

'AUDIENCE DIRECTIONS': WORDS CAN EXPRESS IT ALL

When we speak about stage directions in a play we think of those words in italics or in square brackets which usually appear in dramatic texts. If we take an Elizabethan play and a contemporary play, the first thing that may draw our attention is the abundance of italics in the latter and its scarcity in the former. In a twentieth-century play these fragments have an almost narrative-descriptive value, as in them we are told where, how, and when the action takes place, the characters are described in detail, not only their appearance, but quite often we are also told everything referring to their feelings and personality, or even events prior to the moment the play starts. These italics are instructions that the author gives for the production and performance of the play in the way he imagines it on writing the text, they are "stage directions", that is to say, instructions for the stage.

What happened then in the Elizabethan period? Maybe the playwright had no interest in the way his play was going to be staged? If we take, for instance, Shakespeare, from whose play *Hamlet* we are going to take our examples later, we see that he was part of the company, he even acted with them, and we think that he would have been aware of what was going on on the stage. It is not likely either that the author would be present and giving directions to the actors about movements, entries and exits at every performance. And however Styan (1979: 134) says that "Shakespeare is past master at helping an actor do his job".

Stage directions existed indeed in Elizabethan texts, yet we must distinguish between "explicit stage directions" and "implicit stage directions". We call those which clearly appear as such "explicit stage directions", that is to say, they appear at the beginning or in the margins of the text, conventionally in italics, to indicate movement, the use of a prop or the entries and exits of the characters. "Implicit stage directions" are those which appear intermingled in the text and without distinction in the print type. And here lies the difficulty in staging Shakespeare's plays, in not knowing how to interpret these implicit stage directions, as every movement, every gesture is indicated in the text and we are not always able to interpret them. According to Bradbrook, "The difficulty of reconstructing Shakespeare's productions is chiefly due to the crabbed stage directions. There is little business that is not implied in the dialogue" (52). And quite often these implicit stage directions are overlooked in the productions due to our inability to discover them (Slater, 22-3). However, movement and gesture is continually called for by means of descriptions, questions or commands which appear in the text.

Regarding explicit stage directions we should add that, quite often, they simply consisted of a word, without any need for expansion, because on the Elizabethan stage, so full of conventions, many details referring to performance were taken for granted. Therefore it was enough

to say “above” or “the traverse” for actors to understand what was required of them (Bradbrook, 54). On some occasions, these stage directions were not even located in the right place, in the sense that indications such as “entry” appear some lines before the actor actually enters the stage, simply to tell him that he should be ready. Something similar happened with the exits from stage, when the actor announced he was leaving two or three lines before doing so because of the distance he had to cover.

It seems that the “bad quartos”, so called because they were the pirate editions on quarto-sized paper and based on reconstructions made either by former members of the company or people from the audience, are however the versions which have the most detailed indications about performing. M. Bradbrook (52) explains this by saying that it was so due to the suggestions made from the point of view of the spectator. A. P. Slater, however, thinks that the amount of indications in the bad quartos might be explained by the special view that an actor who had staged the play should have about it

the bad Quartos are accepted as representing the actor’s memorial reconstructions of plays in which they had performed. Their stage directions are thus particularly important because they give us a unique insight into how the plays were actually staged.
(10)

Also W. Poel, in a letter quoted by Styan (1977: 52), says that the 1603 edition or Q1 must have been of special interest for the actors, as its differences in scene arrangement, omissions and stage directions seemed to point to an edition specially aimed at acting.

However, together with A. P. Slater, we would like to go one step further in our considerations of stage directions and introduce a new variety, which is what she calls “audience directions” (13). There are some implicit stage directions, especially those referring to facial expressions or feelings that, even if performed, could hardly be appreciated by the audience if the text did not tell us that they are so. If, for instance, the text says that one of the characters can see something special in another character’s look, this would be impossible to convey to the audience at a distance. However, by means of these internal stage directions, the author can control the actions and expressions of his players, precisely and permanently, for as long as his words are obeyed. But in this way he also manages to grip our attention, forcing us to see what he wants us to see, and even making us turn our heads from side to side in obedience to his words (33).

Once established the definition of “audience direction”, I would like to analyse some of this type of directions which appear in the first two acts of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and see the effect they create on the play and the audience. We have said above how easy it was to overlook implicit stage directions, I would say that it is even easier to overlook audience directions, however we will try to give at least a sample of some of them in order to see more clearly what they are and what their role in the play is.

Act I, scene i, starts with the change of guard between Francisco, who is about to leave, and Barnardo, who is about to start his guard. In line 15 Marcellus, another guard, enters together with Horatio, a scholar and a friend of Hamlet's. Francisco and Marcellus have seen a ghost on two nights running and they have asked Horatio to come with them and be a witness to this spectral sight. Barnardo was expecting both Horatio and Marcellus as is clear from lines 13-14 when he says:¹

Bar. ... If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
 The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste. (13-14)

or later, in line 21:

Bar. Say, what, is Horatio there? (21)

In line 29, Marcellus explains that he has had to convince Horatio to go with him, as Horatio does not believe in this ghost:

Mar. Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
 And he will not let belief take hold of him,
 Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us.
 Therefore I have entreated him along
 With us to watch the minutes of this night, (26-30)

This, as Harold Jenkins says, seems to be "An explanation for the benefit of the audience rather than Barnardo, who was expecting Horatio to come" (167). It has nothing to do with movement on the stage or the use of a prop, it is simply an indication to the audience of what is going on.

The ghost appears indeed, filling the watchers with fear and wonder, something we cannot gather from their expressions but about which we are told in the dialogue:

Bar. Looks a not like the King? Mark it, Horatio.
Hor. Most like. It harrows me with fear and wonder. (46-7)

The fear they feel is mentioned again some lines later when Barnardo says about Horatio:

Bar. How now, Horatio? You tremble and look pale. (56)

Unless Horatio started shaking madly on the stage, the audience could not possibly know about his trembling, and even less about his pale countenance. Marcellus urges Horatio to speak to the ghost, and he does so, although rather tactlessly:

Hor. What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,

¹ All the quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from Harold Jenkins's edition.

Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee speak.

Mar. It is offended. (49-53)

We say tactlessly, because the result of these words is that the ghost is offended, probably by the use of the word "usurp'st" as part of Horatio's first words to him, when it is his crown as king of Denmark that has been usurped from him by his brother (Slater, 23). Again we cannot know that he is offended, unless we are so told or unless we infer it from the following line where it says that he is going away, or because later we are also told, and this is audience direction again, that he had an angry expression on his face:

Hor. ... So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice. (65-6)

This audience direction will be reinforced when later the same scene is retold to Hamlet by Horatio in I. ii. 195-242, and the latter refers again to the frowning expression on the ghost's face, adding, on this occasion that it was due more to sorrow than to anger:

Ham. What look'd he, frowningly?
Hor. A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.
Ham. Pale, or red?
Hor. Nay, very pale.
Ham. And fix'd his eyes upon you?
Hor. Most constantly. (230-4)

Something else is added in this retelling of the scene, that the ghost was pale and also that he "fix'd" his eyes on Horatio, something we cannot perceive, unless we judge it is so from the position of the ghost's head.

In act I, scene ii the whole court is gathered around the new King Claudius and his newly acquired wife Gertrude, formerly King Hamlet's wife, and Hamlet's mother. After an explanatory speech, addressed more to the audience than to the court, summarising recent events in Denmark and after taking leave of the ambassadors to Norway and of Laertes, who is going to France, both Claudius and Gertrude speak to Hamlet asking him why he is still so sad. In the explanation he gives about his state, he describes some physical aspects of his appearance that we can clearly see, such as his black clothes. However, he also tells us about subtler aspects of his appearance, as well as his feelings; aspects and feelings that he cannot represent, but about which we, as the audience, must know:

Ham. ... 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (77-86)

The fear and awe we saw that Horatio and his companions felt in the first scene of the play is present again when, in act I, scene v, Hamlet goes to the battlements of the castle with them to wait for the ghost, which eventually appears, and Hamlet makes reference to the feeling the ghost arouses in them:

Ham. ... That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (52-6)

Indeed the expression “to shake our disposition” can be a hyperbole, and there is no need for the actors to start shaking, but, in our opinion, it is obviously an audience direction to inform the spectators about the characters’ feelings.

Act II, scene i, starts with Polonius briefing his man Reynaldo, who is going to Paris to take some money to Laertes and watch his movements. When Polonius finishes giving him instructions, the servant leaves, and at that very moment Ophelia enters. Depending on how Ophelia enters the stage: rushing, stumbling, pulling her hair ..., we may guess that there is something wrong, otherwise it will be only Polonius’ question:

Pol. ... Ophelia, what’s the matter? (74)

that will tell us that there is something in Ophelia’s expression that make him think that something has happened to her. It is his question, not the expression on Ophelia’s face that lets the audience know that they must pay attention to what is coming next.

The last examples I am going to give belong to II. ii. Claudius and Gertrude, aware of Hamlet’s state and not knowing exactly what is wrong with him, send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to speak to him and to spy on him. Happy as Hamlet is to see them, in the course of the conversation he starts to mistrust them and asks:

Ham. ... Were you not sent for? Is it your
own inclination? Is it a free visitation? Come, come,
deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay, speak.

Guild. What should we say, my lord?

Ham. Anything but to th’purpose. You were sent for, and
there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your
modesties have not craft enough to colour. (274-80)

Once he has caught them out by means of their guilty looks, unnoticeable for the audience as they are, it will be again the expression on their faces that betrays them:

Ham. ... Man delights not me - nor woman neither, though
by your smiling you seem to say so.

Ros. My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts. (309-11)

We can hardly appreciate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's smiles, but we know that they are smiling because Hamlet tells us so and we can also feel the effect these smiles have on Hamlet.

We could find many other examples of audience directions in the other acts of *Hamlet*, but we think these instances are enough to see that we are dealing with a kind of drama based on words, not images. Unlike the cinema nowadays that with its close-ups can bring the actors' faces near the audience showing their tears, smiles, fears and sorrows, Elizabethan drama had to work on the text to present us with a whole world of feelings, to make words express it all.

María José Coperías Aguilar
Universidad de Valencia

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