

**Dr. Wieland Schwanebeck**

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**Shakespeare's 'Problem Plays':  
*The Merchant of Venice***

**Tue (2)**

**HSZ 204**

William Shakespeare wrote tragedies which are, at times, hilariously funny, as well as comedies which often move the recipients to tears. However, nowhere are the borders between the two genres as fluid as in his so-called 'problem plays,' a number of texts which can neither be neatly classified as comedies nor as tragedies.

Though they exhibit many of the distinctive qualities of Shakespeare's writing (such as witty banter and psychological nuance), these plays often shift rather abruptly in tone and reject conventional, generic solutions. They also debate complex moral questions and, for that reason, have remained controversial over the centuries. Though it was not originally viewed as a 'problem play,' it is *The Merchant of Venice* in particular which remains disputed and has been read as anti-Semitic.

In this seminar, we will familiarise ourselves with the basics of Shakespearean drama and with the fundamental categories of analysing plays. This involves both exercises in reading and analysing plays (focusing on the role of dramatic speech, basic techniques of characterisation, plot structures), all of which we will practice on the *Merchant*. Moreover, we will examine different adaptations of the play and assess their individual strategies of coming to terms with the problematic nature of the source material.

The course is also aimed at students who have not yet attended the introductory course.

Please buy the following edition:

William Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. John Drakakis. London: Black, 2006 (The Arden Shakespeare). [ISBN 1903436818]

Further texts will be available on OPAL at the beginning of term.

You do not have to register in advance – just be there for the first meeting.