

An Introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*

2nde IGCSE Ms Carey

Background Information

Written in 1596, most likely performed before the turn of the century

During the period of the Renaissance

A Comedy Play

Technically classified as a comedy, and viewed as such at the time

It has a love plot and multiple marriages

Also referred to as a 'problem comedy', 'uneasy comedy', because of the way in which **Shylock** is treated and presented

Since the Holocaust, every production has had to deal with the twentieth century Jewish experience.

Jewish History

Jewish people had settled throughout Europe due to the Diaspora of 135 AD, when they were expelled from their homeland.

In their newly settled lands they were often thought of as aliens, they were denied citizenship and confined to limited professions.

Many operated as money lenders, this practice was called **usury**.

Opposition to usury made Jews very unpopular.

1290 all Jews expelled from England, in 1391, Jews expelled from France, Spain, Lithuania and Portugal.

Venice

The English were fascinated by Venice

Admired because it was what England aspired to become.

Rich and exotic, full of the luxuries of this time (silks, spices, gold, silver)

Venice was a republic, ruled aristocratic families who chose the Duke to rule.

Dependent on maritime trade, it welcomed all nationalities

Jews in Venice

Many Jews went to settle in Venice

Repressive laws:

E.g curfews, lived in ghettos, had to wear distinctive clothing, heavy taxes, lived in ghettos

BUT could openly live as Jews

Venice was a city which relied on usury

Venice needs lenders but ridicules them - the Jews - for doing this.

The Laws in Venice

Venice renowned for its strictness and fairness of its laws.

Commercial survival depended on it maintaining a reputation for honesty and fair play

Cultural References

Gondola

Masques and Revels

Wealth

The Venetian legal system

Venice a Contemporary Setting

Religious toleration

An unusual experience of religious independence

The bringing together of all men through commerce

Domination of banking, trade and commerce

The Downside of Living in Venice

Shakespeare explores possible downsides of living in Venice:

- Obsession with material wealth, debt problems, superficial courtships, racism and prejudice, all feature in the play.

Resources:

1. Audiobooks

- Tumblebookcloud

<http://tumblebookcloud.com/>

Username = eabjm

Password = login

2. Watch different film productions of the play:

- 2004, Alpacino

Act 1

Act 1 is the Exposition of the play

- Sets up basic elements of the narrative
- Establishes some of the central thematic ideas

Questions:

1. The scene opens in mid-conversation. How is this effective?
2. Look over the scene again, can you identify any 'hooks' that Shakespeare includes to suggest the future development of the story?
3. Apart from Antonio and Bassanio, what other characters might we expect to play an important part later on in the story?