



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Character and Choice in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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Readers, young and old, can learn about themselves by vicariously facing the conflicts, disappointments and triumphs lived out by the fascinating characters they encounter in literature. Shakespeare's plays offer the richest characterizations of human experience to which we may respond sometimes with strong affection and at other times with dread and loathing. His lively, twisting plots are universal in theme and often reflect our own personal struggles in life. Shakespeare's genius is said to lie in his uncanny ability to fully represent vital, living personalities in his plays. His characters come alive for us! Harold Bloom in his book, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), provocatively asserts "personality, in our [modern] sense, is a Shakespearean invention and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness" (p. 4).

Ever since the so-called 'Common Core Standards' were introduced to school curricula in most states the employment of literature (fiction) has really taken a back seat in education to more informational texts (nonfiction). I would like to try to remedy that lapse by introducing my young learners to great literature wherein both the characters and the actual texts possess the vitality and authenticity to stimulate my first-graders to take a real interest in the adventure of learning about themselves through reading.

Why choose Shakespeare over, say, Dickens or Kipling, or some other more modern, professional writer for children? Ken Ludwig, author of *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, answers this question by maintaining that Shakespeare is "one of the two bedrocks of Western civilization in English" (the other being the King James translation of the Bible) and his plays "contain the finest writing of the past 450 years." On the model of what Falstaff says about himself, Shakespeare is "not only creative in himself—he is the cause of creation in other writers" (p. 7). The truth is that, as educators we need to find a way to introduce our children to the creative writers and artists whom we value most and, surely, that means that we should begin to familiarize young students with the works of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's plays remain popular because they so evocatively and powerfully portray our human experience, as we live it today. Many of his characters make mistakes, big and small, but they seem to have the resourcefulness, if they choose, to learn and develop in understanding. There are multiple ways in which characters learn something and change in the course of the play, and it seems to me that exposure to this mysterious, dynamic quality of life that allows us bravely to face conflicts and creatively learn from our mistakes is one of the most important lessons that we need to begin to teach our children. Learning about

ourselves in literature, our own deepest urges and aspirations, helps us to adopt a more resourceful, creative attitude toward our own growth and interaction with others.

When first introducing Shakespeare's plays to very young students my automatic choice is comedies. They are more accessible to children than tragedies because they contain elements that young learners can understand, like mistaken identities, misunderstandings and accidents, people liking and disliking others, and, of course, most important, happy endings. From 1591 to 1601, the first ten years of his writing career, Shakespeare wrote ten comedies, one of which was *The Merchant of Venice*. In this unit I have chosen, upon the recommendation of Professor Leslie Brisman, to introduce my first-graders to the well-known 'three caskets scenes' in this play.

In this curriculum unit I utilize carefully chosen children's books and simplified versions of the following scenes from the play: Act 1, Scene 2 (in narrative story form) and Act 2, Scene 7, Act 2, Scene 9 and Act 3, Scene 2 (in Readers Theatre form). These abridged materials will help me to present core ideas to my young learners because the modified text will more effectively convey the major themes and engage their interest. Visuals will also help the story come alive for my class and so I am using a number of paintings as well as photos taken from movie versions of the play (to be shown on the interactive whiteboard) that portray the main characters and the three caskets scene so vividly.

I am a first-grade teacher at Davis Street Arts & Academics Inter-district Magnet School. The self-contained class of 26 students to which I will be teaching this curriculum unit are a heterogeneous group with varying abilities within the 6-to-7-year-old age range. Although this unit was designed with them in mind, it could easily be adapted for use by teachers in other primary and intermediate grades as well.

This unit is interdisciplinary in scope, incorporating reading, writing, art, and drama. Tapping into a variety of literary sources, it will include familiarization with such genres as plays, fiction stories, biography, and poetry. The students will work in small and large group settings on the unit's activities. The unit lessons will be taught 5 times a week for a period of 40 minutes over a one-month period.

Content Objectives

To learn about the works of William Shakespeare by reading and acting out scenes from one of his plays, *The Merchant of Venice*

To learn vocabulary important to the understanding of the story and script used and keep it in a vocabulary notebook

To become familiar with the storyline of The Three Caskets scenes in the play.

To develop background knowledge about such themes found in the play as making wise choices, love and self-sacrifice

To organize new vocabulary words by using a vocabulary notebook

To identify character traits of story characters by examining their words, actions and feelings

To express ideas using a variety of written response formats (i.e., persuasive letters, journal entries, poems)

To develop reading fluency by rereading the play's scripts.

To perform a Readers' Theatre play before an audience

Teaching Strategies

To use digital tools to enrich the students' study of Shakespeare

To identify and teach vocabulary that is important to the understanding of the text

To use soliloquy to help students gain greater access into a character's thoughts and feelings.

To practice the art of storytelling by having students retell the story of the three caskets to other students

To use graphic organizers to help children organize the information they have learned, compare characters, summarize the stories, etc.

To use Readers' Theatre to introduce students to Shakespeare's Three Caskets scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*

To use 'think-pair-share' to help stimulate student discussion of important concepts found in the play.

To use student pairs to write bio poems about the play's characters

I have divided my curriculum unit into 3 main sections:

Section 1: Pre-reading Activities

Section 2: The Three Caskets Scenes

Section 3: Post-reading Activities

Background

A major theme in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* deals with people's financial and emotional ventures that involve risk-taking and self-sacrifice. Antonio 'hazards all he has' to help his dear friend, Bassanio by agreeing to a bond he makes with Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for the sake of his friend. This financial venture almost costs Antonio his life.

In this unit I plan to focus on the other type of venture, the emotional one between Bassanio and Portia, the rich heiress he seeks to woo. It may be that it is not really until he is in the midst of taking the three caskets test to win her hand that Bassanio realizes he truly loves Portia and becomes willing to risk everything for her. This concept of self-sacrifice out of love for another is a difficult one for first-graders to understand but in Section 1 of this unit I will offer an anecdote and some activities that address self-sacrifice at a level that I think they can relate to.

The three caskets scene, which is really a play within a play, reads like a fairy tale the setting of which takes place in the magical city of Belmont and employs the motif of three choices. 'Living happily ever after' is a destiny that two of the couples, Bassanio and Portia and Gratiano and Nerissa, will share but, alas, for Antonio no such promises are made as he finds himself quite alone at the play's end. In this unit I will not be doing much more than to introduce Antonio as the generous friend who lent Bassanio the money he needed to impress Portia.

For my students the focus will be on the challenge that Portia's suitors face in the context of the three caskets test, an engaging paradigm that children can easily identify with because it is present in many fairy tales they have heard. During this moral trial the suitors will have the rare opportunity to look beyond mere appearances in making their choices. But will they take a risk and do that? In these scenes we will look at how the choice of each of the suitors reflects his own character and decides his ultimate destiny.

Section 1: Pre-reading Activities

In order to provide some necessary background that will help place the three caskets scene in the whole story's context I will read aloud the first page of Edith Nesbit's simplified version of *The Merchant of Venice* found in her book entitled, *Shakespeare's Stories for Young Readers* (p. 63). This reading will give my class a sense of when and where the story takes place and who some of the main characters are. It is important that they meet Antonio and Bassanio early on to appreciate the strong bond of friendship that they share. After witnessing the event when Bassanio procures the funds he needs, we will move directly to the three caskets scene and learn about the deliberations that the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon and the nobleman Bassanio undergo in making their choices.

An important way to help interest learners in a new story is to build some background knowledge about principal story themes. In class we often talk together about why an author wrote his/her story and in this case we will discover that Shakespeare wanted to teach us many life-lessons through his plays.

Self-Sacrifice

Discussion prompt: Have you ever had to help someone else by giving up something that you really wanted? I will then offer them this anecdote:

When I was sixteen, there was a new girl in our class who had recently come from Nigeria. She didn't know much English, but she smiled so sweetly and was so eager to be friends with anyone who would be friends with her that I quickly found myself drawn to her. I noticed that she wore the same blouse every other day, and I guessed that she had only two and that her mother must be washing one every night. And every day, she wore the same pair of old sneakers.

On my birthday, when my Mom took me to the shoe store and told me to pick any pair of shoes I wanted, I chose a pair that was size seven, even though my own foot was a seven and a half, because I knew my friend was a size seven and I thought I could give the shoes to her. The next day, I gave them to her and told her that they were too small for me and that I hoped she might be able to get some use out of them.

Weeks later, my Mom, who usually paid no attention to what I picked out to wear every day, asked me why I

never wore the sneakers she had bought me for my birthday. I assured her that I did indeed like them, but that I had grown since my birthday.

Using the strategy of think-pair-share I will direct my students to turn and talk with a buddy sitting near him/her on the carpet about how that story teaches us about giving up something for the sake of another person. Then they will share some stories of their own either about themselves or someone they know who did such an unselfish thing. A few of their stories will then be shared with the whole group. Before beginning the reading of the prologue and Readers Theatre script I will inform the class that the main characters in the three caskets story had to make an important choice and the question that we will examine is: Which one will make an unselfish choice and get to marry the beautiful princess?

During the caskets test that each suitor goes through we can see how each man inwardly reflects on the inscriptions engraved on each casket. Their reflections offer us revelations into their true characters. It is important to consider that the inscriptions on the gold and silver casket tell the chooser that he will gain something by choosing them while the lead casket, in contrast, requires the chooser to risk everything he has. To begin an exploration of self-sacrifice I would ask the class to put their thumbs up if they like giving stuff up and refer to the anecdote I have just read to them. I would then ask them to consider what an athlete needs to give up (unhealthy food, free time) if he wants to be good at what he does. We will compare giving up something to achieve a personal goal with giving up something to help someone else. After asking students to share times when they gave up something for someone else, I will ask them: How did it feel to give? Do you think you would like to give again? When has someone given something up for you? How does giving up something for someone else help you? This notion of self-sacrifice can be understood by my young students at a simple level that involves their world of experience. Below are some classroom and home scenarios that I will present to the class to discuss:

- On a hot day after recess when everyone has played hard, the classmate behind you in line is not just very thirsty but dizzy from lack of water. Would you let him/her go ahead of you in line at the drinking fountain?
- You have just gotten a set of sparkly markers from the school store and are excited about using them. The student sitting next to you at your table asks to use your pink one. What would you do?
- Your little brother just dropped his ice cream cone on the sidewalk and is crying hard. Would you give him yours?
- Your friend has come over for a play-date. Mom comes in your room to ask what movie you both want to go see. Your friend asks to see 'Frozen' but you have already seen that movie many times. What would you do?
- Your whole class is dancing on the carpet for indoor recess imitating the movements on gonoodle.com. It's great fun! After just a few minutes a shy classmate asks you to go back to the table to color instead during this time. You don't really want to. What would you do?

One way to encourage thinking about self sacrifice in our class is to have a good deed jar where tokens are put in the jar each time a student informs me of a time when a classmate helped her by giving something up. When the jar is filled, we could have a special 'games time' where everyone gets to play with the classroom games.

Vocabulary Study

Using direct vocabulary instruction is essential to effective teaching and so I will have my first-graders practice using four steps of Robert J. Marzano's six-step process for building academic vocabulary using the template

below: write the word, provide a description or example of the new word, ask students to draw a picture representing the term, and have them create their own sentence that uses the word.

Word	Definition
Drawn picture	Student sentences

In order to increase understanding of the readings I will be introducing the following vocabulary items found in either the prologue or the modified play itself. These words and the student-friendly definitions that I have provided will be copied into their vocabulary notebooks.

heiress: a woman who receives money or property from someone when that person dies

suitor: a man who wants to marry a certain woman

casket: a small chest or box for jewelry

lead: a heavy soft metal that has a gray color

engraved: letters or designs carved onto a hard surface

fondly: in a loving way

gain: to win

desire: to want or wish for

deserves: has earned it

hazard: to dare losing

chooseth: choose

hath: has

risk: to take a chance

glitters: shines brightly

skull: the bones forming the head and face

surface: the outside part of something

honor: something that is given to a person as a sign of respect

scroll: a long piece of paper rolled up

eager: very excited and interested

gaudy: bright and over decorated

attractive: good-looking

Character Traits

What are character traits and how can I begin to introduce them to my class? Here is a useful definition of traits that I plan to use: Traits are ways that a person acts or speaks to show what he or she is like. In my lessons I will distinguish traits, which develop over time, from feelings, which can change from moment to moment.

It can be quite helpful before reading a Shakespeare play to determine who the main characters are and what their relationship to each other is. This helps the reader better appreciate the social dynamics involved among the characters. After listing each character involved in the three caskets scenes by name, adding a plain stick figure sketch of each, we can later add character traits that we discover as we read the play. The following graphic organizer will look like this:

Portia: Princess/ Heiress
in Belmont



Loves Bassanio

Clever
Lovely
Generous

Nerissa: Friend to Portia in Belmont



Loyal to Portia

Helpful
Encouraging



Confesses his love for Portia

Proud
Brave
Cares too much about what other people think

Prince of Arragon: Suitor to
Portia



Loves himself

Bigheaded
Selfish
Snobbish

Bassanio: Suitor to Portia from
Venice



Truly Loves Portia

Broke
Loving
Brave
Sacrificing



Loves Nerissa

Loyal
Merry
Fun-loving

I will continue setting the stage for the three caskets scene by reading aloud the following passage that I have written, which encapsulates what has occurred before the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon take on the challenge. In my version I have dispensed with any references to social stratification (i.e., lady-in-waiting, my lord) because such titles may confuse my young students' understanding of the relationships between the characters and are not necessary for the understanding of the story. In both the prologue and the script below I have identified (by underlining>) some of the vocabulary items that my young learners will have learned.

Prologue to the Three Caskets Scene

Long ago, in the city of Belmont in Italy a beautiful rich *heiress* named Portia and her friend, Nerissa, are talking together about the long line of *suitors* who want to win her hand in marriage. Portia exclaims to

Nerissa, “All these men lining up to try to marry me. I feel so tired just thinking about it!” Nerissa tries to comfort her by saying, “Don’t you think that too many men to choose from is far better than not enough men?” Portia complains that it would be so much easier to marry if she could choose her own husband by herself. But, alas, her loving father, a kind and wise king, thought he knew best the way her husband should be chosen. Before he died, he set up a test in his will that any of her suitors would have to pass if they wished to marry her. Before taking the test the suitor had to make three promises if he failed the test: 1.) he would not tell anyone which *casket* he had chosen; 2.) he would not get married for a long time afterwards and 3.) he would leave Belmont immediately. So what was this test designed by her father? Close your eyes and try to picture this: The servant pulls back the curtains in the large room and the hopeful suitor finds himself standing before three caskets: one made of gold, another of silver and the third of *lead*. He walks over to each casket, one by one, and reads the words *engraved* on each casket lid. After examining each one and thinking about the words of warning, the suitor makes his choice and asks for the key to open that casket. It is like solving a riddle. If he chooses the casket that contains a picture of Portia, he would earn the right to marry her. If not, he would have to leave right away, staying true to the promises he had made.

Portia worries about this three-casket test. Will she end up marrying someone who doesn’t really love her? Will she simply grow to be an old maid who never marries? Nerissa again tries to make her feel better by saying, “Surely only a man that you can truly love will end up choosing the right casket.” Portia replies, “I hope you are right, Nerissa.”

Finally, Nerissa mentions a young man from Venice who had come to visit Portia’s father before he died. His name is Bassanio. Portia’s eyes immediately light up and she says, “Yes, I remember him well.” Nerissa offers her opinion about him and says, “Of all the men I have ever met, Bassanio seems to deserve a lady like you the most.” Portia continues to think about Bassanio *fondly*. Their dreamy thoughts are interrupted by a servant who comes in the room to announce that it is time to say good-bye to the suitors who are leaving and that two new suitors will be arriving that night.

Section 2: The Three Caskets Scenes

Now we have arrived at the real focus of this unit, the three caskets scenes of the play. With the help of both the adapted Readers Theatre script found in the book, *Simply Shakespeare*, edited by Jennifer L. Kroll and the rewritten accounts of these scenes contained in the *No Fear Shakespeare* version of *The Merchant of Venice*, I have written a Readers Theatre script for my students to perform. In it I have used more simplified language that they will be able to understand.

The Story of the Three Caskets (Readers Theatre)

Part 1

Narrator: That evening at Portia’s home in Belmont one of her new suitors, the Prince of Morocco, is ready to try his luck with the three caskets.

Morocco: I have made the promise that you put before me. If I choose the wrong casket, I will never tell anyone about it. Also, I will not try to get married to anyone else for a long time. And finally, I will leave your house right away.

Portia: Yes, that is the promise that every man who tries the caskets must make. (to her servant) Please pull the curtains open and let the noble prince see his choices. *If I only knew for sure that only a good person would choose the casket that holds my portrait I wouldn't have to do all of this worrying each time a new suitor takes this test! Here comes that shaky feeling again.*

Narrator: The servant opens the curtains and the Prince of Morocco walks over to each casket and reads the words written on them.

Morocco: The words on the first casket which is made of gold read: "Who chooseth me shall *gain* what many men *desire* ." The words on the second silver casket read: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he *deserves* ." The words on the third casket, made of dull *lead* read: "Who chooseth me must give and *hazard* all he *hath* ." How will I know if I have made the right choice?

Portia: Only one of the caskets contains my picture, Prince. If you choose that one, I am yours.

Narrator: The prince continues to look carefully at each casket.

Morocco: *I have been a brave soldier in many battles but those experiences cannot help me now to make the right choice! I feel that this test treats every man, no matter who he is, the same. I am afraid that I will not be a victorious leader this time.* Now let me see. The lead casket says: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." Why would anyone *risk* everything for lead, a very cheap metal? A golden mind does not bend down to choose something that is worthless! It doesn't make sense to me. I won't choose that one!

Narrator: The prince paces back and forth between the gold and silver caskets.

Morocco: What does the silver one say? : "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Hmm. According to my own wealth, my noble birth, my talents, my good reputation and my love for her I do deserve Portia. Maybe I should stop right here and choose this one. But wait, let me look again at the gold casket. "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." Well, that's for sure! Maybe I think too much of myself, but without a doubt many men desire gold! And many men desire Portia. Therefore, so must I. That's the one I will choose. Give me the key so I can unlock the gold casket!

Portia; Very well, sir. *I don't think I want to look. Maybe I'll just close my eyes?*

Narrator: The servant hands the prince the key and he unlocks the casket.

Morocco: Oh no! What is this?

Narrator: He picks up a small *skull* from inside the gold casket. A note is tucked inside the skull.

Morocco: (reading the note) "All that *glitters* is not gold. Many men have lost everything they had just to take a look at my shiny *surface* . If you had been less dependent on others' opinion, you would have chosen the right casket. Good-bye. You lost your chance." Well, that settles that. Portia, good-bye to you. My heart is too sad for me to make a long good-bye. Losers must leave quickly. *I did want to win you, Portia, when I saw how many others were trying to do that. This test has caused me to lose some of my confidence. I need to remember that just because everyone is excited about something doesn't mean it is good. I won't be fooled again! I have learned my lesson.*

Part 2

Narrator: The next day the Prince of Arragon tries to win Portia's hand by guessing among the three caskets.

Trumpets play (The Prince of Arragon and Portia enter.)

Nerissa: (to the servant) Hurry up and close the curtains. The Prince of Arragon has taken his oath and wants to make his choice now.

Portia: Here are the caskets, sir. If you choose the one holding my picture we will be married right away. *I am so tired of this game where I am the prize. I have always wanted to marry the man that I choose, that I love. Oh, father, why did you do this to me?*

Arragon: I swore to do three things: I cannot tell anyone which casket I chose. If I choose the wrong one, I must not try to get married for a long time. Thirdly, if I choose the wrong box, I will leave right away.

Portia: Every suitor who tries to win me has to swear to follow those three rules.

Arragon: All right. I hope I am lucky and get what my heart hopes for. Let's see. The lead casket reads: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." Hmmph. I would be crazy to *risk* everything for this common lead casket that is not even pretty to look at!

Narrator: The Prince of Arragon moves to the gold casket.

Arragon: The gold casket reads: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men *desire* ." Most people are foolish and just choose what their friends choose. I am not like those fools and so I won't choose this casket! *After all, I have a mind of my own and from childhood I have never picked my clothes, my toys, or my friends just because others picked them. So many others would stupidly choose the gold but not me! I am smarter and better than most other men!*

Narrator: The prince then moves on to the last casket, the silver one.

Arragon: Ah, the silver casket. It reads: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Do I deserve this noble lady? No one should have an *honor* that he does not deserve. *Am I not rich and therefore deserve to marry a rich lady? Am I not smart and therefore deserve to marry a smart lady? And am I not handsome and therefore deserve to marry a beautiful lady? Yes, I think I do deserve the very best! I deserve her...what is her name again...Portia...oh, something like that. It doesn't matter. She will look good standing at my side. People will give me even more respect!* I choose this silver casket. Give me the key!

Narrator: The servant gives him the key. It is very quiet in the room as he looks inside the casket.

Arragon: What is this? (hold up a picture of a "blinking idiot" holding a *scroll*). Do I deserve nothing better than a fool's head? *Now everyone will laugh at me!*

Portia: I will not be the judge of what you deserve. I don't wish to be rude to you so I will not say more. *I am so relieved he chose the wrong casket. How much longer must I play this game? I hope Bassanio comes soon.*

Arragon: (reads the scroll) "You may have thought you were terrific but you made the wrong choice just like a fool who kisses himself in the mirror." Is this my prize for playing this game? The longer I stay, the more

foolish I look. Very well I'll be off. Farewell. I'll keep my promise and patiently wait for my angry feelings to cool down. *This test was really not one for a person of my high rank. I don't deserve to be embarrassed in this way! I should never have allowed myself to agree to take it.* (Leaves the room.)

Part 3

Narrator: Bassanio and his friend, Gratiano, arrive at Portia's house. While Gratiano and Nerissa get to know each other, Bassanio talks with Portia and tells her that he is so excited to be there and is *eager* to try his hand at the three caskets test.

Portia: Please, Bassanio, wait a few days before you try to make your choice. If you make the wrong choice, I will never see you again. Maybe if you stay with me for a longer time it will help you to choose the right casket. *I wish I could just tell him which one to choose, but I am not allowed to. Oh, I do love him so. What will I do if he makes the wrong choice? How will I go on?*

Bassanio: Dear Portia, I want to choose now! Waiting any longer would be painful for me.

Portia: All right then. Let's go to the caskets. I'm locked in one of them. If you really do love me you will find me. (Turns to the musicians and says:) Play some music for us. It will help to cheer all of us up.

Narrator: Bassanio spends a long time standing by each casket, trying to decide which one to choose. *This is harder than I thought it would be. No matter! It's now or never!*

Bassanio: (to himself) *You can't judge a book by its cover* . People are often fooled by what they see on the outside. Someone could be very good-looking on the outside but is actually quite mean on the inside. Gold and silver are both very beautiful metals to look at but they also cause people to fight terrible wars over them. I will have nothing to do with them. No *gaudy* gold or shining silver for me! (Walks over to the lead casket) This lead casket is not shiny or *attractive* to look at but its plainness seems to be reminding me that telling the plain truth is better than pretending. I will choose the lead. Hand me the key ! *Antonio hazarded everything for me. I think he was teaching me that I too must be willing to hazard all.*

Narrator: Bassanio takes the key from the servant and unlocks the lead casket.

Bassanio: What's this? It's a lovely picture of Portia (holds up the framed picture).

Portia: (to Nerissa) My heart is filled with joy!

Bassanio: (reads the scroll) "You that choose not by looks alone have better luck and make the right choice. Turn to where your lady is and give her a loving kiss. (He turns to Portia) May I, dear lady?

Narrator: Portia smiles and holds out her hand. Bassanio gently kisses it.

Portia: Lord Bassanio, I am yours forever. *At last I can marry someone whom I love. You were willing to risk all for me! And I am ready to risk all for you! I am ready to put my money, my house, my happiness, my LIFE in your hands!*

Bassanio: I feel that my heart is about to burst! It is so full of love.

Nerissa: I am so happy for you both!

Gratiano: (to Bassanio) Congratulations, my dear friend. Now wish me the same good fortune because I have decided to get married too.

Bassanio: Of course, you can get married once you have found a wife.

Gratiano: I have already found a wife.

Narrator: Gratiano pulls Nerissa to his side.

Gratiano: This young lady has agreed to marry me.

Portia: Is this true, Nerissa?

Nerissa: I do wish to marry this man. I hope you agree with my choice.

Portia: Of course I do, my friend.

Narrator: The two new couples talk and laugh together as they walk off the stage.

As suggested by many drama instructors, the students will begin familiarizing themselves with the play and the storyline by reading it together as one large group, each person having a copy of the whole script. To accommodate struggling readers, I will pair each one of them up with a stronger reader so they can read it together. After this initial reading, in an effort to determine the extent to which the students have understood the story, I will ask individuals to take turns retelling the story in order, event by event. This will also be a time to get their reactions to the story and to answer any initial questions they may have.

The beauty of using Readers Theatre is that it allows for multiple re-readings of a text in a fun way. During this time students can improve their reading fluency, sharpen their vocal power and practice speaking with feeling. Because there are only seven parts in the play these initial whole group readings provide and require full participation of each class member. The classroom is a community of learners and I want everyone to feel he or she is a part of this learning experience. Following this, actors for each part will be chosen and they will be given ample time to learn their parts before performance day.

To keep it simple the seven actors will sit in chairs in the front of the room to perform the play. Aaron Shepard, in his book, *Readers On Stage: Resources for Reader's Theater*, offers useful tips to the actors once they have been given their parts. He instructs them to hold their script steadily at a height that doesn't cover their faces. He reminds them always to face the audience, speak their lines slowly, talk loudly and speak with feeling. He emphasizes to them that as the characters, they bring the story to life (p. 55).

I realized early on that my young students would not get to know the characters deeply enough by simply reading the play or by watching it performed using just this brief script. I decided that one effective way to reveal more about each character was to use the literary device, soliloquy. Soliloquy is when a character talks to himself and reveals his thoughts. I reasoned that if Shakespeare could do it effectively, so could I! In my research about the soliloquy I learned that its purpose is to reveal more about a character's thoughts, feelings, personality, mindset and even his/her motivations. A soliloquy gives voice to a character's thoughts and we get to know the character more deeply. It gives us a window into what it's like to be that person and perhaps even causes us to sympathize with him/her at some level. So I began my preparation to write accurate soliloquies by rereading the three caskets scenes in the original play in order to get a stronger sense of each character. Then I went back to the Readers Theatre script and added soliloquies at precise points,

using italics to distinguish them. I was happy with the results. This addition offered my first-graders greater access into the characters' personalities and motivations and now we were ready to do some character analysis just like the big kids do.

Section 3: Post-reading Activities

Discussion

To clarify the story line and the interactions among the characters in the play, I will ask the following questions during our discussion period. I have found from experience that choosing different students to lead the discussion by asking the questions and calling on others helps keeps the class as a whole more engaged and so I will have these questions written on notecards for my discussion leaders to use. I will include such questions as:

What is Portia worried about?

Who can explain how the 3 caskets test works?

Why do you think Portia's father made this test?

What is the suitors' problem?

If you were there, which casket would you choose? Why?

What does (name of character) say or think about himself/herself?

What does (name of character) say about others?

What surprises (name of character)?

How did the story end? Would you change the ending? If yes, how?

Does this story remind you of any story you know?

Character Analysis

After this initial discussion we will begin our character analysis. Why teach character traits? Character trait studies add rigor to any discussion of a story and help students develop an understanding of characters' motives. By studying character traits, students learn how to make appropriate inferences from facts and children enjoy debating and explaining their reasoning in a discussion format. At the first grade level, the teacher plays a major role in helping students make inferences as this is a relatively new concept for them. So I plan to help them each step of the way. I will begin with the important question: How do you think that authors show a character's personality to readers? They seldom just tell you by using trait words like brave or lazy. Rather they show the reader by giving them clues to look for in a story. These clues might be the words he says, the thoughts he has or the actions he does. I would tell them that their job as readers is to gather up these clues and then decide what kind of person the character is.

I have found that my first-graders are often confused by the question (found on their BAS reading test): What is the character like? They immediately look puzzled at such wording and respond by saying: "Well, he/she likes to..." When that happens I quietly sigh because, just like Portia, during the test I cannot give any prompting and so they go off on this irrelevant tangent for which they will be awarded no points for comprehension. So my rationale for using this wording regularly is that it will expose them to this common type of question and hopefully they will get a better sense of how to respond to it appropriately and describe what a character is like, not what he/she likes.

In this section we will analyze the characters of Portia, Bassanio, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon. I will begin by showing them a chart of character traits that will look like this:

Character Traits

annoying	honest
bossy	helpful
brave	kind
careful	lazy
curious	mean
daring	proud
friendly	sad
funny	selfish
giving	shy
greedy	smart
grouchy	sneaky
happy	timid

I will ask them to choose two or three traits to describe a parent or a best friend and after listing them on chart paper I will ask them to give some reason or evidence to explain their choice. From this lesson we will move to an analysis of the play's characters. This format of selecting character traits and then finding evidence by looking at a character's words or actions is an effective way for teachers to encourage students to comprehend the text they are reading at a deeper level. In a play such as ours, where the students are just reading the script, there are no pictures to support the text or movement of the actors on stage to observe and so they have to rely on an analysis of the character's written words and actions to determine character traits. The graphic organizer that my students will use will look like this:

Character Trait Evidence

Here is a sample description of each of these four characters, naming traits, actions and feelings that I will be encouraging my students to discover. I suggest not copying this list but trying to elicit from students something like it, however complete or abbreviated. The aim is to have students come up with their own interpretations based on the evidence (found by looking at a character's thoughts, words and actions) in the play.

Portia

Traits	Actions	Feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Smart · Articulate · Perceptive · Resourceful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · initially does not know which of the caskets will win her · remains quiet during the caskets test but is not used to doing so · gives and hazards all she has to Bassanio: her fortune, her household, her right to make her own decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · feels worried that she will end up with an unloving suitor · feels trapped by her father's mandate · feels relieved after both suitors (before Bassanio) fail the test · feels dizzy with love after Bassanio passes the test · feels willing to give everything unconditionally to Bassanio after he passes the test

Prince of Morocco

Traits	Actions	Feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · articulate · proud · powerful · passionate · pompous · virile · brave · self-reflective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · shows himself to be rich in dress and in language · willing to gamble and take the 3 caskets test agreeing to the vows · pompously brags about his bravery and prowess in battle · is fooled by appearances · shows excessive pride and cannot imagine risking everything for the worthless lead casket choice · says that he does love Portia · chooses the gold casket because he thinks only a beautiful thing (her portrait) can belong inside a beautiful thing (the gold casket) · forgets that moral choice is the true arena for the proof of man's worth · does not take his defeat lightly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · feels proud of his background and military prowess · has a superficial love of riches · feels he is worthy of Portia and deserves her based on his wealth, good breeding, manners and his love for her · feels humble about the fact that his nobility and military fame cannot help him in choosing the right casket · feels he is equal to any man · does not seem to understand that worthiness can appear in humble places

Prince of Arragon

Traits	Actions	Feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · proud · arrogant · bloodless · prudent · snobbish · presumptuous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · holds a very high opinion of himself at the expense of others · uses his reason to make decisions · is very dependent on what others think · acts more prudently and does not want to risk all of his possessions by choosing the common lead casket · shows no love or affection for Portia · does not see that appearances can be deceptive · could not imagine that any lesser metal could contain the goal he strives for · chooses the silver casket because he thinks he deserves the very best 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · feels that due to his inherited nobility he well deserves Portia · strongly believes in his own superiority · feels overconfident in his own merit · feels that he alone possesses perfect judgment · feels angry and ashamed when he fails the test

Bassanio

Traits	Actions	Feelings
· daring	· freely asks	· realizes
· eager	his friend,	that he
· articulate	Antonio for	truly is in
· idealistic	financial aid	love with
· spendthrift	over and	Portia
· open-	over again	· feels
minded	· dresses	anxious to
· dependent	himself for	get the
	the occasion	caskets
	very	test over
	impressively	with
	· is ready to	· feels
	risk all he	wary about
	has for	judging a
	happiness	thing
	and love	simply by
	· gives	its outward
	without	appearance
	knowing if	
	he will	
	receive	
	anything in	
	return	
	· learns to	
	look beyond	
	appearances	
	to what is	
	really	
	valuable in	
	life	
	· pensively	
	deliberates	
	over each	
	casket	
	before	
	making his	
	choice	
	unreservedly	
	commits	
	himself to	
	Portia after	
	passing the	
	test	

I am concerned that this lack of visuals in the presentation of this story might hamper my students' understanding of the play's important events. At their age they still rely heavily on picture support of the text in the books they read. Is it better to stimulate their imagination with visual examples of some of the scenes or to ask the students to draw their own visuals? I have collected a number of online paintings and movie photos of the story's main characters and the three caskets scene showing, for example, Bassanio ruminating over his choice (in Robert Alexander Hillingford's 'The Three Caskets' The Merchant of Venice, Act III, Scene II) that I can project on the classroom Smartboard for the class to examine and talk about if need be.

In Lesson Plan 1 the students will learn about verbal clues in the play and how to make inferences about the traits of a character by examining the words he/she says. This lesson is to be taught with a high level of teacher guidance.

Shakespeare's characters in the story of the 3 caskets is rich in life-lesson content. Not only does it teach us about making smart choices but it is also about love, sacrifice, greed, and the deceptive nature of outward appearances. It is important to encourage young learners to realize the fact that people often can and do change as a result of their experiences and become better people. This story provides a perfect segue into such a discussion. Our character analysis will now go a step deeper as we take a look at how each character changes as a result of going through the caskets test. It can be said that this moral lottery devised by her father really did have its desired effect of separating those suitors full of self-importance or greed from those willing to sacrifice everything for his daughter. I would use the following chart to record the discoveries we make.

In the Beginning the character At the End the character

In Lesson Plan 2 the students will take a closer look at action clues, a character's actions and reactions to the obstacles he/she faces that reveal his/her character traits. Through this lesson my students will have an opportunity to see more clearly that our experiences shape us and offer us opportunities to grow and change.

Lesson Plan 3 will be a kind of culminating activity in which the students will take what they have learned about these four characters and try to step inside their shoes to write a bio poem about each of them. I have found a great deal of success pairing students up for more challenging activities like this one and so this will be a 'buddy writing project'.

Conclusion

Character analysis is essential to the understanding of any story or any play. After all, without characters venturing forth into the world, interacting with each other, learning lessons from the challenges they face, there would be no story. Shakespeare has given us so many 'scenes of instruction' within his stories by which we can learn more about ourselves and the world around us. This story of the 3 caskets has important lessons to teach us all about life and the choices that we make.

Lesson Plan 1

Materials: chart paper, black marker, a copy of the unit's Readers Theatre play, a simple list of character traits (found in Section 3)

Objective: To find four quotes made by a character in the play and infer what character traits are suggested.

Procedure:

1. Teacher creates a large chart on which she draws a large stick figure surrounded by four speech bubbles. Under it is the question: Look at the character's words. What kind of person is he/she like? Room on this chart after this question is left for recording the students' ideas.

2. The teacher asks the class to choose one of the four characters from the play: Portia, Bassanio, the Prince of Morocco or the Prince of Arragon and writes that name above the stick figure.
3. The teacher then reads different quotes in the play made by that character and writes them in the speech bubbles.
4. The teacher rereads each quote again and then asks the students to help come up with character traits (found on a list the class is given and is familiar with) that can be inferred by the words and tell what kind of person the character is.
5. The teacher will encourage students to offer their own opinions. This will encourage a more rich discussion. The traits will be written in the space provided on the chart.
6. The same can be done with each of the four characters in the days ahead.

Lesson Plan 2

Materials: chart paper, black marker, a copy of the unit's Readers Theatre play, character traits list

Objective: To identify the action clues of a character in the play to determine his/her character traits

Procedure:

1. The teacher will refer to the first lesson, reminding students how they looked at the words a character said in the story to figure out what character traits the character possessed. Today they will look at the actions of a character, what he does and how he reacts to try to solve his problem.
2. The teacher draws a large outline of a person similar to a gingerbread man showing a head and four limbs.
3. The teacher labels the head area with the character's name, writes the labels 'behavior' and 'actions' in the left and right arm respectively, 'feelings' in the figure's midsection and 'reactions' in both leg areas.
4. The teacher will start with the Prince of Morocco and read parts of the play where he is showing either action or reaction. The point of this lesson is really to help students realize that a person can change and this character does so in observable ways. This prince strides into the casket room confidently but he leaves that same room soon afterwards shocked and with a realization that he did not win because of his own limitations (fooled by trusting others' judgment and by appearances). There is some resolution in his reactions to his failed attempt not just to lick his wounds but to change.
5. The teacher can create such a chart for each of the four characters encouraging lots of discussion along the way and even asking the students to share times when they had to do a hard thing and how it made them stronger, or kinder or more cooperative.

Lesson Plan 3

Materials: chart paper, black marker, bio poem template, pencils, copy of the unit's Readers Theatre play, character traits list

Objective: To write a bio poem about one of the main characters in the play

Procedure:

1. The teacher will begin by modeling how to write a bio poem about the Prince of Arragon following the following format:

Bio poem

Character's name

Adjective to describe the character

Adjective to describe the character

Adjective to describe the character

Wishes for

Dreams of

Wonders about

Is afraid of

Loves

Hates

Believes that

Wants

Learns in the end that

2. The teacher will ask students to help her fill in the information, emphasizing the necessity of it being accurate in regard to this character.

3. Together the class will reread the completed poem in 'shared reading' style.

4. The teacher will then write the names of Portia, Bassanio and the Prince of Morocco on the board and ask student pairs (teacher-chosen to ensure that a struggling reader is matched up with a more capable one) to choose one of the characters to write a bio poem about.

5. Equipped with their character traits list, student pairs will go off with their template, list and play and work together to write the poem. The teacher will circulate during this time offering help whenever it is needed.

6. On successive days the teacher will hold writing conferences with the student pairs to help them create their final drafts that reflect their best word choices and effort.

7. The students will then present their poem to the class by reading it in some shared manner.

Appendix

Implementing District Standards

ELA Common Core Standards for Grade 1

CCSS.ELA.RL.1.2

Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

CCSS.ELA.RL.1.3

Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story using key details

CCSSELA.RF.4b.

Read on-level text orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.

CCSS.ELA.W/1.1

Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name of the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.

CCSS.ELA. SL1.1

Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

CCSS.ELA. SL. 1.3

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

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