

IDH3931- (Un)common Reading Program:
**Shakespeare on Trial – Ambivalent Readings of
*The Merchant of Venice***

Course Description:

William Shakespeare most likely never intended *The Merchant of Venice* as highly contested drama about the Jewish people. The play was first presented as a comedy, and the merchant is Antonio, who risks his life in the service of Bassanio's love for Portia. It is only after the eighteenth century (and initially in Germany) that the minor character of Shylock looms large as one of few Jewish characters in Western literature. The play, accordingly, is classified as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" in which classical structures are disrupted by the crossing over of ethnic, social and religious boundaries. For the modern reader of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare is awaiting judgment: Is *The Merchant of Venice* an offensive anti-Semitic play that should be banned (as it has been in certain US schools at different times) – or is it, on the contrary, a play that affirms the humanity of the Jews through Shylock's declaration that he has organs, feelings, and rights similar to those of non-Jews?

We will therefore run the class as a courthouse, with Shakespeare as the defendant and the students as Jury. Student's presentation will be conducted as expert testimony (as each student will be an "expert" for a short excerpt of the play). Some students might also choose to form "legal teams" the will act as the persecution and the defense in the case. The final paper for the class will be formulated as a legal sentence, arguing for either Shakespeare's guilt or innocence.

Assignments:

Writing Assignment: (25%)

Is *The Merchant of Venice* an offensive anti-Semitic play that should be banned? Or is it, on the contrary, a play that affirms the humanity of the Jews through Shylock's declaration that he has organs, feelings, and rights similar to those of non-Jews? Present your paper as a legal-sentence written by a judge who read the play, and listened to the various presentations/expert testimonies in class.

Presentation: (25%)

Each student will be asked to present a particular aspect of the day's assigned reading – depending upon the number of students this might be done in groups. The presentation will take the form of "expert testimony" about certain parts of the play, and some students might choose to form "legal teams" the will act as the persecution and the defense in the case.

Participation: (50%)

Student participation is essential. Students will be asked to prepare questions and comments for each section of the reading.

Class Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction

Week 8: Act III, scenes iii-v

Week 2: Act I, scenes i, ii

Week 9: Act IV, scene i

Week 3: Act I, scene iii

Week 4: Act II, scenes i-iii

Week 5: Act II, scenes iv-vi

Week 6: Act II, scenes vii-ix

Week 7: Act III, scenes i, ii

Week 10: Act IV, scene ii

Week 11: Act V, scene i (part 1)

Week 12: Act V, scene i (part 2)

Week 13: Epilogue

**Week 14: Conclusion – Writing
Assignments due**