

Three Scenes, Three Societies, Three Shylocks

By Mary Ellen Dakin

Shakespeare can be scary.

I don't mean three-witches scary, or strange-words-and-convoluted-grammar scary. I mean how you feel when you place a troubling text into the hands of high school students whose sensitivity to the -isms that still plague us (racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism) may in fact be more in keeping with an Elizabethan audience than your own.

Unlike my experiences with the more familiar fare of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*, I have yet to reach a comfort zone with *The Merchant of Venice*. I had not read the play since college, and when I returned to it two years ago at the "Teaching Shakespeare Institute", all the old ghosts were still there to mock my absence. There was the brooding merchant, Antonio, so free with his ducats and his Christian self-righteousness; the enigmatic Portia, whose mercy somehow seemed strained; and Shylock, literature's "Jew", tottering on the wire of a stereotype, then falling (or was he pushed?) away from his own humanity.

Why bother with such a play? And why, above all, drag such a jagged bundle into a high school classroom?

For weeks and months I struggled with these questions, and though in the process I have formulated several concrete objectives for this project, I offer you *the struggle itself* as

the preeminent reason for incorporating *The Merchant of Venice*, or parts of it, into the high school curriculum. This play is worth doing for the very reasons why it is easier to omit.

The central conflict is common enough, and decidedly the stuff of romantic comedy -- a young man borrows money to finance his pursuit of a beautiful and wealthy woman. But the devil is in the details, and the details of this play are troubling, ambiguous, and risky. The borrower is a Christian, the moneylender a Jew. The "merry bond", a pound of flesh, has overtones of the crucifixion of Christ, and in a Venetian courtroom, justice and mercy get so entangled that the final verdict seems neither just nor merciful.

Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic? His audience most certainly was, and this play pleased his audience.

But have all audiences, all directors, all casts, and all critics throughout this play's venerable history been anti-Semitic as well? A reasonable answer is no, so one is left with the fact that a play which at times pleases anti-Semites pleases their moral antagonists as well. But how?

Determining how is the central challenge of the project which I developed for my seniors in English IV. Over a period of about 15 class days, we set out to discover the ways in which this play has been a reflection of its audiences, both shaming and entertaining them, often at the same time.

Curtain opens on three caskets

We do not begin at the beginning. Nor do we begin with

explanations of the plot or characters. Finally, and oddly enough, we do not begin with the three scenes chosen for this project.

Scattered throughout Acts II and III is the ritual of the gold, silver, and lead caskets, a sort of moral lottery devised by Portia's deceased father to test the values of her suitors. I determined that our participation in this ritual would be a vivid way to draw my students into the world of the play, but I thought this ritual could also function as a revolving door back to our own world. In asking the students to read the inscriptions and to choose from among the three caskets, the shadow of Portia's dead father would fall upon us all.

And so, one Monday morning in January, I set the stage. As my world-weary seniors trudged into class, I arranged three desks at the front of the room, and placed upon each a "casket" in the form a cigar box. Each casket was color-coded with gift ribbons and "engraved" with Shakespeare's verse:

- Gold -- Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.
- Silver -- Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.
- Lead -- Who chooseth me must give and hazard all.

On the blackboard, I wrote *Italy, 1598, an aristocratic family estate*. Then I listed the "cast call" on the board: *Suitor 1, Suitor 2, Suitor 3, Portia (Lady of Belmont and the "prize"), Venetian society (the rest of you)*. Hands went up, we cleared a space down the middle of the room, and the ritual of the three caskets was underway.

I asked the three suitors to assemble at the rear of the class, and to approach the caskets separately and on cue. Inside each casket I had placed a scroll with the appropriate inscription. Then I handed Portia an index card, and stationed her by the caskets. Portia read from the card, "You have traveled a great distance and passed many tests to be standing in the presence of three caskets. You must choose one. If you choose the right casket, you will win a beautiful, intelligent, rich young woman (*groans and whistles from the groundlings here*) and all her possessions. If you choose the wrong casket, you will never be allowed to marry, or to have children." At this point, Venetian society seemed fully engaged in the game-show dilemma.

The first suitor went directly for the lead casket, and when all three had chosen, I took a quick poll of the audience -- "Hands up if you think the gold / silver / lead casket contains the prize!" Venetian society leaned in favor of the gold, so fraught with modern connotations of victory and wealth. I then asked the "gold" suitor to read his scroll:

All that glisters is not gold,
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms infold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Young in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been inscrolled.
Farewell, your suit is cold. (II.7)

The audience became suspicious -- "It's a trap!" Then the "silver" suitor unscrolled his fate:

Some there be that shadows kiss;
 Such have but a shadow's bliss.
 There be fools alive, iwis,
 Silvered o'er, and so was this.
 Take what wife you will to bed,
 I will ever be your head.
 So be gone: you are sped. (II.9)

"Hey, wait a minute -- I thought he couldn't have a wife," someone in the audience objected.

"Maybe Shakespeare means a common-law wife?" someone else offered, and we went on.

The winning suitor, who also happened to choose first, read aloud:

You that choose not by the view,
 Chance as fair and choose as true!
 Since this fortune falls to you,
 Be content and seek no new.
 If you be well pleased with this,
 And hold your fortune for your bliss,
 Turn you where your lady is
 And claim her with a loving kiss. (III.2)

Then he ungraciously swept Portia off her feet and exited, stage left.

When the desks were pushed back into place, I asked the "lead" suitor what prompted him to choose the least impressive casket.

"I'm a risk-taker, and I figured that people who are willing to 'give and hazard all' for someone or something they love deserve to win, you know, at least in a play." In light of all the risk-taking that goes on in *Merchant*, a resonant chord had just been plucked.

Following up quickly on this introduction to the project, I handed the class a plot outline in tabloid newspaper format, advising them to read it tonight. Precious class time was now needed for the activity at the bottom of the tabloid, which reprinted each inscription and challenged the students to interpret what now appeared to be a moral code embedded in the play.

The directions were simple: "Read each inscription. Explain what each choice revealed about the chooser in the mind of Portia's father." While they reflected upon this task, I wrote the words GOLD, SILVER, and LEAD on the blackboard. About ten minutes later, the columns were filled with their ideas:

GOLD

- greedy people
- people fooled by flashy outward appearances
- materialistic people
- people who sell out for luxury

SILVER

- cautious people
- wannabees -- people who try to be what they're not
- people who make compromises for comfort
- people who sacrifice spiritual health for

LEAD

- risk-takers
- people not fooled by appearances
- spiritual, intellectual people
- people not deceived by

material wealth

- people who take without giving

false values

- people who give more than they get

Finally, I gave them their first assignment: "Think of a person from the world of politics, entertainment, sports, history, or your own life, who would make a good candidate for the Gold, Silver, or Lead casket. Write a short poem that describes your candidate and measures his/her worth within the context of the three caskets." Then I read to them my own entry:

Gold am I, my name is Trump,
A few years back, I hit a slump;
Some even dared call me corrupt
But business is better since I went bankrupt.

Tomorrow would reveal a provocative gallery of candidates couched in some very choppy verse.

Three Scenes

Prefacing their poetry with warnings like "This is really bad, but I'll read it anyway," my students seemed uncharacteristically eager to share their poems. Gold candidates included several pro athletes and a former one, O.J. Simpson ("Simpson's his name, and he is still Gold, Send him \$29.95 to hear his story told. Please buy his tape; be ever so giving, As he needs to continue to make a good living"). Another Gold went to Leona Helmsley ("Gold I am, my name's Leona, To be certain I'm no organ dona'...").

Earning two Silvers was Colin Powell, who had recently announced that he would definitely *not* be running for president ("You won't take a stand on heated topics; Yet silver and green fill up your pockets..."). Echoing the "silver" themes of caution and compromise were two other poems about President Clinton ("...Without the public on my side, Behind Hillary I must hide").

The spectrum of Lead candidates ranged from our principal to Mother Theresa to Bill Cosby. But the most persuasive verse was penned in honor of a Massachusetts businessman named Arron Fuerstein: "Your Malden Mills burnt to the ground, Your employees' jobs nowhere to be found. In the cold winter months of Christmas time, You showed a heart of "lead", sensitive and kind. You paid your employees for months without work, So that their tables would not go without bread and pork. In a time when businessmen are frigid and tough, There's no doubt about it, you're a diamond in the rough."

We spent the remainder of the second day reviewing what we knew and organizing what we were about to know. Then I handed out three scenes which I had reproduced from a CD-ROM produced by Creative Multimedia entitled "Shakespeare":

- Act I.3 (The conditions of the loan)
- Act III.1 (Antonio's loss, Shylock's loss)
- Act IV.1 (The trial)

Footnote-free, these scenes would require some pretty active reading, and I instructed my students to highlight or underline

any words or phrases which they didn't understand. Through discussion, an examination of context clues, and the use of a Shakespearean lexicon dictionary, we would reach an understanding of the scenes.

I chose these three scenes because Shylock is a central character in each one. A partial reading of any play or novel is bound to sacrifice something, and my victims included Nerissa, Portia's lady-in-waiting, who in Act I.2 nearly upstages her mistress with her wisdom; and of course, Lancelot Gobbo, the ne'er-do-well servant whose Beckett-esque clownsmanship injects a ludicrous quality to the tension that exists between the generations, the sexes, and the ethnic groups within this play.

But the greatest loss comes with the exclusion of Jessica, who in a succession of scenes throughout Act II provides a fascinating dimension both to the play and to her father, Shylock. Her relationship with him is ambiguous at best, but I suspect that most teenagers would respond forcefully and dramatically to her situation, and to the choices that she makes. As it stands, it is a necessity to preface the second reading (Act III.1) with a summary of Jessica's elopement in Act II.6.

Three societies, three audiences

Throughout the course of their final year of high school, we ask our seniors to examine their personal values and their future responsibilities as citizens of the world. This emphasis upon romantic individualism in the classical context of social responsibility makes *The Merchant of Venice* an ideal vehicle for exploration and reflection.

Also, since a formal research paper is a traditional senior requirement, this project gave me the opportunity to introduce a new facet of research to my English classes, that of performance history. Though Shakespearean scholars have long been familiar with the delights of this branch of research, few high school teachers and even fewer high school students have ever been exposed to this activity. One enchanted summer at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. had sparked my interest in this brand of research, and left me determined to incorporate it into a student project.

Because the central objective of this project is to determine how *The Merchant of Venice*, in spite of and at times because of its anti-Semitic elements, has managed to appeal to audiences universally for almost 400 years, I decided to frame each scene in a distinct historical era. I was interested in experimenting with shifting perspectives.

Just how much of what we perceive as true and good is influenced by the society in which we live? How different would each of us be if we had been born in another time and place? How difficult is it to be an outcast, unaccepted by your own family or society? Though I didn't expect *Merchant* to offer any conclusive answers to these questions, I certainly hoped it would fuel some intense reflection.

The criteria I used for the three societies I chose was based partly on their separation by time and place, but I also considered the varying degrees of anti-Semitism at work in each. I felt it appropriate to frame one scene in Britain's golden age, Elizabethan England, and another in what one American critic has termed the American Renaissance, the nineteenth century of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and

Thoreau. The third frame seemed ugly but inescapable in light of the project, and after much hesitation I devised a sign-up sheet for these three productions:

| Scene | Society | Cast |
|--|--|--|
| <u>Act I, sc. 3</u> (178 lines; the conditions of the loan) | London, 1598 (Elizabethan England) | Bassanio Shylock Antonio |
| <u>Act III, sc. 1</u> (123 lines; Antonio's loss, Shylock's loss) | Berlin, 1936 (The Nazi Era) | Solario Salarino Shylock Man Tubal |
| <u>Act IV, sc. 1</u> (404 lines; the trial) | Boston, 1845 (The American Renaissance) | Duke Antonio Salerio Shylock Bassanio Nerissa Portia |

Choosing the Elizabethan era for one production seemed both natural and useful, since students would be learning something about the author's society, and perhaps about the author himself. Furthermore, my limited knowledge of that era lead me to view it as a "silver" society, one which walked a middle line in its measured tolerance of Jews. Since our students study American literature in the tenth grade, I very much wanted to set another era on our own shores, giving students the opportunity to research an era of remarkable literary and philosophical activity. With shamefully little

knowledge of the social history of Boston in the mid-nineteenth century, I imagined that our "lead" society would be found among the intellectuals who so celebrated freedom, individuality, and man's spiritual self. My third choice seemed unavoidable, though as a research assignment, the Nazi era would provide the least challenge to students. Needless to say, this era would most definitely be our "gold" society. I scheduled a field trip to the Boston Public Library and encouraged them to hunt down different editions of the play, knowing that editors often include provocative information about the performance history of the play in their introductions.

In this, the research component of the project, it would be their responsibility to learn everything they could about how the play had been adapted to its audiences in the past, and to familiarize themselves with the era in which they would be performing. Even for seniors, a few hours in the BPL can amount to information overload, so I armed my students with a few essential questions: What were the social levels of that society? How did people most often rise to prominence in that society (through education, honest labor, inherited wealth and titles, aggression and intimidation, etc.)? How did people in each level of society dress? What were their distinct symbols of power and justice, shame and derision? To what extent was anti-Semitism accepted in their society?

Three Shylocks

According to my calendar, we had read three scenes and visited the library, all in a period of eight class days. But throughout this time, my students and I had engaged in daily activities designed to examine and manipulate the ambiguities

of Shakespeare's script.

Dialogue is central in drama. From what the characters do and say, we infer their natures. During the reading of Act I.3, I asked my students to fill a chart with quotes spoken by Antonio and Shylock which reveal important character traits. More often than not, my students found themselves at odds over the interpretations of key lines.

When Bassanio invites Shylock to dinner, "If it please you to dine with us --", Shylock replies, "Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you..." (I.3, 26-31). Several students felt that these lines revealed a deeply religious man, someone whose personal standards would not be debased for monetary gain. But other students found in these lines a bitter man whose distaste for his neighbors' lifestyle extended to a physical revulsion. "He's a bigot himself," someone said.

These instances of disagreement provided the opportunity to begin building the third, most compelling, component of this project, the complexity of character. To those students who found in these lines a deeply religious Shylock, I asked how they, as actors, would *show* this. How would their interpretation of these lines manifest itself in the voice, the body, and the face? How would their Shylock dress? What colors would he wear? How would his religious demeanor influence the other two actors on-stage at that time, Antonio and Bassanio? And finally, how would you expect your audience to respond to this Shylock? The same challenge was then put to the students who discovered a bitter Shylock,

driven by hate. The final extension of these exercises is to have students volunteer to put these two interpretations on their feet, and to have the rest of the class/audience analyze what they saw and heard and felt.

After we had read all three scenes, I tried another approach to characterization intended to enlarge the scope of choices available to these budding actor/directors. On a handout I double-spaced the text of Shylock's asides from I.3 (lines 31-35; 38-49), "Yes, to smell pork..."; "How like a fawning publican he looks..."; and his famous speech from III.1 (lines 55-69), "Hath not a Jew eyes..." Telling my students that this activity would help to prepare them for their final performances, I broke them into groups of two to three and instructed them to use all the tools at their disposal -- line editing ("Cross out up to fifty percent!"), instructions in the margins for vocal intonation, gesture, and props ("Props can be costumes, colors, lights, make-up, wigs, jewelry, weapons, sets, et cetera, et cetera!") Then, to raise the difficulty factor, I told the I.3 students, whose Shylock was in the process of venting his anti-Christian, anti-Antonio grudges, to create a more sympathetic Shylock. On the other hand, the III.1 students, whose Shylock was delivering his eloquent speech for human understanding, were told to create a less sympathetic Shylock. Though time prohibited most of the groups from presenting their interpretations, every group was eager to express how they would have staged such scenes. Their deliveries were understandably awkward, but their ideas were exciting, and when on the following morning I showed them the courtroom scene (IV.1) from the 1973 film production of *Merchant*, produced by Jonathan Miller and featuring Laurence Olivier in the role of Shylock, they

watched this performance as seasoned professionals.

At this point in the project, all things were ready -- three groups had been assigned a scene and an era; it would now be their task to assemble a promptbook and a production.

Assembling a promptbook

Using the model from *Shakespeare Set Free, Vol. 1*, edited by Peggy O'Brien, I tailored a handout of specific instructions for the promptbook each group would need to hand in with its final performance.

1. Title Page

Begin with a title page that includes the name of your acting company, the scene you will enact, and the era in which you will perform. List the names of every member of your company, and the responsibilities of each.

2. Research Analyses (3-5 paragraphs, double-spaced)

In an opening statement of thesis, characterize the society which you researched as *most closely* representative of a "gold", "silver", or "lead" society. Refer to the inscriptions on the caskets, and/or to the moral traits associated with each, in your opening statement.

Then write the body of your report. Each paragraph should provide concrete information gathered in your research on such topics as the performance history of the play, the social history of the era, and the observations and opinions of literary and historical experts.

Use *parenthetical documentation* throughout this part of your report. Be sure to include a "Works Cited" page at the end of this section of the promptbook.

3. Script

How did your research influence the editing of your script? Cut and paste a significant edited passage from the script and explain in one or two paragraphs how your knowledge of the era contributed to the decisions made in the editing, directing, and acting of this passage.

4. Character Analyses

Write a brief but insightful description of each character in your scene. *How* is your character being portrayed (greedy, hateful, proud, terrified, etc.) and *why*?

Whenever appropriate, refer to your historical research to show how it contributed to the portrayal of your character.

5. Costumes, Staging, and Props

Sketch or copy the ideal costumes for this scene (you are NOT expected to have them -- just imagine them). Indicate the color schemes for each costume, with a sensitivity to the symbolism commonly attached to colors, and highlight individual ornamentations such as jewelry, weapons, wigs, beards, etc. Historical accuracy is a must!

Diagram the ideal stage for this production. Would your scene work best on a round stage? a thrust stage? a proscenium? Would it require a balcony or trap door?

What props (furniture, objects) would be required on-stage? What would the background include? Describe the use of lights and color. Where would your actors be standing/sitting?

Your sensitivity to the historical era is of paramount importance in these decisions, and your choices must reflect knowledge and understanding of the era in which it is set.

6. Music/Sound Effects

Select music to use as an introduction to your scene. Would you play it during the performance as well? Explain your choice of music. What sound effects, if any, would add to the dramatic effect of your scene?

This handout, along with a mini-review of MLA standards in research format, was distributed on Friday of the second week of our project, so that each group could coordinate the individual responsibilities of each group member, and take advantage of the weekend to get started.

Performance!

As I said in my introduction, Shakespeare can be scary. One of the risks inherent in this project is its freedom from teacher-imposed standards of decency and "correctness". Staging this play for an audience which history tells us was somewhat, or overtly, anti-Semitic required a remarkable degree of trust in both my students and Shakespeare.

I needed to trust that my students would produce a scene which would accurately reflect the era they had researched, but that they would learn from this how insidious a thing is

prejudice. I wanted them to feel the pain of the outcast and the shame of a majority that abuses its power. As for Shakespeare, I hoped to witness a fluid script, alive in the hands of the many and distinct cultures which embrace him. I also hoped to view, as through a mirror darkly, a seed of redemption planted in the script wherein Shylock, Antonio and Portia labored.

These were my hopes and fears. But on the day in which I handed out a sign-up sheet for the three productions, the one student whom I most suspected of harboring anti-Semitic sentiments signed up for the role of Shylock in the "Berlin 1936" cast.

This situation prompted me to design a performance self-evaluation sheet, which I distributed to all my students a couple of days before performance. First, I asked them to list the details they wanted the audience to notice about their portrayal of character. This proved to be too general a request, so I found myself asking them more particular questions: "Will you be speaking with an accent? Walking with a limp? Will you stand up tall and look the world in the eye, or will you blink and stammer?" In all my questions, I hoped to make my students more sensitive to the vital connections between Shakespeare's language and the language of their bodies and minds.

On the other side of the sheet, and with my Berlin Shylock very much in mind, I asked: "What aspects of your appearance and personality do you think are naturally suited to this role? Are there things about you that do not suit the role you must play? How will you compensate?" The responses to these questions were more heartfelt, and many

students found in this writing activity the opportunity to express discomfort with the role they would play.

Quite unexpectedly, I learned that my Berlin Shylock had experienced an epiphany of sorts. During our visit to the Boston Public Library, he had examined a volume about the Third Reich, and in the faces of history's Jews he had caught a glimpse of himself. "I'm not Jewish, but I look like the Jews in Hitler's posters. If I were an actor in 1936 Berlin, I guess my appearance alone would get me the part of Shylock." He admitted that it would be difficult for him to play "a nervous and groveling" Shylock. "I'd want to fight back," he wrote, "but a Nazi audience wouldn't accept that."

Finally, on the fourteenth day of this project, we took up residence on the ramshackle stage in the gymnasium, and witnessed the performance of three scenes from *Merchant*. Did I see three Shylocks? Yes. Parading, groveling, advancing across the stage that day, I saw Shylock as comic villain, victim, and threat.

The first group, performing I.3 in London, 1598, showcased a mustache-twirling, comic villain. In their promptbook, they explained the reasons for this interpretation. From their research, they were surprised to learn that this play was considered a comedy; they also discovered that Shylock often appeared in a red wig and beard, harking back to the red-haired Judas Iscariot; and though Jews had been banned from England for several hundred years, they lived in relative peace as a segregated minority. These and other factors prompted them to characterize London in 1598 as a "silver" society, and to portray Shylock as a silent-film villain with a red wig, and exaggerated speech and gestures.

It was the second group's task to stage III.1 for an audience in 1936 Berlin. An awkward silence descended upon us, the audience. I found myself unwilling to play the part of a Nazi theater-goer, and was suddenly struck with the realization that, if history had chosen to put me there at that time, I would either have become a very different person, or an actress myself, orchestrating a double life of public/private dimensions. This was theater as I had never before experienced it.

In their promptbook, the second group wrote that their research had vividly reinforced what they already knew about the Nazis. Characterizing their society as "gold", their thesis was that, in this society, things were not as they appeared, with the Nazis so clean and sharply dressed on the outside, but rotten within. So struck were they by the myriad symbols of power in Nazi Germany that they chose to dress the taunting Solario and Salarino in uniforms (long-sleeved, collared shirts with black chestbands and military pins borrowed from grandfathers). Shylock and Tubal were hunched and dressed in rags, as befitted their theme of appearances and reality. Throughout the scene, Solario and Salarino encircled the two old men, slowly tightening the ring and punctuating their words with pokes and shoves. A group of students silently gathered on the front-right corner of the stage, throwing pennies at the two old men. By omitting the stage directions for the mid-scene exit of Salanio and Salarino, and by heavily editing Shylock's conversation with Tubal, this group continued to outnumber the old men, whose conversation was cut short by an eruption of violence. Using cardboard tubes which appeared out of nowhere, the gang of young Nazis attacked the two old men, hitting them and

driving them from the stage. When I said that Shakespeare can be scary, I was engaged in understatement.

The third group was entrusted with the longest scene, IV.1, and what I thought would be the most enlightened historical era, the American Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century, set rather parochially by me in Boston, 1845. But the research performed by this group offered a more sobering conclusion - - even the rarefied atmosphere of nineteenth-century Boston was polluted with the impurities of anti-Semitism.

They learned that Emerson, whose influence upon American attitudes extends well into our own era, denounced all organized religions, and that his perception of the Jewish faith was particularly negative. Another facet of their report took me quite by surprise -- they learned that the social elite of Boston was finding itself engulfed by waves of immigrants, and though the Jewish influx was small at this time, they concluded that a Brahmin audience would see in Shylock the threat of "foreign" invasion of their turf. They concluded that the Boston of 1845 was a "silver" society, and their courtroom scene, played against the elegant strains of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons", highlighted a firebrand Shylock whose suit threatened the status quo of American society and law. In this interpretation, Antonio was played by a tall, golden-haired young man in patriotic dress, and Shylock was played by an equally tall, black student wearing a yamalka on his head and a dagger taped conspicuously to his ankle. This Shylock spoke with a thick accent, and when he thought his flesh was about to be delivered, courtroom attendants "bolted" Antonio's arms to an imaginary wall in the manner of a crucifixion.

Will your students make the same discoveries in their research? Will they apply those discoveries in the same ways to each scene? I doubt it. In fact, I suspect that for each year that I do this project, I will see differences in each scene, because the mix of personal values, scholarly research, and text interpretation encourage rather than inhibit simple and predictable responses from students.

Closure

A "Meet the Cast" improv which I had scheduled for the next day was canceled due to a snowstorm that closed schools for two days and gave us a very long weekend. Removed from the immediacy of the three performances, we needed a way to share what we had learned about Shakespeare, time, and ourselves. Above all, we needed to wonder aloud just what this play asks of us.

In the interim, I had reproduced the thesis statement from each promptbook, and when we met again five days later, I asked the three directors to teach us what they had learned about their particular time frame. Then I asked each group to arrange their seats in a different corner of the classroom, separating themselves in space if not in time, and based upon the thesis they had written, I gave each group a copy of the inscription which best characterized their historical era. The Berliners received their "gold" inscription: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." Both the Londoners and the Bostonians received their "silver" inscription: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Then I instructed each member of the class to head their paper with the city and year of their production, to adapt their name to that time and place, and to write a fictional autobiography of

the person they think they would have been in that theater at that moment in history. Time travelers linked by Shakespeare, our voyage had come full circle.

With no one to receive the "lead" inscription, I placed it upon my desk. "I guess there are no 'lead' societies," someone wistfully observed. But then it occurred to me, as I reread the unclaimed verse, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all," that this was the challenge of both the project and the play itself. It is, I believe, what Shakespeare asks of us in *The Merchant of Venice*.

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