

Masks and Subplots

In college, I majored in English and American Literature. It was from literary analysis, of all things, that I first found a way to both analyze karate kata and create curricula in both aiki and karate that had interactive segments.

Today I was listening to an audio lecture on one of Shakespeare's plays. It reminded me how often Shakespeare has characters masquerade as other characters. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Portia ends up masquerading as a male judge in her father's trial. This is ironically inveigled since on the Elizabethan stage a boy or young man would have played Portia. So here was a male actor playing a female playing an older male pretending to be a judge.

As frequently, The Bard creates two or three interweaving plot lines. In the same play, there is the plot about Antonio borrowing money from Shylock, Antonio's daughter Portia falling in love with Bassanio, Bassanio borrowing money from Antonio, and Shylock's daughter running away with much of her father's money. Antonio and Portia live in the fictitious town of Belmont, a sort of fantasyland that the plot demands because only in such a fairy-ville could Antonio offer his daughter in marriage as a prize for the suitor who chooses the correct one of three casks. If they choose incorrectly, they both lose Portia and must agree never to be married—something unlikely to occur in the nearby real city of Venice.

Martial artists are not known for reading Shakespeare, and those that do would rather dwell on the final sword duel in *Hamlet* than the intricacies of old Will's plot construction or the social masquerading in which his characters indulge. But I am a weird bird since both budo and literature came in a sort of package deal way back in college.

The first thing that came to mind during the afore-mentioned audio lecture was that everyone wears different masks in different parts of his/her life. This is not a deep revelation, of course, but martial artists go at least one step further: we wear uniforms that suggest we are about to change from our positions as grocery store manager or high tech consultant into part-soldier, part-student, and part-exercise-enthusiast. Mask donned, we engage in exercises masquerading as combat. These exercises can be as unlikely and as an airy-fairy solo kata, a cooperative aikido combination, or a flow pattern drill with weapons. It is as if we have taken up part-time residence in Belmont.

Okay, so the roles we play are like masquerades, but we don't also invest our efforts in complicated plots, do we? Over the course of a martial education, I think we can't help but do so. Even if we throw out those political interactions in which our Sensei or dojo may become involved, we will experience normal human interactions that are, over time, seldom simple. For example: the only senior student that you do not respect in your dojo has been assigned to tutor you through your next kata; you disrespect him because he was hitting on the very female student you helped through basics, one of which you were interested in but with whom you did not flirt with because you did not want to create an awkward situation in the dojo; she happens to be a good

friend of Sensei's daughter who doesn't study martial arts, but coincidentally is your Math student. No, no subplots there.

So what does all this mean? Are we martial artists merely players who strut and fret our time upon the dojo floor? Well yes, we are that, but we are also, in a strange way, Shakespearean. Certainly I don't wish the fate of Hamlet, MacBeth, or King Lear upon any of us, but do I see us as juggled by both fate (as Shakespeare's characters are, even in his comedies) and by the situations that occur when studying with other people who, like us, want to take their fate into their own hands. To the extent that we do take our fate in our hands, we are like Prince Hal (see the *Henry IV* plays) coming into our martial adulthood. To the extent that we let the dojo completely bat us about, we are, like Romeo, fortune's fool.

You thought the study of literature had little to do with budo. I beg to differ.