

Envisioning the World of a Shakespeare Play: Reading Clues for Context, Objects, and Actions

Maria Fahey

As students read a Shakespeare play, it is helpful for them to be aware of the various kinds of information they might glean from what characters say. What does the dialogue reveal about the setting, such as the time of day or the weather? What does it reveal about objects characters have or garments they are wearing? What does it reveal about what characters are doing? As students read a play and discover its story, you might ask them to look specifically for clues about context, objects, and actions: such clues will help students to envision more fully the world of the play.

Context

Since Shakespeare's theater did not include sets or lighting, audiences would have to glean important context from the characters' speeches. Consider, for instance, the moment in *Macbeth* when the Murderer, waiting for Banquo, observes:

The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day.
Now spurs the lated traveler apace
To gain the timely inn [.] (3.3.5-7)

The Murderer's description lets the audience know that it is almost nighttime with only the last light of dusk visible, the time of day when any traveler out would be hurrying to secure a place at an inn.

- ⇒ Ask students to mark and briefly explain a moment where a character's speech depicts the scene's context. What lighting design or scenery might they include in a modern stage production of the scene? If they were making a film of the scene, where and at what time of day might they film it?

Objects

Characters' speeches also contain clues about the presence of specific props or costume elements. Consider, for instance, the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* when Capulet instructs his servant, Peter, to invite guests to the feast:

Go, sirrah, trudge about
Through fair Verona; find those persons out
Whose names are written there, and to them say,
My house and welcome on their pleasure stay. (1.2.32-35)

"Whose names are written there" indicates that Capulet gives Peter a list of names.

- ⇒ Ask students to mark a moment that indicates the need for a specific prop or costume element. Assign a group of students to keep a running list of props needed for the play.



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Created by Maria Fahey, Friends Seminary Faculty, www.mariafranziskafahey.com
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Actions

The earliest editions of Shakespeare’s plays include relatively few stage directions. Instead, the dialogue itself often provides clues about what characters are doing—about their actions. In contemporary editions of Shakespeare’s plays, editors add stage directions, which they usually distinguish from those in the earliest editions of the plays by enclosing them in brackets. Editors arrive at these stage directions from their reading of the play: your students can do so as well!

Consider, for example, a moment in *Hamlet* when the Ghost appears:

<i>Hamlet</i>	It waves me still. Go on; I’ll follow thee.
<i>Marcellus</i>	You shall not go, my lord.
<i>Hamlet</i>	Hold off your hands.
<i>Horatio</i>	Be ruled. You shall not go. (1.4.78-80)

You might add the following stage directions:

<i>Hamlet</i>	It waves me still. [<i>The Ghost waves to Hamlet.</i>] Go on; I’ll follow thee. [<i>Hamlet starts to follow the Ghost.</i>]
<i>Marcellus</i>	You shall not go my lord. [<i>Marcellus physically restrains Hamlet.</i>]
<i>Hamlet</i>	Hold off your hands. [<i>Hamlet tries to break free.</i>]
<i>Horatio</i>	Be ruled. You shall not go. [<i>Horatio joins Marcellus in restraining Hamlet.</i>]

Textual clues for actions always present choices for interpretation and performance. Another reader of this scene might imagine Hamlet staring blankly into space rather than a Ghost beckoning him with a wave. Maybe Marcellus and Horatio both restrain Hamlet before he moves toward the Ghost. Another reader might add these stage directions:

<i>Hamlet</i>	It waves me still. [<i>Hamlet stares blankly.</i>] Go on; I’ll follow thee.
<i>Marcellus</i>	You shall not go my lord. [<i>Marcellus and Horatio physically restrain Hamlet.</i>]
<i>Hamlet</i>	Hold off your hands. [<i>Hamlet tries to break free.</i>]
<i>Horatio</i>	Be ruled. You shall not go.

- ⇒ Ask students to mark a moment where a character’s speech reveals an action and to write their own stage directions for that moment. They may choose a moment where the editor has not included any stage direction, or they may choose a moment where they envision stage directions different from those the editor has indicated. Ask students to write two different sets of stage directions that imagine two different ways the scene could be staged.

