



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

School
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English.



**Support Materials:
Shakespeare**

Shakespeare's stage: setting the scene



The Globe, London (reconstruction of the 16th-century outdoor theatre)



The Sam Wannamaker Theatre, London (reconstruction of a 17th-century indoor theatre)

Shakespeare's plays would be performed in spaces like those above: either outdoors, in daylight, or indoors, by candlelight. The same was true when his plays went on tour, outside London. They would be performed outdoors, e.g. in the courtyards of inns, and indoors, e.g. in halls.

The stage was also quite bare. As you can see in the left-hand picture, there are no 'wings' to store scenery, and no curtain to drop to conceal scenery changes.

The bare stage and inability to change the lighting very much meant that setting and mood couldn't be created – as now – with elaborate scenery or lighting effects. The theatre companies did have props to suggest setting (e.g. bay trees to indicate a garden; torches to indicate night-time), but audiences had to listen in order to get crucial information about mood or setting. This is why – when writing about going to plays – Shakespeare's original audiences often talked of going to 'hear a play', where we would more naturally say 'see' or 'watch a play'.

Keep an eye out for the ways in which Shakespeare uses dialogue to tell the audience where and when a scene is set, and to create atmosphere. A good example is the opening of *Hamlet*.

Enter BARNARDO and FRANCISCO, two sentinels.

BARNARDO Who's there?
FRANCISCO Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold* yourself. **identify*
BARNARDO Long live the King!
FRANCISCO Barnardo?
BARNARDO He.
FRANCISCO You come most carefully upon your hour.
BARNARDO 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

From the questions – ‘Who’s there?’, ‘Barnardo?’ – it’s clear that the two sentinels (guards) can’t see each other: it’s too dark. This hunch is confirmed when we’re told that the clock has struck twelve midnight, and Francisco is sent to bed. The questions, and short responses, also convey tension: the guards are on edge. This is also shown by the fact that it is Barnardo, who is not yet on guard (he is relieving Francisco), who makes the initial challenge.

Boys playing girls

There were no female actors in Shakespeare’s day. Younger female roles (e.g. the heroines) were played by boy apprentices; older women (e.g. the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*) would be played by adult males. This affects the kind of parts that Shakespeare can write. Shakespeare’s male leads (e.g. Richard III in *Richard III*, Hamlet in *Hamlet*) are on stage in almost every scene, and have lots of lines, including long speeches (e.g. their soliloquies). Those parts are both physically and mentally demanding.

As the boy apprentices wouldn’t be able to shoulder such demanding roles, Shakespeare’s female leads have much smaller parts, even when the play is telling their story (e.g. *Twelfth Night* is Viola’s story for the most part; *As You Like It* is Rosalind’s). Their on-stage appearances are staggered, so that they have time to rest between scenes, and a lot of their dialogue is in the form of exchanges with other characters rather than long speeches, so that they’re not so responsible for ‘carrying’ a scene on their own.

Often, Shakespeare’s female characters also end up disguised as boys. Again, this can be seen as a way of making things easier for the boy apprentices.

Metatheatre

With a bare-stage, use of symbolic props, and features such as boys playing girls, theatre in Shakespeare’s day didn’t try to be realistic. Rather, it tends to draw attention to its own status as performance. This is known as metatheatre: moments when a play draws attention to itself as a play. These metatheatrical moments might include:

- prologues
- epilogues
- asides, where characters address the audience directly
- plays-within-plays
- when characters compare what they are experiencing to a play (e.g. Jacques’ ‘All the world’s a stage’ speech in *As You Like It*).

Shakespeare's language

Shakespeare's plays are mostly written in blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter describes the length and rhythm of the lines: these are lines of ten syllables, where the dominant pattern is of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, e.g.

What bloody man is that? He can report (Duncan in *Macbeth*;
stressed syllables are underlined)

Not all lines of blank verse are so regular as this: it would start to sound very dull and repetitive if they were. Some variation is needed.

Some of Shakespeare's verse does rhyme, though. Keep an eye out for **couplets** where two adjacent lines rhyme with each other. As the rest of the verse doesn't rhyme, the couplets stand out. Often, they're used to signal the end of a scene, but they can also work mid-scene to signal a 'sound-bite', a memorable chunk of 'wisdom', e.g. when Gloucester (later Richard III) tells us:

About a prophecy, which says that G
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be. (*Richard III*)

Or, later in the play, we have the Ghosts of Richard's victims cursing him:

Dream on, dream on, of bloody deeds and death;
Fainting, despair; despairing yield thy breath.

The couplet gives the Ghost's lines a grim finality.

As well as blank verse, Shakespeare's plays often have some characters, or some scenes, written **in prose**. Using prose has two main connotations:

(1) social status: usually, it's non-elite characters who get given prose (e.g. the Porter in *Macbeth*), where the elite characters speak in blank verse (kings, queens, etc). However, keep an eye out for elite characters who switch between verse and prose (e.g. Prince Hal in *1 Henry IV*, or Henry V in *Henry V*). When are they speaking blank verse? When are they speaking prose?

(2) genre: prose is also associated with comedy. This is in part because, in Shakespeare's day, tragedy was seen to be about social elites (the fate of kings, etc), whereas comedy was more socially inclusive. Pay attention to which scenes are in prose. This might tell us about the tone of the scene/exchange (e.g. Mercutio's banter is often in prose in *Romeo and Juliet*).

Pronouns can also tell us about the status of, and relationships between, characters. In Shakespeare's day, there were still two different forms of the singular second-person pronoun.

- 'Thou/thee/thine' were used if you wanted to address (1) someone you know well; (2) someone who is your social equal or inferior; (3) someone you want to show contempt for. (It's like the French *tu*.)
- 'You/your' were the polite forms, used to address (1) someone you don't know well; (2) someone who is your social superior; (3) someone you want to show respect for; (4) as the plural form, when talking to more than one person. (It's like the French *vous*.)

Paying attention to the use of you/your and thou/thee/thine can tell us a lot about the sort of relationship that Shakespeare is portraying, whether it is friendly or contemptuous, or formal and respectful.

Shakespeare's language is also full of **puns**, which is when there's a play on a word that has more than one meaning, or where two words sound the same or mean something different (e.g. son/sun). Shakespeare doesn't only use puns for comic purposes; he also uses them at serious moments, for example in Mercutio's death scene in *Romeo and Juliet*: 'ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man' (where 'grave' means 'serious' as well as 'tomb').

Who's on stage?

When reading – rather than watching – a play, our attention tends to be taken up with who is speaking. Don't forget about silent characters who might also be on-stage. How does their silent presence affect what we're watching? How might they be reacting? For example, in the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what is Hippolyta (Theseus' bride) doing while he tries to force a woman (Hermia) to marry a man she doesn't love?