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The Merchant
of Venice

AQA GCSE English Literature



YORK NOTES

York Notes Rapid Revision

The Merchant of Venice

AQA GCSE English Literature

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PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act I Scenes 1 and 2

Five key things about Act I Scenes 1 and 2

1. We are **introduced** to **Antonio**, the '**merchant**' of the title and his friends, including **Bassanio**, who asks to borrow money to woo a noblewoman called **Portia**.
2. We witness **Antonio's melancholy** and his close **friendship** with **Bassanio**.
3. **Venice** (Scene 1), a place of trade, and **Belmont** (Scene 2) are established as the play's **key locations**.
4. The **casket test** devised by **Portia's dead father** is set up as a key **plot device**.
5. The **themes** of **trade**, **friendship** and **love**, as well as the issue of **fathers and children** are all introduced.



What happens in Scene 1?

- Antonio, a rich merchant with many ships at sea, is unable to say '**why I am so sad**' when questioned about his low mood by friends Salarino and Solanio.
- Bassanio and his young friend Gratiano enter; Bassanio admits his past faults, but asks his friend Antonio to lend him more money to pay his debts.
- Bassanio explains that he has fallen for a noblewoman, Portia, and believes she feels as he does.
- Antonio has no ready money as all his riches are tied up abroad in his trading ships, but he willingly agrees to help Bassanio raise or borrow money.

What happens in Scene 2?

- At her house in Belmont, Portia discusses her frustrations about finding a husband with her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.
- Portia's late father has set a test for prospective husbands which involves choosing from three caskets of gold, silver and lead in order to win her.
- Portia humorously lists her suitors (a Neapolitan prince, the County Palatine, a French lord, an English baron, a Scottish lord and the Duke of Saxony's nephew) but remembers Bassanio as being worthy of Nerissa's praise.
- The arrival of a suitor, the Prince of Morocco, is announced.

Five key quotations

1. Character of Antonio: **'I have much ado to know myself'** (I.1.7)
2. Bassanio's friendship with Antonio: **'To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love'** (I.1.130–1)
3. **Foreshadowing** the risks of Antonio's sea trade: **'all my fortunes are at sea'** (I.1.177)
4. Venice as a business **setting** – Antonio: **'Try what my credit can in Venice do'** (I.1.180)
5. Fathers clashing with children – Portia: **'so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father'** (I.2.23–4)

Note it!

There are several 'teasers' in these two scenes which show Shakespeare's ability to engage the audience. For example, we are not told exactly what the test of the three caskets set by Portia's father consists of. Also, Antonio's business being all **'at sea'** raises concerns.

Exam focus

How can I write about the use of chance in the plot? AO1 AO2

You can comment on Antonio's business and the test set by Portia's father.

The idea of risk is central to the plot. Antonio's money is entirely tied up in his ships and cargo **which are 'all ... at sea'**. The phrase has **a double meaning – they are literally in danger on the ocean, but this is also an idiom that means feeling lost or out of control.** Furthermore, **the 'lottery' of the test for Portia's suitors,** including Bassanio, suggests people's lives may stand or fall according to fortune.

Topic sentence/point

Quotation supports point

Language analysis

Link to other quotation

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about Antonio's character. Use one of the quotations from the list.

From his first words in the play, Antonio is presented as someone who struggles emotionally

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act I Scene 3

Five key things about Act I Scene 3

1. We encounter the main **antagonist** of the play, **Shylock**, a Jewish moneylender, for the first time.
2. We find out about the **roots of the hate** and conflict **between Shylock and Antonio**.
3. The central **plot device** of the '**pound of flesh**' **bond** is introduced.
4. Discussions about the **risky nature of sea trade** and **Shylock's trustworthiness foreshadow** later events.
5. Key **themes** related to **religious prejudice**, **trade** and **appearance/reality** are developed.



What happens in Scene 3?

- The scene begins **in media res** with Bassanio and Shylock discussing the terms of the loan of 3000 ducats over three months.
- Shylock expresses doubts about whether Antonio's ventures overseas are safe.
- Antonio and Shylock meet. In an **aside**, Shylock reveals his hate for Antonio and how he wants revenge for the hurt done to him and the Jewish race.
- Antonio and Shylock argue over the meaning of a biblical story about Jacob, which Shylock uses to justify his way of doing business.
- Shylock gives an impassioned speech about how Antonio has treated him, before finally agreeing to the loan, on the conditions of the bond.

What is the bond that Shylock proposes?

- Shylock agrees to loan the money and not take any interest on it. But he proposes that the bond will be a '**merry sport**' (a sort of game or bit of fun).
- The bond states that if Antonio cannot pay back the money within the set time, Shylock can take exactly a '**pound of flesh**' from any part of Antonio's body.
- Bassanio distrusts Shylock and advises Antonio against accepting the bond.
- However, Antonio willingly agrees, saying that within two months he expects to receive three times as much as the loan from his businesses.

Five key quotations

1. Further foreshadowing by Shylock of risks to Antonio: **'he hath ... other ventures he hath squandered abroad'** (1.3.17–19)
2. Shylock's aside on the theme of hate and revenge: **'If I can catch him once upon the hip,/I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.'** (1.3.41–2)
3. Shylock on the theme of prejudice: **'You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine'** (1.3.106–7)
4. Antonio on Shylock's character: **'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.'** (1.3.93)
5. Bassanio on the theme of appearance and reality: **'I like not fair terms and a villain's mind.'** (1.3.175)

Note it!

Shakespeare keeps up the dramatic **pace** and tension by switching from Belmont directly into the middle of a negotiation between Shylock and Bassanio. This is an example of *in media res* and not only changes the pace but also immediately establishes Shylock's character.

Exam focus

How can I write about the way Shylock is presented?

AO1

AO2

You can comment on Shylock's language and behaviour.

An aside is a dramatic device often used by Shakespeare to enable his villains to reveal their thoughts or motives. Here, the audience learns that Shylock plans to 'catch' Antonio out to 'feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.' The image suggests that his hate is very deep-rooted, like an emptiness he must fill. The audience is bound to be anxious for Antonio.

Topic sentence focuses on dramatic device

Quotations support point

Language analysis

Summary point looks forward

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about Shylock's character. Use one of the quotations from the list.

We are given clues about the danger Shylock poses for Antonio in Bassanio's comment that.....

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act II Scenes 1-5

Five key things about Act II Scenes 1-5

1. We discover more about **the casket test** as the **Prince of Morocco** tries to win Portia's hand.
2. Shylock's daughter **Jessica plans** to run off with **Lorenzo**, a Christian. This is the beginning of another **subplot**.
3. **Comic characters** are introduced: Shylock's servant **Lancelot** and his father, **Old Gobbo**, who both seek to leave Shylock's house.
4. The **theme** of **prejudice** is developed in attitudes to Morocco and Shylock.
5. The **theme** of **appearance/reality** is developed through Lancelot and his father, and the plots to deceive Shylock about his daughter's plans.

What happens in Act II Scenes 1-3?

- **Scene 1:** The Prince of Morocco boasts to Portia of his military courage.
- Portia tells him that if he fails the casket test he can never marry.
- **Scene 2:** Shylock's servant, Lancelot, debates with himself about leaving Shylock, and decides he will. He then fools his half-blind father who asks him the way to Shylock's house.
- Bassanio agrees to take Lancelot into his service. He also agrees to take Gratiano to Belmont with him.
- **Scene 3:** Jessica gives Lancelot a letter for her lover, Lorenzo.



How does the subplot develop in Act II Scenes 4 and 5?

- **Scene 4:** Outside Shylock's house, Lorenzo, Gratiano, Salarino and Solanio prepare for a masque.
- Lancelot arrives with the letter inviting Shylock to supper with Bassanio.
- Lorenzo reveals Jessica is to leave her father, taking his **'gold and jewels'**.
- **Scene 5:** Shylock reluctantly goes to meet Bassanio and speaks critically of the **'Christian fools'** who will hold their party close to his house.
- He leaves his keys with Jessica and warns her to **'Lock up'** the doors.

Five key quotations

1. Portia (to Morocco) on the jeopardy of the casket test: **'if you choose wrong,/Never to speak to lady afterward/In way of marriage'** (II.1.40–2)
2. Morocco comments on the theme of prejudice: **'Mislike me not for my complexion'** (II.1.1)
3. Gobbo to Lancelot on the theme of appearance/reality: **'I know you not, young gentleman'** (II.2.65)
4. Jessica on the rift between father and daughter: **'though I am a daughter to his blood/I am not to his manners'** (II.3.17–18)
5. Shylock's scorn: **'I'll go in hate, to feed upon/The prodigal Christian.'** (II.5.14–15)

Note it!

These relatively short scenes introduce urgency and drama, switching swiftly between Belmont and Venice, with plots coming thick and fast. The fact that the audience does not know the outcome of the Prince of Morocco's choice builds further tension.

Exam focus

How can I write about the structure of the action?

AO1

AO2

You can comment on the importance of the subplot.

The Lorenzo/Jessica subplot adds weight to Shylock as the antagonist of the play. It is his own daughter, after all, who says that while she may be tied by blood to her father, she cannot put up with 'his manners'. The light-hearted Christians, who include Lorenzo, are thus contrasted with Shylock's instinct to lock up his house and his daughter. Ironically, he leaves her to lock up.

Topic sentence/point

Quotation supports point

Explanation and development

Summative point about the action

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about how prejudice is developed in this act. Use one of the quotations from the list.

The theme of prejudice is developed when Morocco enters the play and his first words to Portia.....

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act II Scenes 6–9

Five key things about Act II Scenes 6–9

1. Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo adds **drama and tension**.
2. Further **details of the casket test** are revealed as two suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, try to work out the riddles.
3. **Trouble** is **foreshadowed** with news of ships in danger overseas.
4. The **theme** of **appearance and reality** is developed through Jessica's disguise, and the way the caskets and inscriptions deceive the princes.
5. The **themes** of **money** and **parental love/duty** are reflected in Shylock's furious response to his daughter Jessica's disappearance.



What happens in Scenes 6 and 7?

- **Scene 6:** Gratiano and Salarino meet Lorenzo. Jessica, disguised as a boy, leaves Shylock's house, taking his money.
- Gratiano leaves to meet Bassanio and get the boat to Belmont.
- **Scene 7:** At Belmont, Morocco reads the three riddle-like inscriptions on the caskets. He is initially attracted by the silver, **'Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves.'**
- He finally opens the gold casket that is inscribed, **'Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire'** but is greeted with a skull. He leaves, forlorn.

What happens in Scenes 8 and 9?

- **Scene 8:** Salarino and Solanio report Shylock's angry discovery of Jessica's disappearance.
- They discuss reports of a Venetian ship having sunk in the English Channel and worry it might be Antonio's. They talk of his great love for Bassanio.
- **Scene 9:** At Belmont, Arragon rejects the lead casket, which states, **'Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath'**. He also avoids the trap of the gold casket but vainly believes he deserves Portia, so chooses silver.
- He finds a **'fool's head'** and has to leave. The scene ends with the announcement that Bassanio has arrived.

Five key quotations

1. Jessica on the theme of love: **'love is blind, and lovers cannot see/The pretty follies that themselves commit'** (II.6.37–8)
2. Message in the gold casket on the theme of appearance and reality: **'All that glisters is not gold'** (II.7.65)
3. Shylock's motive for revenge – Solanio: **'O my Christian ducats!/Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!'** (II.8.16–17)
4. Foreshadowing of later events by Salarino: **'there miscarried/A vessel of our country richly fraught./I thought upon Antonio'** (II.8.30–2)
5. Solanio on Antonio's feelings for Bassanio: **'I think he only loves the world for him.'** (II.8.51)

Note it!

The casket test, set by Portia's father, has fairy-tale elements in its structure of three different suitors taking the challenge. The three encounters also touch on key themes of the play: disguise, judgement and justice.

Exam focus

How can I write about the first two casket scenes?

AO1

AO2

You can comment on the importance of the messages in the caskets.

Although the casket test might seem contrived, the first message is important to the play as a whole. The phrase, 'All that glisters is not gold' could be seen as a warning to the characters not to make judgements based on outward appearance. Antonio should not trust Shylock's seeming 'merry sport'; Shylock should not trust his daughter's apparent loyalty. It leaves the audience wondering – what is true?

Topic sentence/point

Quotation supports point

Explanation and development

Summative point about the theme as a whole

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about how later plot developments are foreshadowed. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Shakespeare provides hints of Antonio's later difficulties when Salarino.....

My progress

Needs more work Getting there Sorted!

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act III

Five key things about Act III

1. Rumours about **Antonio's ships** sinking seem to be **confirmed**.
2. **Shylock** resists appeals for **mercy**, and makes it clear he will pursue **payment of his debt** from Antonio in full.
3. **Bassanio** takes the **casket test** and **wins Portia**; **Gratiano** falls for **Nerissa** and they, too, will **marry**.
4. **Bassanio returns to Venice** to help Antonio; **Portia and Nerissa** also leave, in disguise. **Belmont** will be in the hands of **Jessica and Lorenzo**.
5. **Themes** of **revenge, love, religious prejudice and conflict** are developed.

What happens in Scenes 1–3?

- **Scene 1:** Solanio and Salarino discuss tales of Antonio's lost ship. Shylock arrives and accuses them of knowing about Jessica's flight.
- Shylock gives an impassioned speech about the harm done to him by Antonio. He points out he is as human as any Christian.
- Tubal, Shylock's friend, arrives and makes him even angrier with tales of Jessica's reckless spending of his money.
- **Scene 2:** In Belmont, Bassanio takes the casket test, correctly choosing the lead one and revealing '**Fair Portia's counterfeit**'. Portia gives him a ring as a **symbol** of their bond.
- A letter arrives confirming Antonio's losses and his imminent death. Bassanio leaves to help him.
- **Scene 3:** Shylock refuses all appeals for mercy; Antonio seems to accept that he is destined to die.



What happens in Scenes 4 and 5?

- **Scene 4:** Back in Belmont, Portia passes management of her house to Jessica and Lorenzo, while she and Nerissa attend a monastery.
- Portia sends a message to a cousin, Doctor Bellario, and reveals to Nerissa they are to go to Venice disguised as young men.
- **Scene 5:** Jessica, Lancelot and Lorenzo talk humorously about parenthood, and about Jessica's conversion to Christianity.

Five key quotations

1. Shylock on prejudice: **'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?'** (III.1.52–3)
2. Shylock on Jessica's elopement: **'I would my daughter were dead at my foot'** (III.1.79)
3. Portia to Bassanio on their relationship: **'Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/Is now converted.'** (III.2.166–7)
4. Dramatic tension – Antonio's losses: **'my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel'** (III.2.313–14)
5. Shylock's relentless character: **'I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,/To shake the head, relent, and sigh, ... I will have my bond.'** (III.3.14–17)

Note it!

After news of Antonio's problems, Portia's playful plan to disguise herself to follow Bassanio may seem out of place, especially as she has recently pledged herself to him. However, it arouses curiosity – why is she doing this?

Exam focus

How can I write about Bassanio winning Portia? AO2 AO3

You can comment on how love has social implications.

In winning Portia, Bassanio is not only gaining the woman he loves, but, ironically given his choice of the lead casket, a lot of wealth. When Portia tells him, **'what is mine, to you and yours/Is now converted'** she is referring to all her possessions and lands. Modern audiences might find this hard to accept but **this was common practice in Shakespeare's day.** However, **Shakespeare ensures Portia establishes her independence in other ways.**

Topic sentence/point

Quotation supports point

Explanation related to context

Alternative perspective provided

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about how the news of Antonio's ships builds tension. Use one of the quotations from the list.

As the act opens, Antonio's friends report the possible loss of his ships and, by the end, Antonio confirms this when

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act IV

Five key things about Act IV

1. The act mostly consists of **one long scene** that forms the **dramatic climax** of the play.
2. All the **major characters** are brought into **focus** as the plot nears its end.
3. The **court-room setting** and **set-piece speeches** indicate a **change of mood and tone**.
4. **Portia's powerful speech** about **mercy** is the emotional **heart of the scene**.
5. Core **themes** related to **love, friendship, justice** and **revenge** intertwine.

What happens at the start of Act IV Scene 1?

- The duke tells Antonio that Shylock is unwilling to show mercy.
- Bassanio offers to pay double the amount he owes to Shylock, but Shylock refuses and prepares to take his bond.
- Nerissa arrives in disguise bearing a letter stating that Balthazar (in fact, Portia) will take the lawyer Dr Bellario's place.

What happens in the second part of Scene 1 and Scene 2?

- **Scene 1:** Portia/Balthazar argues strongly about the importance of mercy, but when Shylock is unmoved, she acknowledges his right to take his **'pound of flesh'**.
- Antonio bares his chest ready for the fatal cut. Suddenly Portia insists no blood must be spilled and explains that if it is, all Shylock's land and goods will pass to the state.
- Shylock is defeated and requests the money, but Portia now tells him that for seeking the life of a Christian he faces execution. The duke pardons him, but Antonio makes him promise to convert to Christianity and leave half his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica.
- Shylock's words as he leaves, **'I am not well'**, show he is now a broken man.
- Portia asks Bassanio for his ring in payment for her service.
- **Scene 2:** Gratiano gives the ring to Portia; Nerissa says she is going to try the same trick on Gratiano to get her engagement ring back.



Five key quotations

1. Antonio on Shylock's vengeful character: **'You may as well use question with the wolf/Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb'** (IV.1.3–4)
2. Shylock on the theme of justice: **'If you deny me, fie upon your law:/ There is no force in the decrees of Venice.'** (IV.1.101–2)
3. Portia on the theme of mercy: **'The quality of mercy is not strain'd,/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven'** (IV.1.182–3)
4. Bassanio on the theme of friendship: **'life itself, my wife, and all the world,/Are not with me esteem'd above thy life'** (IV.1.282–3)
5. Portia's abilities – Gratiano, mocking Shylock: **'an upright judge, a learned judge!'** (IV.1.321)

Note it!

Audiences in Shakespeare's day would have enjoyed Shylock's downfall, but we may find the 'mercy' offered to him ungenerous: he loses his lands and his religion, and his wealth passes to the daughter who betrayed him.

Exam focus

How can I write about Portia at the trial?

AO1

AO2

You can comment on how Portia's character is presented.

Portia demonstrates judgement, intelligence and wisdom. The poetic symbol of the 'quality of mercy' falling from heaven gives Shylock the chance to redeem himself. But in refusing her appeal he seals his own fate. Portia has placed herself on the side of law, reason and Christian charity, all elements designed to appeal to Shakespeare's audience at the time.

Topic sentence/overall point

Quotation and literary term

Explanation of point

Further comment on audience effect

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about Shylock's vengeful character. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Shylock is presented as absolutely set on revenge in this scene, as Antonio's comparison.....

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Act V

Five key things about Act V

1. There is a **shift** in **pace** and **tone** as the action moves to **Belmont** and **night-time**.
2. The **final elements** of the **plot**, including the ring **subplot**, are **resolved**.
3. **Further news is revealed** regarding the **successful return** of some of **Antonio's ships**.
4. The **mood is enhanced by music**, and **lyrical dialogue** between **Jessica and Lorenzo**.
5. The **themes** of **love, friendship and appearance and reality** are revisited.

What happens at the start of Act V?

- Lorenzo and Jessica, who are waiting at Belmont, talk about classical lovers who were together on **'such a night'** as this one.
- Stephano brings news of Portia's return and Lancelot reports that Bassanio is also on his way to Belmont.
- Lorenzo requests music, although Jessica states she is **'never merry'** when she hears **'sweet music'**.



What happens next?

- Portia and Nerissa arrive first, and instruct the servants and Lorenzo and Jessica not to reveal to Bassanio and Gratiano that they have been absent.
- Bassanio, Gratiano and Antonio arrive. Portia pretends to be meeting Antonio for the first time. Gratiano and Nerissa argue over the ring given to the clerk (Nerissa) of the lawyer (Balthazar/Portia).
- Portia has fun reprimanding Gratiano for giving the ring away; Bassanio is forced to admit he has done the same.
- The trick is revealed as the ring that Portia then gives to Antonio to hand to Bassanio is the original.
- Portia presents a letter from her cousin Dr Bellario which explains her role of lawyer. She also reveals that three of Antonio's ships have safely returned.
- Nerissa breaks the final piece of news – that Lorenzo and Jessica will inherit all Shylock's possessions on his death.

Five key quotations

1. Lorenzo on the theme of love: **'In such a night/Did Jessica steal from a wealthy Jew/And with an unthrift love did run from Venice'** (V.1.14–16)
2. Mood and **setting** – Lorenzo: **'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!'** (V.1.54)
3. **Dramatic irony** – Portia to Gratiano: **'You give your wife too unkind a cause of grief;/And 'twere to me, I should be mad at it.'** (V.1.175–6)
4. Portia's humour: **'I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow.'** (V.1.233)
5. Antonio on Portia's qualities: **'Sweet lady, you have given me life and living'** (V.1.286)

Note it!

The final scene turns the play from what might have been tragedy to comedy. Note the elements of comedy: misunderstandings resolved, lovers reunited, wealth going to those who deserve it – although some audiences may question how deserving Jessica is.

Exam focus

How can I write about mood? AO1 AO2

You can comment on how the mood of the scene is created.

The opening to the act could not be more different in mood and tone from the previous one. The beautiful night-time setting and the harmonious dialogue between Lorenzo and Jessica suggest peace and unity. The references to classical lovers who met on 'such a night' add depth to the lovers' feelings. And yet, the examples given all end tragically. So perhaps this is an omen for Jessica and Lorenzo.

Topic sentence/overall point

Develops point

Quotation supports point

Interpretation raises questions

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about how humour or dramatic irony is brought into the scene. Use one of the quotations from the list.

The humorous mood is created by Portia's joke to Bassanio, telling him

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

Form and structure

Three key things about form and structure

1. The plot has a **classic five-part structure**: **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, **resolution**.
2. There are three **interweaving plot-lines**: the **revenge** plot; the **casket/love** plot; the **Jessica elopement** plot.
3. Although the play takes place over three months, there is a sense of **increasing pace and drama**.

Which is the most important plot in the play?

- The revenge plot is the most important: the court-room scene forms the dramatic climax, and the stakes are high: life and death!
- The narrative journeys of Antonio and Shylock mirror each other: both suffer a fall, but Antonio is rescued, whereas Shylock is destroyed.
- The revenge story powerfully engages the emotions, particularly through Shylock's speeches and Portia's plea for mercy.

What other structural elements are important?

- The movement between the real world of Venice and fantasy-like Belmont create changes in **pace**, **mood** and **tone**.
- The fairy-tale structure of the casket test with its riddles and pattern of three suitors is separate from, and yet intertwines with, the other plots.
- Act V, with its music, lyricism and humour, retrospectively changes the play from being almost a tragedy to conventional comedy.



How does time work in the play?

- Shakespeare cleverly makes the audience wait: we find out about the casket test and Morocco in Act I Scene 2, but it is not until Act II, after the bond is agreed, that Morocco arrives.
- The potential risk to Antonio's ships is rumoured early in the play, and there is then a drip-feed of news until the full extent of his losses (or so it seems) is confirmed in his letter of Act III Scene 3.

Five key quotations

1. Sarlarino foreshadows the loss of Antonio's ships: **'What harm a wind too great might do at sea.'** (I.1.24)
2. The main revenge plot – Shylock: **'I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him'** (I.3.42)
3. The play's fairy-tale element – Nerissa to Portia: **'will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love'** (I.2.30–1)
4. The Jessica/Lorenzo subplot: **'O Lorenzo,/If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,/Become a Christian and thy loving wife.'** (II.3.18–20)
5. Dramatic climax – Portia: **'Why then, thus it is:/You must prepare your bosom for his knife.'** (IV.1.242–3)

Note it!

The fairy-tale element of the casket test not only links to the **themes** of love and appearance/reality, but gives Belmont a different tone from that of Venice. It also lends structure, with the repeating pattern of the three suitor scenes.

Exam focus

How can I write about formal elements of the play? AO1 AO2

You can write about how Act IV uses the form of a trial to build a dramatic climax.

Shakespeare uses the form of a trial, with evidence, a plaintiff (Shylock), an accused (Antonio) and a lawyer (Portia) to create dramatic tension. This is the climax of the plot as Portia tells Antonio to prepare your bosom for his knife. This represents a high point for Shylock, but soon he is on a downward path.

Overall point about form

The elements of the form

Quotation links to dramatic structure

Links to character

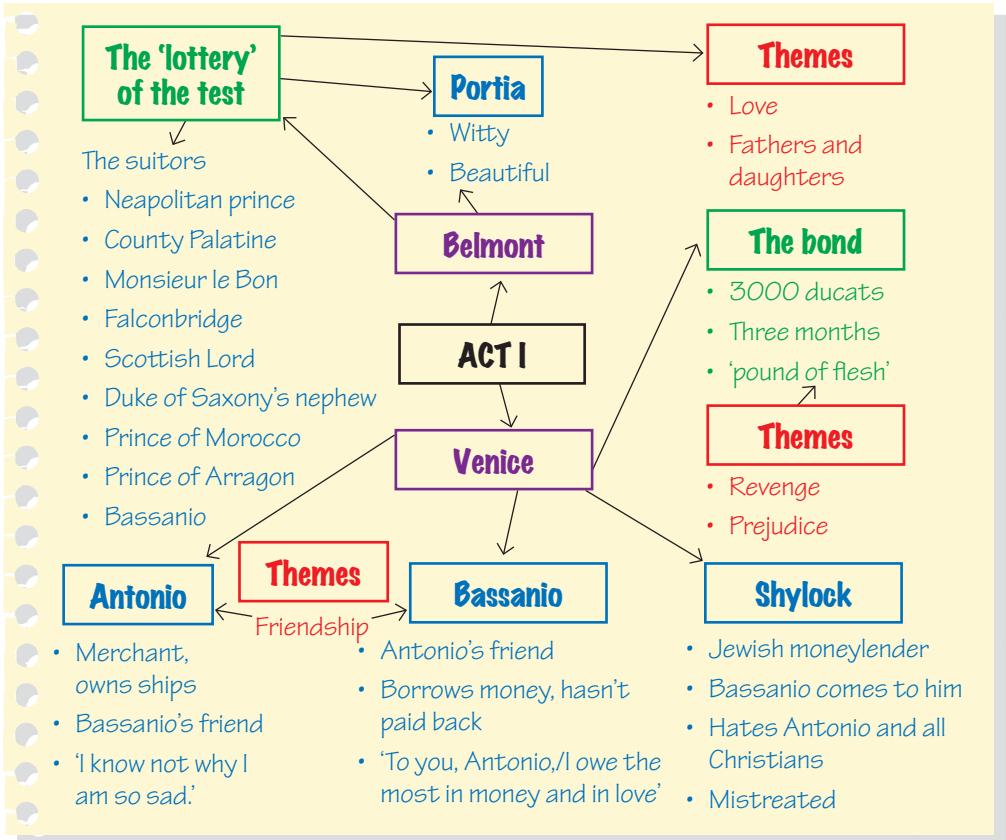
Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about how different types of plot contribute to the play. Use one of the quotations from the list.

The Jessica/Lorenzo love subplot benefits the play in a number of ways: firstly by

PLOT AND STRUCTURE Quick revision

1. Look at this ideas map representing Act I. Is there anything else you could add?



2. Create your own ideas map for one of the other acts in the play.

Quick quiz

Answer these quick questions about plot and structure.

1. In which city does the play begin?
2. What mood is Antonio in at the start of the play?
3. Why does Bassanio want to borrow money from Antonio?
4. Who devised the 'lottery' of the test for Portia?

5. What amount of money does Bassanio ask to borrow from Shylock?
6. Who decides to leave Shylock's employment?
7. What is Jessica going to take with her when she escapes from her father?
8. Which casket does Morocco choose?
9. What worrying news is reported about Antonio?
10. Who chooses the silver casket?
11. Who gives Shylock news of Jessica's reckless spending?
12. What does Portia give Bassanio as a symbol of their love?
13. How does Bassanio find out about Antonio's losses?
14. What does Portia tell Nerissa they are going to do after Bassanio has left?
15. Which important person in Venice fails to change Shylock's mind?
16. What name does Portia adopt as a lawyer?
17. What does the bond *not* allow Shylock to take?
18. What possible punishment does Shylock face but avoid?
19. What does Portia/Balthazar ask for in payment for her services?
20. What other good news does Antonio receive in the final scene?

Power paragraphs

Write a **paragraph** in response to **each of these questions**. For each, try to **use one quotation** you have learned.

1. In what ways do two of the main plots of the play link together in Act I?
2. How do Acts IV and V contrast in mood?

Exam practice

Re-read the section in Act I Scene 2 from line 21 'O me, the word "choose"!' to line 36 'level at my affection'.

Why is this moment significant in the text as a whole? Write **two paragraphs** explaining your ideas.

You could comment on:

- how the casket test is important to the play as a whole
- how Shakespeare explores any key themes or ideas.

SETTING AND CONTEXT Jewish and Christian society

Five key things about Jews and Christians in Shakespeare's day

1. Most families in England subscribed to **Christian values** of the time.
2. Most **children** in England were **baptised** into the **Church of England** soon after they were born.
3. Around the world, there had been a long **history of Jews** being **exiled** from or suppressed in many states, including England.
4. It is unlikely that **Shakespeare's audience** would have known **any Jews personally** as they had been **expelled from England 300 years earlier**.
5. **Playwrights** such as **Christopher Marlowe** also created **Jewish characters**.

How did Christian values affect English society?

- Children were taught the main aspects of Christian faith and Bible stories.
- Henry VIII had founded the Church of England in opposition to the Roman Catholic faith, but Elizabeth I allowed most people to practise other faiths privately.

How were Jews treated in Shakespeare's time?

- King Edward I had expelled the Jews from England in 1290. Prejudice had grown and they were viewed as heretics (people whose beliefs did not agree with the official beliefs of the Church).
- They were also blamed by many for catastrophes, such as the plague.
- In 1594, one of the Queen's doctors, a Portuguese Jew named Roderigo Lopez, was tried and executed for attempting to poison the Queen. Racial propaganda was a key factor in his trial.
- Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* features a Jew, named Barabas, who is presented much less sympathetically than Shylock.

Why is the issue of money-lending so important in the play?

- Ancient biblical tradition suggested it was immoral to lend money with interest, yet in 1571 Parliament legalised charging interest, provided it was beneath 10 per cent.
- In the absence of Jewish moneylenders in England, many English merchants lent money for interest.



Three key quotations

1. Bassanio on debt: **'my chief care/Is to come fairly off from the great debts/Wherein in my time, something too prodigal,/Hath left me gag'd.'** (I.1.127–30)
2. Shylock on money-lending: **'Signior Antonio, many a time and oft/ In the Rialto you have rated me/About my monies and my usances.'** (I.3.101–3)
3. Treatment of Jews – Portia in court: **'The Jew shall have all justice; soft, no haste;/He shall have nothing but the penalty.'** (IV.1.319–20)

Note it!

Bassanio's situation, of being heavily in debt, was true of many of the prominent noblemen of Shakespeare's time, including the Earl of Essex, the Earl of Leicester and the Earl of Southampton.

Exam focus

How do I link context to the play? AO3

You can talk about the different attitudes to Shylock as a Jew.

By the end of the play, it seems that Shylock has been reduced to the **stereotypical Jew, the medieval villain who was foremost in audiences' minds**. Portia tells the court, **'The Jew shall have all justice'** while **Gratiano wants him hanged but the duke pardons him**. It seems that Shakespeare wishes **the New Testament idea of Christian mercy to win over the Old Testament eye for an eye**.

Reference to context

Relevant quotation

Thoughtful analysis

Point summarising opposing attitudes

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about ideas relating to the play's context. Use one of the quotations from the list.

The issue of lending or accumulating money is central to the play, as is shown when Shylock mentions

SETTING AND CONTEXT Settings

Five key things about the play's settings

1. **Contrast** in **settings**: **Venice** is a real place in **Northern Italy**; **Belmont** (meaning 'beautiful hill') is a **fictitious** one.
2. **Venice** in **Shakespeare's day** was probably the most **important trading centre** in the **world**.
3. The play suggests **Venice** is **bustling** and a **melting-pot** of people.
4. **Belmont's isolation** from Venice gives it an almost **fairy-tale quality**.
5. **Italy** was a **common setting** for many of **Shakespeare's comedies**.

What impression of Venice is given in the play?

- Numerous references to business, boats and overseas trade remind the audience of Venice's importance and its reputation: Tubal mentions Genoa, in Act III Scene 1, a rival for Venice's trade and influence.
- Tubal suggests Venice's diversity. While not mentioned in the play, after 1516, by law Jewish people in Venice had to return to a separate district (the ghetto) at night.
- The city's laws are overseen by the duke, but he, too, is subject to them.

What impression is given of Belmont?

- Belmont could be described as feminine – initially there are no men there (although Portia's father casts a shadow over her life).
- As the location of the casket test, with princes coming to try and win Portia, it reminds audiences of fairy-tale castles or mythical challenges.
- It is the setting for most of the play's humour – for example, Portia's witty summing-up of her suitors, the ring trick and its outcome.
- Belmont has a **lyrical**, musical quality, best expressed at the start of Act V as Jessica and Lorenzo talk together in the moonlight.



How is the Italianate setting important?

- Some of the comedy derives from the stock characters of **commedia dell'arte**, such as witty servants and wealthy, often foolish, older men.
- Italy was seen in Shakespeare's day as exotic, passionate and intriguing.

Three key quotations

- Fairy-tale Belmont – Bassanio: **'the four winds blow in from every coast/Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks/Hang on her temples like a golden fleece'** (I.1.168–70)
- Venice as a place of trade – Antonio: **'Try what my credit can in Venice do'** (I.1.180)
- Venice as a melting-pot – Salarino: **'I reason'd with a Frenchman yesterday/Who told me, in the Narrow Seas that part/The French and English, there miscarried/A vessel'** (II.8.28–31)

Note it!

The range of Portia's suitors, from many different countries, reminds the audience that the Venice region (of which Belmont is part) is an exotic centre of travel and fortune-seeking.

Exam focus

How can I write about how the setting contributes to the play's themes?

AO2

AO3

You can write about Venice's role in the play.

The image of Venice as a place of finance and fortune is made clear in the play. For example, Antonio's reputation as a merchant is on the line when he tells Bassanio to 'Try what my credit can in Venice do'. The use of the term 'credit' means both Antonio's monetary status and his personal reputation. In this way, the Rialto (Venice's business centre) is inextricably linked to Antonio's fate and, ultimately, his life.

Contextual overview point

Quotation and evidence

Language analysis

Summary point

Now you try!

Write a paragraph about a different setting in the play. Use one of the quotations from the list above.

Shakespeare introduces the setting of Belmont through Bassanio's

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!