

Miss Bayer
Culture and Justice in Literature
31 July 2006

The Merchant of Venice
Opening text from the 2004 movie

Venice 1596

Intolerance of the Jews was a fact of 16th century life even in Venice, the most powerful and liberal state in Europe.

By law, the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or 'Geto' area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians.

In the daytime any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew.

The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law.

The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter...

Discussion Questions

1. How does Portia talk about law? How does "law" apply to her? How has her father controlled her choice of a husband even after his death? (1.2.15-28)
2. How would you describe the relations between Christians and Jews in Venice? What Biblical story does Shylock use to justify his taking of interest? How does Shylock respond to the Christians' methods of making money? (See 1.3)
3. How has Antonio treated Shylock in the past, and what does Antonio think about that?
4. What agreement does Antonio reach with Shylock for the three thousand ducats Antonio will give to Bassanio? Does Antonio expect to have any problem paying back the money? Why or why not?
5. How, according to Solanio, did Shylock respond to his daughter's departure?
6. What did Jessica use to pay for a monkey?
7. What does the Duke assume Shylock will do? What is Shylock's response? Why is Shylock unwilling to show mercy? How does he respond to the Venetians and their call for mercy? What is his ultimate claim (even "threat") in demanding justice? (4.1)
8. How does the law begin to work against Shylock? Why can't Shylock take the money now and leave? (4.1)
9. To what degree does the play endorse anti-Jewish attitudes?
10. What are your final thoughts on the movie/play?