

Exercise 5

Choose a short scene, or a short piece of a longer scene, from *The Merchant of Venice* and give a detailed account of how it might be presented on the Elizabethan stage. Your 700-word essay should use descriptions of the placement, motion, and gestures of the players, their manner of speaking, and their use of any props, to offer an interpretation of the scene: that is, you should both describe the action as you would stage it, and explain why that staging would help us understand the play.

This is an exercise in understanding the dramatic resources of the Elizabethan stage. You should begin by reading the brief essays on “The Design of the Globe” and “The Original Staging Techniques” (from the Norton Shakespeare, *Early Plays and Poems*, 84-94, available as a pdf file on our Blackboard site). The Globe was not built until 1599, but is close in design to its predecessor, the Theatre, where most of the plays we have read so far were mounted, and to competitors like the Swan.

The Norton essays will give you a sense of the resources available to a company. Your job is to imagine how those resources could be put to use. You might consider the following questions.

- Where the actors stand, where they move (how? how fast?), and when. You can use the conventional modern designations of the spaces of the stage: stage right and stage left (the actors’ right and left, not the audience’s), upstage (the back of the stage), and downstage (the front). Feel free of course to make use of other features of the theater’s construction, e.g. the heavens, the trap, and so on.
- Gestures. Again, the Norton will give you a sense of some of the conventions. You should feel free to inject a little naturalism, but do keep in mind that Elizabethan actors used mostly big, stylized gestures in noisy conditions. That should not preclude your inventing a brilliant bit of stage business, like the tug of war over Richard II’s crown.
- Tone of voice, pacing, pauses etc.: how should an actor speak these lines?
- Costume.

The easiest way to write such an account will be to treat it as a description of a performance, i.e., “Antonio seats himself and raises the back of his hand to his brow” rather than “the actor playing Antonio should now” etc. Reproduce only the text necessary to make your points. You may want to sketch the broad outlines of a scene, to get at the work that it does in the play as a whole; you may choose the close dramaturgy of a relatively small set of lines. Either way, take the occasion to be imaginative and free-thinking: your job is to bring the scene alive, for your reader as well as your imaginary audience, and explain how this particular staging opens up our understanding of the whole play. There will be a later exercise that will take the form of a modern adaptation: for now, try to put yourself in the prompt box at the Globe.