Write on one of the following four topics, shaping a real thesis and supporting it with lots and lots of detail (textual, cinematic, conceptual -- as the case requires). Be sure you have on hand "A Good Paper in English 2080" (downloadable from the open website), which includes models for citation and reference. Feel free to consult with Stuart, Sara, or Steve before writing in order to talk out ideas or check out new approaches. Minimize your quest for secondary materials on the web and elsewhere, but acknowledge them specifically if you use them.

1. **Humors, humor, and the Much Ado's.** Joss Whedon's 2012 *Much Ado* could hardly be more different from Kenneth Branagh's 1993 production -- set in a modern American suburb where Branagh's plays out in sixteenth-century Tuscany; black-and white and parsimonious where Branagh's is extravagantly colorful, emotionally expensive, and wide-ranging; and, arguably, offering a different kind of comedy from Branagh's. View the Branagh *Much Ado* (on the BB website under Week 8) and re-view the Whedon (under Course Reserves) -- paying close attention to the "humorous" elements in both productions. How do the two productions manage the humors, and how do they differ in doing so? "Humors," you'll remember from Northrop Frye's "Argument of Comedy" (coursepack 94), are "people who do not fully know what they are doing, who are slaves to a predictable self-imposed pattern of behavior" or otherwise funny in their obsessions and comic limitations; in *Much Ado*, they include not only Dogberry and Verges but, arguably, Benedick and Beatrice in the revolution of their affections. Compare one or two sequences of actions in the two productions, seeking to explain the different ways the two productions manage what could be called "the economy of humor."

2. **Merchant in performance.** View the Trevor Nunn *Merchant* (2001, based on a Royal National Theatre production of 1999) -- posted on the Blackboard website under Week 11. This is a widely celebrated production of *Merchant* made a little too late to be included in James Bulman's "Shylock, Antonio, and the Politics of Performance," (Coursepack, BB). In your essay, identify and evaluate a feature of the Nunn *Merchant* -- a scene, transaction, episode, role, or relationship between characters that you think reflects (represents, typifies) the interpretation of *Merchant* being offered here, perhaps even the "politics" of this performance. Identify that feature and evaluate the interpretation. Among good possibilities are

- The Bassanio-Antonio relationship (instantiated where?)
- The handling of the Belmont casket-tests of three suitors (how seriously taken, and how apt a device for matchmaking?)
- A key element in the motivation of Shylock (where and how?)
- Jessica's elopement, reception at Belmont, and finale (its role in the production?)
- The staging and resolution of the trial scene (4.1)
- The ring-trick, and how it works to resolve the play (if it does).

Feel free to be intelligently critical of this production, suggesting an alternative treatment of the elements you discuss.
3. **Merchant: scapegoating.** Consider the heart of René Girard’s argument in “To Entrap the Wisest” (1991) (coursepack, BB): that what he calls “scapegoating” is twofold in *Merchant of Venice*, both an *effect or a structure* and a theme, and that the latter undercutsthe former. Test his claim against the text of the play and (where pertinent) the Nunn production. Girard, having made his distinction, declares that in his view “the scapegoat is both structure and theme in *The Merchant of Venice . . .”* and that, particularly in the trial scene,

Shakespeare undermines scapegoat effects just as skillfully as he produces them. There is something frightening in this efficiency. This art demands a manipulation and therefore an intelligence of mimetic phenomena that transcends not only the ignorant immorality of those who submit passively to victimage mechanisms, but also to the moralism that rebels against them but does not perceive the irony generated by the dual role of the author. Shakespeare himself must first generate at the grossly theatrical level the effects that he later undermines at the level of allusions. (Girard 249)

This remark is not solely an argument about Shakespearean anti-semitism, nor is it exclusively a tribute to Shakespeare’s power to have his cake and eat it too. It is a way of dealing with the differences on which the play rests and the state of undifferentiation (between Jew and gentile, Shylock and Christians) which the play approaches. Most narrowly, it is a proposition about the kind and degree of irony with which Shakespeare creates “scapegoat effects” in *Merchant* and encourages the audience to reflect on them. So: just how inevitable and appropriate are the scapegoat-effects in this play and this production, and how effectively are they undermined?

4. **Merchant: the outcome.** Questioning both the exclusion of Shylock from Act 5 foregrounding the Jessica-and-Lorenzo subplot (which was not drawn from its main source), a critic muses:

We would think that the union of Jessica and Lorenzo would have offered a more harmonious means of conversion [than the forcing of Christianity on Shylock]; the subplot, if it is designed for anything, seems designed to that very end . . . As thus: Jessica and Lorenzo enter, (perhaps from Genoa, bearing good tidings about Antonio's argosies); Shylock, already crushed, is urged by all to forgive his daughter and accept Lorenzo as his son-in-law; he still resists, claiming his religion; but finally Jessica's prayers prevail: he embraces Christianity and his newfound children; Antonio magnanimously renounces his claim to half of Shylock's property in favor of the lovers; Portia and Nerissa reveal themselves and are claimed by Bassanio and Gratiano; Antonio is asked to be honored guest at the triple wedding and the godfather to Shylock. Curtain. [S]ome such conclusion would have been a "natural": all the main characters on stage and in harmony . . . . As it is, Shylock exits unreconciled, while Jessica and Lorenzo moon in Belmont to no intelligible purpose, as they were brought there for no intelligible reason. I find it hard to imagine that Shakespeare, when he thought up the Jessica action, was not thinking of a conclusion somewhat along these lines, and that he was not fully aware of the complications and difficulties he needlessly created for himself by rejecting it. Why, then, did he? *

Well, why did he? Treat this remark as a question about Act 5 *and* about the uses of the Jessica-Lorenzo subplot, and don't look for simple answers here. Nor should you stint in supporting your answers with detail from the text (including the interesting dialogue at 5.1.1-87) and from the Nunn production.