views on the outcome of the trial. Be sure to include details from the play in your letter.
49. Portia's statement, "he is well paid that is well satisfied," echoes the saying that "a job well done is its own reward."

In your opinion, does pride in one's work lie only in the satisfaction taken in that work? If you do a good job, is that enough, or do you also need praise or money for your work to be satisfied? Explain.

Act V

50. In this act, Portia and Nerissa reveal to Lorenzo that he and Jessica will inherit Shylock's fortune. Lorenzo responds to this by saying, "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way of starved people." In a short letter to that classmate who does not understand the play, explain what *manna* is and why Lorenzo's comment is particularly significant for Shylock. You might need to look up *manna* in the dictionary or on the Internet.
51. *The Merchant of Venice* is considered one of Shakespeare's comedies. What are some comedic elements in this play? Review your notes and the play itself, and then make a list of some of the comedic touches Shakespeare uses in the play.
52. Some literary critics see Portia as a very strong female character, even as a female role model. What makes Portia such a strong person? Do you find her an admirable character? Be sure to completely explain your answer, using examples from the play.

Wrap-Up

53. *Theme* is a term for the lesson that the readers of a literary work are expected to learn from that work. What are we expected to learn from *The Merchant of Venice*? Write out a statement of what you think the theme or themes of this play might be. Remember that a theme is a *general* statement about mankind; it should not mention characters in the play specifically. Here is an example of a theme that is unrelated to *The Merchant of Venice*:

When attempting a risky, difficult venture, people should be prepared to fail numerous times before succeeding.

The Merchant of Venice

54. Many great actors have performed Shakespeare's works. In fact, it is an honor to be called a Shakespearean actor. If you were casting a film version of *The Merchant of Venice*, which famous actors would you choose to play the major roles? Be sure to explain why you would choose those actors and what each actor would bring to the role. Use the following form:

CHARACTER

ACTOR

REASON

55. Many of the ideas in Shakespeare's works are common in films and stage shows today. For example, the movie *Scotland, PA* is a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In your opinion, which modern film is most like *The Merchant of Venice*? How is the film you chose similar to this play? How do the film and play differ?
56. Choose a portion of a scene from *The Merchant of Venice* and rewrite it in modern language.
57. Write a short essay in which you explore the conflict between appearance and reality in this play. Be sure to use specific examples from the play.
58. Write a review of this play for an online source like Amazon.com or Borders.com. Would you recommend the play? What did you like or dislike about it?

The Merchant of Venice

TEST

I. Multiple Choice

1. Shylock hates Antonio because Antonio
 - A. has spit on Shylock and verbally abused him in the marketplace.
 - B. has lent money to people at zero interest, thereby undercutting Shylock's business.
 - C. has run off with Jessica.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. None of the above.

2. The Merchant in *The Merchant of Venice* refers to
 - A. Shylock.
 - B. Antonio.
 - C. Bassanio.
 - D. Portia.
 - E. Launcelot.

3. The character who says love is blind in speaking of his or her humiliating appearance is
 - A. Jessica.
 - B. Portia.
 - C. Nerissa.
 - D. Gratiano.
 - E. Launcelot.

4. The character who likes to make comments which have double meanings is
 - A. Bassanio.
 - B. Tubal.
 - C. Antonio.
 - D. Gratiano.
 - E. Nerissa.

The Merchant of Venice

5. Antonio cannot repay Shylock's loan because
 - A. his ships have been lost at sea.
 - B. the person to whom he gave the money has not paid him back.
 - C. he is afraid to do so.
 - D. Bassanio has asked him not to repay the loan.
 - E. he wants the case to go to court.
6. This character is presented as defying his or her father's wishes.
 - A. Portia
 - B. Jessica
 - C. Nerissa
 - D. Launcelot Gobbo
 - E. Both A and C
7. Judging from this play, it would appear that the traditional comic figure in a Shakespearean play
 - A. is from the lower class.
 - B. talks on at great length.
 - C. mixes up the meaning of words.
 - D. is not well educated.
 - E. All of the above
8. Jessica's true love is
 - A. Bassanio.
 - B. Antonio.
 - C. Lorenzo.
 - D. Salarino.
 - E. Shylock
9. Antonio borrows money from Shylock because
 - A. he wants to court Jessica.
 - B. his friend needs the money to court Portia.
 - C. he needs it to send his ships out to sea.
 - D. he wants to prove a point to Shylock.
 - E. he wants to humiliate the Jew

Response Journal

10. In this play, Shakespeare meant Shylock to be a
- A. stereotypical figure.
 - B. villainous person.
 - C. character one could feel sympathy for.
 - D. Both A and B
 - E. All of the above
11. The reason the Duke does not declare Antonio's contract with Shylock null and void is that
- A. the people of Venice will rebel.
 - B. the reputation of Venice as a city that honors contracts will be hurt.
 - C. the King will not allow him to do so.
 - D. the Duke cannot tolerate Antonio.
 - E. the Duke feels Antonio is getting what he deserves.
12. Portia tries to get Bassanio to delay making his choice of caskets because
- A. she wants to spend more time with him.
 - B. she is not sure if she likes him.
 - C. she does not know if he loves her or her money.
 - D. she does not think he can be faithful.
 - E. Both C and D
13. The inscription on the casket that contains the portrait of Portia reads,
- A. "who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire."
 - B. "who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves."
 - C. "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."
 - D. "who chooseth me must choose wisely."
14. At the outcome of the trial, Antonio is released from his bond because
- A. Shylock finally feels regret for his actions and wishes to be merciful.
 - B. Shylock is tripped up by the letter of the law.
 - C. the duke steps in and pardons Antonio.
 - D. Portia uses her money and influence to get Shylock to change his mind.
 - E. Both A and D

The Merchant of Venice

15. In addition to Shylock, at the play's end what other character appears as an outsider?
- A. Portia
 - B. Jessica
 - C. Gratiano
 - D. Antonio
 - E. Nerissa

II. Identify the speaker of the quote.

16. "The quality of mercy is not strained, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed."
- A. Shylock
 - B. Antonio
 - C. Portia
 - D. Launcelot
 - E. Gratiano
17. "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions ...If you prick us, do we not bleed?"
- A. Shylock
 - B. Portia
 - C. Jessica
 - D. Lorenzo
 - E. Launcelot
18. "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."
- A. Portia
 - B. Lorenzo
 - C. Gratiano
 - D. Antonio
 - E. Shylock

Response Journal

19. "If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces."
- A. Portia
 - B. Jessica
 - C. Antonio
 - D. Bassanio
 - E. Gratiano
20. "In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice
As far as Belmont."
- A. Antonio
 - B. Shylock
 - C. Lorenzo
 - D. Jessica
 - E. Portia

The Merchant of Venice

Test
Student Answer Sheet

Name: _____

1. _____

11. _____

2. _____

12. _____

3. _____

13. _____

4. _____

14. _____

5. _____

15. _____

6. _____

16. _____

7. _____

17. _____

8. _____

18. _____

9. _____

19. _____

10. _____

20. _____

Response Journal

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The Merchant of Venice

Test
Answer Key

1. ___D__

11. ___B__

2. ___B__

12. ___A__

3. ___A__

13. ___C__

4. ___D__

14. ___B__

5. ___B__

15. ___D__

6. ___B__

16. ___C__

7. ___E__

17. ___A__

8. ___C__

18. ___E__

9. ___C__

19. ___A__

10. ___E__

20. ___C__

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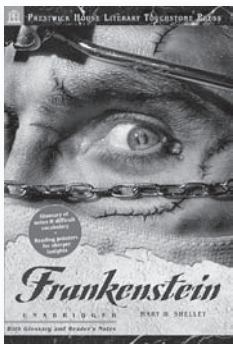
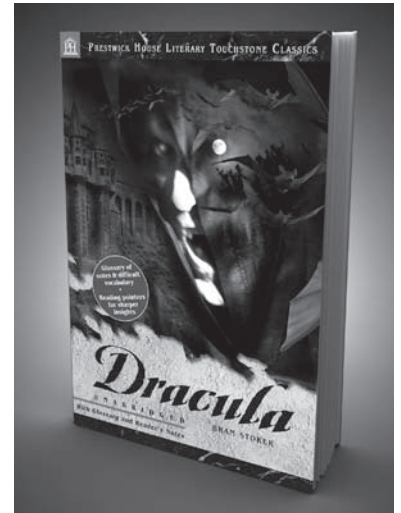
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