

Dwight Eisenhower and William Shakespeare

by Delmar C. Homan

The impact of Shakespeare world-wide is well known; not so well known is the impact of Shakespeare on a Kansan of world renown, General, and President, Dwight D. Eisenhower. The impact came, not from the classroom but from the performance of a burlesque of Shakespeare, although we may certainly infer that Shakespeare was taught and was well known in Abilene High and in the community of Abilene. Otherwise, Dwight Eisenhower's senior class (the class of 1909) could hardly have presented so successfully their class play, *The Merchant of Venice Up-to-Date*.

The program for this class play, on exhibit at the Eisenhower Museum, includes not only the cast list but also a synopsis, which provides a tantalizing glimpse of the play in which the future president had the role of the clown, Launcelot Gobbo. According to the summary, Antonio, Shakespeare's merchant, is captain of the Abilene High School football team; Tubal, Shylock's friend, is captain of the Chapman High School football team; and Shylock, a former Chapman player who was disabled in a game a few years earlier, is a wealthy gambler. For the sake of his friend Bassanio, Antonio borrows, not money as in Shakespeare's play but a "pony" (literal translation of a foreign text) from Shylock to help Bassanio pass a Latin examination and win the hand of Portia.

The pony is not returned, however, and at the time of the Thanksgiving football game between Abilene and Chapman, Antonio is able to escape forfeiture of the bond, which demands a pound of hair cut off nearest his brain, only because X-ray reveals Antonio has no brains. Portia and her friend Nerissa are revealed not to be the lawyers they seem, "by means of an accident perpetrated by Launcelot Gobbo who is proven to be the hero of the occasion." With that, the synopsis breaks off.¹

¹ For the verbatim transcript of the synopsis, see Delmar C. Homan, "Merchant of Venice Up-to-Date: Training Ground for a President," *Shakespeare Newsletter*, 15 (November, 1965), 42.

The play was directed by Miss Lucy Dickinson, a highly esteemed English teacher who had been at Abilene High School for only two years and who left immediately after commencement for Topeka and then Los Angeles, where she planned to reside.² Although credit for adaptation is not given on the program or elsewhere, the inference is surely proper that she not only directed the production but also adapted the play so that Shakespeare became "relevant" to the senior class of 1909. It may also be inferred that she richly deserved the gift presented to her by the senior class on the morning after the production, if for no other reason than the strain she must have been under during that last week of rehearsals.³

The Abilene newspapers indicate that the students were rehearsing daily; they also indicate that the play was scheduled for Wednesday, May 26.⁴ But by Tuesday, May 25, the *Abilene Daily Reflector* indicates a postponement to Thursday, May 27, in a special news item with the headline "HERB SOMMERS A STAR":

Herb Sommers, the baseball expert, will have a star part [Bassanio] in the Senior play Thursday evening. The show will be a good one. Get your tickets early. Downstairs 35c, upstairs 25c. Seats on sale tomorrow.

On Thursday, the *Abilene Daily Reflector* reports that the senior play will be given tonight and that a substitute was secured. In the Friday issue the review of the play indicates that Herb Sommers is ill and that the substitute undertook the role of Bassanio only "twenty-four hours before the time for the curtain to rise." Presumably Herb Sommers was not feeling better on Wednesday so that the postponement was unavailing and a substitute had to be found then for the Thursday performance. That substitute, Paul Jolley, a junior at the time,⁵ received top billing and praise in the Friday newspaper review. Because of the lateness of the substitution, however, his name was not in any cast list or in the listing in the school yearbook, distributed during commencement week,⁶ and by the fiftieth anniversary of the Class of 1909, class members apparently had forgotten the substitution, for the notes of the master of ceremonies for that occasion indicate that he identified Herb Sommers, apparently on the basis

2 See "Commencement Week - Senior Play," *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 21, 1909, p. 3, the review of the play, *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 28, 1909, p. 3, and "High School Faculty," *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 29, 1909, p. 2.

3 "Presents for Teachers," *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 29, 1909, p. 3.

4 See, for example, *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 22, 1909, p. 4, and *Abilene Daily Chronicle*, May 26, 1909, p. 3 ("News About Town").

5 According to the class yearbook, the *Helianthus* for 1909 (Vertical File, Eisenhower Library, "Abilene High School Yearbook, 1909").

6 *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 26, 1909, p. 4.

of the yearbook cast listing, as "a popular fellow who played the part of Portia's suitor in our class play."⁷

Memories of the plot of the play itself, other than the synopsis found on the program, seem also to have faded, and no copy of the text seems to have survived.⁸ Thus the accident that revealed the identity of Portia and Nerissa, and made a hero of the character played by Dwight Eisenhower—a bit of plot added to Shakespeare—remains unknown. However, some additional information on the play and the character portrayals is available from the cast list, from the newspaper review, from another 1909 Abilene graduate, Miss Lelia Picking, and from President Eisenhower himself.

One outstanding addition was a football scene, implied in the synopsis, which, according to the newspaper review, was "realistic and looked like a Chapman-Abilene scrimmage." This stuck especially in the memory of Miss Picking, who remembers "in one scene quite a crowd was on the stage (possibly at the ball game)" and "I was in that crowd." She also remembers that "there was an epidemic of whooping cough in our town" at that time, with "no ban on attendance during illnesses," and so "we really 'whooped it up'."⁹

Characters themselves were added,¹⁰ including a teacher, Miss Abbie S. Threedice; Antonio's mother; Portia's maid; Launcelot Gobbo's mother (a change from his father in Shakespeare); and the X-ray Professor, who was crucial to the plot and helped make the play "up-to-date," since, as President Eisenhower wrote in his discussion of his class play, "X-ray was the latest thing in science."¹¹ Portia's other suitors were omitted.

Shylock, according to the newspaper review, was played to perfection as a villain. Apparently Miss Dickinson did not side with those who give sympathetic or complex readings to Shylock.

Launcelot Gobbo, the clown and precipitator of the denouement, was played as a type character with red hair and blacked-out front teeth. President Eisenhower describes his appearance thus:

That night, my hair was long and all over my face, powdered red, while black gum had taken two of my front teeth out. It was a part written for a blunderer and seemed to have been made to order.

7 Card 8, Toastmaster's note cards for the banquet on May 25, 1959, Vertical File, Eisenhower Library, "Abilene High School Class of 1909 50th Reunion"

8 It is not in the Eisenhower Library, and I have been unable to locate a copy in private hands

9 In a letter to the author in July 1975, Miss Picking in the same letter indicated Mr. Sommers' confirmation of his illness

10 The cast list is available in the 1909 class yearbook, on the program, and in the newspapers. See, for instance the *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 22, 1909, p. 4, and the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, May 26, 1909, p. 4

11 *At Ease Stories I Tell My Friends* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 101. President Eisenhower's comments on his class play in this book were kindly pointed out to me by Mrs. John Perkowski, the daughter of Mr. C. D. Asling, who played the X-ray professor

For this portrayal the future president won a rave newspaper review, which he quotes:

Dwight Eisenhower as Gobbo won plenty of applause and deserved it. He was the best amateur humorous character seen on the Abilene stage in this generation and gave an impression that many professionals fail to reach.¹²

At present no more concerning the play seems recoverable.¹³ But President Eisenhower's class play, and the information associated with it, sheds light beyond the specific facts. First, Kansans in high school and in the community knew enough Shakespeare to appreciate a burlesque of a Shakespearean play. Second, professional actors were frequently seen at least by the reviewer and presumably by his readers, who would not otherwise have appreciated his critical comment on Dwight Eisenhower's performance. Indeed these actors must have appeared on the very stage used for the class play, in Seelye Theatre, "the largest gathering place in Abilene."¹⁴

Finally, and most significantly for the future, this class play, directed and presumably adapted by a local high school English teacher, provided a young man an opportunity that may have affected him more than even he knew. Dwight Eisenhower had not been without achievements in high school, certainly; he was President of the Athletics team, he had written the yearbook article on athletics, and he was the best historian and mathematician of the class, all according to the class yearbook. Nevertheless, fifty-eight years later, he remembers not only his role in the play but also its significance to him: "for once in our school careers, . . . I got more of the spotlight than Ed," his older brother, who played the lesser role of the Duke of Venice¹⁵ but about whom at that time it was predicted that he might run for President for a third term.¹⁶ President Eisenhower further states that the commencement week activities were novel to him, "especially socially," and that "commencement week itself was the high point of our lives."

12 *At Ease* p 101

13 Using the addresses available for cast members in the vertical file, Eisenhower Library, "Abilene High School Classmates of DDE," I requested any surviving memories or information. Most of the play's cast are by now dead, as I learned from those to whom my letters were forwarded. Miss Lelia Pickering, to whom I was later referred, kindly wrote all living class members before she replied to my letter to her. For use of materials and help at the Eisenhower Library, including preliminary research, I wish to thank Ralph W. McCann, archivist. Also I read some of the Abilene newspapers at the Kansas State Historical Library in Topeka.

14 *At Ease* p 101

15 *At Ease* p 101. Ed received a good but not exciting review for his performance. President Eisenhower quotes the review's comment on Ed.

16 Card 4, Toastmaster's note cards for the banquet on May 29, 1959, Vertical File, Eisenhower Library, "Abilene High School Class of 1909 - 50th Reunion."

While he cites a remark of the commencement speaker as “putting iron in the spine of purpose” for him to go on to college,¹⁷ does it not also seem that the play, as part of the week that was the “high point” in his life, helped him to look at himself as an accomplished, free-wheeling individual not under the shadow of his brother and more confident to face the future? If such was indeed the impact of Shakespeare on a Kansan in 1909, the world of literature once more touched the world of action through Shakespeare in America.

17. *At Ease*, p. 102.