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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



*The Merchant of Venice*  
William Shakespeare



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**Prestwick House**

P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938

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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.

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*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.

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*The Merchant of Venice*

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.

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*The Merchant of Venice*

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.

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*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.