The Merchant of Venice
William Shakespeare

MASTERPROSE STUDY QUESTIONS

ACT I

1. What important background information is established in the first scene?
   - Antonio & Bassanio are good friends; both see each other as good people.
   - Antonio is tied up at sea
   - Antonio is sad – no one, including himself, knows why
   - Bassanio wants Portia’s hand in marriage
   - Bassanio is in debt & needs Antonio’s help
   - Antonio will have to guarantee a loan for Bassanio

2. Does Shakespeare intend the audience to view Bassanio as a spendthrift and a “gold digger”?
   - As a spendthrift – mismanages his finances & spends more than he has (1.1 : 123-130) – wants to cut back on his spending habits & pay back his debts.
   - p 13 – willing to pay back?

3. Why, in Scene II, is Portia in such a melancholy mood?
   - Dislikes all the suitors that have thus far come for her hand
   - Worries about getting stuck with someone she dislikes

4. Why does Shakespeare use the word “choose” so often in the second scene?
   - To emphasize Portia’s lack of choice & the choosing of the proper box
   - p 19 1.2 19-25, 30-311 – father’s demands

5. How is Portia characterized in Scene II?
   - self-confidence
   - funny
   - honest/blunt
   - picky
   - loyal to father’s wishes
   - mean/critical

6. In Scene II, why do Portia and Nerissa review the suitors who have come to court Portia?
   - for fun
   - to determine what Portia thinks of each
   - see choice/make Bassanio seem like the best choice
The Merchant of Venice
William Shakespeare

7. How do Shylock’s first words in Scene III help to characterize him?
   - solely concerned with money
   - p 25 1.3.1 “Three thousand ducats, well”

8. What is the point of Shylock’s comments about Antonio’s ships?
   - One must take into account that Antonio’s investments are all at sea & as such they can be deemed uncertain -- ships can sink; pirates can attack; there can be a storm
   - 1.3 15-26 foreshadowing potential trouble of assets

9. Why does Shylock refuse to eat with Antonio?
   - He is Jewish & Antonio is Christian – follow different dietary laws (Kosher)
   - Neither likes the other
   - Only business

10. What is the purpose of Shylock’s “aside” as Antonio approaches in Scene III?
    - 1.3 37-49
    - To reveal his true intentions to the audience -- wants to finally get the upper hand & settle his ancient grudge -- foreshadowing

11. What is ironic about Shylock’s reference in Scene III to feeding his grudge toward Antonio, and then greeting Antonio by saying that he was the last man in their mouths? (1.3 57)
    - 1.3 44 “evil” of Shylock’s character (feeding his grudge)
    - wants to chew him up & spit him out -- have Antonio at his mercy so as to satisfy his hate & desire for revenge
    - was just talking about getting back at him
    - (incidental/unexpected)

12. How does Shylock defend his practice of charging interest on loans?
    - story from the Bible re: Jacob & the spotted sheep -- expanding your worth; profit is a blessing as long as you don’t seal to get it
    - 1.3 69-77 (money lending..increased interest)
13. Apart from the matter of usury, why does Shylock bear such hatred for Antonio?
   - Antonio is Christian
   - Antonio belittles & insults him

14. How does Antonio react to Shylock’s expression of his resentment? (Shylock 1.3 24-27)
   - says he would do & say all those things again (1.3. 28-29)
   - he rejects him -- will continue to be enemies

15. Can the audience believe Shylock when he says he would offer the hand of friendship to Antonio?
   - No, we have heard his aside & know he is scheming

16. Why does Antonio agree to the terms of the “merry bond” -- that is, to forfeit one pound of flesh if he fails to repay the borrowed money on time?
   - His ships are due back in 2 months, one full month before the loan must be paid -- anticipates their safe arrival & a return of 3 times the amount of the loan from his investments
   - 1.3 44-50 & 1.3 55-58

17. What does Bassanio’s reluctance to allow Antonio to agree to Shylock’s bond reveal about him?
   - Truly cares about Antonio as a friend & doesn’t want him to put himself at risk

18. As far as plot development is concerned, what is the importance of Antonio’s agreeing to Shylock’s bond?
   - It is easier to hold someone to the terms of an agreement when the person willingly consented to it
   - Foreshadows something will likely go wrong (rising action)
ACT II

19. How does the scene between Portia and the Prince of Morocco further Portia’s characterization?
   - that to her looks are not enough -- doesn’t judge someone based on that
   - says he has a good a chance as any
   - values a person’s character

20. Why does Shakespeare split the episode of the Prince of Morocco’s choice into two scenes?
   - to build suspense (ie, will he pick the right box)
   - to develop other characters & plot lines -- 2.2 – Lancelot, Gobbo; 2.3 - Jessica & letter; 2.4 - Lorenzo’s plan;
     2.5 - Shylock going to party; 2.6 - Jessica escaping & Bassanio & Gratiano leaving for Belmont

21. What is the function of Launcelot Gobbo in Scene II?
   - comedic relief
   - further villainizes Shylock
   - build up needed to him leaving Shylock’s service & asking to be in Bassanio’s service

22. What new element of plot is added to the play in Scene III?
   - Jessica & Lorenzo’s forbidden love

23. What is Launcelot’s function in this subplot?
   - a go between characters -- messenger -- informer -- confidant

24. How does Jessica’s letter to Lorenzo in Scene IV set up further exposition? (developing plot)
   - their plan to escape – Jessica will sneak out of her home disguised as a pageboy & will act as Lorenzo’s torchbearer for the party -- will also steal money & jewels from her dad
   - 2.4 29-32
25. Why is Shylock reluctant to sup with Bassanio?
   - know he is only being invited to be flattered (softened up) 2.5 14
   - had a dream of money bags - to him a bad omen that things are not going his way right now 2.5 19

26. What is ironic about Shylock’s leaving his keys with his daughter? 2.5 13
   - he told her to lock everything up so he will need her to let him back in but she will be gone
   - she takes all that is valuable so really there is no point in locking up – goes against the proverb he quotes, “Fast bind, fast find” 2.5 54 (lock things up & you will get to keep them) = because he has locked his daughter up she wants to leave him

27. What does Shylock’s attitude toward music reveal about him?
   - he is a very serious & sober individual who doesn’t like to have fun or enjoy life.
   - 2.5 30-35

28. Why is Shylock glad to see Launcelot leave his household to go to work for Bassanio?
   - says he eats too much, is very slow when he works & sleeps all day like a cat
   - 2.5 47-50

29. Should Jessica be regarded as a thief for taking money with her when she elopes with Lorenzo?  (opinionated)
   - 2.6

30. As Scene VI closes, why does Antonio announce that there will be no masque that night?
   - the wind was blowing the right way so sBassanio & Gratiano had to take advantage & set said for Belmont immediately
   - 2.6 65-67
31. **What is the dramatic function of Scene VII?**
   - suspense & conclusion of the Prince of Morocco’s chance at winning Portia’s hand
   - message = can’t judge people/situations by first impressions or their exterior
   - reveal’s Portia’s true feelings towards him – prejudice
   - 2.7

32. **Why does the Prince of Morocco choose the gold casket over the others?**
   - thinks that its message applies to Portia because she is what many men desire as is shown by the many suitors who have come from all over the world for her -- lead is too base (2.7 49-50) -- silver less valuable than gold (2.7 53-55)
   - 2.7 37-41

33. **What is the lesson the prince discovers inside the gold box?**
   - all that glitters is not gold
   - men sell their souls based on appearances
   - sometimes that which glitters actually contains worms
   - should have been more wise than bold
   - worth is more than exterior based -- appearances can be deceiving
   - 2.7 65-73

34. **What is the dramatic purpose of the conversation between Salerio and Solanio in Scene VIII?**
   - to inform us that Shylock has realized Jessica is gone & figures they left on Bassanio’s ship – however Duke discovered they left in a gondola
   - Shylock is demanding justice – very upset all his money is gone, feels deceived
   - that a Venetian ship loaded with cargo was wrecked in the English Channel -- possibly belongs to Antonio
   - 2.8 75

35. **Why didn’t Shakespeare stage Shylock’s reaction to his daughter’s elopement rather than having Solanio report it?**  (speculation)

36. **How does Shakespeare take the opportunity to satirize Spain, England’s rival, in the scene with the Prince of Arragon?**
   (satirize = ridicule)
   - makes a fool out of the Prince of Arragon -- one shouldn’t get more than one deserves, having earned it -- now Spain has gotten things by being corrupt, not by merit -- many who gave orders will now take them
   - 2.9
37. What does the servant’s announcement of the next suitor at the end of Act II lead the audience to expect?
   - that this young Venetian suitor is no other than Bassanio -- that he will be successful in winning the lottery for Portia

ACT III

38. How do Solanio and Salerio prove dramatically useful again in Scene I?
   - Solanio confirms that Antonio has lost his ships -- this will bankrupt him
   - make Shylock face the truth that he had to have known how unhappy Jessica was
   - led the q. which gets Shylock to confirm he will enforce the clause

39. What is the effect of Shylock’s long “I am a Jew” speech in the first scene?
   - to exemplify the prejudice Jews faced in Elizabethan times -- that Jews are humans just as Christians are
   - that one gets the same reaction one receives -- if a Jew wrong a Christian, the latter wants revenge & so the villainy he has been taught by them, he will now use on them

40. How does Shakespeare keep from making Shylock into too sympathetic a character in Scene I?
   - still, if not more than ever, out for revenge & punishment -- no mercy
   - cares more about his lost jewels & $ than his daughter

41. What is the prevailing mood as the scene ends?
   - one of anger, maliciousness, revenge, evil
   - feel sorry for Antonio

42. What is the dramatic importance of Scene II?
   - Bassanio gets Portia & she couldn’t be happier
   - Gratiano revealing he loves Nerissa & vice versa -- will also marry
   - find out what happened to Antonio’s ship & Shylock’s intention
43. Compare the mood of Scene II with Scene I.
   - joy, relief, happiness, good fortune

44. What is the theme of Bassanio’s long speech before he makes his choice of the caskets?
   - not to judge a book by its cover -- often one is tricked with false appearances -- sin & evilness can attempt to make itself look good somehow

45. How does Scene II help to develop Bassanio’s character?
   - see that he must desire Portia for more than her looks & wealth
   - extremely loyal
   - honest

46. How is our understanding of Portia increased in Scene II?
   - truly cares for Bassanio
   - selfless
   - giving

47. What is the dramatic function of Scene III?
   - again shows Shylock can’t be swayed
   - that Antonio accepts his fate & will not try to reason with Shylock any more

48. Why can the Duke do nothing to prevent Shylock’s claiming his bond?
   - would threaten the security of all foreign merchants in Venice & that’s how the city makes money -- if the government disregards the law, it will be discredited
49. How does Scene IV help to “humanize” Portia?
   - being completely selfless & putting both Bassanio & Antonio before herself

50. How does Portia explain her departure from Belmont to Lorenzo?
   - says she is going to live in a convent until Bassanio returns -- says she has promised to live in prayer & thought

51. What is the dramatic purpose of Scene V?
   - further exemplifying Portia’s upright character
   - interaction between Jessica & Lorenzo
   - comedic relief: exchange between Lorenzo & Lancelot
   - Jessica worries that the sins of her father will fall on her

ACT IV:

52. What appeal does the Duke of Venice make to Shylock as the trial opens?
   - that he and others think that Shylock is only pretending to be cruel to make a point but at the last moment he won’t go through with it
   - asks him to show mercy
   - trying to appeal to any human generosity & gentleness in him

53. How does Shylock respond to this appeal?
   - says no -- he will have his bond
   - threatens the city’s freedom
   - says he needs to give no reason why – he just feels it

54. How does Antonio behave in the face of the fate which seems about to befall him?
   - accepts it, asks everyone to stop arguing with Shylock because there is no reasoning with him
   - courageous
55. Is money the most important thing in the world to Shylock?
   - no because he turns down Bassanio’s offer to pay him double the amount he loaned

56. What is the effect of Shakespeare’s delaying Portia’s entrance into the trial scene?
   - audience’s sympathy for Antonio builds -- hatred for Shylock

57. Describe the unfolding of Portia’s argument in the trial.
   - at first she makes it seem like she is siding with Shylock & that she will allow him to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio
   - but then says that there is no allowance in the contract for a drop of blood -- Shylock sees no way to cut a pound of flesh without shedding blood
   - agrees to take his $ but then she charges him with attempted murder

58. When Shylock relents and says he will take the money instead of the pound of flesh, why is he denied?
   - he is charged with attempted murder -- punishment = ½ of his wealth goes to who he tried to kill; the other ½ to the state

59. How does Shakespeare bring the trial scene full circle?
   - Antonio is free, unharmed, shows mercy to Shylock (doesn’t want $) BUT (1) S = Christo. (2) put Lorenzo & Jessica in his inheritance
   - Shylock tricked, forced to be merciful & at the hands of mercy himself
   - Duke says he will only fine Shylock (mercy)

60. What kind of mercy does the court show Shylock?
   - will only issue him a fine rather than take ½ of $ & goods
61. How would the audience of Shakespeare’s day have regarded Shylock’s forced conversion?
   (opinionated -- likely good, justified, redeeming him)

62. Why doesn’t Shakespeare end Act IV with Shylock’s exit from the court in defeat?
   - needs to continue with the marriage plots

ACT V

63. What is the mood as Act V opens?
   - pleasant -- Jessica & Lorenzo discussing famous lovers who lost their love, experienced unrequited love, or love that wasn’t allowed to be

64. In what other scene in the play does music play as important a role?
   - when Portia wants music played as Bassanio picks his box (3.2)

65. How is the ring plot in Act V enhanced by dramatic irony?
   (audience knows more than characters)
   - drawn out in a comedic way by Portia & Nerissa -- make their husbands suffer & beg before revealing the truth to ensure they never make such a mistake again

66. How is the intrigue of the rings finally resolved?
   - Portia & Nerissa reveal that they have the rings & explain the truth of what happened