



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

The Merchant of Venice



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *The Merchant of Venice*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship, dramatic construction and the ways meaning is shaped for an audience. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated, challenged and refined.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's comedies and problem plays do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, dramatic conventions and evolving theatrical practices. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns—justice, identity, prejudice, love and power—and produce different effects.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to texts and productions across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

The Merchant of Venice is particularly well suited to this kind of study. Is Shylock a villain, a victim, or something more complex? Is Portia a champion of justice or a figure who ultimately reinforces prejudice and power? Is the play a romantic comedy, a problem play, or a tragedy disguised as a comedy? Throughout this booklet, you will discover that Shakespeare's play resists simple answers.

This booklet uses *The Merchant of Venice* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

You will notice that this booklet does not ask you to write a complete essay immediately. Instead, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of literary study and gradually builds your confidence and understanding.

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. **Chapter 2** introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.

3. **Chapter 3** focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
4. **Chapter 4** introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation through ideas about religion, race, commerce and Renaissance Venice.
5. **Chapter 5** explores AO4 through comparison with *Hamlet*, considering how Shakespeare presents outsiders, justice and moral ambiguity across different genres.
6. **Chapter 6** introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* have continually changed and that literary study is an ongoing critical conversation rather than a search for certainty.

You should complete the booklet in order. Read the extracts carefully, annotate the accompanying articles, respond to the reflection questions and write in the spaces provided. Do not worry about producing perfect answers. The purpose of this booklet is to encourage curiosity, exploration and confidence.

You may find that your opinions change as you progress through the chapters. You may begin by seeing Shylock as a villain and finish by sympathising with him, or you may find yourself admiring Portia's intelligence whilst questioning her actions in the trial scene. This is not a sign that your earlier ideas were wrong. Instead, it reflects the nature of literary study itself: interpretations develop as we encounter new evidence, new contexts and new perspectives.

Although much of this booklet focuses on refining a line of argument and developing a single analytical paragraph, this is not the final destination. By the end of the booklet, you should use everything you have learned to produce a complete essay response to the original question.

You may wish to print this booklet and handwrite your work, or you may prefer to type your responses so that you can consciously edit and refine them. Whichever you choose, be prepared to submit your essay in September within the first two weeks of starting the course.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;
4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

The paragraph you have developed throughout this booklet should become one part of this larger response.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *The Merchant of Venice*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from Act 4 Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In this scene, Shylock insists on claiming the pound of flesh promised in Antonio's bond, despite Bassanio's offer to repay the debt many times over.

SHYLOCK: I'll have my bond. Speak not against my bond.
I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.
Thou calledst me dog before thou hadst a cause,
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.
The Duke shall grant me justice. I do wonder,
Thou naughty gaoler, that thou art so fond
To come abroad with him at his request.

ANTONIO: I pray you think you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops and to make no noise
When they are fretted with the gusts of heaven;
You may as well do anything most hard
As seek to soften that—than which what's harder?—
His Jewish heart.

GCSE Task

Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents Shylock.
Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Shylock in this extract;
- how Shakespeare presents Shylock in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"Shylock's suffering makes him a more tragic and sympathetic figure than a villain."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of Shylock in the play. Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question:

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself (above).
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- Which assumptions does the statement make about Shylock?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Shylock's suffering makes him tragic or sympathetic?

You might consider:

- his mistreatment by Antonio;
- his exclusion from Venetian society;
- his grief after Jessica's elopement;
- his "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech;
- his forced conversion at the end of the trial.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Shylock should be viewed primarily as a villain?

You might consider:

- his insistence on the pound of flesh;
- his refusal to show mercy;
- his delight at Antonio's losses;
- his treatment of Jessica;
- his refusal to change course in the trial scene.

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Does Shylock become less sympathetic as the play progresses?
- Can suffering explain behaviour without excusing it?
- Is persecution enough to redeem revenge?
- Does Shakespeare encourage audiences to pity Shylock whilst condemning his actions?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Shylock is shown sympathy because he suffers prejudice.

2. A more developed response:

Shylock's suffering encourages sympathy because it reveals the effects of discrimination and exclusion on his character and actions.

3. A more nuanced response:

Shylock's suffering initially encourages sympathy because it exposes the prejudice he endures; however, Shakespeare complicates this response through Shylock's relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's/reader's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of comedy and the problem play shape our interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*?
- How do private experiences of prejudice and revenge become public moments of drama?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" and towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

Shylock's repetition of "I will have my bond" shows that he is determined to have revenge.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

Shakespeare's repeated insistence on "my bond" dramatises Shylock's fixation on justice and revenge. Positioned at the centre of the trial scene, his unwavering language transforms a financial contract into a public contest over identity, prejudice and power. Through this intensely theatrical confrontation, Shakespeare encourages the audience to question whether Shylock's demand is evidence of inherent cruelty or the inevitable consequence of sustained persecution.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- the dramatic placement of the moment;
- Shylock's speech as part of Shakespeare's construction of comedy and the problem play;
- the relationship between Macbeth's private experience and its effect on an audience;
- how Shakespeare uses the resources of drama to shape interpretation.

Task:

Return to the extract from **Act 4 Scene 1**.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock as both victim and antagonist.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of justice, prejudice and revenge.

Your Response:

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

Elizabethan audiences were familiar with prejudice against Jewish people and would have expected Shylock to be presented as a comic villain. His desire for revenge therefore reinforces contemporary stereotypes whilst highlighting the consequences of conflict between Christians and Jews.

A Level

While Elizabethan attitudes towards Jewish people might encourage audiences to interpret Shylock as a stereotypical villain, Shakespeare's repeated emphasis on his experiences of humiliation, exclusion and discrimination also allows the play to be read through a more sympathetic lens. Rather than simply reinforcing anti-Semitic prejudice, *The Merchant of Venice* explores competing explanations for revenge: is Shylock driven by innate cruelty, by religious and racial persecution, or by a desire to claim the justice repeatedly denied to him?

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of Elizabethan attitudes towards Jewish people, religion and commerce deepen your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Shakespeare's plays often confront similar questions:

- How should justice be administered?
- Can mercy overcome revenge?
- How does prejudice shape identity and behaviour?
- What happens when law and morality come into conflict?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *The Merchant of Venice* with another Shakespeare play.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

A Level introduces a completely new Assessment Objective.

A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One production might present Shylock as a tragic outsider whose desire for revenge is the product of prejudice and persecution.

Another might portray him as a ruthless moneylender whose suffering does not excuse his refusal to show mercy.

Neither interpretation is automatically "correct".

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Shylock's desire for revenge makes him more of a victim than a villain."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of Shylock is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Your Response:

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

**"Shylock's suffering makes him a more tragic and sympathetic figure than a villain."
In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.**

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Shylock suffers prejudice throughout the play and this makes him sympathetic.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and an antagonist.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about justice, prejudice and mercy without relying on detailed contextual discussion.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Shylock's suffering initially encourages sympathy because it reflects his experience of prejudice and exclusion.	Paragraph 1: Shylock as an outsider and victim of discrimination.
Sympathy becomes increasingly complicated as suffering exists alongside an obsessive desire for revenge.	Paragraph 2: Shylock's choices and moral responsibility.
Shakespeare ultimately presents Shylock as both victim and antagonist.	Paragraph 3: Moral ambiguity and final judgement.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

- a. How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:
- b. language;
- c. dramatic form;
- d. structure;
- e. placement within the play;
- f. audience response;
- g. the conventions of comedy and the problem play?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Shylock's suffering initially encourages sympathy because it reveals the prejudice and exclusion he experiences.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the

characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, this speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces the audience to confront the prejudice that has shaped Shylock's identity. Rather than presenting him as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows him to articulate the emotional consequences of exclusion and discrimination, suggesting that his pursuit of revenge emerges from experiences of humiliation and injustice. Shakespeare therefore presents Shylock's suffering as evidence of a common humanity, encouraging the audience to view him as more than a straightforward villain.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him...

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"...Shylock asks 'Hath not a Jew eyes?'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, this speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces the audience to confront the prejudice that has shaped Shylock's identity..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of comedy and the problem play.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...encouraging the audience to view him as more than a stereotypical antagonist."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

Task:

Return to the revised line of argument from Chapter 2.

Do you need to make any final changes before beginning your essay?

Remember:

- establish a judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- allude to the ideas your essay will explore.

Revised line of argument:

[illegible]

Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring Shakespeare's dramatic craft?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about Elizabethan attitudes towards Jewish people, Renaissance Venice, or the importance of religion and commerce in early modern society. These details can help us understand why writers make particular choices.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how literary, historical and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, this speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces the audience to confront the prejudice that has shaped Shylock's identity. Rather than presenting him as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows him to articulate the emotional consequences of exclusion and discrimination, suggesting that his pursuit of revenge emerges from experiences of humiliation and injustice. Shakespeare therefore presents Shylock's suffering as evidence of a common humanity, encouraging the audience to view him as more than a straightforward villain.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: Venice, Religion, & Society

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'Historical Background' (see appendices for full article – page 78)

It is believed that The Merchant of Venice was written between 1596 and 1598... Many academics draw attention to anti-Semitic events and sentiments present in this era as the source for Shakespeare's stimulus... During Shakespeare's life Venice was, in many ways, the envy of Elizabethan Londoners. Venice was a rich marketplace where East meets West, considered the pinnacle of fashion, art, literature and architecture. But it was also something of an experiment. It was a thoroughly modern example of a society arranged around mercantile values; money, trading, commerce and law, whereas the England that Shakespeare lived in was still built on traditional principles of faith and religion. Everyone in England had to follow the religion dictated by the monarch, but Venice accepted all peoples as long as they abided by the laws of commerce and trade. Shakespeare loved investigating the ways that human beings structured their lives and so, in Venice, he found the perfect multicultural forum, distant from his own, in which to explore race, religion, commerce, marriage and sexuality.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How might an Elizabethan audience have understood Shylock's role in Venetian society?
- Could the play explore more than a conflict between one Christian and one Jew?
- How does the setting of Venice alter your understanding of justice and prejudice?
- Does Shakespeare present conflict as the result of individual choices, wider social values, or both?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model.

Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. **For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Shakespeare uses this setting to expose the tensions between Christian ideals of mercy and a legal system founded upon contracts and commerce.** Positioned at the centre of the trial scene, Shylock's speech interrupts the momentum of the drama and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. Rather than presenting him as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows him to articulate the emotional consequences of exclusion and discrimination. **His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of the wider social and religious divisions that define Venetian society,** encouraging audiences to recognise that the conflict extends far beyond one individual.

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Performance and Interpretation

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'Shylock: A History' (see appendices for full article – page 79)

Little is known about performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during Shakespeare's lifetime, although it was performed more than once for King James, suggesting that it was popular. Over time, however, actors who played Shylock increasingly felt that he was more tragic than comic, bringing to the role a complexity that went beyond easy caricature. Shylock was no longer a figure of fun but a flawed human being worthy of sympathy instead of laughter. Productions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries increasingly emphasised his experiences of persecution and prejudice, transforming the play from an anti-Semitic comedy into a play about anti-Semitism.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does this change your understanding of Shakespeare's theatre?
- Why might audiences in different periods respond differently to Shylock?
- How might an Elizabethan audience's response differ from a modern audience's?
- Does Shylock become more than a comic villain?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again.

Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected both entertainment and moral debate, Shakespeare uses the stage to challenge easy assumptions about justice and prejudice. Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "**Hath not a Jew eyes?**", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, Shylock's speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. Rather than presenting him as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows him to articulate the emotional consequences of exclusion and discrimination. His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of wider social divisions, encouraging audiences to recognise that Shakespeare's portrayal resists a simple judgement of Shylock as either victim or villain.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Shylock as an individual character?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument & close analysis which developed an interpretation
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation through ideas about Renaissance Venice, religion and prejudice.
Model Reconsidered	Performance context broadened the discussion by considering how audiences and productions have interpreted Shylock differently across time.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At GCSE, you studied *The Merchant of Venice* as a text in its own right.

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- **Explore connections across literary texts.**

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another.

It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- What concerns repeatedly interest Shakespeare across different genres?
- How do different protagonists invite sympathy and judgement?
- How does Shakespeare use different dramatic forms to explore similar moral questions?

In this chapter, you will encounter one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies: *Hamlet*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- **How does Shakespeare present characters who struggle to reconcile justice with morality?**

Shylock believes the law entitles him to a pound of Antonio's flesh and refuses to show mercy.

Hamlet believes he has a duty to avenge his father's murder but repeatedly questions whether revenge is morally justified.

Both characters insist on justice.

Both provoke sympathy and unease.

Both force audiences to consider the uneasy relationship between law, revenge and morality.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *The Merchant of Venice*, what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through comedy and the problem play?

You might consider: justice; mercy; prejudice; revenge; love; friendship; law; identity; wealth; humanity.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *Hamlet*

Written around 1600, *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies.

The play follows Prince Hamlet of Denmark after the sudden death of his father. Before Hamlet has had time to grieve, his uncle Claudius has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, and assumed the Danish throne.

When Hamlet discovers that Claudius murdered his father, he is confronted with a terrible responsibility: Should he take revenge?

Like Shylock, Hamlet becomes consumed by the idea of justice. However, where Shylock pursues revenge with unwavering determination, Hamlet repeatedly hesitates, questioning both the morality and consequences of his actions.

Both characters understand the cost of their choices.

Yet they respond very differently.

As you read, ask yourself: Is justice achieved through strict obedience to the law, personal revenge, or the exercise of mercy?

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

Hamlet opens in an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease. On the battlements of Elsinore Castle, guards and Hamlet's friend Horatio encounter the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet. Disturbed by its appearance, they resolve to inform Prince Hamlet, believing the spirit may have some message for him.

Meanwhile, the audience is introduced to a Denmark that appears stable on the surface but is already marked by disruption. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, has assumed the throne and married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, with remarkable speed following his brother's death. Although Claudius presents himself as a capable and pragmatic ruler, Hamlet is deeply troubled by what he sees as his mother's betrayal and the court's eagerness to move on. Isolated in his grief, he reflects bitterly on the corruption around him, lamenting, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

When Hamlet finally encounters the Ghost, the tragedy's central conflict is established. The spirit claims to be the ghost of Hamlet's father and reveals that he was not killed by natural causes, but murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear as he slept. The Ghost commands Hamlet to avenge this "foul and most unnatural murder", transforming private grief into a moral obligation. Hamlet vows to remember his father's command and devote himself to revenge.

Yet Shakespeare immediately complicates what might otherwise resemble a straightforward revenge narrative. Rather than embracing his task with certainty, Hamlet seems overwhelmed by it. He recognises the enormity of what has been asked of him, lamenting, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" From the very beginning of the play, conscience becomes a burden. Hamlet knows what he believes he ought to do; whether he can bring himself to do it remains uncertain.

Act One therefore establishes the central conflict of the tragedy.

Hamlet knows what he believes justice requires.

The question is whether he can bring himself to act.

AO4 Reflection

Shylock relentlessly pursues the justice he believes the law entitles him to.

Hamlet hesitates over the revenge he believes duty requires.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different relationships between justice, conscience and action from the very beginning of each play?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two explores Hamlet's increasingly complex response to the burden placed upon him. Although he now believes Claudius murdered his father, he remains uncertain about how to proceed. Rather than acting immediately, Hamlet adopts what he describes as an "antic disposition", behaving in ways that appear irrational and unpredictable. Whether this madness is entirely feigned, partially genuine, or a combination of both remains one of the play's enduring questions.

Those around Hamlet attempt to explain his behaviour in simpler terms. Polonius becomes convinced that the prince's apparent instability is the result of his love for Ophelia, believing that rejection has driven him into emotional distress. Confident in his own interpretation, Polonius reports his conclusions to Claudius and Gertrude. Meanwhile, the King and Queen summon Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping that familiar faces might uncover the cause of his suffering. Hamlet welcomes them warmly at first, but quickly realises they have been sent to observe him. Surrounded by people he can no longer trust, his isolation deepens.

The arrival of a travelling company of actors prompts one of Hamlet's most revealing moments of self-reflection. Watching an actor summon genuine emotion in the service of fiction unsettles him profoundly. The player weeps for Hecuba, a queen he has never known, while Hamlet—whose father has genuinely been murdered—remains incapable of carrying out the revenge he believes duty demands. Disgusted by what he perceives as his own inaction, he condemns himself: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"

Yet Hamlet's response to this self-reproach is not decisive action. Instead, he devises another plan. The actors will perform a play that mirrors the circumstances of King Hamlet's murder. By observing Claudius's reaction, Hamlet hopes to determine whether the Ghost has spoken the truth. Only then, he believes, can he act with certainty.

He concludes: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Act Two therefore reveals both Hamlet's greatest strength and his greatest weakness. He refuses to act without evidence, questioning appearances and resisting impulsive judgement. At the same time, his relentless need for certainty repeatedly postpones the action he believes is necessary.

Shakespeare begins to ask whether thought leads to wisdom—or whether excessive reflection can become its own form of paralysis.

AO4 Reflection

Hamlet repeatedly delays action in pursuit of certainty.

Shylock relentlessly pursues the justice he believes he is owed, refusing to question whether mercy might be the wiser course.

Task:

Does thinking deeply lead to wiser choices—or does unwavering certainty become equally dangerous?

How might Shylock answer this question? How might Hamlet?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three marks the dramatic and psychological heart of Hamlet. The questions that have troubled Hamlet since the beginning of the play—whether to act, whether he can trust appearances, and whether certainty is ever possible—become increasingly urgent. It is also the act in which Shakespeare reveals the devastating consequences of both hesitation and impulsiveness.

The act opens with Hamlet's most famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be: that is the question." Reflecting on suffering, mortality and the burdens of existence, Hamlet wonders whether it is nobler to endure life's hardships or to end them altogether. Yet even the prospect of death offers no escape. The uncertainty of what follows—"the undiscover'd country"—fills him with fear. Hamlet concludes that it is often conscience that prevents decisive action: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

For Hamlet, thought and moral awareness are both gifts and burdens. His ability to imagine consequences, to question motives and to consider alternative possibilities repeatedly inhibits action.

Soon afterwards, Claudius and Polonius arrange for Hamlet to encounter Ophelia while they secretly observe. Hamlet's treatment of her is harsh and unsettling. Urging her to "Get thee to a nunnery", he appears disillusioned by love, distrustful of women and increasingly alienated from those around him. Whether this cruelty reflects genuine bitterness, strategic performance or emotional instability remains open to interpretation. Shakespeare offers no easy explanation, forcing audiences to grapple with the complexity of Hamlet's state of mind.

The turning point of the act arrives with the performance of The Mousetrap. The actors stage a scene closely resembling the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder. As Hamlet watches Claudius's reaction, the tension becomes almost unbearable. When Claudius abruptly rises and stops the performance, Hamlet interprets this as confirmation of his guilt. At last, the certainty Hamlet has long sought appears to be within his grasp.

Yet certainty does not lead to immediate action. Finding Claudius apparently alone at prayer, Hamlet has the perfect opportunity to avenge his father. However, he hesitates once again. Believing that killing Claudius during prayer might send his soul to heaven, Hamlet postpones revenge: "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;/And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven."

Ironically, the audience knows that Claudius has been unable to repent sincerely. Hamlet's reasoning, though morally complex, is tragically flawed. The delay that he believes to be principled becomes another missed opportunity.

The act concludes with one of its greatest ironies. Summoned to confront his mother, Hamlet speaks passionately about betrayal, corruption and moral responsibility. Hearing movement behind a curtain, he assumes Claudius is hiding there and, for the first time in the play, acts without hesitation. He thrusts his sword through the arras. Instead of Claudius, he kills Polonius.

The man who has spent three acts struggling to act decisively suddenly abandons caution and acts impulsively—with devastating consequences.

Act Three therefore exposes the central paradox of Hamlet's tragedy. He delays when he believes action is justified, yet acts rashly when certainty is absent.

Shakespeare suggests that neither impulsiveness nor excessive reflection offers protection from tragedy. Conscience may illuminate the moral significance of our choices, but it does not guarantee that we will make the right ones.

AO4 Reflection

Shylock relentlessly pursues the justice he believes the law entitles him to, refusing opportunities for mercy.

Hamlet spares Claudius despite believing revenge is morally necessary.

Yet Hamlet impulsively kills Polonius.

Task:

Both Shylock and Hamlet believe they are pursuing justice.

How does Shakespeare present the dangers of allowing principle to override mercy or action?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of Hamlet's actions begin to unfold rapidly in Act Four. Having finally acted, Hamlet discovers that violence has not brought clarity or resolution. Instead, the accidental killing of Polonius sends shockwaves throughout the Danish court, drawing more characters into the tragedy and accelerating its movement towards catastrophe.

Claudius is quick to recognise the threat Hamlet now poses. Publicly, he presents himself as a concerned ruler attempting to manage a dangerous situation. Privately, however, he sees an opportunity to remove Hamlet permanently. Hamlet is sent to England under the supervision of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, carrying sealed letters that secretly instruct the English king to execute him upon arrival. Claudius's willingness to sacrifice Hamlet demonstrates the extent to which corruption has spread through the Danish court. The distinction between justice and self-preservation becomes increasingly blurred.

Hamlet himself appears strangely calm in the aftermath of Polonius's death. At times, he speaks with dark humour and philosophical detachment, refusing to show the remorse audiences might expect. Yet Shakespeare complicates this apparent indifference. During his journey, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching to fight over a seemingly insignificant piece of land. Fortinbras's decisiveness forces Hamlet to confront his own hesitation once again. Reflecting upon his repeated delays, he condemns himself: "How stand I then,/That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,/Excitements of my reason and my blood,/And let all sleep?" Observing Fortinbras's willingness to act for honour and reputation, Hamlet resolves: "O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

Elsewhere, the human cost of the tragedy becomes increasingly apparent. Ophelia, devastated by her father's death and Hamlet's rejection, descends into madness. Her fragmented songs and disjointed speech reveal profound grief and vulnerability, transforming her into one of Shakespeare's most poignant victims. Through Ophelia, audiences witness the collateral damage caused by the actions and indecisions of others. Unlike Hamlet, she has little agency within the structures that govern her life, and her suffering exposes the devastating impact of political and familial conflict upon those caught in its path.

At the same time, Laertes returns to Denmark, enraged by the death of his father and the apparent injustice surrounding it. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes responds immediately and passionately. He storms the palace demanding answers and vengeance. Claudius skilfully manipulates Laertes' anger, directing it towards Hamlet and proposing a plan to eliminate him. Together, they devise a duel involving a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup, ensuring Hamlet's death regardless of the outcome.

Act Four therefore broadens Shakespeare's exploration of conscience and action. Fortinbras acts swiftly.

Laertes seeks immediate revenge. Claudius schemes decisively to protect himself. Hamlet, meanwhile, continues to struggle between reflection and action.

The tragedy increasingly asks whether hesitation is a mark of humanity and moral awareness, or whether the refusal to act allows suffering to multiply and injustice to flourish.

AO4 Reflection

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a range of responses to conflict and revenge:

- Claudius acts quickly to preserve his position;
- Laertes pursues immediate vengeance;
- Fortinbras embraces decisive military action;
- Hamlet reflects, hesitates and questions.

Macbeth, by contrast, repeatedly recognises the consequences of his choices yet continues to act.

Task:

What are the consequences of delay?

Does Shakespeare suggest that excessive reflection can be as destructive as impulsive action?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, death has become unavoidable. Yet Shakespeare slows the pace of the tragedy, creating moments of reflection that encourage both Hamlet and the audience to consider mortality, identity and the limits of human control.

The act opens in a graveyard, where two gravediggers discuss death with dark humour and surprising irreverence. Their conversation reminds audiences that death ultimately erases social distinctions. Kings, jesters and ordinary labourers alike share the same fate.

When Hamlet arrives, he encounters the skull of Yorick, the court jester who entertained him as a child. Holding the skull, Hamlet reflects upon the inevitability of death: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio." The prince who once feared uncertainty now confronts mortality with a greater degree of acceptance. Even Alexander the Great, he observes, returns to dust.

This meditation is interrupted by Ophelia's funeral procession. Discovering that Ophelia has died, Hamlet is overwhelmed by grief and guilt. In the raw emotion of the moment, he publicly declares the depth of his love for her, confronting Laertes in the process. Yet Shakespeare leaves audiences to question whether Hamlet's recognition comes too late to offer comfort or redemption.

The final sequence centres upon the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Claudius and Laertes secretly intend to murder Hamlet using a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup prepared as a backup plan. However, the scheme rapidly descends into chaos. Gertrude unknowingly drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. During the duel, Hamlet and Laertes exchange swords, resulting in both men being wounded by the poisoned blade.

As death approaches, truth finally emerges. Laertes confesses Claudius's treachery and asks Hamlet's forgiveness. At last, Hamlet acts decisively and without hesitation. He stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup.

Yet this long-awaited revenge offers little satisfaction. The stage is littered with bodies. Hamlet himself has been mortally wounded. As he dies, he entrusts the future of Denmark to Fortinbras and urges Horatio to tell his story truthfully: "The rest is silence."

Fortinbras arrives to assume control of a kingdom devastated by betrayal, revenge and loss.

Act Five offers no simple resolution. Hamlet finally achieves the revenge demanded at the beginning of the play, but only after countless opportunities have been missed and irreparable damage has been done.

Shakespeare suggests that insight often arrives too late to prevent tragedy. Understanding ourselves and our responsibilities does not necessarily equip us to act wisely. Instead, audiences are left to wrestle with uncomfortable questions about justice, agency and the human capacity for error

AO4 Reflection

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a range of responses to conflict and revenge:

- Claudius acts quickly to preserve his position;
- Laertes pursues immediate vengeance;
- Fortinbras embraces decisive military action;
- Hamlet reflects, hesitates and questions.

Shylock, by contrast, pursues the justice he believes the law guarantees him, refusing every opportunity to show mercy or compromise.

Task:

What are the consequences of refusing to compromise?

Does Shakespeare suggest that unwavering certainty can be as destructive as excessive reflection?

Record your ideas:

Protagonists Compared

By this point, you have encountered two very different Shakespearean plays.

At first glance, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet* appear to have little in common.

One centres on a dispute over law, money and mercy, while the other explores revenge, kingship and mortality. One protagonist relentlessly pursues the justice he believes he is owed, while the other repeatedly hesitates over the revenge he believes duty requires.

However, comparison allows us to move beyond obvious differences.

AO4 asks us to consider how texts illuminate one another. Rather than asking simply, "What is the same?" or "What is different?" we might instead ask: "What new understanding of Shylock emerges when we place him alongside Hamlet?"

The table below is designed to help you think comparatively. Notice how each comparison returns us to central concerns that Shakespeare repeatedly explores: justice, revenge, responsibility and judgement

Question	<i>Merchant</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
What initiates conflict?	Shylock seeks justice and revenge after years of humiliation, prejudice and personal loss.	Hamlet is burdened with the responsibility of revenge, yet struggles to act upon it.
What role does conscience play?	Shylock's certainty leaves little room for mercy as he insists upon the letter of the law.	Conscience repeatedly interrupts action, causing Hamlet to question, delay and reflect.
How do the protagonists suffer?	Shylock experiences exclusion, betrayal, humiliation and ultimately the loss of his faith and identity.	Hamlet endures grief, uncertainty, distrust and profound emotional conflict.
When does insight occur?	Shylock rarely abandons his pursuit of justice, even when offered opportunities for compromise.	Hamlet gains moments of clarity throughout the play, though certainty rarely brings peace.
What effect does self-awareness have?	Shylock recognises the prejudice he suffers but allows resentment to shape his choices.	Self-awareness encourages caution, but often contributes to paralysis and missed opportunities.
How should audiences judge them?	Shylock invites both sympathy and condemnation.	Hamlet invites both sympathy and frustration.
What remains unresolved?	Questions of justice, prejudice, mercy and revenge.	Questions of justice, certainty and the limits of human understanding.

Reflection

Comparison does not require us to decide which character is "better" or "worse".

Instead, it encourages us to think more carefully about the questions Shakespeare repeatedly explores through tragedy.

Task

Having encountered both plays, consider the following:

- Does the pursuit of justice always lead to fairness?
- Can self-awareness become a burden?
- Is unwavering certainty more dangerous than hesitation?
- Are protagonists defined by their choices, their circumstances, or both?
- How should audiences respond to characters who believe they are acting justly but cause suffering to themselves and others?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have revisited the same model paragraph, allowing it to evolve as your understanding has deepened.

At the end of Chapter 4, you reconsidered your interpretation through contextual reading (AO3).

Now, comparison invites you to broaden that interpretation once more.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected both entertainment and moral debate, Shakespeare uses the stage to challenge easy assumptions about justice and prejudice. Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, Shylock's speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. Rather than presenting him as a straightforward villain, Shakespeare allows him to articulate the emotional consequences of exclusion and discrimination. His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of wider social divisions, encouraging audiences to recognise that Shakespeare's portrayal resists a simple judgement of Shylock as either victim or villain.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected both entertainment and moral debate, Shakespeare uses the stage to challenge easy assumptions about justice and prejudice. Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, Shylock's speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of wider social divisions, encouraging audiences to recognise that Shakespeare's portrayal resists a simple judgement of Shylock as either victim or villain. **By contrast, Hamlet's moral uncertainty repeatedly delays the revenge he believes he must carry out, suggesting that conscience can restrain violence. Shylock, however, rarely questions the justice of his own course, pursuing the bond with unwavering certainty. As a result, audiences may sympathise with the suffering Shylock has endured whilst also recognising that his refusal to show mercy ultimately perpetuates the cycle of revenge that Shakespeare places at the heart of the play.**

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Instead, it has sharpened it.

AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Return to the paragraph you have been developing throughout this booklet.

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *Hamlet*.

Remember:

- Keep *The Merchant of Venice* as the focus.
- Use *Hamlet* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *Hamlet* reveals about *The Merchant of Venice*.

Revise your paragraph:

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Revise your paragraph:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Shylock deserves sympathy because...

Shylock deserves condemnation because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Alexander Leggatt

Critical interpretations can encourage us to revisit familiar characters from an entirely new perspective.

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of Shylock.

Extracts: from 'A Modern Perspective' (see appendices for full article – page 80)

The most conspicuous problem, of course, is Shylock, and here we need to pause. *The Merchant of Venice* was written within a culture in which prejudice against Jews was pervasive and endemic. It can be argued that this goes back to the earliest days of Christianity, when the tradition began of making the Jews bear the guilt of the Crucifixion. Throughout medieval and early Renaissance Europe the prejudice bred dark fantasies: Jews were accused, for example, of conducting grotesque rituals in which they murdered Christian children and drank their blood. The story of a Jew who wants a pound of Christian flesh may have its roots in these fantasies of Jews violating Christian bodies. Shylock's profession of usury is also bound up with his race: barred from other occupations, the Jews of Europe took to moneylending. Antonio's disapproval of lending money at interest echoes traditional Christian teaching (Christian practice was another matter). Shylock's boast that he makes his gold and silver breed like ewes and rams would remind his audience of the familiar argument that usury was against the law of God because metal was sterile and could not breed. Not just in his threat to Antonio, but in his day-to-day business, Shylock would appear unnatural.

Prejudice feeds on ignorance; since the Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, Shakespeare may never have met one. (There were a few in London in his time, but they could not practice their religion openly.) Given that the villainy of Shylock is one of the mainsprings of the story, it would have been far more natural for Shakespeare to exploit this prejudice than resist it. Many critics and performers, however, have insisted that he *did* resist it. His imagination, so the argument runs, worked on the figure of Shylock until it had created sympathy for him, seeing him as the victim of persecution. The great Victorian actor Henry Irving played him as a wronged and dignified victim, representative of a suffering race. Shylock's famous self-defense, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands . . .?" (3.1.57–58), has been taken out of context and presented as a plea for the recognition of our common humanity. In context, however, its effect is less benevolent. Shylock's plea is compelling and eloquent, but he himself uses it not to argue for tolerance but to defend his cruelty: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.70–72). Gratiano's taunt, "A Daniel still, say I! A second Daniel!— / I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word" (4.1.354–55), shows that Gratiano, along with the word "Daniel," has also picked up from Shylock, without knowing it, the word "teach," and the echo is a terrible demonstration of the ways we teach each other hate so that prejudice moves in a vicious circle.

Leggatt argues that Shakespeare complicates audience sympathy for Shylock by refusing to separate his suffering from his desire for revenge. While Shylock's famous speech, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", powerfully exposes the prejudice and persecution he has endured, Leggatt suggests that it is "less benevolent" than it first appears because Shylock uses this shared humanity to justify vengeance rather than forgiveness. Shakespeare therefore presents Shylock as neither a straightforward villain nor an innocent victim. Instead, the play explores how prejudice can create a destructive cycle in which hatred is learned, repeated and intensified. Students might therefore ask whether Shakespeare encourages audiences to sympathise with Shylock's suffering whilst still questioning the choices he makes

Reflection

Task:

Leggatt argues that Shakespeare resists presenting Shylock as either wholly villainous or wholly sympathetic.

To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Shylock's suffering encourage sympathy?
- Can audiences pity Shylock whilst still condemning his actions?
- Does prejudice explain revenge without justifying it?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *Hamlet*..

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected both entertainment and moral debate, Shakespeare uses the stage to challenge easy assumptions about justice and prejudice. Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, Shylock's speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of wider social divisions, encouraging audiences to recognise that Shakespeare's portrayal resists a simple judgement of Shylock as either victim or villain. By contrast, Hamlet's moral uncertainty repeatedly delays the revenge he believes he must carry out, suggesting that conscience can restrain violence. Shylock, however, rarely questions the justice of his own course, pursuing the bond with unwavering certainty. As a result, audiences may sympathise with the suffering Shylock has endured whilst also recognising that his refusal to show mercy ultimately perpetuates the cycle of revenge that Shakespeare places at the heart of the play.

Task:

Now read the model paragraph below which has been adapted.

Notice how criticism can be woven into an argument rather than attached awkwardly to the end.

What has been incorporated links to the prior point (about Elizabethan audiences and theatrical expectations) and is linked to the point that follows (about Shylock's suffering, which was the original starting point/idea of this paragraph before it developed).

The sentences have been adapted to ensure it is seamlessly integrated.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare initially presents Shylock's suffering as deserving of audience sympathy, this response becomes increasingly complicated by his relentless pursuit of revenge and refusal to show mercy. Set against a society shaped by religious prejudice and commercial values, Shylock's desire for justice reveals both the humanity of an oppressed outsider and the destructive consequences of allowing resentment to eclipse compassion, ultimately presenting him as both a victim and a villain.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected both entertainment and moral debate, Shakespeare uses the stage to challenge easy assumptions about justice and prejudice. **Leggatt argues that Shakespeare complicates audience sympathy for Shylock by refusing to separate his suffering from his desire for revenge. Although his famous defence, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", is "compelling and eloquent", Leggatt suggests it is "less benevolent" than it first appears because Shylock uses his shared humanity not to argue for tolerance but to justify revenge. This interpretation reinforces Shakespeare's refusal to present Shylock as either wholly victim or wholly villain, encouraging audiences to sympathise with his suffering whilst remaining troubled by the choices he makes.** Shylock's suffering initially encourages the audience to sympathise with him because Shakespeare presents him as a man repeatedly dehumanised by the society around him. During his defence of himself, Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew eyes?", using a series of rhetorical questions to challenge both the characters on stage and the audience to recognise his shared humanity. For Elizabethan audiences, Venice represented a cosmopolitan commercial society where questions of religion, identity and law could be explored from a safe distance. Positioned at the centre of the play's conflict, Shylock's speech interrupts the comic momentum and forces both the characters and the audience to confront the assumptions that shape their treatment of him. His suffering emerges not merely as a personal grievance, but as evidence of wider social divisions, encouraging audiences to recognise that Shakespeare's portrayal resists a simple judgement of Shylock as either victim or villain. By contrast, Hamlet's moral uncertainty repeatedly delays the revenge he believes he must carry out, suggesting that conscience can restrain violence. Shylock, however, rarely questions the justice of his own course, pursuing the bond with unwavering certainty. As a result, audiences may sympathise with the suffering Shylock has endured whilst also recognising that his refusal to show mercy ultimately perpetuates the cycle of revenge that Shakespeare places at the heart of the play.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
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- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

- Task:
- Return to your own paragraph.
- Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.
- Remember:
- keep your own argument central;
 - use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
 - avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
 - think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.
- Your Revised Paragraph:**

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, you are not expected to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

Historical Background – Bell Shakespeare

It is believed that *The Merchant of Venice* was written between 1596 and 1598. It was most likely first performed at London's second public playhouse, *The Theatre*, in 1598, as clergyman Francis Meres noted in his collection of essays.

The first recorded performance at court was in 1605 by the King's Men. It was also listed on the Stationer's Register in 1598 and was published in quarto form in 1600 as *The Most Excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice*. Its second reliable publication in 1623, in the First Folio, only differs in its addition of several stage directions and musical cues.

Many academics draw attention to anti-Semitic events and sentiments present in this era as the source for Shakespeare's stimulus. In 1594, Elizabeth I's Jewish doctor, Roderigo Lopez, was supposedly framed, falsely tried and brutally executed for attempting to poison the Queen. Harold Bloom sees a distinct connection between this event and Shakespeare's play and even speculates that "Shakespeare was among the mob looking on" at the execution. Charles Edelman from Cambridge, however, says this is a complete myth, believing Lopez' conviction had nothing to do with his Jewish faith and therefore could not have inspired Shakespeare's play.

Other sources claim that inspiration for the play might have come from Marlowe's 1589 play *The Jew of Malta*, and some even suggest that Shakespeare had his own anti-Semitic beliefs. Closest to Shakespeare's story, however, is Giovanni Fiorentino's novella *Il Pecorone* (1558). It features the 'Lady of Belmont', a rich widow who tests her suitors, a Jewish moneylender who threatens the life of a Christian merchant, and the merchant's rescue by his friend's new wife disguised as a lawyer.

The Merchant of Venice is one of only two plays – *Othello* being the other – that Shakespeare set in Venice. It is probably no coincidence that these are the two (along with *The Taming of the Shrew*) that prove the most problematic for modern audiences and theatre companies because of the sensitivity around the issues they address, specifically in regards to racism and anti-Semitism.

During Shakespeare's life Venice was, in many ways, the envy of Elizabethan Londoners. Venice was a rich marketplace where East meets West, considered the pinnacle of fashion, art, literature and architecture. But it was also something of an experiment. It was a thoroughly modern example of a society arranged around mercantile values; money, trading, commerce, and law, whereas the England that Shakespeare lived in was still built on traditional principles of faith and religion. Everyone in England had to follow the religion dictated by the monarch, but Venice accepted all peoples as long as they abided by the laws of commerce and trade. Shakespeare loved investigating the ways that human beings structured their lives and so, in Venice, he found the perfect multicultural forum, distant from his own, in which to explore race, religion, commerce, marriage and sexuality. We can't be certain that Shakespeare travelled there, despite biographer Samuel Schoenbaum speculating of him "wandering on the continent", but we do know that Italy was a topic of London gossip, and it is no surprise that Shakespeare returns to this setting throughout his plays.

As the Stationer's Register in 1598 also shows records of an alternative title to the play, *The Jew of Venice*, there has been much contention over whom Shakespeare intended as the protagonist of his work. Audiences and directors have historically been drawn to Shylock's plight and Portia's powerful display of wit and intelligence, so these two roles are often the focus of casting, despite Shakespeare's chosen title. *The Merchant of Venice* was highly popular during its time. It was written as a comedy, and Shylock was most likely perceived by Elizabethans as the comic villain, reminiscent of the 'Vice' in the medieval Mystery Plays. Well-versed in these narratives, the first audience of *The Merchant of Venice* would have expected that Shylock would get his comeuppance, so the suspense would have been in waiting to see how it would unfold.

After 1605 the play fell out of fashion, and following a period of neglect it was revived by George Granville in 1701, who reworked the script as *The Jew Of Venice*. He initiated the portrayal of the Jew as a lowly comic 'clown' and it remained so until 1741 when Charles Macklin revived Shakespeare's original text and presented Shylock as a fierce, intelligent, passionate human. As academic Penny Gay states, Shylock was now somebody that audiences couldn't "laugh at". With the cultural shift of the Romantic Era in the late 1700s, Shylock was solidified as a true and tragic villain, the outsider at odds with society. In the early 1800s Shylock became a character to be pitied, and Act 5 was frequently cut to leave audiences musing over Shylock's degrading defeat in court. From the late 1800s onwards, most portrayals of Shylock were highly tragic. However, during the 1930-40s, Nazis used the play as anti-Semitic propaganda to fuel their political cause. Since the fall-out of World War II, although still revered, *The Merchant of Venice* can never be seen again without addressing the issues of racial and religious prejudice.

Shylock: A History – Dr Derek Dunne

The figure of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, perhaps more than any other character of Shakespeare's, has divided critics and audiences for centuries. How are we to take this money-hungry usurer, who tries to claim a pound of another human's flesh in payment of a debt? And what bearing does Shylock's religion have on how he is perceived by the audience?

Shakespeare was not the first to put a Jewish character on the English stage. Some years before, dramatist Christopher Marlowe wrote a play called *The Jew of Malta*. His protagonist, Barabbas, was truly evil – he murders numerous characters, and poisons a convent full of nuns! By comparison, Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock is more even-handed. He does some things that we might consider wrong, like seeking revenge on Antonio. At the same time, he is never purely evil for evil's sake, and Shakespeare gives him a depth of motivation lacking in Marlowe's play. Can you think of any moments in the play that might cause Shylock to act as he does?

Little is known about performances of *The Merchant of Venice* during Shakespeare's life-time. We do know that it was acted more than once for King James at Whitehall palace in 1603, which suggests it was popular. Then the stage history of the play falls silent for almost one hundred years, until a man called George Granville re-wrote parts of Shakespeare's play and called it *The Jew of Venice: A Comedy* in 1701. The fact that Shylock's character now features in the title shows how important his role would become in the success or failure of future productions. The subtitle 'A Comedy' raises the question of whether Shakespeare ever intended the role of Shylock to be funny.

It is listed under Comedy in the collected works of Shakespeare from 1623 – what do you make of this play falling into the category of 'Comedy'? Can you suggest any other categories that might suit the play better?

Over time, actors who played the role of Shylock felt that he was more tragic than comic, and brought to the part a complexity that went beyond easy caricature. Shylock was not a figure of fun, but a flawed

human being, worthy of sympathy instead of laughter. Shakespeare's writing is so flexible that there is still no final word on how to play the part. In the eighteenth century you could go to see a mean and malicious portrayal by Charles Macklin, while at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Edmund Kean brought to the role a new sense of dignity. Instead of the bright red beard associated with Shylock previously, Kean wore his hair black – suddenly it was becoming harder to see what the difference was between Shylock and everyone else. As Portia asks in the trial scene,

'Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?' (4.1.70)

In the late nineteenth century, an actor called Henry Irving took Shylock in a new direction. By re-arranging parts of the text, he emphasised how Shylock is picked on by other characters, who disliked him because of his religion. Suddenly Shylock's actions were not simply the product of a character flaw, they came from years of persecution and bullying. This forced characters, and audiences, to think about their own role in Shylock's actions, since he has been pushed to the limit of his patience. Suddenly Shakespeare's play was transformed from an anti-Semitic play (unwilling to accept Jewishness) to a play about anti-Semitism. What is the difference between these two, in your opinion?

After World War II, nothing could be the same again. During the Holocaust, millions of Jewish people were murdered in Europe. Suddenly Shakespeare's play had an impact that he could never have predicted. A German production in 1985 cast a Holocaust survivor, Fred Düren, as Shylock, and in the trial scene he wore a gabardine and the dress of a concentration camp inmate. Audiences were made to face the logical conclusion of hating a person because of their faith. Considering what you know about World War II, should this affect how actors and audiences interpret Shakespeare's play?

In 1970, Laurence Olivier played Shylock at the Old Vic theatre, under director Jonathan Miller. Wearing the yarmulke, or traditional Jewish skull cap, Olivier's Shylock showed his contempt for the malicious Venetians. Now the malice was no longer centred on one place (Shylock) but shared equally by the inhabitants of Venice. John Barton took a different tack when he directed Patrick Stewart as Shylock for the RSC in 1978. Here Shylock is again the bad guy, who locks away his money and slaps his daughter without cause. This ran the risk of appearing to be anti-Semitic. In your own reading, do you see Shylock as a villain or a victim? Has this changed over time? Why?

In Michael Radford's film from 2004, Al Pacino plays Shylock as a tragic outsider, who is spat on by Jeremy Irons' Antonio in the opening sequence. Pacino brings the necessary intensity to the role, and there is no question that he is a broken man by the end of the play. While Radford's film is set in Renaissance Venice, some directors have updated and relocated Shakespeare's story. Rupert Goold's 2011 production at the RSC swapped Venice for Vegas, and Patrick Stewart as Shylock was surrounded by the seedy underbelly of the casinos in Sin City. Would you update the play if given the chance? When and where would you set it?

The open-air space of the Globe theatre means that whatever happens onstage includes the audience too. During the Globe-to-Globe festival in 2012, the theatre invited the national theatre of Israel to perform the play in Hebrew, by a cast of Jewish actors, meaning that Shylock's vindictiveness was not about religion. How did you find being able to see the rest of the audience during the show? Was it distracting, or did you feel you were part of something bigger?

A Modern Perspective: The Merchant of Venice – Alexander Leggatt

The Merchant of Venice is a comedy. Comedies traditionally end in marriage, and on the way they examine the social networks in which marriage is involved: the relations among families, among friends, among

parents and children, and what in Shakespeare's society were the all-important ties of money and property. Comedies also create onstage images of closed communities of right-thinking people, from which outsiders are excluded by being laughed at. If *The Merchant of Venice* has always seemed one of Shakespeare's more problematic and disturbing comedies, this may be because it examines the networks of society more closely than usual, and treats outsiders—one in particular—with a severity that seems to go beyond the comic.

In the interweaving of the play's stories we see a chain of obligations based on money. Bassanio needs money to pay his debts, and plans to get it by marrying the rich heiress Portia. To make money he needs to borrow money—from his friend Antonio, who borrows it from Shylock, who borrows it, according to the patter of his trade, from Tubal. Once Bassanio has won Portia she becomes part of the network, and the obligations become more than financial. She imposes on herself the condition that before her marriage is consummated, Antonio must be freed from his bond to Shylock; as she tells Bassanio, "never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul" (3.2.318–19). She takes on herself the task of freeing Antonio. As Bassanio must journey to Belmont and answer the riddle of the caskets, Portia must journey to Venice and answer the riddle of Shylock's bond. Antonio thus becomes "bound" (4.1.425) to the young doctor (Portia) who saved him, and the only payment the doctor will take is Bassanio's ring. Antonio now, in effect, has to borrow from Bassanio to pay Portia: it is at Antonio's insistence that Bassanio reluctantly gives away the ring. Yet the ring represents Bassanio's tie of loyalty to Portia, the husband's obligation to be bound exclusively to his wife; she gives the ring, as Shylock gives money, with conditions attached:

Which, when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
(3.2.176–78)

The line of obligation runs, like the play itself, from Venice to Belmont, then from Belmont to Venice, and back to Belmont again. The ring exemplifies the paradox of marriage: it binds two people exclusively to each other, yet it does so within a social network in which they have inevitable ties with other people, ties on which the marriage itself depends. Portia and Bassanio depend on Antonio, who is Portia's chief rival for Bassanio's affection. The story of the ring is based on paradoxes: Bassanio, in giving it to the young "doctor," is betraying Portia at her own request, and giving her back her own. In the final scene Portia gives the ring to Antonio, who returns it to Bassanio, thus participating in a symbolic exchange that cements the marriage relationship from which he is excluded. As Portia's ring comes back to Portia, then back to Bassanio, the line of obligation becomes at last a circle, the symbol at once of perfection and exclusion.

Portia is also bound to her father. When we first see her she is chafing at the way her father has denied her freedom of choice in marriage: "So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.24–25). But by the end of that scene she is reconciled to her father's will when she hears that her unwanted suitors have departed rather than face the test; and of course Bassanio, the man she wants—the man who visited Belmont in her father's time (1.2.112–21)—is the winner. The will of the dead father and the will of the living daughter are one. Portia sees the value of the test from her own point of view when she tells Bassanio, "If you do love me, you will find me out" (3.2.43), and in the moment of victory he insists that to have satisfied her father's condition is not enough "Until confirmed, signed, ratified by you" (3.2.152). The dead father is satisfied, but theatrically the emphasis falls on the satisfaction of the living daughter.

In the story of Shylock and Jessica all these emphases are reversed. Jessica's loyalties are divided. She recognizes a real obligation to her father—"Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child?" (2.3.16–17)—and she hopes her elopement will "end this strife" (2.3.20). For her it does (with reservations we will come to later); but Shakespeare puts the focus on the pain and humiliation it causes Shylock. The vicious taunts he endures from the Venetians identify him as an old man who has lost

his potency, “two stones, two rich and precious stones” (2.8.20–21), and his cry, “My own flesh and blood to rebel!” draws Solanio’s cruel retort, “Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?” (3.1.34–36). While Portia’s father retains his power beyond the grave, Shylock is mocked as an impotent old man. We may find Lancelet Gobbo’s teasing of his blind father cruel; while Shakespeare’s contemporaries had stronger stomachs for this sort of thing than we do, Shakespeare’s own humor is not usually so heartless. With the taunting of Shylock he goes further: the jokes of Salarino and Solanio, like those of Iago, leave us feeling no impulse to laugh.

This brings us to the problem of the way comedy treats outsiders, and to the cruelty that so often lies at the heart of laughter. Portia begins her dissection of her unwanted suitors “I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but . . .” (1.2.57–58) and goes on to indulge that sin with real gusto. The unwanted suitors are all foreigners, and are mocked as such; only the Englishman, we notice, gets off lightly. (His fault, interestingly, is his inability to speak foreign languages; in one of the play’s more complicated jokes, the insularity of the English audience, which the rest of the scene plays up to, becomes itself the target of laughter.) Morocco and Arragon lose the casket game for good reasons. Morocco chooses the gold casket because he thinks the phrase “what many men desire” is a sign of Portia’s market value. This is a tribute, but not the tribute of love. Arragon thinks not of Portia’s worth but of his own. Besides, Morocco and Arragon are foreign princes, and Morocco’s foreignness is compounded by his dark skin, which Shakespeare emphasizes in a rare stage direction specifying the actor’s costume: “*a tawny Moor all in white*” (2.1.0 SD). Portia’s dismissal of him, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.87), is for us an ugly moment. The prejudice that is, if not overturned, at least challenged and debated in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* is casually accepted here.

The most conspicuous problem, of course, is Shylock, and here we need to pause. *The Merchant of Venice* was written within a culture in which prejudice against Jews was pervasive and endemic. It can be argued that this goes back to the earliest days of Christianity, when the tradition began of making the Jews bear the guilt of the Crucifixion. Throughout medieval and early Renaissance Europe the prejudice bred dark fantasies: Jews were accused, for example, of conducting grotesque rituals in which they murdered Christian children and drank their blood. The story of a Jew who wants a pound of Christian flesh may have its roots in these fantasies of Jews violating Christian bodies. Shylock’s profession of usury is also bound up with his race: barred from other occupations, the Jews of Europe took to moneylending. Antonio’s disapproval of lending money at interest echoes traditional Christian teaching (Christian practice was another matter). Shylock’s boast that he makes his gold and silver breed like ewes and rams would remind his audience of the familiar argument that usury was against the law of God because metal was sterile and could not breed. Not just in his threat to Antonio, but in his day-to-day business, Shylock would appear unnatural.

Prejudice feeds on ignorance; since the Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, Shakespeare may never have met one. (There were a few in London in his time, but they could not practice their religion openly.) Given that the villainy of Shylock is one of the mainsprings of the story, it would have been far more natural for Shakespeare to exploit this prejudice than resist it. Many critics and performers, however, have insisted that he *did* resist it. His imagination, so the argument runs, worked on the figure of Shylock until it had created sympathy for him, seeing him as the victim of persecution. The great Victorian actor Henry Irving played him as a wronged and dignified victim, representative of a suffering race. Shylock’s famous self-defense, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands . . .?” (3.1.57–58), has been taken out of context and presented as a plea for the recognition of our common humanity. In context, however, its effect is less benevolent. Shylock’s plea is compelling and eloquent, but he himself uses it not to argue for tolerance but to defend his cruelty: “The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction” (3.1.70–72). Gratiano’s taunt, “A Daniel still, say I! A second Daniel!— / I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word” (4.1.354–55), shows that Gratiano, along with the word “Daniel,” has also picked up from Shylock, without knowing it, the word “teach,” and the echo is a terrible demonstration of the ways we teach each other hate so that prejudice moves in a vicious circle.

Does the play itself break out of this circle? There is little encouragement in the text to think so. In other plays Shakespeare casually uses the word “Jew” as a term of abuse, and this usage is intensified here. The kindest thing Lorenzo’s friends can find to say about Jessica is that she is “a gentle and no Jew” (2.6.53). We are aware of the pain Shylock feels in defeat; but the play emphasizes that he has brought it on himself, and no one in the play expresses sympathy for him, just as no one—except Shylock—ever questions Antonio’s right to spit on him. Given the latitude of interpretation, there are ways around the problem. Critics and performers alike have found sympathy for Shylock in his suffering, and have attacked the Christians’ treatment of him. But these readings are allowed rather than compelled by the text, and to a great extent they go against its surface impression.

It has to be said that many people who normally love Shakespeare find *The Merchant of Venice* painful. It even has power to do harm: it has provoked racial incidents in schools, and school boards have sometimes banned it. One may reply that the way to deal with a work one finds offensive is not censorship but criticism; in any case, everyone who teaches or performs the play needs to be aware of the problems it may create for their students and audiences, and to confront those problems as honestly as they can. At best, there are legitimate interpretations that control or resist the anti-Semitism in the text. At worst, it can be an object lesson showing that even a great writer can be bound by the prejudices of his time. To raise this kind of question is of course to go beyond the text as such and to make the problem of Shylock loom larger than it would have done for Shakespeare. In discussions of this kind, the objection “Why can’t we just take it as a play?” is often heard. But we cannot place Shakespeare in a sealed container. He belonged to his time, and, as the most widely studied and performed playwright in the world, he belongs to ours. He exerts great power within our culture, and we cannot take it for granted that this power is always benevolent.

To return to the text, and to explore the ramifications of the figure of Shylock a bit further: Shylock, Morocco, and Arragon are not the play’s only losers. The group, paradoxically, includes Antonio, who is the center of so much friendship and concern. In the final scene he is a loner in a world of couples, and the sadness he expressed at the beginning of the play does not really seem to have lifted. He resists attempts to make him reveal his secret; but when to Solanio’s “Why then you are in love” he replies “Fie, fie!” (1.1.48), we notice it is not a direct denial. Solanio himself later makes clear the depth of Antonio’s feeling for Bassanio: “I think he only loves the world for him” (2.8.52). In the trial scene Antonio tells Bassanio to report his sacrifice and bid Portia “be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (4.1.288–89). Antonio has not only accepted Bassanio’s marriage, he has helped make it possible—yet there is a touch of rivalry here. In the trial his courageous acceptance of death shades into an actual yearning for it, and in the final restoration of his wealth there is something restrained and cryptic. Portia will not tell him how she came by the news that his ships have been recovered; his own response, “I am dumb” (5.1.299), has the same curtness as Shylock’s “I am content” (4.1.410), and the same effect of closing off conversation. Whether we should call Antonio’s love for Bassanio “homosexual” is debatable; the term did not exist until fairly recently, and some social historians argue that the concept did not exist either. Our own language of desire and love does not necessarily apply in other cultures. What matters to our understanding of the play is that Antonio’s feeling for Bassanio is not only intense but leaves him excluded from the sort of happiness the other characters find as they pair off into couples. This gives Antonio an ironic affinity with his enemy Shylock: both are outsiders. Many current productions end with Antonio conspicuously alone as the couples go off to bed.

Another character who is in low spirits at the end of some productions of *The Merchant of Venice* is Jessica. There is less warrant for this in the text, apart from her line “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (5.1.77). Jessica is a significant case of a character who has broken the barrier between outsider and insider, joining a group (the Christians) to which she did not originally belong. She is welcomed, and seems at ease in her new world, but Lancelet Gobbo, the plainspoken and sometimes anarchic clown of the play, raises doubts about the efficacy of her conversion—she is damned if she is her father’s daughter, and damned if she isn’t (3.5.1–25)—and about its economic consequences: “This making of Christians will

raise the price of hogs" (3.5.22–23). In a play in which money counts for so much, this is a very pointed joke. Lancelet uses his clown's license to raise the question of whether Jessica will ever be fully accepted in Christian society. (His own contribution to race relations has been to get a Moor pregnant, and his reference to her does not sound affectionate.) Jessica's uneasiness at going into male disguise could suggest a worry about the deeper change she is making in her nature.

Her uneasiness also makes a revealing contrast with Portia's attitude to *her* disguise, and suggests there may be a parallel between the two women. Given her easy dominance of every scene in which she appears, it may seem odd to think of Portia as an outsider. But she is a woman in a society whose structures are male-centered and patriarchal. She greets her marriage with a surrender of herself and her property to a man who, like her father, will have full legal control over her:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's.
(3.2.170–75)

Yet she continues to dominate Bassanio, and more than that: like Jessica, she uses male disguise to enter another world, the exclusive male club (as it then was) of the legal profession. Unlike Jessica, she moves into this new world with confidence. Her mockery of swaggering young men as she plans her disguise is irrelevant to the story but seems to answer a need in the character to poke fun at the sex whose rules she is about to subvert. Not for the only time in Shakespeare, we see a stage full of men who need a woman to sort out their problems.

Portia may also be seen as bringing fresh air from Belmont into the sea-level miasma of Venice, and readings of the play have often been constructed around a sharp opposition between the two locations, between the values of Portia and the values of Shylock. Shakespeare, however, will not leave it at that; there are constant echoes back and forth between the play's apparently disparate worlds. Portia gives a ring to Bassanio, who gives it away; Leah gave a ring to Shylock, and Jessica steals it. Keys lock Shylock's house and unlock the caskets of Belmont. Portia calls Bassanio "dear bought" (3.2.326) and Shylock uses almost the same words for his pound of flesh, which is "dearly bought" (4.1.101). Shylock's proverb, "Fast bind, fast find" (2.5.55), could be a comment on the way the women use the rings to bind the men to them. His claim on Antonio's body is grotesque, but the adultery jokes of the final scene remind us that married couples also claim exclusive rights in each other's bodies. Marriage is mutual ownership, and Shylock's recurring cry of "mine!" echoes throughout the play.

The final images of harmony are a bit precarious. The moonlight reminds Lorenzo and Jessica of stories of tragic, betrayed love, in which they teasingly include their own. These stories are stylized and distanced, but not just laughed off as the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The problem of the rings is laughed off, but there is some pain and anxiety behind the laughter. The stars are "patens of bright gold" (5.1.67)—that is, plates used in the Eucharist which are also rich material objects. The play's materialism touches even the spiritual realm, and Lorenzo's eloquent account of the music of the spheres ends with a reminder that "we cannot hear it" (5.1.73). When Portia describes the beauty of the night, she creates a paradox: "This night methinks is but the daylight sick; / It looks a little paler" (5.1.137–38). So, as we watch the lovers go off to bed, we may think of their happiness, or of the human cost to those who have been excluded; we may wonder how much it matters that this happiness was bought in part with Shylock's money. A brilliant night, or a sickly day? We may feel that this is another harmony whose music eludes us. Or we may conclude that the happiness is all the more precious for being hard-won, and all the more believable for the play's acknowledgment that love is part of the traffic of the world.