

The Merchant of Venice

GCSE Study Guide

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Teacher's Introduction

This resource is written for students studying William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The play is a set text for AQA, Edexcel, OCR and Eduqas, and this resource will be of use to any module which involves *The Merchant of Venice*.

The guide is designed to help students understand the themes, characters and issues of the play, and is aimed at helping students to understand how the writer uses language to create meaning and their own informed personal response to the text.

Each scene has a summary followed by detailed notes explaining what happens and the themes of the play, along with significant quotations from the text. Active learning tasks and extended essay questions are found throughout the scene analyses. These allow students to complete activities as well as encouraging students to work through the exercises independently. Questions can also be used as useful revision aids.

The guide also provides a clear, concise summary of the contexts of the play to assist with the political contexts of England and Venice's role in sixteenth century Europe, which are explored, and religious themes of the play. The different social contexts of the Jews in England are also explored, and contrasted, with particular focus on how this is relevant to the play's familiar themes of race and the expansion of overseas trade are also explored.

Key Features of the Resource

Scene summaries and analyses for every scene
Structure, use of language and form sections
Context section
Active learning tasks, debate prompts and extended essay questions throughout
Key terms glossary
Further reading
Indicative answers for all activities

Acknowledgements

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Specification Information

This guide is intended to be used alongside the 2015 (first examined in 2017) AQA English Literature exam board specifications.

Exam Board Specifications

AQA 8702

- Paper 1: 'Shakespeare and the 19th century novel'. Total percentage of GCSE: 40%.
- Exam: written paper, closed book exam. Duration: 1 hour 45 minutes.
- Section A: 'Shakespeare'. Students answer ONE question on the play of the *Venice*) based on an extract and the play as a whole.

Edexcel IET0

- Component 1: 'Shakespeare and post-1914 literature'. Total percentage of GCSE: 40%.
- Exam: written paper, closed book exam. Duration: 1 hour 45 minutes.
- Section A: 'Shakespeare'. Students will answer ONE question focusing first on examining how a theme from the extract is explored elsewhere in the play. Extract approx. 30 lines.
- This question covers AO1, AO2 and AO3.

OCR J352

- Component 2: 'Exploring poetry and Shakespeare'. Total percentage of GCSE: 40%.
- Exam: written paper, closed book exam. Duration: 2 hours.
- Section B: Students will answer ONE question on their chosen Shakespeare play. For each play, there will be two questions from which students should choose one that also makes links to the whole play OR a discursive question.

Eduqas

- Paper 1: 'Shakespeare and poetry'. Total percentage of GCSE: 40%.
- Exam: written paper, closed book exam. Duration: 2 hours.
- Section A: 'Shakespeare'. Students will answer ONE two-part question per play based, and the second concerns the whole text.

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Plot Summary

Antonio is a merchant from Venice. He dearly loves his friend Bassanio and would be happy. Antonio has already lent him a lot of money which Bassanio has wasted on. Bassanio has a scheme to pay off his debts: he plans to marry the rich and beautiful Portia. Although all of Antonio's money is invested in ships trading across the oceans, he lends Bassanio the 3,000 ducats he needs to finance his journey to Belmont.

Antonio has to borrow the money from his worst enemy, Shylock the Jew. Since Shylock arranges that if Antonio doesn't pay back the 3,000 ducats on time, the forfeit will be a pound of flesh, cut off from whichever part of the body Shylock wants.

Shylock has to go to a meal with Bassanio to finalise the loan, and leaves his house with Jessica. Jessica is in love with a Christian Venetian called Lorenzo, who is friends with Bassanio. Lorenzo steal Shylock's money and jewels and elope together while Shylock is away.

Meanwhile Bassanio travels to Belmont with his friend Gratiano to seek Portia's hand. She died some time ago, leaving her a beautiful mansion and lots of money, but no husband of her own husband, and must rely on a sort of test her father left her before he died. All they have to do is pick a casket (box). There is a gold one, a silver one and a lead one. If they pick the right one, Portia, but if they pick the wrong one, they are forbidden to marry anyone.

Bassanio picks the correct casket and marries Portia, who returns his love, while her friend Nerissa. The two clever women give their husbands a ring each and tell them to take them off. The happy moment is spoilt by news that Antonio's ships have not returned. As a result he has no money to pay off Shylock's debt. Shylock demands his pound of flesh. Bassanio and Gratiano rush back to Venice to help Antonio with enough money to pay off the debt.

The play concludes with an exciting courtroom scene. The Duke of Venice pleads for Shylock's mercy, but the cruel Shylock is adamant that he must get his pound of flesh. Bassanio offers more than enough money to pay off the debt, but Shylock refuses to accept the money. Just when it seems that Antonio is about to die, two young lawyers appear to take the case – the two young men are in fact Portia and Nerissa in disguise. The two women win the day by pointing out that it is illegal for a Jew to threaten the life of a citizen of Venice.

Antonio is saved, much to the relief of Bassanio and Gratiano. Although Shylock cannot fulfil his bond, the Duke of Venice offers to pardon Shylock on condition that he becomes a Christian. Shylock flees the courtroom having lost all of his money and his identity as a Jew. Bassanio and Gratiano, disguised as young men, play a trick on their husbands Gratiano and Bassanio.

They demand payment for their legal services, and ask to have the rings they gave them. The dumbfounded husbands are reluctant to give up the rings they were so recently given up giving them away to the lawyers who saved Antonio's life. Everyone, including Belmont, where the ring trick is revealed. Portia and Nerissa return the rings to the lawyers.

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Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

Antonio and Bassanio discuss financial matters. Bassanio has spent all of his money on a rich heiress, Portia of Belmont. However, he needs money to fund his journey to her. Antonio agrees to use Bassanio's journey to Belmont.

Analysis

The play begins with Antonio talking to his two friends Salarino and Solanio. Antonio does not say why he is 'so sad' (1). His friends suggest that it is because his 'mind is tossing with some terrible business' (2). Antonio may be sad because he is anxious about his trading ships coming home safely. They suggest that he might be in love. 'Fie, fie' (46) replies Antonio: he denies he is. It is not entirely clear to the audience why the character is so upset – however, the general atmosphere surrounding this scene might serve to foreshadow Antonio's later difficulties in the play.

Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano then come on stage. They are fellow Venetians and Antonio notices that Antonio looks a bit under the weather, and because of his big mouth, 'he is not well' (73). Antonio replies that every man has a part to play in life, and his is a hard one. He believes he is forever doomed to be unhappy. In one regard, this might present Antonio as a tragic figure. On the other hand, however, it might simply be a reflection of the continual financial pressures he is placed under as a merchant.

Lorenzo and Gratiano leave the stage, and Antonio and Bassanio are left alone to discuss more important financial matters. We learn that Bassanio is in trouble financially, owing a number of debts to Antonio and other Venetians because of his 'prodigal' (129) lifestyle. From this, we learn that he is an immature, irresponsible character, who relies on the wisdom and guidance of Antonio to set him straight.

However, Bassanio has a plan which, if it works, will make him very wealthy and pay off his debts. He tells Antonio of a beautiful heiress called Portia who lives in a mansion in Belmont, owned by a very wealthy father – by marrying her, Bassanio hopes to once and for all settle his debts. The plan is that he doesn't have enough money to 'hold a rival place' (174) at Portia's court, so he asks Antonio to ask for another loan. Antonio demonstrates his inherently caring nature by immediately agreeing to the loan, despite all his own fortunes being 'at sea' (177).

Debate Prompt

This first scene is important to the play's major themes of friendship. It seems to suggest that Bassanio is a bad friend because he is asking Antonio for money. Keep Antonio's friendship in mind as you meet the cruel and selfish Portia later on. Do you think Bassanio is a friend? Discuss.



Active Learning Task 1: Comprehension

In pairs, try to find out the following:

- Antonio's job
- Bassanio's reasons for needing to borrow money from Antonio
- Portia's place of residence



Active Learning Task 2

The play begins with uncertainty. Antonio has invested all of his money in trading ships, which are at risk at sea. This builds a **mood** of **suspense** right at the start of the play. Shakespeare uses this **dramatic technique** throughout the play to build dramatic tension. See if you can spot the same technique in other scenes.



Active Learning Task 3

Bassanio uses a **simile** to describe Portia. He says her 'sunny locks hang on her cheeks like gold in fleece' (169–170). In pairs, decide what this tells us about Portia. What does it tell you about Bassanio?

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Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

This scene, which takes place in Portia's Belmont mansion, consists of a conversation between wealthy Portia and her servant and best friend Nerissa. They discuss the test of the caskets devised by her father. Any man who wants to marry Portia must pick one of three caskets: gold, silver, or lead. If he picks the wrong one, he cannot marry anyone. Nerissa reminds Portia about Bassanio. The scene ends with the announcement that the Prince of Morocco will soon arrive to take the casket test and Portia's marriage.

Analysis

Portia, like Antonio, is 'a-weary of this great world' (1). Unlike Antonio, she clearly describes the reason for her sadness, discussing her inability to choose a husband for herself due to the promise she made to her father before he died. The statement, 'the will of a living daughter is curbed by a dead father' (24–25) exposes just how much control men had over women – particularly fathers over daughters – at the time of the play's production. Anyone who wants to marry Portia must pass a test her father has devised, demonstrating that his influence continues even after death.

Debate

This scene is a major example of Portia's obedience to her father's will. Discuss the impact of this on her character.

Nerissa tries to console her friend. She reminds Portia that her father was 'virtuous' and that everything will turn out all right in the end. Nerissa and Portia then proceed to discuss the suitors. Nerissa asks Portia what she thinks of each suitor, and she responds with funny observations. The Italian suitor is a sort of parrot, the English suitor has stupid clothes on, and the German suitor is a 'beast'. Portia says she does not want to just marry any man who possesses wealth, but to find a husband who is 'wise, well-mannered, and has good manners'.

At this point, Nerissa reminds Portia of the young Venetian called Bassanio. Bassanio is 'a gentleman, a scholar' (100–101) and is 'worthy of a fair lady' (113). By having Portia and Nerissa discuss the suitors at this stage of the play, Shakespeare reminds us of Bassanio's fundamentally good character and his later marriage to Portia.



Active Learning Task 1

In pairs, answer the following:

- Who is Nerissa?
- Why can't Portia marry Bassanio?
- Why doesn't Portia like the German suitor?



Active Learning Task 2

If this scene were performed on stage, where do you think it would be set? Would they be talking loudly in Portia's room, or would they be whispering and giggling? In pairs, act out the scene as you would stage it. When everyone is happy with their performance, perform their version of this scene in front of the class. Think about things like: loud or quiet Elizabethan English or modern day speech, location, etc.



Active Learning Task 3

Portia and Nerissa talk in **euphemisms**. A **euphemism** is when we use a word to replace a harsh or rude word. For example, she describes the Neapolitan suitor as a 'colt' (41), which is a young horse, but also his excessive love of his horse. How does this contrast with the direct, honest language used by Bassanio in the previous scene?

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Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

Bassanio approaches Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan of 3,000 ducats on Antonio's behalf. The agreement will be called a bond. Antonio feels confident in the three months and that he'll have more than enough time and money to pay off the loan. Shylock, however, has decided that he must help his friend Bassanio, even if it costs him his life.

Analysis

Although Shylock is willing to agree to a bond of 3,000 ducats, we learn how much he hates Antonio and Christians in general. He refuses to eat with Bassanio because he believes the Christian's house is unclean, due to the Christian practice of eating pork – an act under **taboo** in the Jewish faith. Furthermore, Shylock bears an 'ancient grudge' (42) against Antonio because, since Antonio lends people money for free, Shylock is unable to charge a high rate of interest on his loans. This brings into question what is more important to Shylock: his money or his faith. In sixteenth and seventeenth century Britain, Jews were often stereotyped as greedy, money-obsessed individuals. Shakespeare therefore presents a biased presentation of Shylock. The Jew's asides in this scene further imply his scheming nature, which allow him to criticise Antonio and Bassanio behind their backs.

Debate

Since Shylock is a Jew, his Christian friends are his enemies.

We then discover, however, that Shylock might actually be somewhat justified in his hatred of Antonio. In Act 1, Scene 1, Shylock, Antonio spat at him, kicked him and called him a 'dog' (105–110). Antonio criticises Shylock's behaviour, and insists that he and Shylock are still enemies – presumably, he feels that Shylock is an enemy to his own Christianity. Antonio declares that he will not forgive Shylock in the future, which might take away some of his sympathy for him later in the play. It is difficult for the audience to sympathise with Shylock at this stage in the play, because we have not yet met both of them. Nonetheless, we should remember that in a production British audiences would have been expected to sympathise with Antonio, due to their prejudices against Jews.



Shylock ends up agreeing to loan Antonio the money to give to Bassanio for his quest. This is the perfect chance to catch his enemy 'off the hip' (41); he decides that the bond does not pay back the 3,000 ducats in the time allotted, Shylock will be allowed to cut whatever part of Antonio's body he pleases. This flesh can be interpreted as a symbol of his Jewish faith, as Jewish faith forbids its members to eat; losing a pound of flesh can therefore symbolise the loss of his Christianity.



Active Learning Task

In this scene Shylock uses what is called a **soliloquy**, which is where a character describes what he is thinking in his head. This is the only soliloquy in this scene. How would you direct this soliloquy? For example, perhaps Shylock holds a knife while he is talking? Where would you have him stand on the stage? When you think about this for a while and have several points, share them with the rest of the class. It might be that there are many different ways there are of directing this soliloquy.

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Context: Act 1

In the first act of *The Merchant of Venice*, the primary issue that drives the plot is the requirement for money to woo Portia, which he borrows from Antonio, who in turn borrows from Shylock. In sixteenth century England, it was illegal to charge interest on a loan, since it was against the economic traditions of Shakespeare's Europe, which were effectively inherited from the medieval period, becoming increasingly obsolete. Renaissance England saw the birth of the British Empire, which rivalled other European powers through **financial** as opposed to **military** victories. This raises the question of ancient laws and how willing we are to abandon our ancient traditions. This is relevant to ourselves as we are faced with the question of economic reform. A capitalist society allows the free flow of money, as businesses must borrow money to create products which they later sell. However, economic crashes in 1929, 1987 and 2008. Although Bassanio, Antonio and Shylock are bound by restrictive laws which disrupt the flow of money, people in the present day lose money because of the lack of regulation of the flow of money.

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Act 2, Scene 1

Summary

Act Two begins in Belmont, where the Prince of Morocco declares his love for Portia.

Analysis

The opening stage directions offer us an indication of the Prince of Morocco's character; the 'flourish of cornets' and his elegant white clothing suggest his wealth and splendour. However, all this unnecessary gaudiness might also suggest that he is a shallow character, and is, therefore, unsuited to Portia. The Prince asks Portia not to dislike him for his dark skin, which he calls his 'shadowed livery of the burnished sun' (2), boasting how he is feared by men and loved by women at home.

Portia is polite to Morocco but is obviously not too thrilled by him. Her suggestion that she is 'not solely led / By nice direction of a maiden's eyes' (13-14) further suggests his shallowness, and indicates that she sees through him. She coldly informs the Prince of the 'lott'ry' (15) he must enter in the form of the casket test, implying that she has no desire to speak with him further and wants to get it over with as quickly as possible.

There are three caskets, made out of gold, silver and lead. The game Portia's father has devised is like a personality test; a person's choices reflect their personality and choices in life.

The gold and silver caskets appeal to people who are self-centred and care only about themselves. The lead casket appeals to people like Bassanio and Antonio, who understand that friendship is based on selflessness.

The correct casket has a picture of Portia inside, and if the suitor selects this casket, Portia makes it clear that she trusts her dead father's judgement and will accept what he provides. Portia reminds Morocco that if he chooses incorrectly, he may 'never see me more' (40-41). Of course, we are led to suspect that he will indeed choose incorrectly.



Active Learning Task 1

In groups, you are going to stage this scene. Where do you think this scene takes place: in the mansion, at the gates of the mansion, or out in the garden? What would Portia wear? How would she speak her lines to him: flirtatiously or warningly? Once you have decided, you should perform it. Make a basic set that reflects your location, decide on costumes, props, etc. Act out your scene in front of the whole class.



Active Learning Task 2

The Prince of Morocco brags about his military victories and noble birth. He makes references to the **classical Greek hero** Hercules. What impact does this use of classical references on Morocco's **character**? Identify the exact parts of the scene where he uses classical references.

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Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

In this scene, we are introduced to two of the comic characters of the play: Launcelot, a Jewish servant, and his blind father, Gobbo.

Analysis

Launcelot complains that his master Shylock doesn't treat him very well. He describes Shylock as 'a kind of devil' (23). He tells us that he is hungry and wants to find a more compassionate master, but that he feels guilty for wanting to leave Shylock. He speaks in a comic **soliloquy**, which pokes fun at the more serious, sophisticated speeches in the play by characters like Shylock and Portia. While the serious characters speak in **verse**, Launcelot talks in **prose**, which defines him as a fool in the context of the play.

Launcelot's father appears on stage and at first does not recognise his son, so Launcelot decides to play a trick on him, claiming he is not Launcelot and that Launcelot has died. He gives Gobbo some nonsensical directions of how to find him, before revealing that he is, in fact, Launcelot. This sequence presents a good example of **dramatic irony** – Launcelot is fully aware of what is happening the whole time, making for an amusing and entertaining scene.

Bassanio then arrives with a few of his servants. He is preparing a leaving party because he is probably to thank Antonio and Shylock for organising his funding. Launcelot asks Bassanio for a new suit. Launcelot and Old Gobbo make a bit of a mess of their request, saying a lot of **malapropisms**. Once again, this sets them apart as fools, distinguishing their language from the more serious characters. For example, Gobbo says 'infection' (120) when he means 'affection'. Bassanio, a well-minded Bassanio agrees to hire Launcelot, and provides him with a new suit.

The loudmouth Gratiano appears on the scene and asks if he can accompany Bassanio. Bassanio thinks that this might be unwise, as Gratiano may say something inappropriate. However, because Bassanio thinks Gratiano is 'too liberal' (176) and 'too bold of voice' (172), he still allows him to go. Gratiano promises to be on his best behaviour.

Debate

The dialogue between Bassanio and Launcelot is a good example of a **pun** is when a character says exactly the opposite of what they mean. In this case, Launcelot says 'I am a servant' when he is 'sui'. Launcelot's request for a new suit is a request for a new suit, but we change the meaning of the word 'suit'.



Active Learning Task

Launcelot speaks in **malapropisms**. This is when a character uses the wrong word to create a comic effect. For example, he says 'infection' when he really means 'affection'. Like the word he was meant to use, but has a very different meaning. In pairs, discuss the **heroic language** used by Morocco in the previous scene?

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Act 2, Scene 3

Summary

Shylock's servant, Launcelot, and his daughter, Jessica, have a conversation at Shylock's house. Jessica tells Launcelot that she is sad to hear that he will soon be leaving her service to go and marry a Christian, Lorenzo, who is a friend of Bassanio and Antonio. She gives him a letter to give to Lorenzo that confirms her desire to elope.

Analysis

Jessica confesses to Launcelot that life in her father's house is 'hell' (2) and that Launcelot is a 'merry Devil' (2) who lightened the sober mood of the house. She regrets losing the servant, and rewards him with a **ducat**.

When Launcelot leaves, Jessica speaks in **soliloquy**, which allows her to express her emotions. She complains that she feels 'ashamed to be my father's child' (17). Her **dilemma** consists of a conflict between the apparent similarity between her and her father because they are of the same blood and the same religious faith, and the difference in their 'manners' (19). What Jessica means is that her attitude toward her father and other people is completely different from her father's. She knows she is unhappy living at home with her father Shylock, and feels guilty for wanting to run away. She is, however, determined to become a Christian and Lorenzo's 'loving wife' (20), demonstrating her independence as a character.



Active Learning Task

Imagine you are directing this scene. How would Jessica talk to Launcelot? Would she be nervous or would she be confident? Work in pairs and compare your thoughts with each other's ideas.



Extend

How do you think Jessica's father would react? How does Shakespeare use language to create this scene?

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Act 2, Scene 4

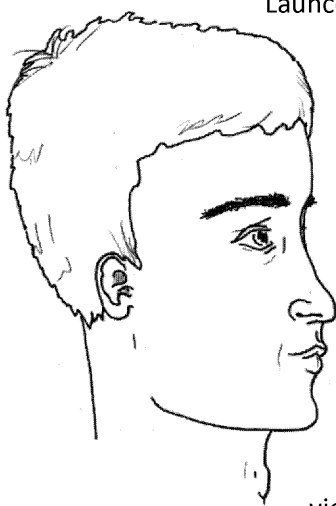
Summary

Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salarino and Solanio are getting ready for Bassanio's masque and Lorenzo's plan to steal from her father and elope.

Analysis

At the party, there is music, dancing and drinking and everyone must wear a mask on their face so their identities are disguised. This creates an atmosphere of tension and deception, which is in contrast to the honest and sincere interactions between Bassanio and Antonio. It allows people to appear differently to their true selves.

Debate
When
Solanio
sent



Launcelot arrives at the masque and gives Lorenzo a note in the confirmation that Jessica wants to **elope** with him while her father is out at Bassanio's party she will be that Lorenzo should come for her then. Launcelot then give Jessica the confirmation that Lorenzo will arrive

Lorenzo reveals that Jessica will dress as a young man recognised. He explains how she plans to steal money to furnish their elopement. Lorenzo acknowledges that to do something immoral (stealing and disobeying the Bible), Jessica's conversion to Christianity and the fact that he is a 'faithless Jew' (37) will excuse the sin. We notice, that Lorenzo never refers to Shylock as anything other than an animal as though he is an animal rather than a fellow human. Viewing Shylock in this way, he can justify his immoral actions.



Active Learning Task

The Venetian men in this scene are getting ready for a party. At festival time they wore brightly coloured clothes. Use your imagination to design an outrageous outfit louder the better. Share your designs with each other. If the class want to actually hold a Venetian fashion show.

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Act 2, Scene 5

Summary

Shylock and Launcelot discuss Launcelot leaving his employment. Privately, Launcelot elopes.

Analysis

This scene is set in Shylock's house, making the Jew appear somewhat more **vulnerable** than when we have previously seen him. Launcelot tells Shylock that he intends to leave him and work for Bassanio instead. Shylock warns him that all he does is 'gormandize... and sleep and snore' (4–5), and that he won't be able to do this when he works for Bassanio. As it turns out, Shylock is the worse master to work for, as he is only concerned about profit and cannot **empathise** with others. Jessica enters and addresses her father rudely, asking merely 'what is your will?' (10). Jessica, unlike Portia, whose father is not alive, shows disrespect which suggests her independence from her father.

We are reminded of Shylock's commitment to his Jewish heritage. He swears by 'Jacob's staff' (36) – Jacob being an ancient Jewish ancestor who had an intimate relationship with the Jewish God Jehovah. He then insults Launcelot by calling him the 'fool of Hagar's offspring' (43), referring to a woman from the Old Testament who was a servant of the Jewish Abraham, and whose children were not selected by God among his chosen people. Throughout the play, Shylock's references to **scripture** demonstrate his hypocrisy, as his own morality seems so different from that proposed in the Bible.

Jessica begins a private conversation with Launcelot, during which he tells her that everything is prepared for her elopement with Lorenzo. Shylock is suspicious of Launcelot, and asks Jessica what he told her, and she lies and replies that he merely said 'goodbye mistress'. Shylock leaves the house with Launcelot after claiming that his sleep has been troubled recently by ominous dreams of 'some ill a-brewing' (17). His speech combines dramatic irony with foreshadowing, making Shylock appear helpless to stop the actions of his daughter and Lorenzo.

Debate

Shylock
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Discuss.



Active Learning Task

This scene takes place in Shylock's house. If you were the set designer working on this scene, how would you design the interior of Shylock's house? Discuss this in groups and come up with ideas for the sets. Think about Elizabethan-era sets but also remember that this could be a modern setting.

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Act 2, Scene 6

Summary

Gratiano and Salarino congregate around Shylock's house, probably in masks. Shylock is still in the last scene, so Jessica is all alone, ready to elope with Lorenzo. Lorenzo enters, prepared in mask and party costume. When he knocks on the door of Shylock's house, Jessica is full of her father's money. Jessica rushes out of the house dressed as a boy, so that she can escape successfully with Lorenzo. Jessica, Lorenzo and Salarino then exit, just before Shylock. He gives the news that there will be no partying tonight: the masque has been called off. It is not favourable for Bassanio's sea journey to Belmont.

Analysis

Gratiano explains that Lorenzo has ordered him and the two Venetian merchants to stand outside Shylock's house at this hour. It is strange that Lorenzo is late, particularly when we consider Gratiano's remark that 'lovers ever run before the clock' (4). This metaphor also hints at the literal running Jessica and Lorenzo will have to do to get away from Shylock.

Jessica feels a little guilty, but justifies her conduct by claiming that since she is in love, and love is blind, she is unable to judge her own actions. She complains that love should be about 'discovery' but in reality it is about motives to others. Her speech comes across as a desperate attempt to justify actions that are immoral – even though she is stealing from a morally corrupt individual, he is still committing an offence in doing so.

Similarly, Lorenzo's loving comments about Jessica seem dishonest; when he declares 'I have proved myself' (55), we cannot help but appreciate the irony of his timing. It is as if because she is a Christian committing an offence against a Jew, she cannot be doing anything right.

Debate

How can we argue that Lorenzo is then looking for things? Is this a description of a relationship? Bassanio's



Active Learning Task

Imagine you are Jessica and think about all the thoughts and feelings that she plans to elope. Write a diary entry where she tells us how she felt and what she did when she eloped. How would Jessica leave her father's house for the last time? Would she go out the back door or the second floor? Or would she run or walk out the front door?

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Act 2, Scene 7

Summary

In this scene, we return to Belmont, where the Prince of Morocco makes his choice of Portia's hand in marriage. Portia and Morocco and their servants are in the hall where Morocco begins by reading out each inscription on the gold, silver and lead casket. He will know he has picked the correct casket if he finds her portrait in it.



Analysis

Morocco once again shows his superficial nature when he chooses the golden casket because of a 'golden mind', his mind, 'stoops not to see' (21). He does not even consider the lead casket as it does not reflect his own worth. He then considers the silver casket, which claims that whoever chooses it will 'get as much as he deserves' (23). He rejects the silver casket as his own worth may be higher than Portia's, so he chooses the golden casket.

Morocco chooses the golden casket: the wrong choice. He finds, instead of Portia's portrait, a skull with a scroll. The scroll says 'out the scroll it warns that 'all that glisters is not gold' (69). The moral of Morocco's choice is that the exterior, such as gold, may be worthless inside. It is a warning about the value of mere exteriors.

Morocco leaves Belmont. Portia is evidently relieved that she will not marry him, declaring that he leaves with a 'gentle riddance' (77). Thus far, then, it seems that Portia is safe from men unworthy of her.



Active Learning Task

This is an important scene for Portia. Imagine that you are the director – how do you think she should act? She could be **cool, calm** and **confident** that her father's test will bring her happiness, or she could be **nervous** and **jittery**. How would you direct her? Share your thoughts with the rest of the class.

Debate

Why do you think Portia behaves this way? Do you think she inherits her character from her father? Do you think she is born from her father? Do we inherit our character? Were born with it?

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Act 2, Scene 8

Summary

In this scene, we get to see a conversation between Salarino and Solanio. Their conversation provides a summary of events so far, and the effect that these events have had on the characters. The scene also sets up the next scene, by suggesting that things could be about to go very wrong for Antonio.

Analysis

Salarino and Solanio function as a plot device to tell us what is happening off stage. Their conversation is in the voice we would typically find in a novel. Salarino describes how he saw Bassanio and Belmont, and says that Shylock approached the ship while it was still docked with his officers, with the aim of finding Jessica. He also explains that Jessica and Lorenzo fled through the canals of Venice, but that Shylock was thwarted in apprehending his daughter.

Salarino reports how upset Shylock is after learning of his daughter's betrayal and elopement. He thinks this is funny, and reports how a group of young boys followed Shylock in the street, mimicking his cries of 'oh my daughter', 'oh my ducats' (15). This is reflective of how all the Christian characters in the play regard Shylock: as a weak, comical figure who is there to be laughed at.

Salarino and Solanio mention that a Venetian ship has been wrecked off the coast of England, and that it might have been Antonio's. We then have a foreboding reminder of Antonio's debt to Shylock, and the possibility that he might not be able to pay him back. Salarino tells us that Bassanio has left for Belmont with a tearful goodbye from Antonio. When he tells how Antonio told Bassanio not to worry about him and to concentrate on his business, he tells us that Antonio cares about his friend and wants him to succeed. Salarino declares that 'the world is not the earth' (35), a point that reinforces the audience's care about what might happen to Antonio.

Debate

Do you think Shylock's behaviour is justified? Should Shakespeare have focused more on the reactions of the Christian characters to Shylock's behaviour?



Active Learning Task

In groups of three, assign two people the roles of Salarino and Solanio and one person the role of director. The director needs to decide where to set this scene (e.g. in the street, in the ship, in the canals). How would the scene be directed? For example, how would the characters enter the scene? How would they stand in relation to each other? Each group should then perform their version of the scene. Discuss how differently directed scenes have dramatically different effects on the audience.

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Act 2, Scene 9

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Summary

We return to Belmont, where the Prince of Arragon is the next suitor to take the casket test.

Analysis

Nerissa and a servant wait in the hall in Belmont where the three caskets are kept. Nerissa informs us that Arragon has taken his oath and is about to read the three inscriptions to decide which one he will choose. Arragon and Portia enter the hall.

Like Morocco, Arragon is shown to be a self-centred and ignorant character. He immediately rejects the lead casket, put off by the notion that he should 'hazard all he hath' (20) – Arragon believes that Portia does not look adequately attractive to justify his own sacrifice. Ironically, he seems to believe he is being deeply philosophical when he rejects the gold casket, suggesting that only the 'fool multitude' (25) would make a decision based on the glamorous 'outward wall' (28). In making such a statement, the Prince merely underlines his own arrogance, and his unfounded belief that he is superior to the majority of men because of his wealth.

Instead, Arragon chooses the silver casket, whose inscription reads that whoever chooses it 'shall have as much as he deserves' (36). Like Morocco, Arragon thinks that he deserves Portia's wealth. Arragon is similar to Shylock in that he is an isolated and self-obsessed character. Choosing the silver casket is the wrong casket, and Arragon receives the image of a fool instead of Portia. He reflects that he will leave Belmont with *two* fool's heads (the other being his own).

After Arragon leaves, a messenger arrives to inform Portia that a young Venetian has arrived. He is good-looking, an 'ambassador of love' (92). This news seems to restore hope to Portia's husband, implying that Bassanio is the destined man.



Active Learning Task

In pairs, choose some props that you might use to express Arragon's vain and self-centred nature. What items could you give the actor playing Arragon?

Debate Prompt

This scene is notable for its use of rhyme. Discuss the effects of the rhymes on the audience's perception of the characters and the scene.



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Context: Act 2

The sixteenth and early seventeenth century saw the rise of the middle class, who were more powerful. This was opposed by the previous holders of power, the aristocrats. The aristocrats held power, which consisted of owning large sections of land. The middle class became more powerful; some had ancestors who were serfs (effectively slaves). They were keen to marry into aristocratic families, to inherit the social status which came from being a Duke. The aristocrats, on the other hand, resented the middle class for their social aspirations but at the same time they needed themselves with the middle class for their money. This vital issue is dramatised in *The Merchant of Venice* by the interactions of Jessica and Lorenzo, and Portia and Bassanio. Both families take pains to control who their daughters marry. Shylock is unsuccessful, and Jessica is 'contaminated' by Lorenzo, while Portia's father puts his faith in a lottery test. The play explores *how* and for *what reasons* men and women should get married.

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Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

Act Three begins with another conversation between Solanio and Salarino, where misfortunes. One of Antonio's ships may have been wrecked off the coast of England, which puts in doubt. Shylock then enters the stage. He is angry and upset that Jessica, 'his blood' (31), has abandoned him and has stolen his money with the Christian Lorenzo on Antonio. Tubal, a fellow Jew, enters to give news that Jessica has been wasting her money, but one has been able to find her.

Analysis

The merchants remind us what a good reputation Antonio has. He is known in Venice as 'Antonio the Honest' (12–13), and Solanio wishes that he had as good a reputation as Antonio does. When Shylock gets upset over Jessica's behaviour, Solanio reminds him that Jessica was 'full fledged' (26), meaning that she is old enough to make her own decisions in life. Shylock responds that he does not forgive or even **empathise** with Jessica, insisting that they are of the same family and religion. Solanio, however, insists that Jessica and Shylock are *not* of the same 'blood', suggesting that although they share the same ethnicity, their personalities are entirely different. Shylock and Jessica, according to Solanio, are as different as 'jet and ivory' (31).

Salarino asks Shylock to be merciful; if it turns out Antonio cannot pay back the bond, he should not demand his pound of flesh. Shylock insists that Antonio's pound of flesh reminds us of Antonio's harsh treatment of him because of Shylock's usury. In this context, Shylock's determination to punish Antonio is a matter of principle, an act of vengeance against the way Jews were treated at the time of writing. Shylock attempts to appeal to Solanio's dignity: 'Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses...?' (49–50) – in other words, that just because he is of a different religion, it does not give Christians like Angelo the right to mistreat him. By extracting Antonio's pound of flesh, he believes that he would be getting his revenge.

Shylock is upset that Jessica has sold a ring which he bought for his wife, Leah. When she gives it to a monkey, it symbolises her rejection of her Jewish heritage. But Tubal has a piece of good news: one of Antonio's ships has been wrecked off the coast of Tripoli. This is fantastic news for Shylock because it means that the unlikely Antonio will be able to pay the 3,000 ducats. Shylock can demand his pound of flesh and finally get his revenge. After his earlier speech, the glee with which he looks forward to punishing Antonio once again suggests his cruel nature: 'I am very glad of it. I'll plague him, I'll torture him, I'll gild it' (96). While the way Shylock is treated as a Jew is pitiable, his actions and his attitude towards others are not sympathetic.



Active Learning Task

Shylock's 'prick us' speech (45–62) is one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches. Practise reading this out loud and note how the **rhythm** of the speech increases its impact.



Extended Essay Question

Salarino declares that Jessica is 'jet and ivory' (31) – different from Shylock. How are they different? How are they the same? How are they in fact utterly different? How are our personalities formed? How do we behave?

Debate

In part, Shylock is so angry because this comes from a place of pain. Shylock is a Jew and he is a Jew.

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Act 3, Scene 2

Summary

In this scene, we return to Belmont, where Portia begins with a speech to Bassanio. She could teach Bassanio the correct answer to the casket test, but knows that she could not tell him. Bassanio chooses the correct casket. Gratiano and Nerissa reveal their love to Bassanio. Salarino, Jessica and Lorenzo then come on stage, having just arrived from Venice. Antonio's ships have been wrecked and he will be unable to pay off the bond, and must give up a pound of flesh. Portia insists that Bassanio, Gratiano and Salarino return to Venice to get the money to pay off the bond.



Analysis

Compared to the entrances of Morocco and Antonio, Bassanio's is relatively simple: 'Enter BASSANIO, PORTIA, Gratiano, and their trains.' This immediately implies his high status compared to the other suitors. Portia is normally cool and collected, but in her opening speech she seems confused and uncertain. 'I have something tells me – but it is not love – / I have a feeling' – this confusion indicates that, although she clearly loves Bassanio, she has complete faith in her father's casket test.

Bassanio begins his deliberations over which casket to choose. He begins by describing examples in life of beautiful, fair and noble appearances actually concealing ugly hearts. He gives us the example of people who wear white robes and are brave men with beards like Hercules who actually are cowards. (86). Bassanio understands that true love can penetrate deeper than mere appearances. He rejects silver, the 'common drudge between man and man' (102–103), citing silver as a bad reason for his rejection. Instead Bassanio chooses lead, the correct casket, stating 'I have more than eloquence' (106). His correct choice demonstrates that he will not be deceived by implied honesty makes him the best possible match for Portia.

However, the optimistic tone of Bassanio's success is soon contrasted by the news of Antonio's financial failures. The structuring of the scene from this point onwards adds to the effect of the bad news. Shakespeare builds tension by allowing Bassanio a moment to read the letter that brings the news, leaving the audience to guess what it says. The message contained within the letter is hinted at by the change in Bassanio's face, as Portia observes: 'There are some shrewd contents in yon same paper / That steals the colour from Bassanio's cheek' (242–243). It is not until the very end of the scene that he actually reads the letter aloud, but by this point we have already acknowledged the situation.

Debate Point

The main theme of the scene is deception. Bassanio reveals his true feelings and chooses the lead casket, always deciding to be vain and against the experience of others.

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Active Learning Task

While Bassanio is making his choice, music plays in the background. Why do this and what is the overall dramatic effect for the scene? Discuss your ideas in class, create an 'ideas wall' of thoughts.



Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

Back in Venice, Antonio has run out of time to pay his debt and Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh. Antonio is under arrest and is accompanied by Salarino and a jailer. Antonio decides to give Shylock 'bootless prayers' (20). He recalls how he has often thwarted Shylock and all the names he has called him. Antonio also expresses his wish to see Bassanio.

Analysis

Shylock reminds Antonio of all the times he has called him a dog, warning him to 'beware his fangs' (7), and thus implying that he has justification for his revenge. By using his own insult against him, Shylock reinforces just how much he hates Antonio and desires revenge against him.

Shylock exits, and Salarino reassures Antonio that the Duke of Venice will not allow him to take his pound of flesh. Antonio disagrees with Salarino, and claims that denying Shylock his forfeit would undermine the justice of the state of Venice, since the economic stability of Venice relies upon upholding business contracts. If the Duke does not give fair justice then people will be reluctant to trade with Venice, and this is why the Duke will not protect Antonio from Shylock's revenge; he will not 'deny the course of law' (26). Once again, Salarino suggests Antonio's virtuous nature and increases the audience's pity for him.



Active Learning Task

In this scene, Antonio is under arrest. If you were the director, would you have him plead with Shylock? Would you leave his hands free to plead with Shylock? Think of the dramatic choices. In groups, once you have decided how to stage the scene, act it out in front of the class.



Extended Essay Question

Why do you think the Duke will not save Antonio? What would be the consequences? What does this tell you about how justice is presented in the play?

Debate Prompt

The Duke cannot save Antonio. Would he 'impeach the law' if he always morally right individual? Can you imagine this would not be the case?

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Act 3, Scene 4

Summary

Portia, Nerissa, Jessica, Lorenzo and Balthazar (Portia's servant) discuss recent events. Portia and Nerissa will go to a monastery while their husbands are away at Venice. Launcelot are to be left in Belmont to look after the house while everyone is away. Portia goes to Padua to get legal advice from her relative, Doctor Bellario. She then reveals to her new husbands.

Analysis

Lorenzo explains how close Bassanio and Antonio are, and how Antonio's generosity has given Bassanio the opportunity to come to Belmont. Lorenzo describes Antonio as a 'true gentleman' (6) and a 'dear lover' (17) of Bassanio. Portia reasons that since Bassanio and Antonio are friends, and Portia loves Bassanio, then Antonio must be a similar person to Bassanio. As the audience, we know that they are two very different people, but we may still admire Portia's support of Antonio.

Portia asks the messenger to request some lawyer's robes. She sets out a plan for her and Nerissa to impersonate young lawyers and travel to Venice 'accoutred like young men' (63) and help Antonio in his persecution by Shylock. Her speech highlights the unequal responsibility of men and women in sixteenth and seventeenth century society, suggesting that they must turn the 'mincing steps' (64) of a female into the 'manly stride' (68) of a male in order for their word to be taken seriously. Law was a profession occupied solely by men – disguising Portia and Nerissa as lawyers to undermine this gender imbalance.



Active Learning Task

After Portia describes her plan to her maid, Nerissa replies 'why, shall we be as stupid; she is being a bit dirty deliberately. In Elizabethan English a 'turn' means to turn someone, often in the context of prostitution. Nerissa deliberately misinterprets her husband's relief in this tense scene, but in another way the pun reveals the truth of the plot. Portia's plan to please some men. Make a list of any other deliberate puns in the play.



Extended Essay Question

The previous scenes in Act Three praised honesty and criticised false appearances. Portia's plan to do good by deliberate deception. Does this undermine the main theme of the play?

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Act 3, Scene 5

Summary

This scene is set at Belmont in Portia's garden, with Launcelot and Jessica discussing Launcelot playfully teases Jessica over her conversion to Christianity. He claims that mean, she will still inherit his characteristics and the guilt of his actions even though Christianity. Lorenzo enters and joins in the fun. He defends his wife by accusing La woman pregnant. He also warns that Launcelot should not be getting his wife Jessi implication that he might be trying to seduce her.

Analysis

Launcelot's criticisms in this scene appear to be little more than a game; he jokes that since Jessica has been converted to Christianity, the price of pork will increase. Nevertheless, Jessica may actually feel guilty because she has broken two of the Ten Commandments: respect your parents and do not steal. Launcelot offers Jessica the consolation that 'your father got you not' (9–10), i.e. that she may be a bastard and is therefore not Shylock's daughter. The fact that being a bastard – something which would have made people an outcast in the seventeenth century – is seen as being preferable to Jessica's present situation, indicates how wrong she has been in stealing from her father.

Lorenzo reflects upon the fool's ability to 'play upon a word' (40), by which he means Launcelot's ability to **pun**. Lorenzo asks Jessica what she thinks of Portia, and she replies that Bassanio must live an 'upright life' (68) – in other words, that he should behave morally and not be unfaithful to Portia. The scene ends with Jessica promising she will 'set forth' (84) Lorenzo, an example of a **double entendre**; to 'set forth' means to tell someone off, but it also means to give a man an erection. This unwitting pun, then, might imply that Jessica is just as much of a fool as Launcelot.

Debate Point

The serious rejection between apostasy made fun of Launcelot and this have on



Active Learning Task

Imagine you are the director of this scene. How would you direct Launcelot? When he speaks to Jessica, perhaps he could speak pompously and wear your ideas and then compare them with the rest of the class.

Context: Act 3

Act Three contains Shylock's 'prick us' speech (III.i), one of the most famous speeches in literature in general. The reason Shylock's speech is compelling is because we sympathise with someone whose moral choices we find repellent. Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, wrote a play called *The Jew of Malta* in 1590 whose main character is Barabas who wreaks terrible vengeance on his enemies, only to be killed by one of them. Shakespeare takes this tradition of using a Jew as a stock nasty protagonist and gives him the option of using the legal courts for revenge. Shakespeare is innovative in that his Shylock converts to Christianity in Act Four as opposed to dying at the end. Shakespeare shows us how literary traditions evolve, while his plays themselves can be reinterpreted. Literature can provide new meanings for each historical epoch.

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Act 4, Scene 1

Summary

This scene is set in the Duke's Palace in Venice. The Duke and his assistants preside over a courtroom, with Antonio as the plaintiff and victim, while Bassanio, Gratiano, and Salarino observe their friend. Shylock enters and tells us he has sworn a religious oath to get the pound of flesh from Antonio, so no amount of persuasion will stop him. He declares he does not need a reason to hate Antonio so much. Nerissa puts her plan into action. Shylock is made aware of the full consequences of his bond. The Duke decides to show mercy to Shylock and pardons him of the death sentence. Antonio likewise shows mercy, and proposes instead that Shylock should become a Christian and give one half of his goods to Lorenzo and Jessica instead. Shylock is speechless and leaves the courtroom thoroughly defeated. Since the case is concluded satisfactorily, the Duke and his assistants leave as well.

Analysis

Antonio tells us that he is prepared to suffer whatever happens with a 'quietness of spirit' (12), while the Duke reminds us that Shylock has refused to offer Antonio mercy and will insist on his bond. Shylock is presented as a 'stony adversary' and an 'inhuman wretch' (4), while Antonio is made to appear honourable as he approaches death. Since Bassanio has just returned from Belmont he now has plenty of money to pay off Antonio's debt. He offers Shylock 6,000 ducats instead of his pound of flesh, but Shylock mercilessly stands by his commitment to obtaining a pound of flesh.

The Duke tells us he has requested legal opinion from Dr Bellario, and Nerissa enters disguised as a young male lawyer's assistant and gives the Duke a letter. Gratiano last out at Shylock, and calls him a dog and a wolf, continuing the anti-Semitic prejudice seen throughout the play. The Duke reads the letter aloud to the court; it states that since Shylock cannot appear in person, he has sent his assistant, a young lawyer from Padua. In an example of **dramatic irony**, the audience knows that this is really Portia, but no one in the courtroom does.

Portia begins by describing how mercy 'becomes a throned monarch better than his crown'. She argues that although it would be suitable as far as justice is concerned for Shylock's bond to be enforced, it wouldn't fit with the ideal of mercy. Portia says that God shows us mercy by forgiving us even though he has the right to punish us for them. This might indicate that, contrary to the stereotype of the time, women might be better suited to working as lawyers than men; unlike a male lawyer, a woman has the compassion that should accompany the application of the laws. She then, however, argues that Venice cannot be changed, as it would undermine the authority of the Venetian law code. The bond must be honoured.

Shylock praises Portia as a 'second Daniel' (219) at this point, by which he means a wise man who used scripture to make his point. Portia gives permission for Shylock to cut the pound of flesh from Antonio to 'prepare his bosom' (241). Portia makes it very clear that Shylock has refused to be as cruel as he can be, but nevertheless allows him to proceed.

Just as it seems that Antonio is about to die, Portia reminds Shylock of the full extent of the consequences of his bond, which he was not previously aware of. It turns out that Shylock must cut exactly one pound of flesh from Antonio, and is not allowed to take any of Antonio's blood when cutting, since this isn't specified in the bond. If he does, the state will confiscate all of Shylock's money and property. Furthermore, since Antonio is not a Jew, Shylock is in breach of a law which prevents Jews from threatening the life of a Christian. If he dies, half of Shylock's goods go to the state and half to the victim. Shylock is shocked while Gratiano and Bassanio are overjoyed at the result.

Bassanio thanks Portia and Nerissa, who are still disguised as young men, for saving them. He offers to give them anything they desire. The girls decide to play a little joke on their husbands and refuse to give them anything. Bassanio and Gratiano are at first reluctant to give the rings they swore not to give away. Portia and Nerissa leave, but Bassanio sends Gratiano after them with the rings to give to them. Antonio and Bassanio are left alone on the stage, and decide to go to Belmont.



Active Learning

At the end of the scene, Shylock has lost his revenge. He must convert to Christianity. But how will he walk, or maybe crawl out of the courtroom? You would direct Shylock's exit.

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Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

Portia and Nerissa are still disguised as two young lawyers, walking down a street. Nerissa sends the deed to Shylock which specifies his conversion to Christianity, and to Antonio and the state of Venice. She also explains to Nerissa how they will leave before their husbands get there, so that their husbands won't know they ever left.

Analysis

Gratiano enters with Bassanio's ring, gives it to Portia and asks the two girls, whom he still thinks are two young lawyers, to dinner at Bassanio's house that night. They both refuse, as Portia and Nerissa must get back to Belmont before their husbands, so they will not be suspected of leaving. Portia asks Gratiano to show Nerissa the way to Shylock's house. Nerissa, in an aside, tells Portia that she plans to get Gratiano's ring, which he 'swore to make him keep forever' (13–14), from him while they walk to Shylock's house. Both women, then, toy with their men in order to show how easily Bassanio and Gratiano give in to male authority, despite their promises.

Debate Point

Rings are symbols of commitment. Portia is sticking to her promise to Bassanio, but Nerissa abandons Shylock's ring. Gratiano gives up his ring to be comic relief in their marriage.



Active Learning Task

Portia and Nerissa cross-dress in Act Four. How would you dress them? What is the serious nature of the courtroom scene? Or would they be more colourful? Add any colours, pictures, or textures that you think would be appropriate.

Context: Act 4

For Hollywood film directors, courtroom scenes are popular. They are a fantastic way to combine dramatic tension and catharsis with social commentary. A courtroom scene is an opportunity to see if a society will discriminate against a particular gender or ethnicity when discrimination occurs. Consider Gratiano's vicious attitude towards Shylock's judgement in what is effectively a kangaroo court. The courtroom scene also illustrates the powerful positions in Venice. You should consider whether it is merely amusing to watch men in this scene, or whether Shakespeare is making a serious point that women are not of being lawyers. Keep in mind that on the one hand most women had very little power, but on the other hand Queen Elizabeth I was a very powerful and competent ruler.

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Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

This is the final scene of the play, and it is set at night, in the entrance to Belmont. The Belmont girls and their mythical lovers. A messenger arrives and informs Lorenzo that Portia will soon be free. The girls and Nerissa return home dressed as themselves. They taunt their husbands about the ruse.

Analysis

The scene begins with Lorenzo and Jessica discussing famous stories of mythical lovers, such as Troilus and Cressida, and Medea and Jason. The myths they are comparing their own story to are ancient Greek tragedies. Given that *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy – and thus ends with a resolution – these comparisons reinforce the light, optimistic tone of the scene.

The conversation soon moves onto the theme of music. Lorenzo makes an analogy between harmonious music and harmony between people. Different notes combine to make beautiful sound, so different people can work in harmony. Lorenzo describes how music can calm ‘unhandled colts’ (72), and how Greek myths claim that the musician Orpheus could move ‘trees, stones and floods’ (79–81). He decides that if a man is not moved by music he is dangerous and anti-social, which reminds the audience of Shylock’s dislike of music in Act Two, Scene Five.

Portia and Nerissa are pleased to see the lights of their home, and Portia compares her background to ‘a good deed’ (91), using symbolic contrast to compare the pessimistic tone of the plot’s resolution. Lorenzo hears Portia’s voice and the friends confirm her identity. Lorenzo tells Portia that she and Nerissa have been at the monastery, and continues the dramatic irony by warning Lorenzo, Jessica and the servants not to tell Bassanio otherwise. A trumpet sounds and Antonio, Gratiano and their servants arrive. Bassanio introduces Antonio to Portia and Nerissa. Bassanio’s kindness allowed him to fund his journey to Belmont.

Nerissa asks to see the ring she gave Gratiano before he left, and he exclaims that he has lost it. Nerissa pretends not to believe Gratiano, and claims that he has been dishonest. Portia then asks for the ring she gave to him before he left for Venice. Gratiano claims he gave it away to Antonio’s lawyer. The girls have a bit of fun with their husbands. They tease the men by suggesting that they won’t sleep with them unless they give them the ring. Portia claims she will instead sleep with the lawyer, a highly amusing comment given that she is already married. Once again, we see how Shakespeare allows women power over men within the comedy.

Portia reveals her trick by showing Bassanio the letter from Dr Bellario, revealing that he has sent two young lawyers who helped Antonio in Venice. Portia also shows Antonio a letter from Dr Bellario, revealing that his ships have come home safely and that his finances are secure. The play ends with the Belmont girls pledging their loyalty to each other. Antonio, on the other hand, is a quiet and lonely man at the beginning of the play. Given the title of the play – which suggests that Antonio’s continued loneliness might undermine the otherwise joyful ending of the play.

Debate Prompt

In this scene, Portia argues that beauty is not in the face, but in the mind. What this means is that beauty is not in the face, but in the mind. Beautiful when the mind is beautiful. This is her claim that beauty is not in the face, but in the mind. Compared to the face, the mind begins to fall away. Crows only so long as larks. Do you agree? The issue here is whether beauty is an **absolute** value, or whether it is relative, which are always beautiful.

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Active Learning Task

The comic element of this scene is the argument between the Belmont girls. Would you direct Nerissa and Gratiano in this scene? They are both sharp. Would Nerissa be huffy and pouty? Would Gratiano be angry or would he be so calm? Decide how to direct the scene and then act it out.

Context: Act 5

The final act of *The Merchant of Venice* begins with a list of famous lovers from a by Lorenzo. As the scene develops, the audience witnesses revelations and reflection of the whole of the play. This scene is similar to the play as a whole in that it is looking at the end of the play and economic traditions. *The Merchant of Venice* elegises the end of these traditions as they began to be eroded by the reform of the Renaissance. The Jews would soon disappear. In 1868 a Jew called Benjamin Disraeli would become Prime Minister of England.

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Character Summaries

The Venetians

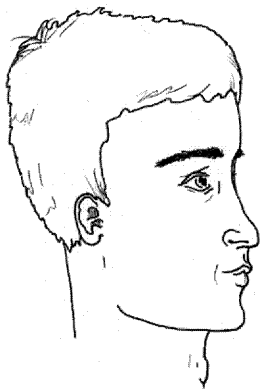


Antonio

Antonio is a sad and lonely character, but the audience never sees him as unhappy. He doesn't think he is in love and he assures us that he is not. He makes risky investments in trading ships. Although the play is narrated by him, he has very few lines and is quite passive as far as the plot is concerned. He is his worst enemy Shylock the Jew to help his friend Bassanio. Antonio risks his life to help his friend. He is generous and

Bassanio

Bassanio is a young man who has wasted almost all of his money on a reckless lifestyle. He plans to marry a rich heiress called Portia to pay his debts. He gets the money to finance his trip from his friend Antonio. Bassanio shows he understands what love is by making the right choice in the casket test and successfully marrying Portia. Although he is irresponsible with money, he is well liked by all his friends, since he is honest, handsome and has a good way with words.



Lorenzo

Lorenzo is a Venetian and a friend of Bassanio and Antonio. He falls in love with Shylock's daughter. They end up running away with lots of money and eventually marry.

Gratiano

Gratiano is the sort of person who can't stop himself from talking. He sometimes says things that are inappropriate, but he is honest, perceptive and funny. We often rely on him to tell us the truth about characters and situations in the play. We learn more about Antonio and Bassanio by comparing their behaviour to Gratiano.

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Salarino

Solanio and Salarino

Solanio and Salarino, like Antonio, are two Venetian merchants. We rely on them to give us information about Antonio's trading ships and Shylock's court case against Antonio.



The Duke of Venice

The Duke of Venice is the judge who supervises Shylock and Antonio. He is a weak leader as he is unable to save Antonio from his bond. He asks Shylock to be merciful, which fails. When Portia saves the day, he spares his life and shows he is a good Christian.

The Venetian Fools

Launcelot

Launcelot is Shylock's servant but he ends up leaving him and serving Bassanio. Although Shylock isn't a kind master, Launcelot cares about and assists his daughter Jessica. Launcelot plays funny tricks on his blind father, which gives the play a comic element and balances the more serious issues in the play.



Old Gobbo

Old Gobbo is Launcelot's blind father. He loves his son and does a good job where he is treated well by his master. Gobbo says some funny things he doesn't mean but his heart is in the right place. He is a fool who does the exact opposite!

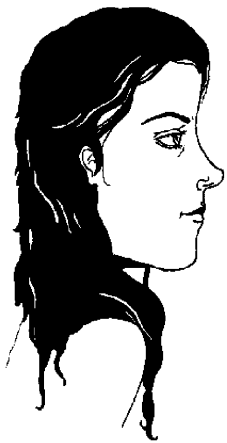
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The Jews Of Venice

Shylock

Shylock is a Jewish moneylender. He charges interest on his loans and this makes him unpopular with the Venetian Christian establishment who disapprove of his business practices. He and Antonio hate each other deeply, and this leads him to lend Antonio money on the condition that if he does not pay the money back, Shylock will be allowed to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio. The audience feels a mixture of revulsion and sympathy for Shylock, because although he does not show mercy to Antonio and is more about profit than people, he is abused by the Venetians. He loses his daughter and his ducats, and this might provoke pity from the audience.



Jessica

Jessica is Shylock's daughter. She loves Lorenzo and plans to run away with him, feeling guilty about running away from her father and having to ask for his forgiveness. Although she is a minor character, her moral dilemma makes her sympathetic.

Tubal is a rich Jew who assists Shylock in setting up the bond with Gratiano and Salarino in that he provides us with news of Shylock's plans. He tells Shylock the bad news about his daughter. Although he seems to be very sympathetic to him, and

The Ladies From Belmont

Portia

Portia is a beautiful heiress from Belmont. When her father dies, she inherits a beautiful mansion and lots of money, but no husband. Portia cannot choose her own husband, and worries she may be forced to marry someone she doesn't like. She is clever and funny. She often plays with her stupid suitors. At the end of the play, she outwits all three suitors, leading to the play's happy ending.



Nerissa

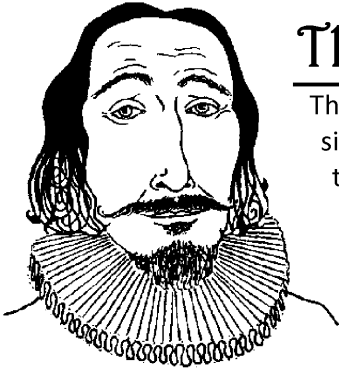
Nerissa is Portia's loyal servant and friend. Like Portia, she is clever with words. Her playful banter with her mistress suggests that they enjoy an intimate relationship. She ends up marrying and outwitting Gratiano.

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The Suitors To Portia



The Prince of Arragon

The Prince of Arragon tries and fails to win Portia's hand in the silver box in the casket test. His incorrect choice shows us that he is more concerned with his own pride than other people.

The Prince of Morocco

The Prince of Morocco is a proud and boastful suitor to Portia. He picks the golden casket in the casket test and doesn't get to marry Portia. Morocco and Arragon serve as foils to Antonio and Bassanio.

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Major Character Analysis

Characterisation is the process through which characters are created and p

Antonio

Antonio is a character who earns our admiration but also our disgust. His loyalty to friend Bassanio is intense and selfless. He enters into a potentially dangerous bond with Shylock, his worst enemy, so that Bassanio can have a chance at wooing Portia. Shakespeare describes him as 'Antonio the Honest' (III.i.12–13) while Lorenzo calls him a 'true gentleman' and a 'dear lover [of Bassanio]' (IV.iv.5–10). At the end of the play, Antonio mentions that he would even be willing to risk his 'soul' (V.i.253) for Bassanio, which is a proof of the faith and admiration he has of his friend. Antonio's faith in Bassanio's success to succeed and the sacrifice of his body which he offers to atone for Bassanio's problems reminds us of the sacrifice that Christians believe Jesus made for us, so that our sins are forgiven, allowing us to be eligible for heaven. But in another way, Antonio's pathological anti-Semitism makes him repellent. He repeatedly insults Shylock, and we have reason to feel from the Jew that this abuse also occurred in the past, before the action of the play. Antonio has notably few lines, considering the play is named after him. In Act Four, Scene One, the courtroom scene where his life is at risk, he is passive and reluctant to enter arguments. In Act Five, Scene One, the final scene of the play, he is a solitary figure surrounded by married couples. Antonio is a complicated and compelling character since he is at once social and antisocial, generous and mean, saintly and demonic.



Shylock

Although Shylock is the villain of the play, a modern day interpreter might consider him the tragic hero. His hatred of Antonio seems to be founded on the insults and the 'spitting' and 'kicking' he has suffered in Act Three. But his almost pathological commitment to seeking revenge confirms the negative opinions the Venetians have of him and makes him the 'villain' of the play. His emotional outburst and powerful monologue in Act Three, Scene One reminds us that he is not an unfeeling wreath. He is also obviously proud of his Jewish heritage, and is devastated when Jessica has abandoned him. He is strangely quiet in Act Four, Scene One when he must either convert to Christianity or be executed, which shows his emotional devastation and 'speechlessness' at being told he must abandon his Jewish identity. The language used by the Venetians for describing Shylock: 'cut-throat dog', 'stranger creature', 'man', 'inexorable dog', 'cruel devil', 'dog Jew', 'impenetrable cur', 'currish spirit'.



Extended Essay Question

Is Shylock the victim or the villain in this play? How do you think original audiences responded to this character and why do you think our response today is different?

Portia

Portia is a character we can relate to emotionally for two reasons. Firstly, she is the only woman in the play who has the right to make important choices in her life because of the wealth of her father. She overcomes these difficulties and saves the day in Act Four, Scene One. She is a heroic character because she outwits Shylock and exposes his lack of mercy. But she also shows her humanity when she helps her husband, and demonstrates that he is not likely to keep his wedding vows, which is explained in Act Five, Scene One. She is emotionally expressive and articulate, even philosophical. She comments that she is 'weary of this great world' (I.ii.1), which sounds like a melancholy princess locked in a tower. Portia has powers of social observation which the male characters lack, and this is demonstrated in her comments on her father's will in Act One, Scene Two. Shylock and Antonio are unable to see past their mutual hatred, but Portia is relatively fair considering the historical context of the play. She offers mercy to Shylock, which is a character in the play to offer a solution which would resolve Shylock and Antonio's conflict. It is subversive and daring for Shakespeare to have such a strong and active female character in a play about men.

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Relationships

Antonio and Bassanio

Antonio and Bassanio are best friends. Antonio can be viewed as being very kind and generous. He keeps lending him money and even has to ask his worst enemy, Shylock, for help to get Bassanio happy. On the surface of things, they appear to be best and true friends. However, Bassanio is very loyal to Bassanio; perhaps a true friend would try to curb his excessive lifestyle rather than let it continue.

Antonio and Shylock

Antonio and Shylock do not like each other. Antonio is firstly presented as being very kind and generous in his treatment of people, however his treatment of Shylock in the past shows us a different side. Shylock sees the loan and the bond of a pound of flesh as revenge upon a person who has wronged him. When Antonio cannot pay, he demands his flesh and refuses mercy; this shows his relationship shows us different sides to both of these characters.

Bassanio and Portia

At the beginning, Bassanio sees Portia as a way to repay his debts; she is rich and beautiful. He chooses the correct casket in the casket test, showing that he understands the truth. They soon fall for each other and marry, although one could argue that he marries for her money rather than according to her father's wishes. The ring trick hints that their marriage might not be as straightforward as it seems.

Shylock and Jessica

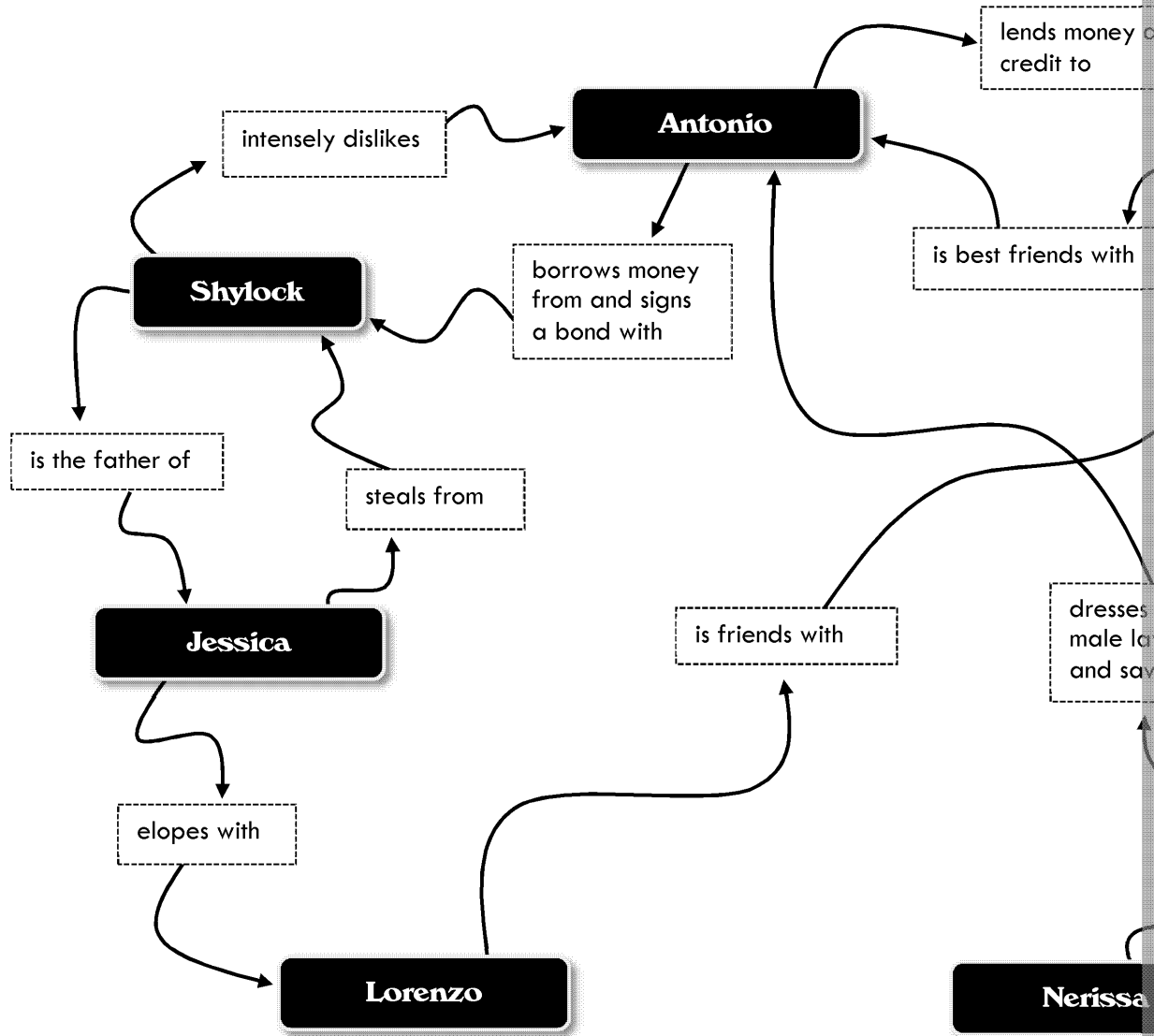
Shylock and Jessica are father and daughter. Jessica does not like Shylock as she is a Christian and knows that Shylock would be against such a match. When he is out at dinner, she steals some of the jewels from his house in order to elope with Lorenzo. Shylock is extremely angry with her. Jessica feels guilty but Shylock will not forgive her. Alongside the religious dimensions, this is ultimately Jessica and Shylock are a daughter and her father going through a typical father-daughter relationship as the daughter grows up and craves independence, the father tries to restrict her. The relationship breaks.

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Relationships Mind Map



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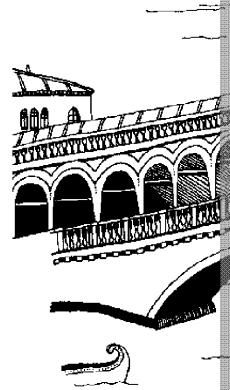
Settings and Props

A setting is a location where major events occur. A prop is something that is used in a play to represent a character, object, or a concept.

Settings

Venice

Venice is the place of commerce and business within the play; it is the central setting for most of the main action. Two merchants, Antonio and Bassanio, discuss their financial situations and monetary needs. Antonio strikes a deal with money-lender Shylock, which he is subsequently unable to pay. Events in Venice are concerned with the daily reality of things: money, commerce, law, justice. However, Venice can also be seen as a place of political intrigue and racism. Despite this play's status as a comedy, Shylock is abused by both Venetian men (Antonio specifically) and the Venetian court system as a whole. Despite making a bond in Venice, Shylock is forced to surrender his claims and is robbed of his religious faith when he is made to convert to Christianity. (For more information on Venice, see out more about Venice in the Context section of this guide.)



Belmont

Belmont embodies the world of a courtly past. It is a world of culture, of laughter, of cultivated upper-class people. The language used by the Belmont characters is described as 'more refined and more cultivated than the Venetians'. Belmont is an archaic place, an idyllic location for Portia's father's casket test. It is not concerned with commerce or other base matters.

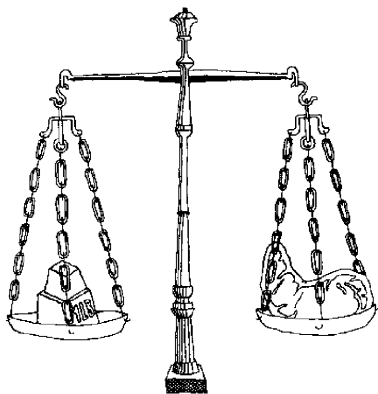
The Venetian Court

The Venetian Court is a central location for the climax of the play. It is where Shylock demands his pound of flesh, where Portia shows mercy and refuses, whereupon he is forced to drop his claims and convert to Christianity. It is also where Portia and Nerissa challenge the roles of women in society by dressing up as male lawyers.

Props

Rings

Rings are traditionally symbols of fidelity and loyalty between two people. Portia gives her husbands rings to symbolise this and make them promise to never take them off. When the two men give the rings back to the two women, who are at that point in disguise, it suggests that the marriages are not always as simple as it appears to be and perhaps hints that these marriages are not perfect.



Scales

The scales of justice remind us that justice and mercy are often in conflict.

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Themes

A theme is an important subject that occurs throughout

Major Themes

Sacrifice and Love

The primary theme in *The Merchant of Venice* is friendship, and the sacrifices and risks we want to be a good friend. Antonio risks his freedom, money and life to help Bassanio. When Shylock is concerned, he follows the example of Jesus. Antonio's saintly status is suggested by him 'honest Antonio' in Act Three, Scene One and by Bassanio in his praise at the end of the play.

Christians believe that God disapproves of our immoral behaviour, and because we cannot be truly forgiven for our sins without some sort of sacrifice. They believe that the world so that he could be punished in our place. Bassanio, with his reckless life, while Antonio could be like Jesus, who sacrifices himself to help us. The bond, which is made in Act One, Scene Three, can be read as a metaphor for friendship.

But nothing in Shakespeare is that simple. This is why we still read his plays 400 years later. In Act One, Scene Three, Shylock describes Antonio's offensive behaviour towards him. In Act Three, Scene Three, Jesus teaches us to 'turn the other cheek' and to tolerate. When Antonio's name-calling is concerned, he doesn't follow Jesus' example (although at the end of the play).

Shakespeare's original audience would have immediately recognised Antonio's generosity. They would probably not have been sympathetic towards Antonio's treatment of Shylock. They would have compared and contrasted Antonio lending money to Bassanio without interest with Shylock's moneylending, which was condemned in Act One, Scene Three. Remember that Christians who did not follow the Church of England's teaching were burned at the stake in Elizabethan England. As modern interpreters of the play, and citizens of a pluralistic Britain, we are more sensitive towards Shylock's abuse, and we probably have no scruples towards the charging of interest on loans. Our entire economy is based upon the principle.

Debate Point

Antonio is the moralistic, who is willing to make sacrifices.

Loyalty and Heritage

The second major theme of the play centres on the female characters. In many of Shakespeare's plays, the women are often much more interesting than the men. As second-class citizens they must be more cunning to get by in the world. Jessica and Portia are faced with the dilemma of either obeying their fathers' commands, in which case they are loyal to their heritage, or making their own decisions in life.



Portia explains her dilemma in Act One, Scene Three. Her father has asked her to choose her own husband, and Portia must have faith that her casket system will select the appropriate husband for her. The casket dilemma is a central theme in the play. Jessica has a very similar dilemma. She can either be loyal to her father. She chooses to abandon her father and her religion by her selling of the ring for a monkey, described by Tubal in Act Two, Scene Three.

When Bassanio and Gratiano give away their rings in Act Four, Scene One, they promise to their wives, they get the rings back and are forgiven. For the female characters, marriage is not an option. Their choices are absolute, which means that there is no going back for them. In Elizabethan England, Catholics were put under enormous pressure to convert to Anglicanism and conform with the rest of society. Can you think of any contemporary interpretations of this theme?



Extended Question

How is the theme of loyalty explored in the play? Answer in terms of the marriages, father/daughter relationships, and Antonio and Bassanio's friendship.

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Minor Themes

Appearance and Reality

The **casket test** symbolises the first minor theme of the play, which is the choice between appearance and reality. Characters like the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon are rejected by the Duke of Venice because they are only concerned with beautiful appearance in Act Two, Scene Seven and Act Two, Scene Eight. The Duke says that 'all that glisters is not gold' (65). Bassanio chooses lead because of its quietness, knowing that true love is about inner beauty. The **moral** of the **casket test** is that outer beauty does not always have worth. Beautiful things may have rotten insides.

Gobbo and Launcelot take on this theme in their comic mistakes in Act Two, Scene Three. Launcelot recognises his son and Launcelot pretends not to be who he is. Shylock's use of sarcasm in Act Four, Scene One also exemplifies this theme. Although Shylock uses examples from the Old Testament to describe what Antonio believes to be the essence of religion: forgiveness and selflessness. The minor as opposed to major are that there are no related **dilemmas** and it doesn't lead to a crisis in the play in Act Four, Scene One, Antonio's trial scene.



Active Learning Task

Thinking about the casket test, in pairs create a new updated version of the casket test with three objects as examples. What would you put in your three caskets? Which one would you choose?

Mercy and Justice

The conflict between Antonio and Shylock is essentially a contrast between the demands of mercy and justice. The Bible is made of two parts, the Old Testament, which was written by prophets, and the New Testament, which was written by the disciples of Jesus. The Old Testament is in parts, largely vengeful. The enemies of his chosen people, the Jews, have terrible fates. In the New Testament, Jesus asks us to forgive our enemies and not to pursue vengeance.

Shylock is given opportunities, in Act Three, Scene Three and Act Four, Scene One, to show mercy and cancel the pound of flesh clause in his bond, but instead insists on revenge. In Act Four, Scene One, the Duke of Venice and Antonio could sentence him to death, but instead shows mercy and allows him to convert to Christianity. Shakespeare's original audience would have considered this a happy ending. They might have even found it funny that a Jew had to convert.

For a modern reader of the play, is justice really served? *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that is often seen as a happy ending with a happy ending with a happy ending.



Extended Essay Question 2

Neither true mercy nor true justice is served in *The Merchant of Venice*. Discuss.

a happy ending with a happy ending with a happy ending. The play today as the 'Tragedy of Mercy' resembles Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in that the flaws lead them to self-destruction.

Music

All Shakespeare's plays would have been performed with musical accompaniment. Music is particularly conspicuous in *The Merchant of Venice*.

When Bassanio makes his choice in the casket test in Act Three, Scene Two, Portia orders music to be played and a song is performed. Portia reflects on how the music will sound sad if Bassanio makes the correct choice and happy if he makes the correct choice. Thus our mood changes our perception of the music is **relative** to our inner state. The inner is connected to the outer. Read Lorenzo's speech about music in Act Five, Scene One and explore why it is relevant to the play.

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Racism

Shylock is universally despised in this play. He is treated with suspicion by Antonio in Scene Three where Antonio calls him a 'smiling villain' (95) and at the end of the play in the courtroom scene in Act Four, Scene One. But the Venetians make clear that this is not just about racism. Shylock's usury and lack of mercy are specified as the reasons for his unpopularity among both Jews, but since they can empathise with people they don't seem to be abusing, it is. It is more accurate to say that this play is about cultural and religious conformity.

On the other hand, although Jessica has publicly renounced Judaism and her father, and it is clear to the audience that she and Shylock are not of the 'same blood', she is treated differently from the Christian Venetians. Launcelot treats her with mock suspicion in Act Three, Scene Five, and in the scenes where she and Lorenzo are in Belmont, she generally remains silent. At the end of the play, both Jessica and Shylock convert to Christianity. *The Merchant of Venice* which means that there is a happy ending of marriages as opposed to death. Can Jessica now be considered as equals now they are of the same faith as the Venetians? Or is the cultural racism still present?

Debate Point

This play is a

Morality Plays

One of Shakespeare's biggest influences in writing his plays were the 'morality plays' which were written hundreds of years before Shakespeare was born. They were very simple, and were often performed on religious occasions. The characters in morality plays were personifications of moral virtues or vices, when a character represents something abstract. Characters in morality plays often represent virtues, like honesty and generosity, or vices, like greed and envy.

Considering this important part of Shakespeare's literary heritage, how far can *The Merchant of Venice* be considered a morality play? Think of what virtues and vices the primary characters represent. The reason Shakespeare is such a famous writer is that he took the morality plays and made them more complex and naïve, and wrote plays whose characters were morally ambiguous. What this means is that his characters inspire admiration and revulsion at the same time, and it is often hard to decide whether

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Form

Form refers to the way that the text is written and how it is presented.

The Merchant of Venice is a play. It has five acts, all of which are comprised of a certain number of scenes. Acts could be seen as being a bit like volumes and scenes as the individual chapters within each volume. However, the one major difference between a play and any other type of written text is that plays were written to be performed, not simply read. They are living texts that can only ever fully be understood when they are read aloud; they come to life through performance. This also means that there are many different ways of staging and interpreting a play, all of which can be valid. Compare a nineteenth-century staging of this play with a modern interpretation; while the basic elements may be the same, many factors can be different. These can include staging, lighting, costumes, setting, and the focus of a scene. This is what makes plays alive in a different way to other forms of literature.

Shakespeare was writing his plays in the late 1500s and early 1600s. He began his career writing comedies, then moved on to histories and tragedies. *The Merchant of Venice* is believed to have been written between 1596 and 1599. Although technically a comedy, as the play ends with marriages, it has some darker moments. Shylock's speech in Act 3, Scene 1 is one such example. Shakespeare was also a pioneer of the concept of a morality play, a play with very two-dimensional characters that told a story. *The Merchant of Venice* is a complex exploration of what makes people human. He took the morality play form and made it altogether much more modern: an exploration of humanity. It is for this reason that Shakespeare's plays are relevant to everyone across different historical periods; the themes of human nature that are eternally true.

A play is different from a novel or a poem because it is written for performance and includes stage directions. Stage directions are instructions written onto the play's script that tell actors when to enter the stage, exit the stage, or how to play out a particular scene. Sometimes they are very specific, other times they can be more open to interpretation. Different directors and actors have interpreted stage directions differently to create very different interpretations of the same play.

The play as a form is very changeable; it is hard to pinpoint what the text means because it can have many different visual interpretations. While the action of a novel takes place inside the reader's mind, the action of a play occurs on the stage. A novel usually has one specific author whereas the form of a play has many authors. In Shakespeare's time especially, although a playwright would write the text, actors would often change things according to their interpretations. These changes were often made within different theatre companies. Therefore, the text of the play would gradually change over time. Unlike a poem, the spoken words of a play were always changing. This process still occurs today. The play as a form is much more dynamic than any other.

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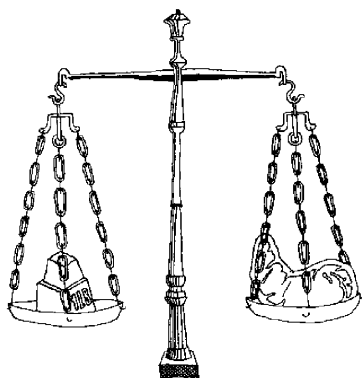
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Ideas and Messages

At the time in which this play was written, Jewish people were not allowed to live in England and would have been seen as normal. Christians disliked Jews for many reasons, one of which was that they would lend money to other people. This was called usury and it was forbidden for Christians to do. The play explores the idea of Judaism in several ways. We can see Shylock as a demonic character who does seem to be beyond redemption. He refuses to give up his claims to Antonio's money under anti-Semitic law and is forced to give up his faith. However, we are told that Antonio has a dark past. He also loses the love of his daughter as he cannot give his permission for her to marry. Antonio can be seen as the self-sacrificer, a Christ-like figure, but again that is too simple. He does anything to help Bassanio but he is not very nice to Shylock. Shakespeare is perhaps showing us that as a purely nasty money-making stereotype; the play shows us reasons for Shylock's actions. Here is perhaps that anti-Semitism is what causes Jewish resentment. If we all worked together, we could be a happier place.

The ideas of love and self-interest run throughout the play. Characters such as Antonio and Portia are of love, whereas other characters such as Shylock and even Jessica seem to act purely out of self-interest. However, things are not so simple. Jessica acts out of self-interest when she steals her father's money for Lorenzo that drives her to act like this. She subsequently feels guilt over her actions and acts out of resentment rather than self-interest. Antonio helps Bassanio out of love but also out of self-interest. Once Bassanio is married to a rich heiress, he would stop asking Antonio for money. We are all human; none of us are inherently good or inherently bad. By creating characters with more than one side to their personalities, Shakespeare is perhaps telling us that we are all human beings who should be mindful of each other. He also brings in morality play in order to explore exactly what it is that makes us human.



Balance as a concept is important throughout the play. The balance of emotion, and the balance of friendship and love, is finally balanced once Bassanio is married. When he introduces him to his future wife, it is the balance of justice and mercy. The two couples are married, and the gender relationships are balanced. The message here is that all things for there to be happiness and stability.

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Writer's Techniques

Language

The Merchant of Venice has two distinct styles of language: the plain, practical language of Venice and the elaborate, showy language of the court of Belmont. Although Shakespeare uses different techniques to develop each distinct style, both Belmont and Venice concern over the distinction between reality and appearance, and making judgements about value.

Salarino and Solanio exemplify the Venetian merchant. They are informal and plain speaking, and love to gossip. Solanio describes Antonio in very simple terms as 'he that hath the wind of his love' (I.i.100). When they do use figurative language, it is usually ironic. In Act Three, Scene One, for example, when he condemns Jessica, Salarino comments that 'there is more difference between thy heart and ivory' (32–33). This sarcastic simile which comments on a very serious issue shows a degree of detachment from reality. It is also worth noting that precious commodities are valued over someone's personality.

Shylock similarly uses plain, rhetorically structured language. His famous speech in Act Three, Scene One is a little direct metaphorical language. Instead, he uses rhetorical repetitions and lists to compare the possessions of Jews and Christians, like 'hands, organs, dimensions, forms, faculties, complexions, and textures' (3.1.81–82). He makes a value judgement that Jews are just as prone to revenge as Christians. When he does use figurative language, it is playfully instead of seriously. For example in Act Two, Scene Four, he orders Jessica to 'mean my casements' (33). When he uses the metaphor, he immediately explains it, showing he considers figurative language as suitable for jokes, not for serious matters. We first see this in Act One, Scene One when Solanio playfully lists various calamities which could befall Antonio.

The courtiers of Belmont, on the other hand, use formal figurative language very effectively. Portia compares herself to 'Hercules' (II.i.35), and describes his dark skin as the 'burnished livery of the sun' (II.i.36). As the hero of the play, he uses suitably heroic language to describe his own appearance. Portia, by Bassanio as 'golden' and 'hanging from her temples like a golden fleece' (I.i.165–166), like Jason the Argonaut.

In the casket test, the three metals of gold, silver and lead are personified, which means they are given human characteristics. Bassanio describes lead's 'paleness' being more persuasive than 'eloquence' (III.ii.106), while silver is the 'common drudge between man and man' (III.ii.103–104). Judgements of value are established in the play by comparisons to precious metals and mythical heroes. Although Belmont and Venice are very different, they share their chief concern, which is the worth of people.

Tone

The Merchant of Venice is a comedy, as opposed to a tragedy. The play has a happy ending, with Shylock being executed in the courtroom scene. The play ends with three marriages: Portia and Lorenzo, Nerissa and Jessica respectively.

There are, however, dark undercurrents in the play. Shylock is abused by the Venetians. Gratiano gives away the rings they promised never to take off only a few days after Antonio casts a shadow of melancholy over the play. He is apathetic when in danger, and he is on his own while all his friends have married.

Debate Point
'Heroic metaphor' vs 'appearance'

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Style

Shakespeare uses two formal styles in his plays: **blank verse** and **prose**.

Blank verse is made up of lines ten syllables long which generally do not rhyme. If the lines do not reach the end of the page. These ten syllables have a rhythm where the rhythm is similar to the beat of your heart, dum-DUM, dum-DUM, dum-DUM. This is called iambic pentameter. When Shakespeare introduces rhyme into his blank verse it is generally called rhymed blank verse. Rhyming phrases often summarise what has happened in the scene or introduce a new scene.

Prose is generally used by the comic characters of the play, like Launcelot and Gobbo, where the lines go right to the end of the page, like a novel. Although there is rhyme in prose, it is not in a regular form like blank verse. When a serious character uses prose, like Shylock in Act 3, it shows how furious and confused they are. In your close readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, you should identify when characters change from one form to the other, and explain what this means and why the character has done it.



Active Study
Study / example

Structure

The structure refers to how a play is organised and the relationship

The play is made up of five acts, which are made up of individual scenes. The play Venice of merchants and traders and the Belmont court of finery and sophistication when Bassanio visits Portia and when Portia pretends to be a young lawyer and tr

Act 1 introduces the main characters of the play. Act 2 serves to launch the conflict of the play. The animosity between Shylock and Antonio is established while Portia's role in the casket test is also delineated.

Act 3 presents three minor resolutions. Bassanio wins Portia in the casket test and pay his bond back to Shylock. Act 3 sets up the conditions required for the climax.

The **climax** is when the major source of tension in the play, the issue which supplies the conflict, occurs in the courtroom scene of Act Four. A climax will provoke anxiety in the audience, whether Shylock will get his pound of flesh. A climax is generally followed by catharsis, the resolution of the major theme of the play. This is solved either in a character dying or the issue being resolved.

The **dénouement** is the conclusion of the story, and occurs in Act Five of this play. It is filled up with Lorenzo and Portia's discussions of music and good deeds, and the relationship between Gratiano, Bassanio and their wives are reiterated. In Elizabethan comedy, it was typical to end with marriages.

Shakespeare was building on the traditional structures of sixteenth century plays. characters and purely comic characters that heighten the comedy to relieve the serious and comic scenes next to each other for the same purpose.



Active Learning Task 2

Look at Act Four, Scene One. Examine the structure and try to note down structural features at work.

Debate Prom

*This play is very
Discuss.*

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Shakespeare's Time

The Merchant of Venice was written by William Shakespeare between 1596 and 1599. England since 1290, so the play was written in a time when there had been no Jews in England. It is impossible to know whether Shakespeare intended his original audiences to feel sorry for Shylock or if audiences do. Shylock's speech in Act 3, Scene 1 certainly hints that Shakespeare questioned the idea of Jews as sub-human; they have the same human blood in their veins as Christians. However, it is also possible that there simply have been a way for Shakespeare to explore the complexity of human morality through the lens of Judaism.

In the late 1590s, Elizabeth I was still on the English throne. She had been queen since 1558. A strong and intelligent woman, eventually brought relative stability to a tempestuous century. Her father, King Henry VIII, had reformed the Church significantly in England. He had banned Roman Catholicism and created a new Church of England. Protestantism originated in Germany and questioned many things about Catholicism, the need for ornaments and icons, what actually happened at the Eucharist, and in what ways it should be practised. After his death, the throne passed briefly to his son, who subsequently died. His daughter, Mary II, committed Roman Catholic, then became queen and persecuted all the Christians practicing Protestantism. She then took control later the same year and reinstated a modified Church of England. It was during this time that people feared for their lives based on their religious practices. When Shakespeare was writing *The Merchant of Venice*, things had settled enough for him to be able to compare a Jew and a Christian. In the play, different types of Christianity were avoided; he relied on patronage and wished to stay on good terms with the monarchy.



The mid to late 1500s also saw a rise in Western exploration of the world. This led to an exotic influence in the setting of Belmont. Primarily Spanish and Portuguese ships were setting sail to explore the Americas and to see what rare and exotic goods they could find. Spain also began to gain more prominence in overseas trading. Advances in shipbuilding and navigation reflected in several Shakespearean plays including *The Tempest*.

The Elizabethan era, the name given to the period of Elizabeth I's reign, was very important for drama and literature; there was a great outpouring of plays from writers such as Shakespeare and Marlowe. It seems that Elizabeth liked and appreciated dramatic works. Times changed somewhat when the monarchy changed in 1603 and King James I of England came to the English throne. James was a very moral man who feared witches; thus Shakespeare changed the source material of *Macbeth* to represent a combating of such fears. It is important to remember how much Shakespeare was reliant on the goodwill of the reigning monarch during the time the play was written and originally performed.



As the monarchy changed, the second of the Elizabethan era, including the reign of James I, Shakespeare's time, the monarchy was a very important factor in the play.

This period was also when England began to seriously examine Renaissance ideas that had been popular in the previous century. The Renaissance asked people to look again at what made us human, to explore how we could be cultured human beings. It looked at what made us different from other cultures, and to explore how we could be cultured human beings. It looked at what made us different from other cultures, and to explore how we could be cultured human beings. It looked at what made us different from other cultures, and to explore how we could be cultured human beings. It looked at what made us different from other cultures, and to explore how we could be cultured human beings.

Extended Essay Question

Did Shakespeare intend his original audiences to feel sorry for Shylock and for Portia? Or is this the result of our modern-day interpretation of the play? What does this tell you about the play as a form?

Shakespeare looked towards a new world emerging during the late 16th century. He was interested in the emerging world of trade, overseas commerce, and individual prosperity. He was beginning to look decidedly away from the medieval. Shakespeare explored the complex morality of his time in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Venice

Who was in charge in Venice?

Venice was a **city state** and a **republic**. A republic is a type of political organisation without a king or queen. This means Venice was not part of a country, because the country 'Italy' did not yet exist. Most Italian cities, like Milan or Florence, were surrounded by walls and the Venetian lands indirectly.

Although Venice was ruled by a Duke, the Duke was elected. He did not inherit his power like monarchs did. If a Duke was unpopular, he could be removed by peaceful means. Venice was famous for having a very stable form of government and a very conservative society, not influenced by any foreign power until modern times (Napoleon in 1797).

Since Venice is built on a chain of islands it is not technically connected to the mainland. It had some level of independence from the continent of Europe, much like England. Venice is a **metaphor** for England. You might want to consider the similarities and differences between Venice and London.

What was Venice like?

Venice is on the coast of the north of Italy, near the Adriatic Sea. Venice was one of the main trade routes into the east, until alternative trade routes were discovered. It was a **cosmopolitan** city because many foreign traders from the East visited it to sell their products in Europe. Shakespeare may have found it easier to write exciting stories set in Italy because he was able to have characters (considered exotic at the time) like North Africans and Jews. Venice had a reputation for being a luxurious city where those who lived there would have had better access to luxury items, such as silk, spices and gold, than in Shakespeare's London. It is also a city where canals are used instead of roads and buildings are decorated with marble. Venetians lived in a crowded city where they were constantly surrounded by water. This makes Venice a good place to set a story about vanity and greed.



Ponte Rialto in Venice

Why did Jews live in Venice?

In Shakespeare's time, there were no Jews in England. The only people who would have been in England were aristocratic men, who travelled in Europe and visited places like Venice and were expelled from England by King Edward I in 1290, as they were blamed for the plague of the thirteenth century. Jews only officially returned to England in 1656. Although they lived in Venice, they didn't have the rights of a citizen of Venice. They had to distinguish themselves by wearing a gaberdine (a sort of cloak) and a red hat. They couldn't own property, so to make a living they became doctors or moneylenders.

They were also forbidden to live with or marry Christians, and had to live in a separate area called the *ghetto*. If a Jewish man had a sexual relationship with a Christian woman, he was expelled. Christians were discouraged from participating in Jewish festivals. The *ghetto* was surrounded by a wall and a moat, and it was connected to Venice by a drawbridge which was guarded by Christians. Although this might sound cruel, it was actually to protect the Jews from anyone who might harm them.

One of the reasons Jews were allowed to live in Venice was that they could lend money to the Venetian state. They were heavily taxed by the Venetian state. This was one of the reasons Venice was able to become a powerful city.

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Anti-Semitism

The representation of Jews and anti-Semitism is a significant feature of *The Merchant of Venice*, linked to the issue of racism – a problem that is still prevalent in our society and, to some extent, audiences today. The persecution of Jewish people is also a momentous and tragic part of history. Throughout history, Jews have suffered from two primary sources of suffering: (1) persecution against them from people of other religions, and (2) their lack of a homeland. This led to discrimination and harassment in Europe, and this peaked when the Nazi Party came to power in 1933 to 1945. The Nazis began a programme whose aim was to destroy every single Jewish person, their religion and cultural identity. The Nazis' motivations were based on unfounded scientific claims; they mistakenly claimed that Jews were genetically inferior to non-Jews. The Nazis killed millions of Jews, known as the Holocaust.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jews are second-class citizens. They do not have the same status as Christians. Even though Jessica converts to Christianity at the end of the play, since she is not of 'blood', she is not treated the same as those who were born Christians. This suggests that anti-Semitism is more than just religious doctrine; it is a *racial* issue. Although there may have been Jews in London in Elizabethan England, Judaism had no official presence in England. The difficulty of integrating into English culture was their rejection of Jesus as the Son of God. In England, the belief that Jesus was the Son of God was a major tenet of cultural identity, and one of the reasons why Shylock is unpopular in the play is that he refuses to accept this.

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Key Terms Glossary

All fields of study have technical terms, whether we are studying plants, people or understand what each of these terms mean. A good way to make sure you are ab up examples in your head. If you decide to highlight the use of one of these litera essay, make sure you explain what effect it has upon the audience and if it underr of the play.

Alliteration:	This is when two words begin with the same sound.
Assonance:	This is when the middle of two words share the same vowel sound.
Blank verse:	A formal poetic form where each foot of a line is stressed and each line has five feet, creating iambic pentameter.
Characterisation:	The process through which characters are created and presented.
City state:	A city that has its own government, in the same way that a country has.
Climax:	When the main source of tension in the plot is resolved.
Cosmopolitan:	Incorporating many different nationalities and national cultures.
Dénouement:	The ending of the story.
Dilemma:	An extremely difficult decision between two options.
Double entendre:	A double meaning, often used in Shakespeare's plays for comic effect.
Dramatic irony:	Occurs when the audience are aware of a detail/details that the characters are not aware of.
Elope:	To run away with a partner in an affair.
Empathise:	To be able to understand or relate to someone else's situation.
Euphemism:	When we use a polite word to express a more risqué idea.
Figurative language:	When someone uses language to create meanings other than the literal.
Form:	The way in which the text is written and presented to the reader.
Heroic language:	A form of figurative language when a character alludes to classical figures.
Irony:	A linguistic device by which writers express something that is the opposite of what is said.
Malapropism:	When a character uses the wrong word accidentally to comic effect.
Metaphor:	When a writer describes two unlikely things as <i>literally</i> sharing a quality. 'x is like y', a metaphor uses 'x is a y'.
Prop:	Something that is used in the play to convey a message or idea.
Prose:	A form of written speech that reflects the style of ordinary conversation.
Prosody:	The way words sound when you read them aloud.
Pun:	When two words that are spelt exactly the same but mean different things create a comic effect.
Republic:	A country/state without a king or queen.
Rhetoric:	This is a broad term which includes many techniques, but it often refers to the repetition of a certain sentence structure to increase the impact.
Scripture:	The writings contained within the Bible.
Setting:	A location where major events occur.
Simile:	When a writer compares one thing to another using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .
Soliloquy:	An individual speech by a character, when the other characters are not present.
Solipsistic:	Caring only about oneself and one's own view of the world.
Structure:	How the play is organised and the relationship between its parts.
Taboo:	A religious rule/principle forbidding members of the religion from doing something.
Verse:	Speech written in a poetic form i.e. with rhyme and metre.
Vulnerable:	Exposed to danger.

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Suggested Answers

Act 1, Scene 1

Active Learning Task 1

Antonio is a merchant; he is the merchant of Venice. Bassanio needs to borrow money in Belmont to meet the rich heiress Portia; he hopes to solve his money worries through marriage.

Active Learning Task 2

- The play starts with uncertainty and creates a mood of suspense right from the start using the technique that is used throughout the play.
- Looking specifically at Act 2, there are several points at which the mood of suspense and interest for the audience. In Scene 1, we learn that the Prince of Morocco must choose between two suitors, and he is forbidden from marrying anyone else if he chooses wrongly; this builds suspense as the audience wonders if he will choose the correct one.
- Gobbo and Launcelot are comic characters whose purpose is to punctuate the mood of the Act.
- When Launcelot says goodbye to Jessica and she wonders how her future will unfold, it creates suspense and doubt with her; we wonder what will happen to her, how she will feel about her new husband and whether she will love her new husband enough to warrant her loss of a father. In the action, the audience feels the suspense with them, wondering whether they will be able to save her from her house.

Active Learning Task 3

- On the surface of things, this simile tells us that Portia is probably blonde, classical and beautiful.
- In reality, this probably tells us more about Bassanio's motives than it does about Portia. He is desperate to make Portia like him; he wants to make a good impression. He does this by using figurative language to liken her to the great beauties of antiquity, something that is a compliment at that time.

Debate Prompt

- Antonio can be seen as a good friend because he will do almost anything for Bassanio, even risk his ships from someone that he hates, Shylock, knowing full well that his ships might be lost in order to help his friend.
- However, he could also be seen as arrogant, sure that he would not be made to look foolish.
- It can also be argued that perhaps he is too nice to Bassanio. If he had perhaps stood up for himself earlier, Bassanio's debts at the start of the play might not have been so great.

Act 1, Scene 2

Active Learning Task 1

Nerissa is Portia's servant and best friend. Portia cannot marry whomever she wants because her father has died to ensure that she would marry a good man; she respects him too much to defy him. She is a suitor because he is a drunkard.

Active Learning Task 2

Credit should be given for any staging. The two women could be whispering, shouting, giggling with the suitors, inside or outside, it could be in modern day or Elizabeth speech. The key is to think about the staging of a scene and think about how it could be conveyed to an audience.

Active Learning Task 3

- Portia and Nerissa talk in euphemisms. They also use many other devices within their language including: similes, metaphors, heroic language and rhetoric.
- Their language contrasts sharply with the direct and literal language used by the suitors.
- The contrast shows the difference between the two worlds of the play. Venice is a world of mercantile transactions; the language is direct, literal and honest. Belmont is the world of the suitors and casket tests, of archaic antiquity; the language is formal, figurative and uses a different type of language, the play highlights the real differences between these two worlds.

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Debate Prompt

- It can be argued that we should never disobey rules. They are there for a reason and Jessica obeys her father's command despite being frustrated by her inability to choose for herself in her father's wisdom.
- However, sometimes rules might be ethically or morally wrong. If we feel deeply that a rule can be argued that we then have a moral duty to disobey that rule in order to live our lives as we see fit.

Act 1, Scene 3**Active Learning Task**

Credit should be given here for any relevant staging. Any relevant props, locations and stage directions should be noted. The key point here is for the students to realise how many different ways there are of staging a scene.

Debate Prompt

- From a Christian point of view, making money on money-lending was considered a sin. Those who did this, mostly Jewish people, were therefore morally despicable. It can be argued that this is why, in the play, we should lend money to friends for no other reason than Christian charity.
- However, for Jews such as Shylock who were not allowed to hold property, there was no other way to make a living. One such way was through money-lending. Known as usury, it was one way that Jews could earn money. As they were faced with the prospect of no other way to live, people did this.

Act 2, Scene 1**Active Learning Task 1**

Any relevant staging should be given credit here. Students should show visual evidence that the scene should be staged in terms of costumes, how the lines are spoken, setting, etc. The choice of location that are made should reflect the choice of location.

Active Learning Task 2

- The Prince of Morocco uses heroic language to brag about his military victories and how he has won. This has a positive effect when he uses this type of language. However, it can be seen that it ends up looking foolish. His use of such language therefore has the opposite effect to what he intended.
- 'The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun,
To whom I am a neighbour and near bred.' (2–3)
- 'By this scimitar
That slew the Sophy and a Persian prince
That won three fields of Sultan Solymán,
I would outstare the sternest eyes that look' (24–27)
- 'If Hercules and Lichas play at dice
Which is the better man, the greater throw
May turn by fortune from the weaker hand:' (32–34)
- 'So is Alcides beaten by his page;
And so may I, blind fortune leading me,
Miss that which one unworthier may attain,
And die with grieving.' (35–38)

Act 2, Scene 2**Active Learning Task**

- The comic puns and malapropisms of Launcelot contrast sharply with the heroic language of Morocco.
- The comic language returns the reader to the realms of the human and the world of the play.
- The comic language also pricks the bubble of the heroic language; it shows the Prince of Morocco is not so concerned with formal matters.

Debate Prompt

- It can be argued that we can change our religion and/or heritage easily as Jessica does. She leaves her father and marries a Christian. She becomes a person with a new identity seemingly overnight.
- However, the play also hints that it might not be so simple to change our religion. Shylock only converts when he is forced to do so and Jessica feels guilt about how she has changed.

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Act 2, Scene 3

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant understanding of this scene.

Extended Essay Question

- Jessica's attitude differs to Portia's in that Jessica defies her living father whilst Portia defies her dead father.
- It is arguable as to which attitude is presented as being better. From the point of view of the play to obey fathers, Portia's attitude is correct. However, Jessica might have felt forced to accept unreasonable attitudes of her father.
- It is clear that, in the centuries before this play was written, Portia's attitude would have been typical. In this way represents a new way of thinking where individuals take responsibility for their own thinking is typical of that found within Renaissance ideas of the self.

Act 2, Scene 4

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant costume design. If possible, the costumes could be used in a fashion show. The point is to encourage student engagement with the text through costume design.

Debate Prompt

- Gratiano, Solanio and Salarino's quick, short sentences make the audience aware of the time.
- They need to work quickly and they must be aware of the time. The short sentences create a fast pace; the play gathers pace as events quickly unfold.

Act 2, Scene 5

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any ideas relating to the set design of the interior of Shylock's house.

Debate Prompt

- Shylock seems to care only for money and profit; his servant and daughter leave for other reasons to do with love and loyalty, and the treatment of others.
- Bassanio also frequently requires money, however he does not love money itself, he loves what it can provide. He is a charming and interesting friend despite his wastefulness.

Act 2, Scene 6

Active Learning Task

- Credit should be given for any diary entry that is written from the viewpoint of Jessica.
- Material could include: Jessica's inner thoughts and feelings just before and just after she escapes with her goods, her thoughts about Launcelot, her feelings towards Lorenzo, her thoughts about her father, her feelings about leaving the house, and other relevant material.
- The diary entry should be written as if it were by Jessica.

Debate Prompt

- It is arguable that Jessica's argument is convincing as people who are in love often do things in order to be together. This is how she tries to convince herself, and the argument she uses towards her father is justified.
- However, it is arguable that such immoral behaviour is never acceptable, even because of blind lovers applies to Antonio and Bassanio in the way that Antonio continues to be blind to Bassanio's faults with money.

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Act 2, Scene 7

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any answer that can be justified. Portia could be calm and collected or nervous. The point here is for the student to engage with the character and the concept of credit.

Debate Prompt

- Morocco is concerned with the appearance of things; he cannot believe that something outside could be worth anything on the inside. His preoccupation with appearance leads him to choose the wrong casket. It is arguable that his behaviour and system of values are part of him from his bloodline.
- However, it is also arguable that he has learnt this behaviour and value system through his experiences as a wealthy prince.

Act 2, Scene 8

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant direction of this scene. The point here is to see how different productions of the play can have dramatically different effects on an audience despite the same text.

Debate Prompt

- It is acceptable for a modern audience to feel sorry for Shylock; he is cast out of his faith, he is tricked out of his money and his justice, he is controlled by Christians and his daughter. In this way, Jessica's actions are not justified; she might be in love but she is acting against the societal laws that also govern Portia's behaviour.
- However, Jessica can be seen to be justified in her actions when they are considered in the context of her father is unreasonable and she is in love.
- In the 21st century, we are probably on balance less likely to find the misfortunes of Shylock something that, unlike Shakespeare's original audiences, we are unfortunately all too familiar with. Within such a context, modern audiences are more likely to be sympathetic towards characters who are persecuted due to their faith.

Act 2, Scene 9

Active Learning Task 1

Credit should be given for any relevant prop.

Active Learning Task 2

- Rhyme is often used in the play at the end of a speech to produce comic effect or to highlight previous events.
- Here it has the effect of concluding the Prince's efforts to win the hand of Portia.

Act 3, Scene 1

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for all readings of the speech. The rhythm does indeed increase its dramatic effect.

Debate Prompt

- Shylock is angry because Jessica has run away, she has stolen from him, he is upset and he is generally angry with Antonio because of Antonio's treatment of him. He has been wrecked as it allows him to have revenge on the merchant.
- Whether Shylock is justified in his anger towards Jessica and his resentment of Antonio is a matter of debate. Which do you feel that Shylock is the victim of this play rather than the villain. Either way, he is a complex character.

Extended Essay Question

- Salarino's comment tells the audience that, despite the blood ties between Jessica and Shylock, they are different to each other.
- Shakespeare here is exploring the nature versus nurture debate, i.e. are our personalities determined genetically before we are born or are we completely products of our environment? This is a debate that is different to each other despite sharing familial ties.
- However, there is also a hint here that they are not of the same blood, meaning that the debate is also up for debate.

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Act 3, Scene 2

Active Learning Task

- Music plays several important roles in the play. Here, it helps to focus the moment and heighten the tension as Bassanio picks a casket.
- Any ideas can be a part of the ideas wall. The point is to start talking about how the characters might feel at that point in the play.

Debate Prompt

- Appearances can be deceptive but they do not always have to be deceptive; it depends on the people involved.
- Some people are how they appear to be and other people can be very false. Not everyone is what they seem.
- Credit should be given for any examples drawn from a student's own personal experience.

Act 3, Scene 3

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant staging of this scene.

Debate Prompt

- It can be argued that it is always morally right to think of the many over the individual when it is economically secure.
- However, there are arguably exceptions to this concept, for example when dealing with justice. This presents a conflict with the needs of the state; how a state deals with justice is a state it is. For example, many Western countries allow individuals access to justice.

Extended Essay Question

- The Duke will not save Antonio as, if he did, it would undermine the justice system.
- The consequence of this would be catastrophic on the economically extremely poor. If the Duke wanted to do business in a place where they cannot be sure that their business deals are safe, Antonio, he would therefore risk the economic destruction of Venice.
- This shows us that justice in the play is intrinsically linked to commerce and economic interests above such material concerns.

Act 3, Scene 4

Active Learning Task

There are a great many deliberate puns in the play. The following list includes a selection of them:

- Antonio: 'Hie thee, gentle Jew' (act one, scene three) (172) – a pun on gentle and Jew throughout the play.
- Gratiano: 'For if I do, I'll mar the young clerk's pen' (act five scene one) (237) – a pun on pen and pen throughout the play.
- There are a huge number of puns concerned with materialism and commercialism throughout the play. Credit should be given for any valid pun.

Extended Essay Question

- On the one hand, it does not undermine the main themes of the play, as Portia acts as a judge by simply lending a helping hand. The play's main theme could be seen to be the triumph of justice over deception.
- However, it does undermine the main themes of the play precisely because their actions are based on truth, appearance over reality. Obtaining a false justice for Antonio and robbing him of his money through deception and trickery are not moral actions.

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Act 3, Scene 5

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant staging.

Debate Prompt

- The serious scenes and material are often punctuated and split up by comic characters.
- Usually, a dramatic scene will be followed by a comic one.
- The effect of this is to retain the dramatic tension in the dramatic scenes through the comic ones. Changes in mood mean that an audience is more relaxed when they enter a comic scene; in this way the tension and the drama becomes heightened.

Act 4, Scene 1

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant staging ideas.

Debate Prompt

- Men in the play are often shown to be action heroes, likened to classical figures.
- Women, as Portia's speech shows, are shown to be the centres of mercy and forgiveness who nurture and tend to the heroic men.
- However, the play questions these stereotypical roles as much as it presents them by comparing himself to such overly heroic figures. Bassanio also shows us that men can be weak and have to be rescued by rich heiresses. Antonio is also shown to not always be a hero. Shylock shows a darker side to his character.
- Portia plays the part of a traditional daughter who obeys her father's wishes yet she challenges the patriarchal system when she pretends to be a lawyer. She also challenges him and shows that she is more than a match for her new husband.
- Jessica defies traditional gender roles in her rejection of her father and of his authority.
- These challenges to gender relations show us that Shakespeare was exploring and questioning as well as simply presenting them.

Extended Essay Question

- Yes the ending is just in as far as the world of the play where Jews are considered outcasts and Shylock is shown a certain degree of mercy; he is allowed to live.
- However, when we judge the play by modern standards, it is not at all just. Shylock is forced to convert. He is tricked.
- Even in Shakespeare's time, it is hinted at that this is not real justice; it is a type of justice in his interests.

Act 4, Scene 2

Active Learning Task

Any colours or textures should be given credit. Mood boards should be colourful with lots of photos, magazine clippings, etc.

Debate Prompt

- It is supposed to be comic; they have been tricked by their wives, something that is not within Shakespeare's patriarchal society.
- However, it also hints at the possibility that the marriages will not last. If the ring is a symbol of loyalty and fidelity, it does not take the men long to break it.

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Act 5, Scene 1

Active Learning Task

Any relevant staging and direction should be given credit.

Debate Prompt

- The debate here is about whether there are absolute values in the world, things that are beautiful, or whether things are only ever relative. For example, Portia is only beautiful because of her father's choice; she has no intrinsic beauty in her own right. This could be debated either way, this debate has raged for hundreds if not thousands of years.
- It can be argued that some things are always absolute. For example, it is never right to kill. However, this has also been argued for many years.

Major Character Analyses

Debate Prompt

- It can be argued that Antonio is a virtuous character: he loves his friends, he is generous, he helps those people that he cares about and he is generally a moral character.
- However, we are also told that he has verbally abused Shylock in the past and made him feel inferior. He is unwilling to see through to the end. In this way, he cannot keep his word, thus making him a villain.

Extended Essay Question

- Shylock can be seen to be the villain in the play as, like in the morality tradition that was the basis for this play, he is the traditional demonic stock character. He is not Christian, he loves money and not love, he is concerned only for vengeance and revenge. He refuses to be merciful. He is consumed by greed and revenge. In these ways, he is a villain.
- However, Shakespeare goes beyond the morality tradition in many of his plays, in that he explores the motivations that people have, and when they are vengeful or bitter, he examines why. In this way, he is saying that no one is born evil or horrible; we are all victims of the world we live in. Viewed like this, Shylock is a victim. He is abused by the Venetian citizens and in certain areas and many professions, he cannot own property and he is shunned because of his race. Then that he ends up bitter and full of hate; he is a product of the racism of his time.
- It is impossible to know for sure how original audiences would have responded to Shylock. Some might argue that they would not have responded to his character with as much empathy as we do today. Still very much second-class citizens in the time in which this play was written; the Venetians viewed him as a sub-human and oddities. Faced with his situation, Antonio, it is reasonable to argue that most people would have sided with the honest Christian over the evil bitter old Jew.

Themes

Debate Prompt 1

- Antonio is the perfect Christian: he is self-sacrificing, he helps his friends without expecting anything in return, he is a fair merchant and he is moral and virtuous.
- However, he is also abusive towards Shylock and goes back on his word to him.

Extended Essay Question 1

- Loyalty is explored in the play in several ways: between friends, between lovers and between family.
- Antonio and Bassanio are loyal friends to each other; Antonio is perhaps a bit too loyal, as he needs money.
- Bassanio and Portia appear loyal to each other but the ring trick hints that perhaps they are not as happy as it appears to.
- Portia is loyal to the wishes of her father.
- Jessica is disloyal to her father.

Active Learning Task

Credit should be given for any relevant reimagining of the task.

Extended Essay Question 2

- True mercy is not delivered in the play as mercy is only shown to Antonio based on his status, while only shown to Shylock because it is a way to convert him and take his money.
- Although mercy is shown, there are caveats. Therefore, it is not true mercy.
- Justice is not given to Shylock; he is denied his pound of flesh, his revenge on Antonio. While the appearance of justice is given, the reality of things is quite different.

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Debate Prompt 2

- The play is not anti-Semitic; the Jew character is used because it was familiar, not for reasons. Anti-Semitism as a concept did not really exist in the same way in the sixteenth century.
- However, the play is anti-Semitic when judged by modern standards. Shylock is excluded and finally tricked into losing his money and converting.

Writer's Techniques**Active Learning Task 1**

The scene opens with blank verse and finishes with prose and a rhyming couplet.

Active Learning Task 2

- The Act opens with Scene 1 set in a Venetian court. The Duke and Antonio enter; Shylock enters; this already prejudices Shylock as he was not party to the conversation.
- The structure of the scene follows the pattern of a long speech then short questions; characters give their points of view and for them to then be questioned by other characters and the audience.
- The tension builds through this structure.

Debate Prompt 2

- In some ways, the structure of this play is very simple. There are five acts, each with a set location.
- However, the fluidity of the locations as they interact and the gradual climatic build-up to the play that climaxes in the courtroom scene show that, under the surface, the structure is complex.

Debate Prompt 1

- Heroic metaphors do strengthen the heroic appearance of certain characters as they draw connections between the classical heroes and the characters themselves.
- However, most of the time it is so overly emphasised that the overall effect is comical.

Context**Active Learning Task**

1558 – Queen Elizabeth I takes the throne.
 1564 – Shakespeare born.
 1564 – Marlowe born.
 1567 – Nashe born.
 1580 – Francis Drake returns to England after his global explorations.
 1580 – Montaigne's *Essays* published.
 1587 – Mary Queen of Scots executed on Elizabeth I's orders.
 1588 – Spanish Armada.
 1589 – Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* published.
 1593 – Marlowe dies.
 1594 – Shakespeare's company The Lord Chamberlain's Men formed.
 1596–99 – *The Merchant of Venice* published.

Extended Essay Question

- It is impossible to tell for certain whether Shakespeare intended his audiences to feel sympathy for Shylock. What is certain is that there were no Jews in England in the time in which he was writing and it is highly likely that original audiences would have found the figure of Shylock as quite alien.
- Our twenty-first-century eyes view Shylock quite differently due at least in part to the twentieth century's horrific events of the Holocaust are still very much a part of our consciousness. Against such a backdrop, Shylock is more easily seen as a tragic victim of racial antagonism.
- There are also hints in the play that Shakespeare was asking his original audience to question the treatment of Shylock was right or just. He includes several speeches that question the treatment of human as Christians. They deserve respect too. The extent to which Shakespeare's Shylock was treated equally will never be known; what is interesting is that, during a time when the norm was to exclude, the play questions this view at all.

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