The Merchant of Venice Study Questions

Answer the following questions in complete sentences on separate paper. For every question marked with an asterisk (*) include a full citation for the line or section of dialogue where you found your answer. Be sure to answer all parts of every question.

1.1
1. What is the tone of Antonio's first speech (1.1.1-7)?
2. How does Antonio see his position in the world (1.1.81-83)?
3. Why has Bassanio come to talk to Antonio (1.2.126-128), and what does he start talking about instead? How do these two topics come together?
4. How does Bassanio describe Portia and his quest for her (and her wealth)?
5. Why can't Antonio give him the money he needs now? What will he do about it?

1.2
6. How does Portia feel at the beginning of the scene? How does this compare to Antonio at the beginning of 1.1?
8. As Portia and Nerissa talk about the long list of suitors, how good do Portia's prospects generally sound? What one good prospect does she have?

1.3
9. Why does Shylock hate Antonio, as he says in his aside in 1.3.42-52? What further reasons does he describe directly to Antonio in 1.3.116-139?
10. In 1.3.116-139, Shylock is pointing out what he feels to be extraordinary irony and hypocrisy. Do you think he has a point? Explain.
11. *How does Antonio respond to Shylock’s point in the last question?
12. Antonio has a famous line in 1.3.106-111; briefly paraphrase what he’s saying.

After Act 1
1. Consider Antonio’s behavior and dialogue in both 1.1 and 1.3. Why does he treat Shylock the way he does? Is it justified? (Answer should be more than half a page.)

2.1

2.2
2. What does Lancelet want from Bassanio?
3. *Why doesn't Bassanio want to take Gratiano with him to Belmont?

2.3
4. What does Jessica ask Lancelet to do for her? What is she planning to do?
5. In what way(s) are the situations of Jessica and Lancelet, as well as the dialogue between them, similar?

2.4 -- none

2.5
6. *Where is Shylock going to dinner? Why doesn’t he want to go? Why was he invited?
7. *Why is Shylock happy that Lancelet is now working for Bassanio?
2.6  
8. What is Jessica’s disguise for her escape from her father's house?  
9. *What does she take with her?  What is she carrying it in?

2.7  
10. What are the three caskets made of?  
11. *Which casket does the Prince of Morocco choose?  What reasoning led him to that choice?  
   What reasoning led him to not choose either of the other two?  
12. Paraphrase the poem that the Prince of Morocco finds in the casket he chooses.  
13. What is Portia's response after his departure?  Why do you think 2.7.87 is often cut out of modern productions of the play?

2.8  
14. *How, according to Solanio, did Shylock respond to his daughter's departure?  
15. *How, according to Salarino, did Antonio respond to Bassanio's departure?  
16. Is it possible either account isn’t entirely accurate?  Why might gossipers like Salanio and Salarino skew these accounts on purpose?  Or, does the question of accuracy provide us with ambiguity?

2.9  
17. *Which casket does the Prince of Arragon choose?  What reasoning led him to that choice?  
   What reasoning led him to not choose either of the other two?  
18. Paraphrase the poem that the Prince of Arragon finds in the casket he chooses.  

After Act 2  
19. By process of elimination, we now know which casket has Portia’s picture in it.  Why that one, instead of the others?  
20. Did you guess which casket was the correct one before any of them were opened?  If so, how did you guess?  If not, why did you predict the one that you did?  
21. How are the events of Act 2 all about appearance vs. reality?  Find and explain at least five examples.  (Answer should be at least one page.)

3.1  
1. Why does Shylock tell Antonio (indirectly) to look to his bond (3.1.43-49)?  
2. What news does Tubal have from Genoa?  What is the effect of Tubal’s alternating reports about Antonio and about Jessica?  
3. *What did Jessica use to pay for a monkey?  Why is Shylock so upset about this particular item she traded?  How does this make us feel about Shylock?

3.2  
4. Why does Portia want Bassanio to wait a day or two before choosing a casket?  
5. *Which casket does Bassanio choose?  What reasoning led him to that choice?  What reward does he get?  Is that any surprise?  
6. Remember that the inscription on the lead casket is "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.11-12).  Why is this inscription appropriate for preparing for marriage?  Do you think this inscription is appropriate to Bassanio?  Explain.  
7. What does Portia say about the ring she gives Bassanio in 3.2.175-178?  What does Bassanio say about the ring?
8. How does Bassanio tell Portia about Antonio? What is rich Portia's response? How do you compare her wealth (now Bassanio's) with Antonio's or Shylock's? (Remember, Shylock had to get help to loan Antonio three thousand ducats.

9. Read Antonio's letter carefully in light of his earlier attitude toward Bassanio. What is he asking of Bassanio? What is he trying to do to Bassanio?

3.3

10. What is the point of this scene between Shylock and Antonio?

11. What does Antonio's last speech tell us about Antonio's chances of survival?

3.4

12. What reason does Portia give to Lorenzo for her departure with Nerissa? What does she send Balthazar to do?

13. What does Portia tell Nerissa they will actually be doing?

3.5 – None

After Act 3

14. What is the function of 3.1.52-72? Does Shylock see any differences between Christians and Jews? Explain your reaction to this speech, and explain if and how your view of Shylock (or any other characters) has changed as a result. (answer should be more than half a page)

4.1

1. What does the Duke think Shylock is going to do (4.1.18-35)? What is Shylock's response?

2. Why is Shylock unwilling to show mercy? How does he respond to the Venetians and their call for mercy (4.1.91-103)? What is his ultimate claim (even "threat") in demanding justice (4.1.103-104)?

3. What is Portia's first judgment about the bond (4.1.180-188)? Why “must” Shylock then be merciful (4.1.188)? How does this discussion help us see the purpose and focus of the "quality of mercy" speech (4.1.190-212)? What religious message does the speech contain? What religion does the message come from? How likely is Shylock to respond favorably to it?

4. Why is it important that offers be made to pay Shylock the amount owed him and even more?

5. Look at what Bassanio and Gratiano say to Antonio, with Portia’s and Nerissa’s responses, in 4.1.294-306. What sort of potential problem is brewing here? How does it relate to the play’s theme of the bonds of male friendship versus heterosexual/romantic love?

6. What happens at 4.1.319-325? How does the law begin to work against Shylock? How has his strategy for revenge backfired?

7. Why can't Shylock take the money now and leave (4.1.335-336)? What additional problem with the law does Shylock have at 4.1.363-377? Why does this law against an "alien" apply to Shylock?

8. How are the tables turned at 4.1.378? How does Gratiano respond to this request? How does the Duke respond?

9. What penalty does the Duke decree (4.1.386-388)? What clarification does Portia provide at line 389? What "mercy" does Antonio add (4.1.396-406)? Who, ultimately, is the big winner here?

10. Describe the different kind of mercy Shylock asks for (4.1.390-393); how does this bring the meaning of mercy into question?

4.2 – None
After Act 4
11. What can we conclude from the different behaviors of Bassanio and Gratiano in 4.1? (answer should be more than half a page)

5.1
1. What does the argument about the rings say to Portia and Nerissa about their husbands? What does it make you think about their husbands?
2. In this whole situation about the rings, do Bassanio and Gratiano have good reason to be upset with their wives?
3. *What is Antonio's role in resolving it?*
4. Why, in the context of the play, is it proper to have waited until now to consummate the marriages (and not in Act 3, when they were married)?
5. What is Antonio’s situation at the end of the play? Compare this to his lines in 1.1.

After Act 5
6. How does the issue about the rings reflect two of the major themes of the play, revenge and mercy? (answer should be more than half a page)

After the Play – Responses must be at least 75 words each, not counting any quotations you use.

1. Use the definition of “The Other” to explain what Shylock is blamed for and why. Then, give examples from the play of any of the other characters actually committing the acts or exhibiting the traits assigned Shylock.

2. Does our legal system focus on rehabilitation, mercy, or revenge? Is our legal system effective? Having read the play, do you think it could be more effective if we focused on something else?

3. What did the play mean in Shakespeare’s time? What does it mean to us today? What does any change in meaning over time say about the works of Shakespeare?

4. Using two or more of the quotes below as well as examples from the play, explain what you now think about the balance between law, justice, revenge, mercy, and forgiveness.

   Justice without force is powerless; force without justice is tyrannical.
   --Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French mathematician, scientist and philosopher

   I have always found that mercy bears richer fruit than strict justice.
   --Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), 16th American president

   How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice?
   --Robert Frost (1874-1963), American poet, from a letter written late in life

   I can get you justice, I can get you what’s right, or I can get you a pound of flesh—I can’t get you all three.
   --Bill Witt (1950?-2011), criminal and civil suit attorney