



READING SHAKESPEARE

with Young Adults

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Introduction: “To the great Variety of Readers”

Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe: And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him.

John Heminge, Henry Condell, 1623 Folio

Why should we read Shakespeare, again and again, with young adults in classrooms across the country? And if we can agree upon some answers to that question, the corollary ensues—*How?*

This book began years before I wrote it with a series of questions I couldn’t answer on my own. But at the core of all my interrogatives there stood a stubborn, imperative spine: Speaking Shakespeare, writing about Shakespeare, performing Shakespeare, listening to and viewing Shakespeare, all proceed from *reading* Shakespeare, and the act of reading Shakespeare is something we need to understand.

Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults celebrates the collaborative reading of Shakespeare’s plays. *Collaborative* as in what we can learn from classroom teachers, adolescents, literacy researchers, Shakespearean scholars, performers, and media specialists; *reading* as in what we can do with increasing independence to construct meaning from the transaction with challenging content written in early modern English; *plays* as in what we can apply to thirty-seven of them because the reading skills and strategies outlined in this book are transferable across the collection of Shakespeare’s plays.

This book is written by an English teacher who knows firsthand the complexity, the challenge, and the reward of working with apprentice readers in the secondary classroom. The students at my school bear every label the educational system can muster—advanced, at-risk, mainstream, minority, English language learner, limited English proficient, straight, gay, special needs. In the crucible that is the twenty-first-century American classroom, reading Shakespeare with all of these students has become the most rewarding transaction we share. I use the word *transaction* as Louise Rosenblatt defines it in her preface to *Literature as Exploration* to suggest the infinite ways in which meaning “‘happens’ during the transaction between the reader” and a word, a line, a speech, or a scene in a Shakespearean play (xvi).

So *why* should we read Shakespeare again and again, in secondary classrooms across the country? My answers, outlined briefly here and in detail throughout this book, neither begin nor end with me. In fact, I can no longer distinguish between my reasoning and the reasoning of hundreds of others—students, teachers, researchers, scholars, performers, artists—who have over time whispered answers in my ear. Pardon me then in assuming the public voice, the royal “we,” to state the reasons why we should read Shakespeare with our students.

Because he never ages. His plays are continually performed and made into films that feature actors with broad adolescent appeal—Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes, Laurence Fishburne, Ethan Hawke, Julia Stiles, Ian McKellan, and Denzel Washington, to name a few. He has spawned a small library of young adult literature spin-offs.

Because he includes. More than any writer in the English-speaking canon, Shakespeare transcends the isolation of human being and the barriers of time, place, gender, race, and status that divide us. His plays have been translated into more than eighty languages. “Shakespeare,” writes Ralph Alan Cohen, “is not about exclusion” (17).

Because he is in the water supply. In December of 2008, as I composed the final draft of this introduction, I was struck (again) by the degree to which Shakespeare permeates our culture. Uncle Bob, voracious reader and ad hoc family archivist, had saved me his copy of the *New York Times Book Review* with a note, “See page 11,” scribbled on the front. On page eleven was the review of a book I had just purchased, Marjorie Garber’s *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*; the first sentence of her introduction states, “Shakespeare makes modern culture and modern culture makes Shakespeare.” The night before, I had paused in my reading of the 1999 novel *Ahab’s Wife*, at Chapter 93, entitled “Shakespeare and Company.” These are merely the most recent random episodes in what has come to feel like a perpetual state of *déjà vu*: Shakespeare is cited on the nightly news and emulated in pop culture (“Is this a dagger which I see before me, or a pizza? Mmmm, pizzaaa.”—*MacHomer*). He is so quotable that, as Garber points out, he is often “quoted without quotation marks” (xviii). He is one of the most frequently anthologized and most frequently taught authors in America’s schools (Applebee 75, 105).

Because we still can. Nothing lasts forever, not even Shakespeare. We are lucky to be born just heartbeats away from the early modern era in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, and to read the pieces of what he left us, not in translation, but with our own hearts and minds (Rosenbaum 511). It’s only a matter of time before Shakespeare, like the *Beowulf* poet, requires a translator.

Because his plays are not just literary texts, they are working scripts. They require collaboration, voice, and movement. Choral readings, comparative viewing, quartos and folios, tableaux vivant, speaking text and subtext, writing directorial commentary, blocking scenes—these and other reading, writing, and performance strategies empower students to explore language with their whole bodies.

Because his plays are not just working scripts, they are literary texts. For the past three decades, the pedagogical and scholarly emphasis on Shakespeare as script has tended to minimize Shakespeare as text. In his 1997 introduction to *King Lear*, R. A. Foakes seeks a kind of equilibrium by asserting, “Plays have a double life, in the mind as read, and on the stage as acted,” and that each experience is “different but equally valid” (qtd in Erne 23). In 2003, Lukas Erne published a scholarly study that vigorously argues “that the assumption of Shakespeare’s indifference to the publication of his plays is a myth” (26). Yet even if we continue to accept the claim that Shakespeare wrote his plays not for readers to pore over but for actors to perform, a mere seven years after his death they were published in a book to be read and reread—“Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe . . .”—and they remain, as Ron Rosenbaum proclaims, the bottomless treasure of the English language (12–18). As working scripts *and* as literary texts, their exploration requires an arsenal of reading skills.

This brings us to the last, best reason why we should read Shakespeare with young adults:

Because he is the great equalizer in the literature classroom. He is new and strange to us all. His English is early modern, and perhaps most richly felt by those readers in the early stages of their own development. His language challenges us all to think twice, to look again, to doubt our eyes, and this perhaps gives our English language learners a small advantage since this is what they must do with every text they read. His characters defy easy labels, just as our too-frequently labeled students do. We need to teach the reading of Shakespeare’s plays to all of our students because the very nature of the task requires that we study to the roots of what we know and think we know about the needs of novice and intermediate readers, struggling readers, and English language learners.

And *how* do we read Shakespeare with young adults?

The answers began to manifest themselves in 1994 at the Folger Shakespeare Library’s Teaching Shakespeare Institute (TSI). It was here that I met Peggy O’Brien, director of education at the Folger since 1981, and her team of teacher educators—Louisa Newlin, Mike LoMonico,

Paul Sullivan, Sheri Maeda, Caleen Jennings, Michael Tolaydo—and resident scholars Russ McDonald, Stephen Booth, and Jean Addison Roberts. It was here that I made a friend for life in Janet Field-Pickering, a secondary English teacher in Pennsylvania who would take the helm at the Folger when O'Brien left for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1995, and who would enlist a brilliant new team of scholars in Rob Watson, Margaret Maurer, and Stephen Dickey.

The Folger introduced me to the fundamentals of performance-based teaching outlined in the series of books that came out of the institute, *Shakespeare Set Free*. The methods were time-consuming, but being told that we didn't have to read the whole play and that we could provide our students with scene summaries to advance their initial comprehension of the text felt liberating. Still, I began to hear the inarticulate stirrings of something more fundamental than performance. The act of reading Shakespeare was something I needed to understand.

In 2001, I found myself sitting on the Massachusetts Department of Education's Assessment Development Committee for the Grade 10 English Language Arts exit test. (In newspeak, that's the MDOE ADC for the ELA MCAS.) In four years' tenure on this committee, I saw firsthand the need to equip students with the skills and strategies they would need to read and write on demand. In an urban district where almost 70 percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch, the sophomores at Revere High School would be expected to read excerpts from texts of varying complexity, answer multiple-choice questions about those texts, and write open responses and an essay that demonstrate their comprehension of text—on their own. And oh yes, Shakespeare would be on the test. A 2006 survey of author frequency on my state's grade 10 ELA exit test since its inception in 1998 places William Shakespeare in the lead with six appearances. The second runner-up is Sandra Cisneros, with three. Revere High School literacy coach Christina Porter conducted the survey.

So in 2003 I revised an old question and wondered where to look for the answers: *What things do accomplished readers do to understand Shakespeare's text, and how can we teach these things to our students?*

Some of the answers could be found in the performance-based teaching methods I had learned in the past. But not all. So I went looking again, and started with myself. What were the things I did to understand? What reading Shakespeare survival skills did I develop as an undergraduate, when to read a play a week, independently, was the norm? What things did I do with a Shakespeare text before I would teach it to others?

I looked to my colleagues and found a partner in Christina Porter, an English teacher with a master's degree in adolescent literacy and a passion for theater and Shakespeare's plays. Porter's encouragement and advice permeate this book. I shared ideas and lesson plans with novice teachers Ben Murphy and Althea Terenzi and with veterans Nancy Barile, Kelly Andreoni, and Allison Giordano and got back from them as much as I ever gave. Curriculum directors Ron Eydenberg and Jonathan Mitchell provided constant support and encouragement. I made frequent trips down the hall to technology teachers—David Kaufman who teaches Web design and Alec Waugh who teaches music technology—for their expertise on the newest literacy tools.

As the Shakespeare elective teacher to juniors and seniors and a teacher of sophomore English, a course whose required whole works included *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, I began to see the classroom as a laboratory and my students as assistants. Finally, I began to read the research on adolescent and adult literacy and to incorporate this new knowledge more consciously into my practice. Four years later, in 2007, I began to write this book.

This book is what happens when a work-in-progress meets a final deadline. Its author will always have questions that go unanswered for another day; some of the activities and projects described in these pages will reshape themselves as classroom technology continues to advance. But into these pages I have unpacked a lifetime of wondering about *why* William Shakespeare's plays* still matter, to me, to colleagues, and to the students who wander into our classrooms every day from the mean and easy streets of America. We can't force kids to believe that Shakespeare matters. But we can teach them—with explicit skills instruction, with interdependence, with humility, with wonder, and with imagination—*how* to read Shakespeare, and they will learn the power and play of words, the frustrating complexity of meaning, and the necessity of community. Unrestricted by an omniscient narrator, untutored by an authorial presence, unburdened by descriptive stage directions and prescriptive directorial commentary, they will experience reading as active, constructive, visceral. Because reading him requires so much of them, they will take Shakespeare with them into college, into the armed forces, into jobs that pay the bills, into hospitals, cemeteries, and jails, and they will feel less alone. Shakespeare's characters have already been there.

*Unless otherwise stated, all line citations in this book are from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition, edited by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells.

What's past is prologue.

Enter Ms. Dakin, sophomore English teacher. The year is 1990 and the curriculum mandates *Julius Caesar*. With a bachelor's degree in English and an unquenched thirst for words, words, words, I come trailing clouds of glory into a secondary school filled with urban adolescents and watch in helpless dismay as the things I love come crashing to the classroom floor.

How do I teach this stuff? And why?

This book is one teacher's attempt to answer her own questions.

I Vocabulary: Understanding Words

POLONIUS: What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET: Words, words, words.

Hamlet 2.2.193–195

Every time I scratch the surface of what students know about words, I throw imaginary arms up in disbelief. It is not just the English language learners who struggle with tier-two words, high-frequency mature words that occur less in conversation and more in content-area written texts (Beck et al. 16–20). The past three decades have produced a rich body of research on the necessary relationship between vocabulary instruction and comprehension, yet the gap between research and practice has barely closed (Allen 87–91). Deciding which words to teach when students seem so far from the 60,000 they are supposed to know by adulthood (Neergaard A10) is the first dilemma. Reading the research and revamping outmoded methods of instruction—word lists with dictionary definitions and multiple-choice / fill-in-the-blank assessments—is the next task. Making time in the notoriously overstuffed secondary curriculum for meaningful and frequent vocabulary instruction is the third challenge.

The lessons in this section tackle word study from two different directions. First, think of *understanding* as a verb. As a verb, you might want students to understand, for example, what a stage direction such as *exeunt* means. You might want to demystify the high-frequency archaic words—*hence*, *anon*, *knave*—that distinguish the Shakespearean vernacular from our own. Of course, there are the traditional collections of tier-two words in Shakespeare’s plays provided by textbook and test-prep publishers, but if you check the word frequency lists in Michael LoMonico’s *The Shakespeare Book of Lists*, you will discover that their appearance in the plays is rare. In fact, the highest-frequency words in Shakespeare’s plays are basic, tier-one words.

Next, think of *understanding* as a verbal. In this sense, you want students to have a vocabulary rich enough to express a fine-grained understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of Shakespeare's characters or of the myriad tones with which words and lines can be read and spoken.

The lessons in this section support a systematic and sustained approach to word study that is crucial to understanding and enjoying Shakespeare's plays.

1 The Functional Vocabulary of Shakespeare's Stage Directions

Flourish the bell. The Kids exeunt the classroom and descend to the cafeteria. Hautboys play in the headphones. Enter CHORUS of Friends and advance to their table. The dumb-show enters and in an aside, the Friends make fun of them. Within, the Lunch Ladies yell at some Kid. ALEX advances to TESS. She draws. ALEX retires to the dumb-show table. Flourish the bell. Students exeunt severally, attended by the Dean.

Stage directions composed by sophomores, 2005

For too many years, I took for granted that students understand the high-frequency words that constitute the working vocabulary of Shakespeare's stage directions. After all, the most frequent stage directions are written in general, everyday language—*Enter, Exit, Dies*. With a cavalier dismissal of stage directions as sight words, I failed to see the irony of my neglect: the explicit stage directions in Shakespeare are in fact sight words in that they help readers to visualize the text. For example, we read “[*Hecate retires*]” in the Dover edition of *Macbeth* 4.1. “What does *retires* mean?” I asked a roomful of sophomores one day. Blank stares, shoulder shrugs, then one response, “It’s what you do when you’re old.” I opened my eyes a little wider that day to the little big words in italics.

Playing Peek-a-Boo

Some people do retire when they are, as one fifteen-year-old put it, “old,” so I thought it would be fun to play with the multiple meanings of words. I skimmed the plays I teach most frequently for the stage directions common to each and put them in a list:

Enter

Exit

Exeunt

Flourish
Sennet
Aside
Alarum
Advances
Attends
Within
Retires
Draws
Beneath
Dies
Descends

If I showed students the entire list at once, they would probably read it immediately as stage directions so I needed a way to de-contextualize the words. I made an overhead transparency of the list but also made a cover for it using heavy paper and a precision hobby knife to cut tabs that could be peeled back to reveal just one word at a time. Then we played peek-a-boo.

Peeling back the tab for *Draws*, I asked students what this word means. They went silent the way adolescents do when the answer to your question is so obvious that it doesn't deserve a response. Someone drew pictures in the air. I tried again with *Attends*. "That's when you go to school," someone said. Then I peeled back the tab for *Retires* and they smelled a rat. Revealing the whole list to them, we started from the top, easily defining most stage directions and taking guesses at some.

Then I distributed a handout of definitions adapted from *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Figure 1.1), an odd source, one would think, for definitions of theatrical jargon but the only one I could find to guide me in the construction of a handout I needed the next day. To this day, I think it does the trick.

To practice and extend their new awareness of Shakespeare's functional vocabulary, we considered these more detailed stage directions, taken from several plays, and talked about the possibilities of meaning.

Enter, with train
Enter Chorus
Enter, attended
The dumb-show enters
Exeunt severally

Functional Vocabulary Definitions

We can understand the most common stage directions, *Enter* and *Exit*, without the help of a dictionary. Others, like *Dies* and *Descends*, are just as easily understood. Nonetheless, even these most readily understood stage directions require the reader to imagine just how, in each set of circumstances, the performance of the stage direction should look and sound.

Before we read Shakespeare's play, review the meanings of these stage directions, most of which are extracted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*:

Advances: Moves forward; moves against another.

Alarum: Loud, frantic, or excited activity; clamor. The sounds of war or warlike activity. The movement of soldiers across stage.

Aside: A piece of dialogue intended for the audience and supposedly not heard by the other actors on stage. A remark made in an undertone so as to be inaudible to others nearby.

Attended: To be accompanied or waited upon as by a companion or servant.

Beneath: In a lower place; below. Underneath the stage.

Draws: Pulls out a weapon for use.

Exeunt: Two or more performers leave the stage.

Flourish/Sennet: A fanfare (of horns, trumpets, etc.) to announce the entrance or exit of a person of distinction.

Retires/Withdraws: Seeks seclusion; moves back or away without actually exiting the stage; recedes.

Within: An inner position, place, or area close to, but not actually on, the stage.

NOTE: Most modern editions of Shakespeare's plays follow the practice of putting into parentheses, brackets, and/or half-brackets anything that isn't in the copy text of the play. The copy text is the quarto or the First Folio used as the basis of the modern edition. In other words, brackets *almost always* alert the reader that whatever is in the brackets has been added by an editor to clarify what is implied but not stated in the original text.

Figure 1.1. Functional vocabulary definitions.

Ordnance shot off within

They retire without the door

Exit, pursued by a bear

"Think about the trains on the Blue Line," I asked them. "How could someone enter, with a different kind of *train*, like '*Enter Caesar and his train*'?"

“Should *Chorus* be a group? Does it have to be?”

“If someone is said to be deaf, dumb, and blind, what can *dumb* mean? And what might a *dumb-show* be?”

Before re-contextualizing the vocabulary of stage directions to Shakespeare’s plays, I challenged my students to write their own stage directions, using people they know as characters and incorporating multiple stage directions from the list. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is one example. I think you will find, as I have, that adolescents are invariably delighted by the strange, new faces of familiar words.

What’s Going on with Those Brackets?

“I don’t know,” I was forced to admit one day when a student, motivated perhaps by curiosity but more likely by the desire to stump the teacher, called attention to those funny little signals scattered throughout the pages of the play, especially in the vicinity of the stage directions. I had majored in English as an undergraduate and taken every Shakespeare course offered, and I had taught the plays for at least ten years without paying any attention to the parentheses, brackets, and half-brackets that encased Shakespearean words and lines like innocuous little warning flags, content to be ignored.

Enter Margaret Maurer, Shakespearean scholar at Colgate and faculty member of the Folger Library’s TSI. It was she who first taught me to pay attention to these editorial signals, in part because so many of the explicit stage directions in Shakespeare’s plays have been written by someone else. The parentheses and brackets are used by editors to indicate this textual interference in the modern editions of the plays. In the introduction to the New Folger Library text of *Othello*, for example, editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine point out that there are two printed versions of this play from which editors draw, the 1622 Quarto and the 1623 Folio. Mowat and Werstine explain their signals in this way:

1. All the words in this edition that are printed in the Quarto version but not in the Folio appear in pointed brackets (< >).
 2. All full lines that are found in the Folio and not in the Quarto are printed in square brackets ([]).
 3. Sometimes neither the Folio nor the Quarto seems to offer a satisfactory reading, and it is necessary to print a word different from what is offered by either. Such words (called “emendations” by editors) are printed within half-square brackets ([]) (xlvi–xlvi).
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Furthermore, Mowat and Werstine assure the careful reader that "whenever we change the wording of the Folio or *add anything to its stage directions* [my italics], we mark the change" (xlvii).

Why should we care?

Because our students need to see the possibilities in Shakespeare's text, and sometimes well-meaning editors limit or confuse those possibilities. There are places in the modern editions of Shakespeare's plays where editorial interference with the stage directions manipulates the action and potential meaning in a scene. For example, in 1.2 of *Othello*, upon a torch-lit stage, an angry father named Brabantio enters with Roderigo and officers to arrest "the foul thief" Othello who has married his daughter without Brabantio's blessing and permission. Othello is onstage with his officers, Iago and Cassio. The New Folger edition of the confrontation reads:

RODERIGO: Signior, it is the Moor.
BRABANTIO: Down with him, thief! [*They draw their swords.*]
IAGO: You, Roderigo! Come, sir, I am for you.
OTHELLO: Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

When I listen to my students working through these lines (72–77) in their reading companies, I hear them questioning the text and seeking to clarify whether "*They draw their swords*" means every character onstage, or every character *except* Othello. The point is even more debatable when we read from the Dover Thrift edition, whose stage direction reads, "[*They draw on both sides.*]" If Othello is included in the pronoun *They*, then students tend to read him as aggressive. Yet it is Othello who defuses the situation by telling the mob to sheathe their swords against the dew. If he is the exception in this angry crowd, then we read and see Othello differently. Whether the added stage direction is there or not, readers need to decide what Othello does in this opening confrontation, but at this moment in the play, the editors' stage direction interferes with the text in ways that can limit or confuse our students' reading of the character Othello.

There's another reason why we should care about stage directions in square and half-square brackets, but I must return to my first reason in order to state the second: our students need to see the possibilities in Shakespeare's text, with their own eyes first.

Too often, editors' emendations do the reading for us, not only by stating the obvious, as in this example from 3.1.63 of the Folger edition:

POLONIUS: I hear him coming. Let's withdraw, my lord.
[*They withdraw.*]

... but also by too eagerly explaining what the dialogue implies. Even if you do not teach *Romeo and Juliet*, consider distributing this excerpt from act 3.1, in which Tybalt goes hunting for Romeo but is lured from his target by Mercutio. The scene is famous enough that some students might recall film or stage readings, but read it aloud once and then challenge students to reread it in small groups and stage it in their mind's eye. The text is the New Folger edition, lines 61–108, minus all editorial emendations:

TYBALT: Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford
No better term than this: thou art a villain.

ROMEO: ... Villain am I none.
Therefore farewell. I see thou knowest me not. ...

MERCUTIO: O calm, dishonorable, vile submission!
Alla stoccato carries it away.
Tybalt, you ratcatcher, will you walk?

TYBALT: What wouldst thou have with me?

MERCUTIO: Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives
....

TYBALT: I am for you.

ROMEO: Gentle Mercutio, put thy rapier up.

MERCUTIO: Come, sir, your *passado*.

ROMEO: Draw, Benvolio, put down their weapons.
Gentlemen, for shame forbear this outrage!
Tybalt! Mercutio! The Prince expressly hath
Forbid this bandying in Verona streets.
Hold, Tybalt! Good Mercutio!
Away, Tybalt!

MERCUTIO: I am hurt.
A plague o' both houses! I am sped.
Is he gone and hath nothing?

BENVOLIO: What, art thou hurt?

MERCUTIO: Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch. Marry, 'tis enough.
Where is my page?—Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.

ROMEO: Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.

MERCUTIO: No, 'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough. 'Twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. . . . A plague o' both your houses! . . . Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.

From the day I first read this scene to now, I am deeply moved by Mercutio's aggrieved, near-rhetorical question, "Why the devil came you between us?" and its devastating corollary, "I was hurt under your arm." Just how this fatal moment, in a play that sets its full gaze on fatal moments, manages to happen is something I want students to construct for themselves. When we teach them to read the dialogue as active instead of passive readers (or in the language of theater, as players instead of spectators), they will discover clues embedded by an actor's poet in the dialogue.

So I ask them, as I ask you now, to look for the weapons in this scene. Who draws first? When? Who is the aggressor, the first to strike? Does Romeo draw a weapon or is he so true to his love that he never draws yet thrusts himself unarmed between two enraged enemies? At what moment is Mercutio fatally stabbed, and how does he physically react? What happens to Tybalt?

Then I tell students they are the editors, and in groups they translate their reading of the scene into stage directions, using the vocabulary of stage directions listed in Figure 1.1.

After students have begun to see the text with their own eyes, I distribute the same lines of dialogue with the addition of stage directions composed by the Folger editors:

TYBALT: Romeo, the love I bear thee can afford
No better term than this: thou art a villain.

ROMEO: . . . Villain am I none.
Therefore farewell. I see thou knowest me not. . . .

MERCUTIO: O calm, dishonorable, vile submission!
Alla stoccato carries it away. [He draws.]
Tybalt, you ratcatcher, will you walk?

TYBALT: What wouldst thou have with me?

MERCUTIO: Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine
lives. . . .

TYBALT: I am for you. [He draws.]

ROMEO: Gentle Mercutio, put thy rapier up.

- MERCUTIO: Come, sir, your *passado*. [They fight.]
- ROMEO: Draw, Benvolio, put down their weapons.
[Romeo draws.]
Gentlemen, for shame forbear this outrage!
Tybalt! Mercutio! The Prince expressly hath
Forbid this bandying in Verona streets.
Hold, Tybalt! Good Mercutio!
[Romeo attempts to beat down their rapiers.
Tybalt stabs Mercutio.]
Away, Tybalt!
[Tybalt, Petruchio, and their followers exit.]
- MERCUTIO: I am hurt.
A plague o' both houses! I am sped.
Is he gone and hath nothing?
- BENVOLIO: What, art thou hurt?
- MERCUTIO: Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch. Marry, 'tis enough.
Where is my page?—Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.
[Page exits.]
- ROMEO: Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.
- MERCUTIO: No, 'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church
door, but 'tis enough. 'Twill serve. Ask for me tomor-
row, and you shall find me a grave man. . . . A plague o'
both your houses! . . . Why the devil came you between
us? I was hurt under your arm.

Though some students are pleased to learn that what the editors saw embedded in the dialogue they saw too, others are ready to disagree with the professionals. To well-meaning editors everywhere I would ask in the name of Shakespeare's youngest readers and their teachers, *Why the devil come you between us and the text?* One of the reasons why we so need Shakespeare is because he so needs us. More than three centuries before a literary critic would insist that "The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (Rosenblatt 24), and more than three centuries before a biologist would claim that language is "like nest-building or hive-making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings" (Thomas 89), this poet-playwright understood that language and meaning must be under constant construction.

Seeing Implicit Stage Directions

There's another way to look at this: whenever editors change, omit, or add to the stage directions, they are reading what's not there, and often, what's not there is what we want our students to read.

When Macbeth says, "I drink to the general joy of the whole table," I stand stiff and motionless at the front of the room (with a water bottle strategically situated within reach on my desk) and challenge them to read a stage direction that's not written on the page. I say the line again, in a party-hostess voice, with arms glued stubbornly to my side. "It's a toast!" some young veteran of a family wedding always cries out, "Raise the water bottle and say it again!" At a moment such as this one, tell students that Shakespeare's plays are filled with invisible stage directions, that those stage directions are called *implicit* stage directions because they are implied, not stated, and that in order to read Shakespeare, we need to read the cues for gesture, action, line delivery, and props embedded in the lines.

The next time your students arrive at a dramatic, action-filled scene in Shakespeare, copy it, white out all the stage directions (or at least the bracketed ones), and distribute the text to your students as Shakespeare most likely would have written it and distributed it to his company, entrusting the players to read the page onto the stage. Review the terms *explicit* and *implicit stage directions*, and let them work in groups at writing their own stage directions, as editors do, for the places where a particular gesture, action, or prop illuminates a word or line. For some wonderful classroom activities that address Shakespeare's explicit and implicit stage directions, see Rex Gibson and Janet Field-Pickering's *Discovering Shakespeare's Language*, pages 127–131.

One of my favorite scenes for reading implicit stage directions is act 3.4 in *Macbeth* in which the bloody ghost of Banquo appears at a banquet. After we have read the scene once for initial comprehension, I tell students to close their books and put them away—they are not students in an English classroom anymore but players in Shakespeare's company, and he has written a scene for them filled with dialogue and ripe for action. In small groups they look for the clues to action embedded in the dialogue, and then I ask for volunteers to show us what they found. Reading for what's *not* on the page is required reading in Shakespeare.

Parsing Explicit Stage Directions

ex·plic·it *adj.* Fully and clearly expressed; leaving nothing implied.

Earlier in this chapter I acknowledged *The American Heritage Dictionary* as my source for definitions of the most common explicit stage directions. But lo and behold, when I looked up the word *explicit*, the second half of the definition rang an alarum bell in my head. When it comes to Shakespeare's stage directions, and for that matter to almost any word or phrase of consequence in literature or life, ambiguity is not only desirable but also essential. In an essay entitled "Information," biologist Lewis Thomas points out that, "It is often necessary, for meaning to come through, that there be an almost vague sense of strangeness and askewness" in the language we use to inform (94). In other words, *explicit* doesn't mean there's only one way to get the job done.

Take *Hamlet's* "Enter GHOST," for example.

How can a Ghost enter a theater, a stage? How should it enter? In a play echoing with questions of heaven, hell, and purgatory, if the Ghost enters from above, what does that imply about its nature? If it enters through the trap door of the stage floor, what does that imply? If it walks on level ground as you and I, what implications are there? If you had a million-dollar budget, how would your Ghost enter? If your *Hamlet* were set in present-day New York City as opposed to seventeenth-century London or twelfth-century Denmark, how might the Ghost enter? If you were filming *Hamlet* instead of staging it, how could technology be made to serve art? Keep asking your students to question the explicit stage directions. Leave nothing clear.

Enter. Exit. Retires. Dies. No two are alike.

Shakespeare? *Really?*

Although the works of William Shakespeare are universally taught in high schools, many students have a similar reaction when confronted with the difficult task of reading Shakespeare for the first time.

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So, yes, Shakespeare. Really!

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