

LAKESIDE SCHOOL
Student Reflections
Summer 2011
Javier D.

Being in Stratford was unlike anything I have ever experienced before. The dignified culture and classy atmosphere never ceased to amaze me. Going to the Royal Shakespeare Company and being able to sit front row to watch these performances was incredible for me. Overall I would have to say my favorite plays were *Cardenio* and *Macbeth*, but closely following was *Merchant of Venice*, which captured my attention, and being that it was our focus play meant that we got to see it twice. The subtle details I missed the first time watching *Merchant of Venice* did not go unnoticed the second time for me. The second time I was better equipped knowing full well the work and energy put into the play by its cast. Getting to meet the actress who played Portia really gave me insight into the level of absolute talent each actor puts forth in every play.

Seeing Shakespeare and DOING Shakespeare are definitely two things often underrated by English courses, as our voice lessons coach repeated to us. I was privileged with the opportunity to go everyday to the Birthplace Trust and DO Shakespeare, whether that meant voice lessons, acting tutorials and games, directing and enacting our own scenes, or simply discussing our thoughts on the plays we had read and watched. All of these fueled my understanding of Shakespeare and launched me into a greater appreciation for the theatre arts, Shakespeare himself and all the plays we saw.

While at times it may have been fast-paced, I became very accustomed to the day-to-day routine. I must admit, however, that I found myself unusually jetlagged and struggled sometimes maintaining my energy level at peak performance. However, as Mr. Burgess explained to me, it was only natural given the amount of attention and focus we put into each day while in England. I was astounded by the amount of information and helpfulness the Birthplace Trust had to give to us. I was stunned with their ability to bring Shakespeare to US. The Birthplace Trust should not be underestimated in the least, even now that I'm writing from home; I have access to and can contact them via Twitter, Facebook and their blog, which surprisingly contrasts well with the fact that Shakespeare's plays are about 400 years old. This is some serious effort on the Birthplace Trust's behalf!

The fact that every performance was accompanied with a pre-discussion or post-discussion greatly influenced my understanding of that performance, especially on those plays which we had not studied, such as *The City Madam* and *Cardenio*, without which I would be lost in translation. Both of these plays took place in the *Swan Theatre*, a smaller more personal theatre, which I enjoyed very much. With less mechanics and fewer backdrops, it forced me to imagine a little further than the larger *RSC theatre* did, but not too much. Seeing the actors up close was surreal in some ways because not only was I in a foreign country, but I was sitting in a live theatre set in a different time period (excluding *Merchant of Venice*) and let's not forget Patrick Stewart! Putting Patrick Stewart aside for a moment, *The Merchant of Venice*, taught me just how modern Shakespeare can be interpreted in a live theatre. Sure, I too had seen the more contemporary gangster film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, but that was film. To do *The Merchant of Venice* in a contemporary setting and for it to work and convert over nicely was really neat. I, like everyone else in the audience, felt trapped when it came time for Antonio's pound of flesh to be removed, suspended from above. I thought the director did a very nice job with this slaughterhouse court setting.

Warwick Castle added a ton of excitement and acknowledgment into Shakespearean times for me. Being on top of a super tall tower was terrifying but also pushed the limits of my disbelief of the entire trip, being in Stratford and living this surreal life. I relished the differences between Stratford and Seattle. The food was amazing, our bed and breakfast was amazing, and our hosts were very kind. The properness of Stratford can be seen upon arriving and talking to any of its inhabitants, in a way I thought it was similar to Seattle in that it was isolated from the rest of the world. Stratford

was an honest uplifting place with beautiful scenery surrounding it. We were very fortunate in being able to revisit Shakespeare's background. Stratford offered a sincere sense of soothing and scholarly climate. As cheesy as it may sound my only regret of being in Stratford was not being able to spend more time there. Nonetheless, I can honestly say I can't wait to go back someday to Stratford, only next time bringing my family with me.

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Hannah R.

The moment I first beheld the RSC theatre, I knew I wanted to perform there someday. In retrospect, I find it difficult to explain the powerful feeling that took hold of me there, standing by the Avon River in the crisp morning air, swans honking their welcome. Maybe it had something to do with the detailed carvings in the brick walls of the theatre, or perhaps it was the simple concept of such a grand theatre, not sandwiched between other buildings and offices, standing on its own for the sole purpose of performance, of art. Whatever the cause, the feeling only increased as the week continued.

In the lounge of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, I abandoned my lovely caffeinated tea and wandered over to a small shelf of books, running my fingers over the spines, head tilted to read the titles. How amazing, I thought, to work in a place dedicated to the Bard, to be at the center of discovery and knowledge regarding the man and his plays. I felt the same way standing in the Birthplace, Hall's Croft, and Nash's House – a feeling of awe, suppressed excitement, and perhaps even reverence. I took few pictures, not because I didn't have time (although that was also the case), but because the important thing for me was *being* there, and a photo couldn't capture all of that sensory detail and emotion.

Although I find it unlikely that Shakespeare wrote more than a portion of *Cardenio*, the idea of seeing a "new" Shakespeare play was one of the most exciting parts of the week. It was amazing to sit in the audience and not know the next word, the next entrance, or the outcome of the plot. As with books, the fact that I enjoy rereading favorite books doesn't mean that I'm not excited to read new ones.

In addition, the trip opened my eyes to a bit more of the world of professional theatre. I was fascinated by how many different kinds of stage weapons and ways to get blood onstage the RSC employed, from the standard retractable dagger to knives with attached phials of blood that could be squeezed for the authentic throat-slitting effect. I was impressed with the stagefighting during *Macbeth* (though not so much during *The City Madam*, where the kicks and punches looked just fake enough to fail at being either realistic or comic).

I may not have learned a huge amount of facts during the week in Stratford (although it was interesting to hear the "official" take on several Shakespearian debates), but, more importantly, I gained a sense of Stratford today and Stratford as it would have been in Shakespeare's day. I could use many adjectives to describe various different parts of the trip, but the only universally applicable word I can find is 'special.' It was special to see the productions, for the quality and innovation and the simple fact that they were productions by The Royal Shakespeare Company! It was special to stand in the rooms at Mary Arden's, Anne Hathaway's, and the other houses, to climb the narrow staircases and walk over the same floors where Shakespeare would have walked. It was special to be in Stratford-upon-Avon, to laugh and cry and clap for the actors performing the Bard's work. It was special to work with experts at the Birthplace Trust, and to speak and study Shakespeare in England, in Stratford, at the center of Shakespearian thought and research. I'm not sure I'm even doing an adequate job explaining just how special it was to me, so I will turn to the words of the Bard. In *Henry VIII*, the title character says, "It is a kind of good deed to say well; and yet words are not deeds." So I shall suit the action to the word and the word to the action, and hope that the actions of speaking, listening, watching, writing, acting, in Stratford shall speak for themselves.

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Cori J.

A small group trickles in through the doorway, talking amongst themselves in small groups; discussion is varied and playful. Laughter rings out as the people find their seats in the circle and conversation recedes to a few last sentences said in a near whisper. The lecturer starts the discussion. After an awkward moment or two of silence, hands start to rise as people recall the night before and the emotions the play evoked. Soon people are engaged as they remember the power of the play. There is no disputing the merit of the post-play discussion; however, I think that the often-overlooked pre-play lecture can add even more to a performance than a post-play discussion. Many of the pre-play lectures at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust did just that and greatly helped my understanding of the plays. All three maximized my enjoyment and appreciation of the performances.

The pre-play talk on *The Merchant of Venice* significantly helped me understand the history of the play. When simply reading the text, partly, I believe, due to the fact I read it on the plane, it felt rather dull and I did not fully understand all the different directions it could go. In the lecture I was educated on the ways that the play as whole and specific characters, mainly Shylock and Portia, have changed in their portrayals over the years. Learning about how the play went from being a comedy to a humanitarian play, as the focus on Shylock grew, truly helped me appreciate the director's choice to make it a bit of both. I would not have otherwise realized how significant it is to have *The Merchant of Venice* played with moments of hilarity, tragedy, and empathy. I also appreciated the lecturer's choice to not share the ending, as it was unexpected.

The *Cardenio* talk was very well-presented. I really appreciated it, as it explained how the script of *Cardenio* came about and all the controversies and different ideas about it. Learning the history of the script was extremely important and I found it quite enjoyable. This allowed me to form my own ideas and conclusions, and not be confused as to where the language came from, after watching the play. The amount of plot she revealed was perfect. She brought up interesting topics in the play to consider but not enough to ruin the suspense. After all, it is unusual to watch a play of Shakespeare's and not already know the plot. This pre-play lecture was the most informative and interesting of the three.

When the speaker for *City Madam* talked to us, I appreciated her extremely in-depth research. The small details she gave us helped the world come alive. For example the explanations of how there was limited knowledge of American "Indians" and the specifics of how the English people dressed were important. Knowing the importance of the ribbons and lace, and how they were used to show your wealth, helped me understand the characters of *City Madam* wonderfully. If I had not received the talk I probably would have just thought that the ladies and Mr. Plenty dressed ridiculously, not understanding the intentional message it sent. However, the speaker's choice to reveal the ending was frustrating because otherwise the play would have been more engaging. Though, generally, the amount of information provided about the play and its plot was just enough to whet my appetite.

Besides the pre-play discussions, which I think were the singularly most helpful activity, much else in Stratford helped me understand Shakespeare and his plays. Visiting the Shakespeare properties was useful to help paint a picture of the times and customs that existed in Shakespeare's day. Seeing the spare bed laid out in Shakespeare's childhood home's parlor helped me understand the lengths people went to show off their wealth. This helped me view the characters that did similar types of things in the plays seem more understandable, namely the characters in *City Madam*. In addition, learning about Shakespeare's life as a child was informative. I noticed the references to gloves more after learning his father was a glove maker and how often terms relating to that profession appear in

his plays. Another fact I appreciated was the details of his early marriage. This makes me wonder about his life and how he felt about his family. This was an especially interesting fact, to me, because I already knew that his family never lived with him in London. Learning about Shakespeare's background was appreciated, both to understand his plays better, as well as to try to understand him.

Of course, the plays themselves truly brought Shakespeare to life. While I have always enjoyed watching Shakespeare's plays much more than reading them, I really appreciated RSC's versions of the plays. It was wonderful how they never seem to let a play just stand as is and are always looking for new ways to further the meaning. The choices they made were very thought-provoking and reminded me that you can do more to modernize or make Shakespeare interesting than simply setting it in a new place. The plays off of stereotypes in *Merchant*, particularly Balthazar and the Mexican janitor, were particularly poignant and I loved the switching of roles in *Macbeth*.

Donaldbain's death seemed to fit much more smoothly into the play than Young Siward's ever did and the choice of creating the child witches was simply amazing. I was constantly intrigued by the details they played with, such as the dolls, the crosses on their faces, and having them double as Macduff's children. It was all excellently done and new and fresh without seeming like it was trying to change for the sake of trying.

Finally, the special sessions that related to our main play were wonderful. The voice lesson and scenes we worked on helped me to focus in on those parts of the play when we saw it for the second time. Seeing the play a second time was very interesting as I could start to analyze the choices they made and where they came from. It added to my understanding and seeing *The Merchant of Venice* a second time was a treat. Additionally, the question and answer session with the actress who played Portia was quite possibly my favorite group session of the entire trip. This also created greater anticipation for the second viewing and clued me in to even more details and choices. Overall, I feel that this trip has helped deepen my appreciation for Shakespeare and all the versions of his plays produced. So, the next time I file into the theater to watch something of Shakespeare's I will truly question every choice and word in a way I would not have not known how to previously.

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Sebastian S.

The past week in Stratford-Upon-Avon, I experienced different lectures, plays, and sites which helped my understanding of Shakespeare's life and his writing. Specifically, Shakespeare's language, something that was previously very baffling and that I wished that I had a better comprehension of, became clearer. So, too, did Shakespeare's life that I had known very little about. With that newfound knowledge, I have acquired greater appreciation for his work.

The Merchant of Venice is the play that we were focused on during the week, and we saw it twice. The production was set in Las Vegas, a city famous for its atmosphere of greed, lust, and gambling, making it a fitting set for the play. Watching the play made the text considerably more understandable, as it should. Having it set in a recognizable, contemporary place made what the actors said and did even more so. Shakespeare's language became more and more familiar as it was acted out in a familiar setting, which didn't take away from the actual text any more than changing the word "ducats" to "dollars." It was good, though that the other plays were not shifted in time or setting for the reason that "ducats" was changed. The more radically the play's set is changed, the more it drifts from Shakespeare's words and meanings. Even if the play gets more understandable, it does so by getting away from its actual self. So, one up-to-date location for one play was enough.

Visiting sites like Shakespeare's birthplace and the Tudor farm demonstrated things about his life and times that I hadn't ever looked into or learned about. Seeing a glimpse of what life was like for him and other people during that time made me appreciate the plays he wrote more. Obviously, there are many ways of entertaining ourselves during this time, but back then, the plays were some of the only ones. It was that, or things like hiring prostitutes and watching a bear get killed by dogs. Shakespeare writing plays was a way to entertain the people while they still paid attention to ethics. The lectures about the theaters, actors, and plays in general also helped to see what things were like back then. After seeing a little of Shakespeare's times, I now grasp the plays and value them more. That feeling was then furthered by the Birthplace Trust's lectures about the plays. Without them, they would have been much harder to understand, mainly *Cardenio* and *The City Madam*, two plays which I knew nothing about. The talks on the origins, setting, and plotlines of those two were crucial to any understanding of them I might have had.

What understanding of the plays was not from the lectures or my own personal comprehension was from the discussions afterward. The discussions assisted my insight into the meanings of the plays. The discussion after *The Merchant of Venice* drove me to look forward immensely to the next viewing, because I wanted to apply what we talked about to the play and comprehend it even more.

Before the trip, my grasp of Shakespeare's text was less than thorough, and my knowledge of his life and times was almost nonexistent. But after the plays, discussions, sight-seeing, and so on, I now appreciate and can make sense of his works. Without visiting Stratford's Birthplace Trust, I would still be lost.

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Annabella S.

First off, I would like to start out by saying that this trip to Stratford–Upon-Avon definitely made the list of the top trips I have ever taken in my life! I thought it was such an amazing opportunity to be able to come to Stratford, home of Shakespeare, after vigorously studying him and his works in Seattle beforehand. This trip definitely made the whole world of Shakespeare “come to life” for me, and it helped me to get a lot more out of the course as well as to gain a deeper understanding of Shakespeare in general.

When I first signed up for the Shakespeare summer course, I had limited knowledge about Shakespeare. I had previously read two of his plays in my English classes (*Romeo & Juliet* and *Hamlet*), and I had seen a few plays and movies back in Seattle as well. However, I sometimes had a hard time understanding Shakespeare’s language and the plays in general. At the end of my trip to Stratford and the Shakespeare course, I definitely feel more comfortable with Shakespeare’s plays and, in addition, I feel like I am much more knowledgeable about him as a person overall.

Because of this, I definitely think that the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust succeeds in their statement to “lead the world’s enjoyment and understanding of Shakespeare’s works, life and times.” In fact, I couldn’t agree more with it! Not only did I simply *understand* more about Shakespeare on this trip – I actually *enjoyed* it as well! I really liked how the Birth Trust focused on his “life and times” in addition to just his “works.” It was a great way to really immerse myself in his culture and therefore get a better understanding of the plays as well. For example, the visits and tours of Mary Arden’s Farm, Shakespeare’s Birthplace, Nash’s House, Hall’s Croft and Anne Hathaway’s Cottage allowed me to develop an understanding of Shakespeare’s world and how he grew up. I even loved seeing the people working at the different houses dressed in Elizabethan style clothing, because it helped me to get into Shakespeare’s mindset and visualize what everyday life was like for him. That being said, I would have liked to have a little bit more background information on Shakespeare’s life in an actual class at the Birthplace Trust. In our first talk with Elizabeth Woledge she didn’t really talk about this because she said we would be learning about it more on our tours, but I feel like we didn’t end up learning as much as I would have liked. It would have been interesting to have a brief talk/discussion about what it was like in Shakespeare’s time, and what kind of world he lived in, though of course I was grateful for the site visits because they helped to answer some of my questions.

I thought that two of the things that was most helpful in my understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare on the trip were the performances at the Royal Shakespeare Theater and the discussions we had about them at the Birthplace Trust. In our voice class with Michael Corbridge he said that Shakespeare isn’t just words on a page – you have to actually get up, move around, and *act* it out! I couldn’t agree more, and I realized how true his statement was after getting to see Shakespeare’s plays performed for us (both in the classroom with our scenes and in the actual RSC theater). Seeing these plays in Stratford definitely added a whole new dimension to my knowledge about Shakespeare, which helped me out a lot. Furthermore, the discussions and lectures we had together about the performances added yet another dimension to my understanding: these talks not only helped me to understand the performances, but the plays themselves as well. I enjoyed these talks on the performances because back in Seattle we had been mostly focusing on the text of the plays, but then in Stratford we were able to focus more on the actual performance/production side of it, and were then able to see the play in a new light. It was one thing to actually see the plays come to life, but then to be able to share ideas about them allowed me to truly appreciate and get more out of the performances that I would have otherwise. A lot of the times in discussions, or even when we were walking home from the plays, one of my classmates or professors would bring something up

that I would have never noticed or thought of before! I was so grateful to have my peers and the experts at the Birth Trust with me on this trip, because I loved being in an environment (at the Birthplace Trust and Stratford in general) where everyone around me was so enthusiastic and passionate about Shakespeare - the energy was contagious. Being in a place entirely devoted to Shakespeare helped me to really “hone in” and appreciate all that he had to offer – because, like I said before, there is so much more to Shakespeare than just words on a page!

For the play *Merchant of Venice* specifically, I felt like I received a great level of education in Stratford. In just reading the play (as I did before coming to Stratford) I would have never realized all the complex layers that I was able to see at the RSC production. They introduced so many interesting ideas, especially about Portia’s character and all of the different layers/personalities that she had. When I was reading the play, I never would have thought of that because I was more focused on the dilemma with Shylock and Antonio, so I thought it was a great choice for them to bring it out more in the play. Their decision to focus on Portia really illustrates the fact that you can interpret the text in so many different ways and do a lot of different things with it (this was also shown when we performed our scenes on the last day and people interpreted them in ways I never would have imagined).

I would like to end by saying a sincere thank you to everyone at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (and everyone else involved) for making this a truly memorable experience. Coming to Stratford was like putting on 3D glasses and diving into the world of Shakespeare, and I couldn’t have asked for anything better! The trip has not only helped me get a deeper understanding of Shakespeare, but also helped me to realize that there is so much more to “Shakespeare” than I thought – we were able to tackle the issue from so many different angles (discussions, visits, workshops, plays, etc). This has also made me appreciate and enjoy his works a lot more than I did at the start of this course! Thank you so much.

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Julia S.

Our weeklong trip to Stratford-Upon-Avon was an experience that opened my eyes to so many more aspects of Shakespeare's writing than I thought possible. I was already very fascinated with Shakespeare's work before we left, but was captivated by his beautiful language and heartfelt stories even more so after being thrust into the small town that was essentially the heart of William Shakespeare. Deep discussion of the plays with those who have acted in them and been a part of productions helped me gain a better and more complex understanding of what Shakespeare meant to convey through his words, especially with the *Merchant of Venice*. Overall, the trip provided me with a greater appreciation for the work that the people involved in the plays put into their performances, a better understanding of Shakespeare's writing and its depth, and a love for Shakespeare's works and history that I was unaware I had before being thrown right into the heart of it.

The first night we went to see *The Merchant of Venice* at the RST, I was amazed by the production itself, but hadn't really thought about all the time and energy that goes into such a performance. Shakespeare is almost like a foreign language to those who first read it. It is full of hidden complexities, and almost daunting when first handed to you. I didn't fully appreciate what the actors were bringing to the stage right away because they made their heartfelt performances look so easy and believable. After speaking to Susannah Fielding about her audition experience and the different accents and layers that she and the director worked on, I was shocked by the enormous difficulties and minute details that went along with creating a Shakespeare play. When we had our voice class with Michael Corbridge, who works with the actors involved with the RSC, we were given the task of developing a character and becoming more comfortable with a monologue we had just been handed. After an hour, the progress we had all made with the monologue was incredible, but I definitely felt challenged and it took a lot of effort. It was amazing to go through what the actual actors and voice coaches go through every day. I truly began to understand all the hard work it takes to act in a play with language and meaning so complex as Shakespeare's. We also got a glimpse of what the wig and makeup workers do when new plays are being worked on. Without the wig and makeup designers, the three child witches in Macbeth wouldn't have captivated the audience with their zombie-like appearance, and we wouldn't have been able to see the contrast between Lady Frugal's extravagant life full of ornamental wigs and makeup, and the dirty servant life she had to portray later. Listening to Brenda Leedham discuss how she hand-made her wigs with actual hair, placing every strand individually, was astonishing. The time and effort that it takes to put on the amount of Shakespeare plays that the RST does was amazing to hear about, and that hard work showed in each of the plays we saw on our trip.

Reading a number of Shakespeare plays prior to our trip was incredibly helpful for me to understand the style of writing better: when we arrived in Stratford and had our daily discussions and lectures about different plays, ideas began to form inside of mine and my classmates' heads about the layers and layers behind Shakespeare's text that might not be noticed when you first read it. Our class had especially detailed discussions about *The Merchant of Venice*. After watching the actual play with Susannah Fielding as Portia, I think we all immediately fell in love with it. The mask of Portia's character really came out in Susannah's portrayal of her and we all couldn't help but discuss it on our way to our hotel that night, in the post-performance seminar with Alycia Timmis the next morning, and for almost the entire trip. As we had our discussions we were able to uncover so much about the different characters that I had not even thought about when reading it the first time. Being able to look at the archives on Thursday was also very eye-opening in terms of the characters and how they were portrayed differently throughout history. All of the different variations that Shylock was given were fascinating to me, and we were even able to see a book of stage directions to interpret what the directors were thinking in terms of presentation of the characters. We had the

time and the resources to dive into the intricate lives of many of Shakespeare's characters - it made me even more fascinated in what Shakespeare was thinking when he created his characters, and what they meant to him.

Being tossed in the mix of a town built around Shakespeare himself gave me so much more admiration for the work he did and a greater fascination for the life he and his family lived. Being able to take a five minute trip to Shakespeare's birthplace, Nash's House, Hall's Croft, Mary Arden's Farm, and Anne Hathaway's cottage was enthralling for everyone, because we all knew this piece of history was right in the palm of our hands. Walking through the small streets of Stratford every day and passing by these historical monuments made Shakespeare come alive. It made him more relatable, because he began to feel more like a person rather than just a famous name. When Shakespeare came alive for me, his writing came alive, and it added to the entire experience.

The trip to Stratford was truly one of the most remarkable trips I have ever been on. Not only was it historical, fascinating, and incredibly fun for the entire group, but it opened up the world of an incredible writer to our group of twelve and let us put a modern spin on what he had to say about issues in the world when he was alive. I would love nothing more than to go back, and wish the trip lasted longer; I gained a completely contemporary and more complex view on Shakespeare's work and the people who have chosen to devote their lives to what he has written and the characters he has created.

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Andrew G.

The trip to England was valuable, insightful, and fun. It was a truly amazing experience, being able to see and imagine what 16th century England, the England that Shakespeare lived in, would have been like. At Mary Arden's farm, I learned about farming, falconry, and smithing. In the house where Shakespeare was born, the guide showed me the rooms where he lived, ate, and played as a kid. She also told me a few interesting tidbits, such as how people slept sitting up because they feared that if they lay down, Death would take them away, thinking they were dead. At Halls Croft and Nash's House, I saw props from Shakespeare's plays and learned how Shakespeare's daughters lived. Finally, the guide at Anne Hathaway's cottage explained the purpose of and the history behind the various objects and practices in the cottage, such as the device that turned the spit in the kitchen, and the how they baked and shared the bread, with the upper crust going to the highest ranking people in the household. The visit to Warwick Castle was also fascinating, from the gaol where they tortured prisoners to the firing of the trebuchet, and to the eerily realistic mannequins scattered throughout. Running up and down the various towers was exhausting, but the view from the top and the experience of climbing all those steps was definitely worth the effort. As I climbed, I imagined how difficult it would be for someone to fight his way up one of those towers while burdened with heavy steel armor. Being at the castle allowed me to really imagine the sieges and battles in Shakespeare's works. In my mind, I could see the catapults and trebuchets battering down the wall of Warwick Castle, as they did to Harfleur's wall in *Henry V*. I could see a furious melee on the green outside of Dunsinane Castle, just as Shakespeare described in *Macbeth*. Warwick Castle gave me a backdrop over which I could paint a portrait of Shakespeare's plays.

I enjoyed walking through the houses and climbing through the castle, but what truly captivated me were the plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Out of all the plays we saw at the RSC, the only one I had seen produced before was *Macbeth*. However, the RSC production of *Macbeth* was completely different from the first production I had seen of *Macbeth*, with children in place of witches, the intense scene before and after the intermission, and the changes in the backdrop. I liked the RSC production of the play better, and some of the choices the director made in interpreting the text of the play were fascinating, as I had never seen *Macbeth* in that way before. My only regret was not being able to have a full discussion about those choices in that play. I also enjoyed watching the *Merchant of Venice* twice, especially after discussing it with the rest of the group and with the actor that played the role of Portia. Especially since the lift worked the second time, I saw things that I hadn't seen the first time: the car scene with Lorenzo and Gratiano, Portia's acting decisions in the trial scene, and the actors' and casino chips' movements and actions in the very beginning. Furthermore, watching it a second time enabled me to fully appreciate the director's and cast's production decisions. I didn't need to puzzle over which actor played which character or wonder what was that prop for or speculate what was going to happen. I didn't need to pay attention to the whole stage, so I could focus on picking up the details. I don't agree with some of the director's interpretations of the text in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, but watching both plays really helped me appreciate and understand the text more. Shakespeare's text is often very confusing, and it is hard to tell what Shakespeare intended to convey. Watching the plays truly brought Shakespeare's words to life and allowed me to understand his text in a clearer light. It was also refreshing to be able to see words and text come to life as a play. I enjoy reading Shakespeare because he forces me to work to comprehend the story; after each line, there is a feeling of accomplishment as I piece together the plot. Watching his plays come to life on a stage, however, is like starting a fire with a blowtorch, as opposed to starting the same fire by rubbing two sticks together. There's no feeling of accomplishment with the blowtorch, but the fire burns just as brightly, if not brighter. The other plays that we watched, *The City Madam* and *Cardenio*, were both engrossing, especially with the background that Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Fernie gave us. I watched

Cardenio especially closely, and it was amazing how similar it sounded to Shakespeare. I also appreciated being able to contrast Shakespeare's plays with *The City Madam*, which was written shortly after his death. While most of Shakespeare's plays empower the main female role and encourage the crossing of social boundaries, such as in *Twelfth Night* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The City Madam* emphasized obedience to the male head of the family and to one's appointed role in society. The contrast emphasized both how much of a forward thinker Shakespeare was, and how many of his plays are still extremely popular, four hundred years later.

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Andrew T.

Stratford-Upon-Avon and my trip to this historical location opened my eyes and allowed me to truly appreciate Shakespeare and his extraordinary works of literature. The pre-performance discussions of the plays helped prepare me for the small nuances that I probably would have missed otherwise, the actual viewing of the plays helped me understand certain aspects that I did not understand from the plays in written form, and the post-performance discussions of the plays really solidified my understanding of the plays.

Prior to undertaking this class, Shakespeare and his works of literature were extremely daunting to me -- they still are but I believe I have slightly moved up the path towards understanding his works. Any help given to me was taken with great appreciation. The pre-performance discussions really helped in this aspect: they gave me help, regardless of their helpfulness's worth, and as help it was taken. I remember thinking that the character activities we did for *The City Madam* were strange and outlandish. I mean why would we need to how characters aligned with each other in terms of worth or influence? I kept thinking that until we actually saw the play after which I had a slap-on-the-forehead moment with myself and realized how if I had not received that pre-performance preparation that I would have really struggled with *The City Madam*, a play that had an almost hierarchal system of naming that I would have missed otherwise. Cardenio and its pre-performance discussion/lecture were placed in a similar situation for me. I somewhat feel that the general trend would be that pre-performance preparation really helped with plays that I was alien and foreign to but the pre-performance preparation work was still helpful for plays that we were studying or had studied. With *The Merchant of Venice*, the trend continued. Just prior to the first time we watched *The Merchant of Venice* in the Royal Shakespeare Theater, I had only read up to Act 2 scene 7 or so of *The Merchant of Venice*. The preparation work helped fill in the gaps. I remember Kate/Cait -- I forget how her name was spelled -- telling me to pay attention to a particular elevator scene as that was the scene Javier and I were doing as our scene for the week. She told us the scene could either be amusing or boring depending on the way it was depicted. This combined with Javier's and my work on our scene gave me a general idea what the scene was and how it would be portrayed. Even though I'm not sure if this was actually preparation work for the play, in my mind it was as it led me to understand a scene that I had not yet seen.

I'm a visual person and visual props tend to help me understand almost anything to a better degree, even things that aren't as complex as Shakespeare's literature. I especially liked the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* was placed in a more modern setting that was somewhat more relatable to me. Being able to see things played out such as Portia's gameshow *Destiny*, Salarino and Solario's elevator scene, or Shylock and Antonio's prison trial scene allowed me to say to myself things like "oh, Portia's way of marriage as stated by her father in his will is almost like a game. There really is no true love as this is just a game and Portia has turned herself into the prize of her own gameshow" and "Act 2 scene 8 actually is just a scene where basically two friends are talking about events that are unfolding." It was almost as if I was rereading/relearning the play. Of course, the written work and our studies in America helped out from time to time when I didn't hear a line here and there but really, as the play continued, things that didn't really come through in the written plays came alive in the performance of the plays. Things like atmosphere, mood, emotion, and tension -- things that couldn't come alive in a written version of the play -- came alive in the play. Antonio and Shylock's prison trial scene created huge tension that could almost be felt building in the room; Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene gave me a heightened sense of foreboding that ran chills through me; and Cardenio's finals scene where Fernando got away scot-free gave me a large sense of disappointment, though I think I probably would have also felt similarly had we studied Cardenio.

Even through all of this – the preparation and the plays – there still were areas that things just didn't connect. The post-performance discussion connected a large number of those disconnected dots for me and solidified my understanding even more. I feel like our post-performance discussions included a decent amount of clarification points and thus really helped me in this aspect and through this process, I believe I have gained a greater appreciation for Shakespeare and his works of literature.

LAKESIDE SCHOOL
Student Reflections
Summer 2011
Geoffrey M.

I have a crush on Portia, or rather, Susannah Fielding, who played Portia in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Merchant of Venice* and came and talked to us after we saw it for the first time. It would have been amazing to meet with anyone who had been a part of putting on such a fantastic piece of theater, but meeting with the central actress was truly thrilling. The actors in these productions acquired the aura of famous movie stars. While walking through the street we saw Scott Handy, who played Antonio in *Merchant* and Ross in *Macbeth*, at the pub. When we went to see the seventh *Harry Potter* movie, we ran into Chris Jarman, who played the Prince of Morocco in *Merchant*. It was akin to a trip to LA in which you see your favorite Hollywood stars. This kind of closeness with Shakespeare and the people who preserve his memory and plays was one of the reasons that the trip was so meaningful. Being in a place so steeped in Shakespeare lent a whole new dimension to the plays we studied in Seattle.

Shakespeare and the theater are an integral part of Stratford's existence. In some ways this lent it a touristy feel with large tour groups flocking across the square wearing matching backpacks or interpreters explaining the details of Shakespeare's birthplace to a group of middle-aged Japanese people. In others though, it made the trip seem wholly focused on Shakespeare. The old and slightly crooked buildings gave the town a feeling of age, but like Shakespeare they were still in use today. The visits to historical sites gave the whole trip the ambiance it needed.

Then there were the theaters. They were recently renovated spaces that were clearly constructed with all the benefits of modern architecture, but they preserved the style of the theaters of Shakespeare's day. Seeing Shakespeare performed on a thrust stage, as it would have been in his day, helped to inform us on the Shakespearean style. The Swan especially had a very intimate atmosphere that added a new dimension to the theater-going experience. One of the advantages of a thrust stage, I think, is that it makes the action seem more realistic: actors are not forced to face out and can instead speak directly at each other. It also lends itself more to interaction with the audience because the audience is much closer to the action. Several times in the productions we saw, actors broke the fourth wall to address the audience. Sometimes this was in an appeal to the audience as a whole, as when in *Cardenio's* Alex Hassell, playing Fernando, asked the audience to understand his logic when he argued that he had not raped Dorothea, as if they were the part of his mind that he needed to convince. Jamie Beamish, as Seyton in *Macbeth* actually went into the audience and spoke to specific people, increasing the sense that he acted as the play's master of ceremonies. These aspects of Shakespeare's plays and the craft of acting are not really things that can be taught in a classroom, and seeing the RSC put on such high quality productions of Shakespeare really helped to illustrate the appeal and relevance of his plays today.

To complement these excellent productions, the format of learning about the play and its history before seeing it, then discussing our reactions in a structured setting afterward gave an excellent framework to learning about the plays and the specific productions. It was nice going into the theater with some knowledge of the play and how it had been performed before, and it allowed us to focus on what this production had done differently. It was also excellent to have a chance to share my ideas and opinions on the choices of the production afterward and hear the ideas of my classmates. Our discussions always seemed productive and fruitful, and we were still trying to talk when we had to go, so it is clear that they weren't forced or lacking in energy. Although we had studied it in Seattle, I really saw what was missing when we didn't get this format of classes for the production of *Macbeth*. Having one play without the discussion showed how valuable the discussions had been.

The entire trip was exactly what I think travel should be like: while I took quite a few pictures, most of the value of the trip could not be captured by a camera. The importance of the trip was not in viewing stagnant objects, but in experiencing and learning about excellent theater. This course has made me rethink my self-designation as a “math and science guy” and rekindled my interest in theater and in Shakespeare.

LAKESIDE SCHOOL
Student Reflections
Summer 2011
Max C.

Something that I find rather frustrating about humans in general is that it almost always takes an enormous amount of persuasion and effort to sway their opinions of things, even if they realize that their opinion isn't the best one. This is especially true with regards to high-school students and studying Shakespeare. High school students seem to have terrible tolerance for Shakespeare, and for a while, I was no exception. I had absolutely loathed every work of Shakespeare I encountered (which is to say, not that many), and until reading *Hamlet*, I could never bring myself to understand his appeal, however hard I tried. In truth, before the Shakespeare summer course began, I had expected to learn very little from the week-long trip to Stratford that concluded the course in comparison to the first two weeks in the classroom. I expected our role there to be more as tourists than students, but I was quickly proven wrong. After seeing the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions, visiting a number of historical sites, and attending the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's Shakespeare exploration course, I realized that I had achieved something very few high school students had done—I'd grown a legitimate appreciation for Shakespeare's work.

What ended up surprising me the most about our trip was that after the first day, the entire class had grown to approach the study of Shakespeare's life and his works with an enthusiasm that I'm sure not many of us had previously expected to have. This moment of realization came after Monday's performance of *The Merchant of Venice* drew to a close. As *The Merchant of Venice* was not a play we read or discussed during our time in the classroom, the class was informed, much to our collective chagrin, that we would have to study *Merchant* during the trip to Stratford. The prospect of reading a Shakespeare play during our much-anticipated voyage to Stratford was not exactly met with universal approval, and I attempted to finish reading the play the first chance I got, hoping to rid myself of the inevitable tedium it would bring me. Unfortunately, this resulted in my having an extremely superficial understanding of the play (I must also admit that I spent a good deal of time dwelling on our edition of the play's commentary section). Thus, I was utterly astonished the next day when our lectures at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust began, and I found that I was actually beginning to *enjoy* discussing *The Merchant of Venice*. The lecture on *The Merchant of Venice* given before we actually saw the play helped solidify my understanding of it, and though I had to fight to stay awake as a result of my poor acclimatization to the new time zone, I was filled with anticipation for the performance that we were to attend later that night.

When we walked out of the Royal Shakespeare Theater and started back towards our Bed and Breakfasts after the play had ended, it struck me as odd that every single member of the class was engaging in thoughtful and eager deliberation on the play that we had just watched. Such discussion went beyond mere opinion—it was the kind of conversation that would usually have to be drawn out of students in the classroom. This pattern continued for each and every performance we attended, and my fears that the post-performance discussions at the Birthplace Trust would be unexciting and dull were quickly done away with. It became an exhilarating experience to debate the merits of one actor's performance, or a directorial choice, or different interpretations of the source material, and I soon found that I eagerly anticipated immersing myself in these discussions, which became more and more engaging as time passed.

The Birthplace Trust was also a place where all our imminent thoughts and questions regarding Shakespeare and his plays could be addressed immediately. Particularly helpful in this arena was the question and answer session we had with Royal Shakespeare Company actress Susannah Fielding, who played Portia in the Company's production of *The Merchant of Venice*. This extremely informative session helped immensely in giving me an idea of what it was like to be involved in the process of bringing a Shakespearean work to life, and Fielding provided several insightful remarks

towards the nature of her character in *The Merchant of Venice*. Through the duration of the course, we met a number of people with ties to the Company who were extremely passionate about their work, and were equally excited about sharing it with us. I'd be lying if I said that none of their devotion and excitement for their job was transferred over to me. Although we were primarily a literary study class and not a drama class, it was refreshing to see every one of us letting ourselves go and playing the part when it came to performing our *Merchant* scenes or participating in Michael Corbridge's vocal exercises with Lancelot Gobbo's speech. The drama aspect of our course was actually something I particularly enjoyed. It allowed me to see what performing and interpreting Shakespeare's text meant to every individual, and made the entire Shakespeare experience much more tangible to me.

I came out of this trip with a much different perception of Shakespeare, classical literature, and theatre in general, and I'm sure many of my peers had the same response. It was nice to be in Stratford and experience firsthand the environment that had produced William Shakespeare, but without the guidance of the course that the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust had offered us, I'm not sure if any of us would have gotten as much out of the course as we did. I may not have signed up for this course thinking that I would grow to genuinely love Shakespeare's plays, but it seems that the outcome was just that.

LAKESIDE SCHOOL
Student Reflections
Summer 2011
Andrew B.

My first impression when walking into the Birthplace Trust was that if there was one place to go to learn about Shakespeare, it must be here. The first thing I remember seeing was all the different posters of all the productions the company had done of Shakespeare's plays and thinking about how much they must know in order to do all those shows. When we got up to the classroom and were given a presentation from Elizabeth Woledge, I felt welcomed and was quite comfortable. Overall, my experience was enjoyable and educational, which I think was the goal of the entire program. I thought it accomplished what it intended to.

Since education was the primary concern of this program, I'll start with what I learned the most from. I thought that the most helpful speaker was Amanda Jenkins by far. I really enjoyed her lectures and learned a lot from them. She helped further my understanding of our focus play, *The Merchant of Venice*. And she was good at going in depth into the plays just enough to help me understand important issues, without spoiling them for us. I thought her presentations on *The City Madam* were the most helpful. I went into this class not knowing anything about this play, but her presentations provided me with information about the backgrounds and history and helped me understand it. She did a very good job teaching us something new and interesting every single lecture.

Besides just the lectures, I thought that another important part of our education was the interactive parts, such as learning about makeup design, working with the voice coach, and working with Cait to perform scenes. All of these interactive activities were quite enjoyable and were in my opinion a necessity. Having only lectures without these would have been boring and uninteresting, but by mixing it up it provided the perfect mix between interactive learning and lectures. I enjoyed all three of these activities a ton: It was cool seeing just how much work actually goes into preparing an actor/actress for the stage and learning about techniques for performances, but my favorite of the three was working with Michael Corbridge. It was a fun way to get used to reading and understanding Shakespeare more clearly.

Another thing I thought was great for teaching us was being able to see all the historical documents in the archive. I thought that this was really cool because you could see all the ways the plays could be interpreted and changed. Unfortunately, we only got to see this for our focus play. It would have been nice to see these for some of the other plays we saw, but I understand that this could be a hassle and possibly a risky move on the Birthplace Trust's part.

One of my favorite parts of the entire trip was definitely getting to meet the actress who played Portia. It was interesting to see what was going on in her mind during different parts of the show and hear about different techniques actors use to get into character. Hearing about all the work they put into each show really helped me appreciate how much respect they deserve for putting on a show. Again I wish we could have done this for every show, but I realize that this again might be a hassle for the company and the actors.

LAKESIDE SCHOOL
Student Reflections
Summer 2011
Zoe M.

Before I started the Shakespeare course in Stratford, I wasn't sure how much extra knowledge I was likely to learn considering that our class had already done so much discussion and analysis beforehand. However, despite our previous daily discussions and research, by the end of the week in Stratford I had learned an incredible amount. Taking this course at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust gave me a whole new level of understanding about –and appreciation for –Shakespeare and his work.

When we began our course on Monday, I thought that it was nice to start off with some historical background information on the time period that Shakespeare's plays were written and first performed. This gave me a better understanding of the stage sets and the types of costumes that the actors would have worn. For instance, I hadn't made the connection that the clothes worn at that time would have been considered the modern equivalent of fashionable designer clothes, rather than elaborate costumes that we see them as today. Other than the costumes and set, it was also interesting to learn about character types, for example how the ideal male lover would have looked, which helped me to visualize the lovers from plays such as A Midsummer Night's Dream.

As Merchant of Venice was our focus play, it was fitting to launch into it in the first day with a pre-performance discussion. As we had just finished reading this play and hadn't yet had time to discuss it thoroughly, it was useful to be able to get some information about the Royal Shakespeare Company's production before watching it later that night. Not only did the talk prepare me, but it also got me excited to watch the play. In fact, all of the performance discussions I thought were very useful. These discussions helped by reminding me about any plot details I had forgotten –or altogether missed, informed me about how the play had been performed historically, and gave me specific things to look out for in the production that we were about to watch. These discussions proved especially important for Cardenio and City Madam, two plays which we hadn't looked at before coming to England. For the most part the endings of the plays weren't given away in the discussions. However, we were still able to learn about the plays' plots, as well as receive information which aided us in our understanding of certain cultural references mentioned in the play. One example that I thought particularly important in the case of City Madam were the facts about the difference in the court and the city society, as well as the stereotypes of new money buying up all of the latest trends and accessories.

One of my favorite aspects of this course was being able to watch the various performances at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. This gave me a whole new perspective on Shakespeare's plays as a whole. It's one thing to read a play, but another to witness one performed, along with the director's interpretations and being able to see the character interactions. When I read Merchant of Venice, I didn't pay too much attention to Portia's character, so it was very interesting to see a production where Portia was the main focal point. From watching this production, I was able to understand the layers to Portia's character and the motivations behind her wish to take part in the trial of Antonio, all of which I seemed to have missed while reading the play.

At Lakeside School, as well as in the Shakespeare study course in Stratford, we did quite a bit of looking at the text for different ways to interpret it. I found that the voice, acting, and stage makeup classes very interesting because they took interpretation a step further. In the voice class we learned about the different ways of delivering specific lines in order to gain a variety of meanings. We took one passage from the character Lancelot and read it multiple times, each time accentuating different aspects of it through tone and movement. This seemed to help the text flow well, and also helped me

to understand the subtleties of the passage that I hadn't seen earlier. In the acting class we were able to take a scene from Merchant of Venice and interpret it as we liked: changing setting, character gender, and character relations – while making sure to back up our decisions through textual evidence. This put some of the creativity into our own hands, allowing us to explore new ways of viewing character dynamics, more so than if we'd simply read through the text.

My experience with the Shakespeare course was very positive. I learned so much and enjoyed the great variety of things that we were able to do throughout the week. From the lectures to the question and answer time with one of *Merchant of Venice's* lead actors, Portia, I was exposed to a wide variety of viewpoints. In conjunction with our class at Lakeside School, this course helped to fill out and add to the many of the topics we had covered, taking our level of understanding to the next level.

Zoe M.