

Shakespeare

A Teaching Guide

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Chapter 4

Mime as Meaning: *Hamlet*

Preliminary Exercise: The Telling Emotion

Not all students are able to express their understanding of a play in words, so I appeal to the actor in them. First, to get everyone energized, I use a simple warm-up exercise: to mime a particular emotion. It helps to do this early on, both to vary the usual discussion format and to overcome inhibitions. Some time during the study of Act I of *Hamlet*—for example, the day after the first quiz—I ask the class to stand and form a circle at the front of the room. (If the classroom is small, they may have to surround the desks or move to a larger space like the auditorium or the gym.) Then, I tell them to stay in the circle but turn to face the back of the next student, and to start walking. As they walk, I clap or pound the desk in a steady rhythm. Then I call out a feeling expressed by one or more of the characters in the first act of *Hamlet*—for example, “suspicion.” As soon as they hear the word, the students are to begin silently acting out that emotion, with the clap or the beat to keep them moving. After a few turns around the circle, I say, “Stop!” They pause, turn back toward the center of the circle, and mime suspicion in one frozen pose. Only then do they get to look around at what their fellow mimes are doing.

Next, I split the circle in two, and call out a second emotion—for example, “terror.” The two halves of the group alternate as silent actors and audience. Before the mimes relax, I add a new component: I ask the audience to describe what they see. What are the actors doing to show terror? In one class, for example, a boy was grimacing in a silent scream, mouth wide open, hands raised like helpless claws. A girl was cringing, hiding her face with her hands; another was squatting, one eye peeping over her tense fingers. Another boy was frozen in mid-run, looking back over his shoulder and calling silently for help. A girl was standing stock still, hand on her heart, eyes raised, jaw dropped.

Afterwards, we talk about what we have just seen: What kinds of experiences could prompt such fear? Do these statues have any similarities? What—if anything—can they teach us about the characters in the first act of *Hamlet*? Someone will probably say that they all look like they’ve seen a ghost. Modern audiences don’t believe in ghosts—or do they? What

do we have in common with Marcellus, Bernardo, and Hamlet himself, in the scene where *they* see one? Most of us dislike darkness and winter cold and unexplained phenomena. As mystery novels and horror movies continue to make clear, ghosts suddenly appearing at midnight still “harrow” not just Horatio but most of us with “fear and wonder.”

After the audience has finished commenting, I turn to the actors and ask: What happens to our bodies when we feel afraid? Someone will probably say that we feel alone, or small, or helpless. We want to cry out for help, or hide, or both. One girl said that at first she couldn’t get into the mood. What changed that? Imagining her grandmother’s basement, a place she’d been afraid of as a little girl because it smelled musty and because she’d once seen a huge spider there. A third said that as soon as he began forming his mouth into a scream, he felt his stomach contract and his hands begin to sweat; having to stay silent made it seem even more frightening, like not being able to cry out in a nightmare.

After the actors have described their feelings, I ask the audience to comment on their own responses. Someone noted that all these actors were either shrinking or trying to get away. Several of them looked incredulous—this cannot be happening, their expressions said. Another said that as soon as he saw the actor glancing over his shoulder as he “ran,” he remembered a time that the class bully was chasing him, and he felt a rush of adrenalin. So for both actor and audience, physical associations, with gestures or facial expressions or postures, can be the key to understanding a character.

The aim of this technique is not only to teach students something about a particular episode in *Hamlet* but to recreate the experience of being in a theater. The objective is to make the students react as actors and spectators, rather than as passive readers. This technique, a common kind of warm-up for actors, can be used with students of any age and level of ability. I once participated in a version of it—on random emotions, not related to any particular play—at a summer institute for teachers run by Shakespeare & Company. Our group ranged in age from late twenties to early sixties, and in experience from people who had never set foot on a stage to veteran actors and directors. For us, too, it inspired camaraderie and a release of creative energy.

If time permits, I go on to mimes of other emotions: “depression” (to help students sense Hamlet’s mood), “triumph” or “guilt” (for Claudius), “timidity” (for Ophelia), “self-righteousness” (for Polonius). I do not make these connections explicit: The mime is meant to be based on real-life experience. With younger or less able students, I might also do mime of a role, such as “king” or “daughter” or “father.”

These exercises can also serve as an audition: They allow me to note which students are imaginative or agile or uninhibited, and to see how they project their feelings “on stage.” The most promising actors, in class as on Broadway, are often not the scholarly types. Even during simple mimes, talented performers can illuminate moments in a play and win some heartening applause. Later in the term, I often find that the same students also excel at more complicated acting tasks.

The Two Faces of Claudius

By the end of Act I, students should have come to the same conclusion as Hamlet himself: Claudius has more than one face. He is both king and murderer, charismatic leader and hypocrite. A class that was having trouble understanding those seeming contradictions inspired me to invent a more involved mime exercise: “The Two Faces of Claudius.” It works like this: I ask for six volunteers to walk to the front of the class and pair up. “All right, which of you is A?” I ask.

“What? What do you mean?”

Without explaining, I say, “A’s, will each of you raise your right hand?”

After a few shrugs, the hands go up.

“Each of you is Claudius’s public face, the side he shows to his court. All right, B’s, raise your hands. You’re his private face, the self he becomes when he’s in his own chamber. Remember, you’re two sides of the same man, so you have to be linked somehow.”

A girl asks: “Is anyone else there, like Gertrude or Hamlet?”

“No, the king is alone. But he might be thinking about one of them.”

“Can we move?”

“This is supposed to be a statue, but you may make one repeated movement if you want to, like a mechanical toy. Okay, you have two minutes to work this out. Don’t just talk. Use your whole body. Try out some poses and expressions, and see if they change when you link up. When I say, ‘Stop,’ freeze and show us your two ‘faces.’”

I distract the rest of the class with a discussion on some related issue but not the process going on in front of the room. After a few self-conscious moments, the Siamese statues start forming. I give them a while to experiment. Then, once the poses are fairly set, I ask them to freeze.

In one class, a pair showed a tall, athletic boy assuming the confident stance of the conqueror, head back, arms folded, back straight; but at his side, crouching and clutching his belt, was a cringing girl. In contrast to the condescending glance of A was B’s thumb-chewing look of terror. Face A took one step forward in an attempt to shake off face B, but the cringing figure clung on and crawled after.

The next pair, both girls, were sitting in back-to-back chairs, their sides to the class. A was nodding and smiling serenely, the right hand raised in a benevolent gesture; B was grimacing fiercely and looking around suspiciously, the left hand raised to ward off blows. Here the repeated gesture was the turning head—A to bestow blessings on the court, B to search every corner for traitors.

The last statue had A holding an imaginary crown just above his head; he was facing the audience and his expression was proud and triumphant. The B figure, meanwhile, had turned away, his back touching A's side at a three-quarter angle. He, too, was holding an imaginary crown, but clutching it tightly to his chest, his shoulders hunched and his expression wary. Neither figure moved.

I asked the rest of the class to walk up to the three pairs and observe—to be the visitors to the sculpture gallery. After a round of applause, I asked the audience to describe what they saw: What impressions of Claudius did they get? Did the three versions have anything in common? What new insights did the statues give them about Claudius's strengths and weaknesses? Someone who had felt only Claudius's ruthlessness before might notice the fear that his transgressions could provoke. Another might see the competence of the man, the splendid public figure that he makes. Some might question for the first time how much of his private self he reveals to his new queen.

After the audience has commented, the actors can talk about how they felt. What difference did it make to be representing only half of the man? Did they change a gesture or a concept in response to their partner? Did they discuss the change, or simply do it? Would they change anything now, after seeing the other pairs? They might mention the effects of ensemble playing, of how a conception grows in relation to other actors. They might realize the range of choices possible in playing Claudius—and some of the pleasures of making such choices. They might comment on how playing a role makes you more sensitive to other actors' choices. The older and the more articulate the class, the more they will notice. I do not, of course, expect the acting to be of professional calibre. Some students will be self-conscious or melodramatic or wooden. But others will give deeply felt and inventive performances. The audience, having tried the exercise and realized its demands, is in a better position to appreciate those efforts. Their comments, on these scenes and on more polished performances that the class sees later, tend to be both informed and warm.

The Two Faces technique can work with any conflicted character—with Ophelia in her madness, with Laertes in his vengeful stage, with Hamlet in nearly every act. It is equally useful for other plays—in bringing out Iago's hypocrisy, for example, or Viola's concealed attraction to Duke Orsino, or Lady Macbeth's ambivalence about murdering the fatherly Duncan. This method gets students on their feet and spotlights people who are better actors than readers. It creates some odd couples and encourages them to communicate and cooperate. It gives a class's response to the play an immediacy that reading and discussion may not provide. Finally, the mime becomes both a reward and a summary for the study of the text that has led to this felt understanding.

Chapter 5

The Live Sculpture: *Hamlet*

A more complex mime exercise than the Two Faces technique is one that I learned from Mary King Austin at the Shakespeare & Company summer institute: the Live Sculpture. The object is to create a silent arrangement of some key moment in a play—the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, the murder of Desdemona in *Othello*. The goal is not a literal re-creation of the episode but a grouping that suggests what each character knows and feels, and how he or she relates to the others. It may include not only characters literally present in the scene but any who exert an influence. For example, the senior Capulets and Montagues could be shown blocking the lovers' attempts to reach one another; Iago might be hovering over and laughing at Desdemona's death struggle. The sculpture may even include a character who never appears in the play—the Duchess of Gloucester reacting to her husband's illegitimate son; the Nurse's dead daughter, whose place in the woman's affections Juliet fills. What this technique asks students to do is to look at a scene with a director's eye and then show, not tell, the subtext: what is beneath and beyond the words. Here is how it works.

When I want a change from the usual reading-writing-discussion format or when I sense that some people are having trouble understanding motives and relationships, I tell the class that we're going to do something completely different. At this point in our study of *Hamlet*, for example, I want students to understand not only the conflicting feelings in Claudius but also how they affect his relationships with his family and his subjects. I say that we're going to create a live sculpture of the king's first public audience. I ask someone to volunteer to be the "sculptor." His job, I explain, is to choose classmates who will act as the various statues, and to arrange them in poses that show their roles in the scene and their relationships to one another. He may describe how he wants someone to stand, or, briefly, what he thinks the character may be feeling at this moment. But the emphasis should be on practice, not theory. I ask the sculptor to pick and arrange the statues one at a time, in what seems to him their order of importance. He may limit the choices to the major actors in the scene or he may add minor players. He may also include a character who is not, in fact, present but who influences the action at this point—someone who is on a journey or who has died, for example.

Even with these instructions, there is often a flurry of questions—Can girls play male characters? What if someone does not want to be in a scene? Can the actors move? Can they use props? What if the sculptor gets things wrong? I try to dispose of such questions quickly, before the energy gets lost in self-consciousness: Girls may be cast as males, and vice versa. Everyone has to take part. Each actor is allowed one movement, clockwork-style, as in the Two Faces exercise. “Props” should be imaginary, suggested by gestures, but actors may use a piece of furniture, like a chair, if it is important to the scene. If the sculptor misreads a relationship or an action or leaves out something crucial, there will be two chances to correct it. Once the group sculpture is complete, each actor will be allowed to move, to create her or his own statue. Finally, the audience and then the “statues” will be asked to comment, both on the individual figures and on the ensemble.

On this occasion, Holly, who has been in several school musicals, volunteers to be the sculptor. She looks around the class and finally picks Clint, a tall, handsome boy. “You’re Claudius,” she says. He blushes, but follows her good-humoredly to the front of the class. “Could you help me move Ms. H’s desk chair to the middle of the room?” They put it in the center of the “stage.” “Okay, that’s your throne. Sit in it, and for right now just look pleased with yourself and in charge.” He sits. “No, sit up more. Pretend you’re holding one of those sticks kings always have.” “A scepter,” someone volunteers. “Yeah,” she says. She squints at him critically. “Put your chin up a little more. This is your big moment, like Christmas morning and graduation all at once.” He draws himself up straighter.

“Good. Okay, now I need Gertrude.” She looks the class over again and points to Molly, a large, bold-looking girl, who gives a pleased giggle. “Now we need another throne, a smaller one. Are there any more chairs? No, we’ll just have to use a desk. Tom, can I borrow yours? Thanks.” They move it to the right of Claudius’s. “Now, sit down, Gertrude, and look at Claudius. You’re in love, and you’re really glad to be queen again.” The girl tries a Madonna come-hither look. “Not *that* much in love. The whole court is there, don’t forget.”

Molly looks offended. “Where? I don’t see anyone.”

“Just pretend. No, wait, let’s get ’em up here. Who else is around?” She appeals to me. “Can I look in my book?”

“No, no books,” I say, “but you can get help from your audience.”

“Help me, you guys,” Holly pleads, and people begin speaking up.

“It said ‘courtiers’ in the book. I looked it up—people who hang around the court.”

“Yeah, and the old guy—Polonius is there.”

“And his son. What’s his name?”

The sculptor’s memory has been jogged. “Right, Laertes. Okay.” She goes up to a thin blond boy. “Ken, you’re Laertes. Come on up and stand to the king’s left. He’s just given you permission to go back to France, so you like him a lot. Bow a little in his direction. Yeah,

that's it. Now, let's see," she looks at a heavy-set boy and nods. "Mike, you're Polonius. Come and stand next to Laertes, and put one hand on his shoulder. You're really proud of your boy and glad that the king appreciates him, too, but you hate to let him go. Look a little more sad." Mike wrinkles his forehead. "Can you look older, too?"

He bends over, and leans on a imaginary cane. "How's this?"

"Great!" She stands back. "Wow, this is practically all men. We oughta have some court ladies here, too. Let's see, Amy and Laura, will you come up here? Get over there with Polonius and Laertes. Bill, stand next to Laura, and Jim, next to Amy, and take their arms. Okay, you ladies have fans, and you're staring straight at the royals. Naw, this looks lopsided. Could we have one couple move over beside Gertrude? Bill and Laura—yeah, good."

"How are we supposed to feel? Do we suspect anything?" Amy asks.

"Hmmm. Good question. *You* do, you're looking a little suspicious, but the other three are just going along with it—the yes-men. Hide behind your fan a little and stare at Claudius. Good... So, that's it, I guess."

"Hey, what about Hamlet?"

"Oh, wow, how could I forget *him*? He's the one who changes everything." Her eyes skim the class and stop at a sallow-faced boy with a wry expression. "Jeremy, you're Hamlet." He starts, then follows her to the front. "Okay, you're right at the front, looking out at us. No, not in the center, off to the right. That's it. Now look back over your shoulder at Claudius and Gertrude, but at us, too."

"Huh? How can I do both of those things?"

"Well, stand at an angle. Yeah, point your shoulder at them but look at us. Okay, now cross your arms. You're *not* going to go along with celebration stuff."

She gives the panorama a last critical glance. "Gertrude, you have one hand on Claudius's arm, but you're looking at Hamlet. And you're worried. Okay, that's it. I'm done."

Now I ask the audience to look carefully at the sculpture, standing up and walking around it if necessary. After everyone has seen it, I ask for a round of applause. Next, I tell Holly to go up to each actor, in the order in which she chose them, and ask if they want to move. Claudius says that he likes the triumphant pose for *one* moment, but wants to be able to check Hamlet out—to turn his head and glare at him—no, just shift his gaze and narrow his eyes. When he does that, Gertrude decides to turn and look at him, questioningly, and her grip on his arm tightens. As they shift, Hamlet does, too: He puts his hands on his hips and turns to confront them directly. The courtiers react by looking more suspiciously at Hamlet. Only Laertes remains smiling and oblivious. Finally, Polonius says that he feels he should be between the king and Hamlet, bowing and holding a hand out to each. The actors decide not to switch back and forth between the two poses but to hold the second. The class claps again.

I tell the actors to relax but to stay in their places. Then I ask them to comment on their choices.

Clint, a.k.a. Claudius, says, “As soon as Hol added Hamlet to the scene, I felt threatened. I mean, I know that I killed his father, and I’m afraid he does, too.”

Molly-Gertrude responds, “As soon as Clint got defensive, I felt worried. I don’t want to know what happened to my first husband, but I think I *do*—at least, on some level.”

Bill—a courtier—says, “I think the courtiers know, too. That’s why I looked daggers at Hamlet. I think we’re all Claudius’s boys: if he goes, we do, too.”

Jeremy-Hamlet objects: “But Hamlet doesn’t know about the murder yet, does he? Has he met the ghost yet or not?”

Clint: “He hasn’t, but he already hates his uncle. He’s going to make a big public scene and embarrass him, remember.”

Me: “So we definitely need Hamlet there. Does everyone agree that all three members of the Hamlet family suspect that something is rotten?”

Nods and mumbles. From a girl in the corner: “Yeah. I liked the second sculpture better, ’cause it showed that.”

Clint: “I actually liked the first version better, because it showed the image we were trying to get people to accept—the new king, the new marriage, everything A-okay.”

Holly: “Maybe I should’ve done both poses—you know, the surface and the real thing.”

Several murmurs of approval.

Me: “Okay. Was there any statue that *didn’t* seem right?”

Laura: “Well, I’m not sure that Polonius would be exactly torn between Claudius and Hamlet. I think he’s the king’s man, whoever that king is. I’d have him lean more toward Clint.”

Mike-Polonius concedes.

Me: “Is anyone missing, anyone you would add?”

Ken, who played Laertes, sits up: “What about Ophelia? She was there, wasn’t she?”

Several students check their books. Meg says, “It doesn’t list her—I mean, she doesn’t talk in this scene—but it does include the whole court. And if her father and brother are there, she’d have to be.”

Me: “Good. Be Ophelia for a minute, Meg. What would you do?”

Meg stands up. “Can I get Ken and Jeremy back up here? Okay, I’d just stand there and look back and forth between them.”

“Try it. What do you think, people?”

Holly: “She needs Polonius there, too. She’s such a Daddy’s girl.”

“Okay, Mike, back up for a second. How do you feel now, Meg?”

“Oh, like he’s watching me—or I should be watching him. I think I’d look back and forth between him and Hamlet. But I’m really happy right now. Clueless.”

“Do it. What do you think, audience?”

Molly: “Yeah, that’s good. It’s easy to forget about Ophelia, but she’s going to be destroyed by all this stuff she doesn’t even suspect right now. Poor thing.”

Me: “So, is that it?”

Jeremy: “No, I think that my old dad should be there—his ghost, I mean.”

Ken: “But he hasn’t even met Hamlet yet.”

Jeremy: “So? He’s what’s really behind this whole scene.”

Me: “Okay, Jeremy, cast him.”

Jeremy: “Dave. Drag that desk over behind the throne. Okay, stand up on it and sort of hover over Claudius.”

Dave: “Should I, like, stab him?”

Jeremy: “No. That’s Hamlet’s job. But you can point to him—yeah—and sort of beckon to Hamlet.”

Holly: “Ooh, wow, wish I’d thought of that.”

Me: “Good work, everybody. Okay, let’s do the whole sculpture one more time, with Ophelia and the Ghost added.”

Holly: “Can people switch back and forth between the two poses—the glitzy surface and the ugly stuff underneath?”

Me: “You’re the boss.”

Holly: “Okay. I want the two poses, but the Ghost will only be in the second one. Dave, crouch down behind the throne. Now when he climbs up and looms over Claudius, everyone else switch to the guilty pose.”

This time the switch in mood is striking and the applause enthusiastic.

If there is time, and the interest has remained high, I ask the class to do a second sculpture during the same period. Another scene from Act I that works well is Laertes's farewell to his father and sister. There, too, the tasks are to decide how close to make the family members, how much to reveal about their hidden feelings. This assignment can also be useful for a mid-play climax: the terrified exit of Claudius from Hamlet's "Mousetrap," the murder of Banquo in *Macbeth*, the public shaming of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the "trial" of Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*, the confrontation of Antony and Augustus Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It works equally well for a final panorama—the "quarry" of deaths in the last scene of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, the marriage dances at the end of *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the recognitions and revelations that close *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale*. Finally, I have used it with not a particular scene but a general relationship—e.g., the evil sisters' battle for the bastard Edmund's affections in *King Lear*, or Iago's taunting of Othello, both of which continue through several scenes.

The group sculptures usually become more inventive as the semester goes on. As students come to understand the goals of the assignment and get to know one another better, they are usually more willing to risk looking silly or melodramatic. The performances become more intense and the sculptors' focus sharper.

Like the Two Faces exercise, the Live Sculpture serves several purposes, and it works for students of every ability level. It rewards daring, spontaneity, and instinct, the nonverbal qualities that fine actors share. It also clarifies the director's role, by reducing casting and blocking to the simplest terms and by showing how a single change in expression or position creates a ripple effect in every actor. Whether students are directing, playing in, or watching such silent scenes, this technique can build confidence in those who do not see themselves as scholars. At the same time, it calls on the critical gifts of students who are not natural actors but can hear and explain a nuance of meaning. Both kinds of students learn a new appreciation of their peers; a talented few make the heady discovery that they can act or direct or analyze with equal ease. As in playing on a winning team, cooperation, not competition, becomes the ruling principle, and everyone gets a chance at the fun of seeing a play or the thrill of performing before an audience. In other words, the Live Sculpture serves theater's essential communal role in a classroom setting.