

Shakespeare Wrote No Characters

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Abstract:

The purpose of my research was to answer a simple question: “What can be said about Hamlet's character?” When analyzing any Shakespearean play, it is commonplace to begin (and end) with the characters that inhabit it. But is this sort of analysis appropriate for Renaissance plays? Freud's famous interpretation of Hamlet operates in this fashion, determining the meaning of the play through the vehicle of Hamlet's character—specifically, the psychology of Hamlet's character. Such a reading assumes, however, the interiority of character: that fictional characters have mental landscapes, complete with pasts that lead to the present as related in the events of the play. Are these kinds of assumptions about characters consistent with the environment from which they came? In other words, did writers like Shakespeare during Shakespeare's time possess the ideological framework to create such characters? This thesis will probe that very question, tracing the history of the fictional character and the philosophical movements necessary for their development, examining the society in which these characters were created through an investigation of Renaissance concepts of theatrical production, identity, authorship, and the individual, as well as the editorial practices that have and continue to shape character. When these disparate, but interrelated threads are observed as a whole, the modern notion of character seems an ill-fitting garment for the already distempered prince of Denmark to wear, giving him attributes his Elizabethan audience could never have imagined. I will argue in my thesis that to approach Hamlet as a character is to project an ideological framework upon him, and by extension Shakespeare, that

cannot be reconciled with our understanding of history, and that another, more accurate term may suit him: namely, role. Role grounds Hamlet in the textual origins of his existence, identifying him as a part of a greater whole, the play—not an abstracted identity separable from the text, which is the modern character.

Introduction

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Whatever its charms, Dr. Ernest Jones hated Canada; in a letter to Sigmund Freud, the fierce Welshman laid out his misgivings:

They are a despicable race, exceedingly bourgeois, quite uncultured, very rude, very stupid and very narrow and pious. They are naïve, childish and hold the simplest view of the problems of life. They care for nothing except money-making and sport, they chew gum instead of smoking or drinking, and their public meeting places are monuments of sentimental platitudes.¹

Though thoroughly resentful of his current environment, Jones's stay in Canada precipitated an explosion of academic work.² Jones credited the "cold weather and the unattractive environment" as the source of his diligence; the bland surroundings—dearth of music and the arts—provided just the backdrop necessary for Jones to write one of the most important essays in the history of psychoanalysis—also, interestingly, one of the most important essays in the history of Shakespearean studies: "Toronto unleashed Jones's imagination. His essay on Hamlet was the first, and arguably remains the best, Freudian interpretation of a work of literature."³ Although Freud is best known for the Oedipal reading of Hamlet, his analysis of the play was at the time only a footnote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.⁴ Freud himself never established psychoanalysis as a literary

¹ qtd. in Brenda Maddox, *Freud's Wizard: Ernest Jones and the Transformation of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: da Capo, 2006) 69.

² Maddox 83.

³ Maddox 69, 86.

⁴ Maddox 86.

school; “It was left to Freud’s followers, however,” Jonathan Gil Harris observes, “to turn psychoanalysis into a bona fide mode of literary criticism.”⁵

Jones’s essay, published in January of 1910, started what would become an integral part of conventional literary rhetoric concerning Hamlet and tackles what had been a problem for critics of Hamlet for centuries: why does Hamlet delay? Jones fleshes out what Freud began in his footnote; desires, hidden for years in his psyche, prevented Hamlet from immediately killing Claudius. Hamlet saw Claudius as doing what he never could: “kill his father and marry his mother.”⁶ Hamlet’s delay was then framed as the result of repressed emotions, his distemper the consequence of the psychological turmoil that comes from incestuous desires unfulfilled. This important essay, which would later be expanded into a book, attempted to establish the legitimacy of psychoanalytic thought, a burgeoning theory whose emergence loosely coincided with the rise of literary criticism as a whole.⁷ This concurrence mirrors the seeming relationship between the theory and Shakespeare; “if Freudian psychoanalysis aims to take that architecture of the self apart,” Phillip Armstrong remarks, “then it becomes apparent why Freudian theory and *Hamlet* appear to have been made for each other all along.”⁸ This connection would be strengthened by the work of later psychoanalysts, creating a close relationship between the Renaissance playwright and the controversial school of psychology.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan expounded on Hamlet’s desire through some interesting, if a little incoherent, means.⁹ Using “digressions, obscure puns, and diagrams that do not quite make sense,” Lacan modified Freud and Jones’s paradigm

⁵ Jonathan G. Harris, *Shakespeare and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) 78.

⁶ Maddox 86.

⁷ Philip Armstrong, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2001) 26.

⁸ Armstrong 41.

⁹ Harris 95.

concerning Hamlet and the Queen; Lacan contended that “Hamlet’s legendary indecision is therefore not the product of an Oedipal desire *for* his mother. . . . Rather. . . Hamlet is frozen by his fixation *within* his mother’s desire, from which he cannot separate himself.”¹⁰ Through the vehicle of criticism like Lacan’s, it remained popular to interpret Hamlet psychologically, to psychoanalyze his “character.” This type of interpretation has continued on through the work of contemporary literary figures like Julia Reinhard Lupton and Philip Armstrong, critics whose informed, engaging work has helped to maintain the viability of the psychoanalytic approach to Shakespearean texts.

But almost since its inception the bold theory has had to contend with detractions. “The first major statement rejecting this psychological approach,” Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights observe, “was L. C. Knights’s famous essay ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’”¹¹ Knights attacks the psychological nature assumed of Shakespearean characters by critics, arguing for a more textual, less psychological analysis of character: “[T]he bulk of Shakespeare criticism is concerned with his characters, his heroines, his love of Nature or his ‘philosophy’—with everything in short, except with the words on the page, which it is the main business of the critic to examine.”¹² Knights’s criticism of the psychological approach to characters is not without its contemporary champions; during the late nineteen-eighties, through the nineties, and beyond the turn of the millennium, critics like Henry Berger, Stephen Orgel, Margreta de Grazia and Peter Sallibrass have questioned the psychoanalytic approach to Shakespeare and,

¹⁰ Harris 95, 97.

¹¹ Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin, “Introduction,” *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 2.

¹² L. C. Knights, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism* (New York: Haskell, 1973) 11.

specifically, the perceived internality of character on which the approach is predicated. The 2007 publication of de Grazia's *Hamlet without Hamlet* and the 2009 edition of Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton's *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* signal that an animated critical dialogue concerning the nature of Shakespeare's characters is still active. The 2009 publication of Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights's *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, a collection of essays by noted Shakespeareans, captures a cross-section of this vibrant conversation. It seems that literary criticism, to a certain extent, is searching for a character paradigm and is in an unstable state that is the result of decades of spirited debate:

But Shakespearean characters, who have been de-realized and whose influence has been severely diminished by materialist critique, have not fully recovered their prominence or vitality within Shakespeare studies.

Shakespeare criticism, we suggest, has been rendered tongue-tied by the absence of a coherent account of what Trevor Ponech in this volume calls “real fictive characters.”¹³

Hundreds of years old, but as timely as ever, the question of character looms over Renaissance studies. But, despite this “absence” of critical consensus, it seems common, traditional, and appropriate to interact with Shakespeare's characters as one would modern “real fictive characters.” It's a notion of his plays that has remained active, even dominant, in literary discourse. “We're used to the idea that Shakespearean character is something large and personal,” Anthony Dawson contends, “that it is distinct from allegorical personage or satirical caricature, that it entails psychology, some sense of a

¹³ Slights and Yachnin 4.

match between our own inner experience and our perception of the fiction being constructed.”¹⁴ The Shakespearean character that Dawson discusses is contingent on numerous theoretical assumptions, assumptions that he partially outlines in the passage. He assumes that Shakespearean character is something apart from literary devices like “satirical caricature” and “allegorical personage.” It is something he regards as “large and personal,” equipped with a “psychology.” In other words, Dawson approaches characters as if they were individuals that emerged from Shakespeare’s authorship. There is nothing foreign or unusual about these assumptions—as Dawson accurately puts it, we’re “used to the idea.”

Indeed, we are “used to the idea,” but it’s an idea over which the current conversation remains embroiled. The “materialist critique,” spearheaded by such figures as Jonathan Goldberg and Jeffrey Masten, took its toll on the “psychological” Shakespeare character—but the “psychological” Shakespeare character remains. The depths of characters’ minds continue to submit themselves to literary analysis, and the legitimacy of such analysis has been represented and maintained in the work of many prominent critics. The purpose of this thesis is to engage with and continue that conversation. Through the figure of Hamlet, and the work of many scholars, the nature of Shakespearean character will be investigated. It’s a journey that begins in the environment from which his “characters” were born. The first chapter will delve into this environment, tackling the concepts of “author” and “individual.” As the discussion continues, the status of these concepts in Elizabethan England will appear a good deal removed from their use in contemporary discourse: the author will feel dubiously

¹⁴ Dawson, Anthony, “Is Timon a Character?,” ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 197.

authorial; the individual will appear curiously dividual. Authorship will be revealed as a product of a different time, invested with concepts of originality that didn't arise until copyright laws were governmentally mandated. The individual will suffer the instability of gender in Shakespeare's time—an insecurity that subverts the stability of identity necessary for the concept of the individual. Through scholarly insights into the significance of property, clothing, signature and name, the individuality of the individual will seem increasingly improbable, perhaps wholly anachronistic. In short, the literary and philosophical notions that underpin modern "character," that generate or inspire "characters," were, in the Renaissance, demonstrably lacking to suit the needs of modern character criticism. The second chapter will concern characters and the texts in which they are found. Beginning with the classical concept of character, the semantic evolution of the term will be traced. As character emerges, the very timing of the word's arrival in English, first as a signification of an engraved "character," later as dramatic personage, will throw uncertainty on the appropriateness of its association with Shakespearean texts. Speaking of texts, the very material properties of the texts will resist character; their instability, malleability, and uncertainty violate the terms on which literary character is founded. But more than just a critique, the second chapter will conclude with the suggestion of another, perhaps more accurate term for Shakespearean personages—a term that takes into account the complications with which the Renaissance theater presents the reader and critic.

The literary critical term "character" has long been accorded the incontrovertibly of the obvious. This thesis will show, however, that it was neither obvious to Shakespeare and his audiences nor historically inevitable. That is not the same as

returning us to Shakespeare's true intentions. For even if we were to replace "character" with a more suitable sixteenth-century word, we would still bring to our study a modern perspective and more than two-hundred years of lexical change. Yet the elucidation of the history of character is eminently valuable because it exposes the priorities and values of the critical tradition that put it in place and thereby helps us to begin to glimpse other possible ways of approaching the Shakespearean text. Only Shakespeare knew what passed through his mind as he penned whatever portion of Hamlet he penned. It's possible he conceived Hamlet as a psychological being, but this thesis isn't concerned with the total refutation of the possible, only the assertion of the probable. The probable places Hamlet in a room apart from character; the probable places Hamlet over a century removed from the concept. The probable would have us say, against tradition and inclination, that Shakespeare wrote no characters.

Chapter 1

The Author and the Individual

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Who possesses a name and by what right?

—Stephen Greenblatt

Published in 1741, *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope, in Prose. Vol. II* includes an interesting little piece of satiric fiction that wasn't exactly, or I should say exclusively, the work of Mr. Pope.¹⁵ In the second half of the publication—with its own pagination—resides the curious work in question: *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*.¹⁶ It's interesting that such a piece should find itself so presented, but, before I get to the *Memoirs* themselves, perhaps I should clarify my comment concerning its authorship. When I say that the work “wasn't exactly” the work of Pope, I think the constitution of a work must be discussed; I must first address the assumptions that a work comes with, namely, its origination in an author.

The popular modern conception of authorship is a rather simple one: authors create books. They generate works. Authorship is, in at least two ways, understood mostly as an *original* process. The completed, satisfactory work of an author is an “original,” carrying with it the authority of artistic intent fulfilled. Literary authorship, however, creates an original of another sort; Literary authorship is an expression of *originality*—the unique ideas of an individual writer's mind. In fact, literary authorship emerges from the concept of the individual. It is only through individual expression that

¹⁵ Charles Kerby-Miller, “The Authorship, Composition, and Publication of the *Memoirs*,” *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, by John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and Alexander Pope, ed. Charles Kerby-Miller (New York: Russell, 1966) 64.

¹⁶ Kerby-Miller 64.

works can be formed. Works powered by exceptional inspiration, delivered in inventive rhetoric, and preserved in a whole and healthy manuscript are the products of individual authors. When questions of authorship come up, when works are discussed, the foundational concept of the individual is implied.

Given this conception, the authorship of *Memoirs* seems to have a tenuous correlation to the concept of “authorship” that is now commonplace. *Memoirs* is a satire, written by members of the Scriblerus club; some notable Scriblerians, and, therefore, co-authors of a sort, were Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and John Gay. These men did not comprise the whole of the document’s authorship; Both Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot had a hand in the creation.¹⁷ The sort of authorship at work in the construction of *Memoirs* is therefore, by modern standards, a vague one. The attribution of intellectual property, exactly what is whose, could hardly be more unclear. Such problems are always encountered when dealing with a work of collaboration, but this particular “case is made worse by the absence of any concrete information.”¹⁸ The best source we have for sorting out this authorial mystery is the commentary of Swift, who, in a letter to Arbuthnot, appraised the work of the members involved:

To talk of Martin in any hands but yours, is a folly. You every day give better hints than all of us together could do in twelvemonth; and to say the truth, Pope who first thought of the hint has no genius at all to it, in my mind. Gay is too young; Parnell has some ideas of it, but is idle; I could put together, and

¹⁷ Kerby-Miller 57.

¹⁸ Kerby-Miller 57.

lard, and strike out well enough, but all that relates to the sciences must be from you.¹⁹

This account, which Charles Kerby-Miller calls a “very sharp analysis,” scarcely gives an actual report of who wrote what—which is, after all, the essential part of authorship.²⁰ Indeed, figuring out who wrote what would be a feat. It would require an impossibly perceptive editorial eye to search through the text, divining which of the many “ideas” of *Memoirs* where the “some ideas” of Parnell or how much of the work should be attributed to Pope—considering he “first thought of the hint,” yet of the complete work “has no genius at all to it.” What can be said of the fact that its first publication is in *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope, in Prose. Vol. II?* What does this suggest about the conception of authorship at the time, given the questionable nature of Pope’s “hand” in the work? After all, according to Swift, to talk about the text in anyone’s “hands” except Arbuthnot’s “is a folly,” yet there it first was, in Pope’s *Works*—not in Arbuthnot’s “hands.” Credit was given to Arbuthnot in the text—“the work was identified as by Pope and Dr. Arbuthnot”—but the other contributors are nowhere to be found, and the significance of its inclusion within Pope’s *Works* cannot be overlooked.²¹

Memoirs proves to be an intriguing text even as the cover is lifted, wherever it is found. In a particularly interesting turn of events, Martinus Scriblerus finds himself married to conjoined twins; this marriage, extraordinary as it is, is promptly brought before the court as a possible case of bigamy. In defense of Martinus and answering the charge of bigamy by the prosecutor Dr. Leatherhead, Dr. Penny-feather makes a fascinating contention: “[Dr. Leatherhead] maintains no less an absurdity than this, that

¹⁹ qtd. in Kerby-Miller 57.

²⁰ Kerby-Miller 57.

²¹ Kerby-Miller 65.

One is Two; and that Lindamira-Indamora, the individual wife of the Plaintiff, is not one, but two Persons” (156). In support of this declaration of the singular, “individual” nature of Lindamira-Indamora, Penny-feather asserts that “where there is but one Member of Generation, there is but one body, so there can be but one Soul; because the said organ of Generation is the Seat of the Soul; and consequently, where there is but one such Organ, there can be but one Soul” (158). In other words, because Lindamira and Indamora share the same set of reproductive organs they are, effectively (legally), *the same person*. As “absurd” as this line of argument sounds (it is a satire, after all), it provokes interesting questions about the nature of identity—at least, the conceptions of that nature at work even in a post-Renaissance Europe. And provoking questions should naturally emerge from a text that seems to be resistant to rigid assignation of authorial identity and ambivalent concerning the source of individual identity.

But fiction doesn’t ask the most powerful questions of that sort; historical events present equally challenging situations. Stephen Greenblatt discusses a rather strange case of identity theft in his introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*:

In his essay “On Cripples,” Shakespeare’s great contemporary Montaigne alludes to a strange case of impersonation in a small rural community in southwestern France. There, a cunning imposter succeeded in assuming the identity of Martin Guerre, a man who had disappeared some years before. The imposter lived in the community for three years, sleeping with Guerre’s wife and farming his land, until the real Martin Guerre unexpectedly returned. Convicted of fraud, the imposter confessed and was hanged.²²

²² Stephen Greenblatt, “The Comedy of Errors,” Introduction, *The Norton Shakespeare*, by William Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and

It seems ridiculous that no one, not even *Guerre's wife*, could differentiate between the man that was Martin Guerre and the imposter that claimed to be, but, as ridiculous as it seems, it happened. And, the fact that it happened has provocative implications. “More telling, perhaps,” Greenblatt continues,

the questions raised by the strange case of Martin Guerre linger unresolved at the end of Shakespeare’s comedy: What is the self? What are the guarantees of identity? Who possesses a name and by what right? How is individuality secured? How can one person represent another?²³

This chapter will explore similar questions. This thesis’s investigation into the nature of character, specifically the Shakespearean character, must first start with the origin and model of character: the “authors” that create them and the people from whom they are derived. Many modern critics, like Dawson, approach characters as if they were distinct individuals; they approach Shakespeare’s creation of these characters as an act of authorship; therefore, a more informed concept of the Renaissance notion of authorship and the individual will appropriately background the discussion of the character of character. As such notions are discussed, the context in which Shakespeare’s works emerged will appear increasingly unstable—as demonstrably uncertain as the “authorship” of *Memoirs*.

Despite being commonly identified as the “early modern” period, the Renaissance environment described will be one strikingly removed from modern thought, exhibiting disparities that manifest themselves most dramatically in the concepts this chapter is

Andrew Gurr. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 717.

²³ Greenblatt 718.

primarily concerned with. In the past several decades, the particular nature of Shakespeare's authorship has been radically reexamined, and this chapter, for the most part, represents a review of some of the most poignant of these critical reassessments in Renaissance literary studies. Would Shakespeare have considered himself as an "author"? Would he have identified himself as an "individual"?

The Individual

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To suggest that the secret to a person's identity can be found in his or her sexual organs, as Dr. Penny-feather did in Martinus's defense, would seem ridiculous and possibly insane if suggested in a modern courtroom. Though for our postmodern culture sex is relevant to issues of personal identity, the individual is more or less an abstract concept, fetched from elsewhere so to speak. The modern sense of identity, it seems, is not so tethered to the specifics of our anatomy that even such an odd case would allow for a singular conception of what is evidently two persons, but, when Renaissance notions of personhood are examined, what at first seems entirely preposterous becomes eminently possible. If nothing else, what *Memoirs* implicates is a radically different concept of identity at play over a hundred years after Shakespeare's death, which, by extension, suggests that those concepts at work in Elizabethan England might be as radical, if not more so. Such radically different concepts are never more obvious than in sixteenth-century ideas about gender. Currently, normative ideas about gender identity remain largely an issue of anatomy: the body defines the dual categories of male and

female, categories that are, for the most part, stable and exclusive. Interestingly, such stability wasn't afforded by Renaissance medical principles, as Peter Stallybrass explains:

the instability of gender categories...was already inscribed within what was still the dominant Galenic medical discourse. According to the Galenic view, the only genital distinction between men and women was one of heat—the heat which caused the female vagina to “pop out” into the morphologically identical male penis. Or, as Ambroise Paré, perhaps the greatest Renaissance surgeon, put it, the genitals of men and women differ “onely in situation and use. For that which man hath apparent without, that women have hid within.”²⁴

The dichotomy of gender, what is now, obviously, a commonplace two-category certainty, was not so dichotomous, was not so obvious; “In Galenic discourse, then,” Stallybrass continues, “There was no stable biological divide between male and female.”²⁵ Gender, while anatomically dependant, was not biologically secure, an

intriguing flexibility of identity that was reflected in artistic practices. There is a striking instance of this controvertibility in two states of an engraving of James I and his family by Willem van de Passe. The second state of the engraving shows alterations made to reflect changes in the royal family, but not as we might expect. Instead of engraving each child anew to denote growth and maturation, the younger children have been moved into the bodies formerly occupied by their elder siblings....Even gender subscribes to place,

²⁴ Peter Stallybrass, “Introduction,” *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 8.

²⁵ Peter Stallybrass, “Introduction” 8.

so that a pantalooned figure is now a young princess (Louisa) when it had previously been her elder brother (Mauritius).²⁶

Such instances indicate a cavalier attitude toward what is now considered an essential distinction of the individual identity, a curious plasticity of gender manifested in Shakespeare, as his “Master Mistress sonnet” attests.²⁷ Willem’s inattentiveness to the gender of the children suggests, at least, that gender itself wasn’t a salient aspect of identity or, perhaps, that gender itself wasn’t as important as other qualities already indicated by the body itself, regardless of gender. As de Grazia and Stallybrass observe, the pressing issue to the artist seems to be one of position within the family, not gender differentiation.²⁸ Gender, if it were indicated in such a portrait, would be more significant in its relation of hierarchical position than representative of a specific individual: “The individuated bodies represent not individuals but rather relational places within the family.”²⁹ Thus, the fixity and accuracy of gendered depiction (and, therefore, the accuracy of individual depiction) was secondary or supplementary to “relational” distinction. What is communicated by this portrait is not distinct representation, not concern with “individuals”; the artist’s ambivalence—or what we would call ambivalence—not only fails to denote individual persons but effectively effaces any claim they would have to such a distinction. Such a work has implications concerning both the Renaissance artist’s representational obligations and the concepts of the persons the artist sought to represent. Seemingly, it was not incumbent on Willem to produce individuated persons within his work, an ironic absence of representational accuracy

²⁶ Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” *Shakespeare: The Critical Complex*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Sean Keilen (New York: Garland, 1999) 16.

²⁷ de Grazia and Stallybrass 16.

²⁸ de Grazia and Stallybrass 16.

²⁹ de Grazia and Stallybrass 16.

where it would now be thought most important, indicating that either the artist didn't feel responsible for such a thorough reproduction or that what he created was a thorough reproduction and what is now considered accuracy was then irrelevant. Far from suggesting some sort of malicious intent on the part of the artist, it seems that Willem's subjects were not considered individuals whose individuality could be erased.

Intrinsically unstable, almost undefined by definition, it would appear that gender was "manifestly a *production*, in which sexual difference was constructed and transformed."³⁰ Far from being inherent to the individual and guaranteed by the physical realities of organs, gender identity was secured by more superficial means. Identity as a whole, in fact, was secured by more superficial means, requiring multiple supporting apparatuses of identification. This "production" to which Stallybrass refers was manifested most immediately in clothing: "At least eight proclamations were issued in Tudor England in order to prevent 'the confusion...of degrees' that results 'where the meanest are as richly appareled as their betters.'"³¹ Such a vested concern in the distribution and wearing of class-specific dress suggests that class wasn't considered something intrinsic to a person's body, but instead something tenuously upheld by regulated structures of identification; a surprising amount of who was who, in other words, was determined by who wore what.

The Renaissance exhibits curious examples of this perception of identity. In Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Cloten steals Posthumus's clothing and is subsequently beheaded in them; the body is then encountered by Imogen, whose observations on the body are clearly the product of the clothing it's found in: "A headlesse man? The

³⁰ Stallybrass, "Introduction" 8.

³¹ Stallybrass, "Introduction" 9.

Garments of *Posthumus*?/ I know the shape of's Legge: this is his Hand: His Foote Meruriall: his martiall Thigh/ The brawnes of *Hercules*"³² "The passage is extraordinary," Stallybrass notes, "because, seeing the garments of Posthumus, Imogen reads the body of Cloten as Posthumus. If these are Posthumus's clothes, then this is his hand, and this his leg, foot, thigh and brawn."³³ Far from just a garment, clothing in this passage has assumed the qualities of the person with whom it is connected, drastically tempering the observations and altering Imogen's perception of reality. Posthumus's body is not Cloten's, but, through a switch of clothing, the distinct features of Cloten's individual body become the recognizable characteristics of Posthumus's. Thus, clothing not only absorbed the weight of societal rank but, also, the very shape of the body, relating features that aren't present through the garb that usually presented them. The sum total of the features of the person, physical and otherwise, radiated from the clothing that surrounded them.

Besides clothing, identity was also a matter of properties owned. Lands and goods held could almost be seen to subsume the identity of the ostensible "owner," so that "removing what a person *has* simultaneously takes away what a person *is*."³⁴ The center of identity could probably be better understood as located peripherally; a person's belongings secured their person. As James Berg notes in "The Properties of Character in *King Lear*," "But feebleness at the core of formidable persons is for me the play's central

³² Peter Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds: Clothes and Identity on the Renaissance Stage," *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. De Grazia, Margreta, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 309.

³³ Stallybrass, "Worn" 309-10.

³⁴ Margreta de Grazia, "The Ideology of Superfluous Things: King Lear as Period Piece," *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Maureen Quilligan, Peter Stallybrass, and Margreta de Grazia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 21.

theme...[that core being] a collection of symbolic belongings.”³⁵ Such a conception is diametrically opposed to the modern individual, a notion that is by definition considered alone, apart from all else. In order to be discussed as an individual in the modern sense of the word, a person must be disengaged from property, distanced from possessions; then, and only then, can the individual’s identity be determined. But in Renaissance culture, to consider a person apart from their belongings would have effaced their identity, making an action contemporarily considered personalizing depersonalizing for early modern society. “Possessions then are the superfluous things, superfluous because unnecessary for subsistence,” Margreta de Grazia contends of Renaissance persons, “...Yet they are absolutely necessary for upholding social and personal identity.”³⁶ Bearing the weight of personhood, property was more than a matter of personal comfort or freedom: it carried the burden of self itself.

Like clothing and property, signature had its own role in identity—although perhaps not as expected. The combination of given name and surname is now commonly seen as a reflection and, in some way, a guarantee of individuality; specifically, the full name written individually, the signature, secures the authority of the object signed based on the unique individuality of written expression. The notation has power because of its distinct characteristics, distinct characteristics that reflect the distinct character of the person writing. The Renaissance concept of name and signature doesn’t seem to reflect this familiar convention. For example, the signature of a nobleman often wasn’t the product of the nobleman himself; it was the duty of his secretary to produce such an

³⁵ James Berg, “The Properties of Character in King Lear,” *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 99.

³⁶ de Grazia 24.

inscription, meaning that the individuality which is “the claim for the signature” must always be “read in conjunction with this other hand.”³⁷ By taking the most individual and authoritative expression of the name, the signature, and expressing it in a manner removed from the individual it is supposed to represent, the signature is seen less as a direct representation of an identity and more as a reproducible emblem of authority. This was possible because the coherent, consistent properties of signatures that now assure their legitimacy, consistent properties now regulated by orthography, was nowhere to be found in Elizabethan England. The authority of the signature had less to do with its regularity than the “situation in which the name is inscribed.”³⁸ It wasn’t uncommon for the same “individual” to have authorized signatures exhibiting disparities in spelling and form.³⁹ “What’s in a name,” Jonathan Goldberg asks,

when the proper name has no propriety? This Shakespearian question resonates in the face of the six indisputable Shakespeare autographs, each with a different spelling of the name, each with wide divergencies in their letter forms. These hands are authentically Shakespeare’s only because their documentary location insures and authenticates them.⁴⁰

In other words, it wasn’t the distinction and representation of inscription that guaranteed the signature; it was the signature’s subscription to the rules of textual presentation that assured the document’s authority. This concept portrays a striking difference between the Renaissance and modern notion of identity. The former was dependent on conventions, relationally defined and situationally regulated. The identity of the

³⁷ Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: from the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) 234.

³⁸ Goldberg, *Writing* 241.

³⁹ Goldberg, *Writing* 241.

⁴⁰ Goldberg, *Writing* 241.

signature is imbued with credit through regulation and not individuation. Since the inscribed identity of the “individual” is identifiable through its generic location, the personal identity can be seen in the same light—not effective or recognizable for its individuality, but rather, because of its conventionality.⁴¹

Indeed, speaking of the name itself (free from paper), the personal name that is now commonly associated with relational familiarity (I call you Bill instead of Mr. Roberts because I know *you*) and individuality (Bill seems to point more at the individual than his surname Roberts) was likely not viewed in the same manner by Elizabethan society. As Stallybrass notes: “Although there is no single principle of naming in Shakespeare’s plays, I believe that Shakespeare usually moves away from personal names as he writes. Furthermore, the act of being given a personal name, at least for those of high status, is often an act of *unnaming*.”⁴² Though seemingly counterintuitive, the personal name didn’t carry the weight of identification for members of the upper classes. Family names secured the person within a specific line, linked the person to property, and, since property secured the identity of the person, the name associated with that property also secured that identity.⁴³ Commoners often secured their identity by attaching their occupations to their given names, as the Shakespearean characters Bottom the Weaver and Dick the Butcher attest. Personal names obfuscated the person designated, because personal names failed to link the person to the essential identifiers of family and property. Thus, similar to the signature, the Renaissance “individual” is *less* authoritative, *less* significant the *more* personal the name attributed to them is. It is only

⁴¹ Jonathan Goldberg, “Hamlet’s Hand,” *Shakespeare’s Hand* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003) 124.

⁴² Peter Stallybrass, “Naming, Renaming and Unnaming in the Shakespearean Quartos and Folio,” *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality* ed. Andrew Murphy (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 108.

⁴³ Stallybrass, “Naming” 114.

more recently that identity became tied to personal names, a trend exemplified by the shift of the names in Shakespearean persons. “For example,” Stephen Orgel notes, “Claudius has no name in *Hamlet*; nowhere in the dialogue, in any of the three texts, is he ever called anything except the king. He is also called “King” throughout the speech headings, and none of the original texts includes a cast list.”⁴⁴ The character now known as “Claudius” was then referred to as “King,” a shift in nominal identification that parallels the shift in emphasis from Renaissance relational identification to modern individual consideration.

Viewed as a whole, the “individual” seems wholly alien to what we can surmise about the Renaissance conception of the person. Identity was dependent on property, communicated through clothing, and secured by family names and titles; it could be as unstable as gender, as impersonal as “King.” The concept of the individual, a consideration of the person apart from such signifiers, would have made little sense to the playgoer in Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. To reflect on such an abstraction would be far from an act of personalization; it would have likely been incoherent. The individual divorces the person from his and her surroundings, a context that was vital for Elizabethan society. It seems no exaggeration, then, to contend that such a concept would have been of little use in such an era. It’s worth noting that the definition of the word as “a single human being, as opposed to Society, the Family, etc.” didn’t come into use until 1627; and, though Shakespeare has been “taken to be the very definer of

⁴⁴ Orgel, Stephen, “What Is a Character?,” *Text: Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1995) 104.

individuality,” his canonized plays do not contain the word.⁴⁵ So, the answer to one of the questions of this chapter—would Shakespeare have identified himself as an “individual”?—is conceivably made easier by the semantic range of the word during his time: no, he wouldn’t have. “Individual” did not signify the concepts that modern “individuality” requires; the Shakespearean individual would wait on those concepts. There were no individuals in the Renaissance.

The Author

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Author. More than anything else, Shakespeare is considered an author, perhaps, *the* author. But the precise nature of Shakespeare’s authorship has, for many decades, been the source of heated debate. It has been maintained by a respectable number of respectable names that William Shakespeare was not the author of Shakespeare’s works, that it was more likely Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, etc. and that their names, not Shakespeare’s, should be synonymous with *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*. But such objections to Shakespearean authorship make a seemingly innocuous assumption: that one could be an author during the Renaissance.

The problem that remains regardless of whether Shakespeare was the author or Bacon was the author is the manner in which Shakespeare and Bacon are being addressed: as singularly credited authors. The fact of the matter is that Renaissance plays were rarely the product of a single writer. As Jeffrey Masten observes, “Playwrights in early modern England did write alone...but more often they wrote with another

⁴⁵ Peter Stallybrass, “Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text,” *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992) 595.

playwright, or with several others, or revised or augmented scripts initially produced by others.”⁴⁶ To think of a playwright as operating “alone,” in any context, is counter to the kind of lifestyle that was common for the employed poet. Playwrights often lived together, wrote together, and sometimes even slept together; it was a culture of collaborative activity.⁴⁷ The distinction of intellectual labor that we find necessary for modern authorship runs counter to the indistinction present in Renaissance theatrical practices: “the collaborative project in the theater was predicated on *erasing* the perception of any differences that might have existed, for whatever reason, between collaborative parts.”⁴⁸ The authorship of a play was most commonly the work of such a team, the manifestation of an entire mechanism of theatrical production. “The creation of a play,” Stephen Orgel contends,

was a collaborative process, with the author by no means at the center of the collaboration. The company commissioned the play, usually stipulated the subject, often provided the plot, often parceled out, scene by scene, to several playwrights. The text thus produced was a working model, which the company then revised as seemed appropriate. The author had little or no say in these revisions.⁴⁹

The text, the ostensible product of the “author,” was scarcely, perhaps never, the product of *anyone*. Assembled piecemeal, the text that resulted represented the unification of a joint effort, a unification whose solidarity partly depended on the erasure of the

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Masten, “Playwriting: Authorship and Collaboration,” *A New History of Early English Drama* ed. David Scott Kastan and John D. Cox (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 357.

⁴⁷ Masten, “Playwrighting” 366.

⁴⁸ Masten, “Playwrighting” 373.

⁴⁹ Stephen Orgel, “What is a Text?,” *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 83-4.

independence of the independently written parts. Even when finally gathered as a whole, the script was immediately split among the players; paper itself was a luxury, a unified play text was, therefore, impractical for the Renaissance Theater.⁵⁰ The script was then viewed as intrinsically divided; the author of those divisions being obscured by the complex, collaborative playwrighting process and the technological limitations of the time. Thus, not only was the written play rarely the work of an individual author, when the text was the result of several playwrights, any signs of individuation would be resisted by theatrical practice. The text represented the theater or the publisher, not the playwright(s) and, therefore, the authority of the text lay in those systems of production, not with the author.⁵¹

Authorship, in the sense that it is used today, didn't come into being until a fundamental concept was established: intellectual property—and that would wait on John Locke.⁵² In “Authors and Owners: the Invention of Copyright,” Mark Rose discusses the emergence of this vital authorial notion: “The key to Locke’s thought was the axiom that an individual’s ‘person’ was his own property. From this it could be demonstrated that through labor an individual might convert the raw materials of nature into private property.”⁵³ According to Locke’s thought, once a person removes an object out of “the State that Nature hath provided” and mixes “his *Labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own,” it then becomes “his *Property*.”⁵⁴ Before Locke, specifically in Elizabethan England, “The authority of the published text was, for the most part, that of

⁵⁰ Kurt Schreyer, Personal interview (23 Mar. 2011).

⁵¹ Orgel, “Text” 86.

⁵² Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: the Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 5.

⁵³ Rose 5.

⁵⁴ qtd. in Rose 5.

the publisher: he owned it.”⁵⁵ The establishment of intellectual property in copyright is what allowed authorship to fully develop into its modern incarnation. It was after this shift that the author became the center and origin of the text; once works were conceived as originally the property of those whose “Labour” had been mixed with “Nature,” it only followed that textual authority should lie with the author.

A Renaissance playwright would have never considered himself an author. The text was not his property, and it was rarely (if ever) solely his product. But perhaps Shakespeare, as a writer, a player and an investor in his theatrical company, could have had an analogous notion of his profession; perhaps, since he was “in on more parts of the collaboration,” he should be considered as having a status comparable to the modern author.⁵⁶ Despite this being an already feeble stretch, the way writing itself was conceived in Shakespeare’s time was diametrically opposed to the notion that underpins the credibility and authority of the modern author’s work. The legal copyright that assures the individuality of text and the authority of author operates under the “concept of the unique individual who creates something original.”⁵⁷ But textual originality, the unique expression of written thought, was exactly how writers were told *not to write*; Shakespeare, like most men who had received even a modest education, was taught to glean memorable passages from the books he read and to record them in a personal notebook, known as a commonplace book, which could then be consult and copied from on later occasions.⁵⁸ This ancient writing practice, what we would now label as plagiarism, was a familiar and legitimate form of generating text. In fact, plagiarism was

⁵⁵ Orgel, “Text” 86.

⁵⁶ Orgel, *Text* 84.

⁵⁷ Rose 2.

⁵⁸ Robert S Miola, “Reading the Classics,” *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford:

what Shakespeare deliberately and shamelessly did in the construction of his poems and plays. He appropriated for his own use what he read or heard....Shakespeare consciously practiced his own form of database. It is only in a regime of originality that such techniques become secretive and shameful....The great Renaissance tradition of commonplacing was a systematic practice of overcoming the originality (i.e., unacknowledged repetitiveness) of one's own mind by organizing one's reading as a database.⁵⁹

The originality that forms the foundation of our modern concept of authorship is “systematically” undermined by actual Renaissance writing practices. Authors, now “conceived as the originator,” were then, quintessentially, negotiators between past and present—serving as contemporary conduits for conventional rhetoric.⁶⁰ Playwrights like Shakespeare appropriated classical as well as medieval stories, and consulted established works like Plutarch and Holinshed to supply textual material. “Throughout his career,” Robert S. Miola asserts, “Shakespeare used classical authors as direct sources, as books on the desk that he plundered for plots, character, and language.”⁶¹ Rather than treating works as defined, distinct identities—rather than “drawing lines between works...saying where one text ends and another begins”—Shakespearean “authorship” thrived on the permeability of those “lines.”⁶² There were no established textual boundaries; thus, texts bled into each other freely. Old was reinvigorated in the new, but the “newness” of this kind of “authorship” was firmly rooted in derivative technique, an institution of

Blackwell, 1999) 174.

⁵⁹ Peter Stallybrass, “Against Thinking” *PMLA* 122.5 2007: 1582.

⁶⁰ Miola 179.

⁶¹ Miola 176.

⁶² Rose 3.

derivation that appears irreconcilable with the expectation of originality that comes with the word “author” since Locke.

Renaissance playwrights weren’t the only element of textual production to serve as negotiators; the early modern compositors who turned manuscript into typed page in the printing presses were trained to perform a kind of negotiation between written manuscript and typed document.⁶³ In the 1683 work *Mechanick Exercises: Or, The Doctrine of handyworks. Applied to Printing*, printing expert Joseph Moxon outlines the responsibility of the compositor:

A good *Compositor*...reads his *Copy* with consideration;...and consequently considers how to order his Work the better...As how to make his *Indenting, Pointing, Breaking, Italicking, &c.* the better sympathize with the *Authors* Genius, and also with the capacity of the Reader.⁶⁴

Moxon’s seemingly harmless guidelines have notable implications regarding authorship during this era. Such practices betray textual malleability, even after the manuscript’s completion—a strikingly bold willingness to “tamper” with the author’s work.

According to Moxon, the compositor is responsible for not only making the work even closer to the “Authors Genius” than the work that the author created—an odd contention in and of itself—but also for considering “the capacity of the Reader” and modifying the text accordingly. This combination of interpretation of authorial intent coupled with what Jeffrey Masten calls the compositor’s “duties...of negotiation” with the audience endows the compositor with almost authorial, at least editorial, powers.⁶⁵ But unlike with an editor, the author’s say is nowhere to be found; their “Genius” or abilities, however

⁶³ Masten, *Pressing* 95.

⁶⁴ qtd. in Masten, *Pressing* 95.

⁶⁵ Masten, *Pressing* 95.

great, seems to be subject to the “consideration” of the compositor arranging typeset. The authority that is now conceived as emanating from the author’s manuscript was clearly an authority of a different kind when Shakespeare wrote, because texts involved authorship of a different kind. The “author” of a work was the full mechanism that produced and sustained texts—a production that was undifferentiated and undefined concerning the specific responsibilities of each of the parts involved. The sort of textual decisions that would now be reserved for the author were then reserved for the author as well, only the “author” could be seen as any one of the members of production handling the text. Principles such as these unsettle notions of individual authorship, because principles such as these preceded those notions.

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Texts like *Memoirs* seem like an aberration. But in fact simple questions such as “who wrote what?” have no simple answers with regards to early modern texts. The challenge that Renaissance authorship presents us with begins before such simple questions are formulated. A question of “who wrote what?” assumes that the answer to “who” in the question is consequential. It is only consequential given a certain concept of the mechanics of writing, authorship and the individual. Modern thought makes it consequential. It is common to approach Shakespeare as “the very definer of individuality,” as an “individual author,” but such conventions became conventional at a time other than Shakespeare’s. The Renaissance practice of commonplacing alone resists such notions. However many different characters he created, it is difficult to assert that he would have conceived of them as individuals or modeled them after individuals; individual consideration would seem foreign to a playwright writing in a time when

identity was constructed through clothing, attached to property, secured by family name—in a time when even notions of gender identity still hadn't solidified in ways we consider normative, so that male and female became roles produced instead of realities lived. In order to gain a more accurate understanding of Shakespeare's works, it is necessary to disassociate some of the concepts most associated with Shakespeare from Shakespeare. Such dissociation allows a clearer, perhaps more accurate picture of the Renaissance playwright to come to the surface, and allows for a discussion of Shakespeare's most lauded creations, his characters, to commence.

Chapter 2

The Character and the Text

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An interest in Shakespeare's characters is as old as an interest in Shakespeare himself.

—Brian Vickers

The word “character” has a fascinating poly-significance. The word contains an interrelated semantic ambiguity so that each differentiated meaning still seems to hold some connection to the others. We don't always find the same kind of relation in other words. A character, in the most literal sense, is a letter—a textual device, an institutionalized phonetic signifier that, together with other characters, gives an interpretable form to thought. When dealing with these kinds of characters, the individuality of an alphabetical letter isn't what gives the character its worth and quality; instead, it is its uniformity. Within a text, the legibility of a written character goes hand-in-hand with its standardization. Doctors' notes are infamous for their illegibility. Without a doubt, the scribblings of an overworked, near-manic MD may have plenty of personality, but, for all their individuality and distinction, the note's characters are often indiscernible from one another.

Another meaning of the word is used in normal conversation to describe personal merit or identifying features. Taken in this sense, to discuss character is to address matters of integrity or inherent quality; to “have character” is to display moral fortitude. Paradoxically, while a person's character can refer to their inherent, therefore, inalienable qualities, it can also seem to be something divorced from that person. When someone is accused of acting “out of character,” they aren't being held

up to external standards of integrity—that's not the meaning of character at work here; they are being compared to their own (ostensibly) inherent qualities. Actions deemed “out of character” are actions incongruous with a sense of a person that others have created. It is only through the creation of a transcendent “character” that a person may violate their character. The bizarre logic behind such a statement has some intriguing implications. The fact that a person can act “out of character” suggests that, at some point, the person's character ceased to be a product of that person.

Finally, character can refer to an entirely fictional identity. Characters populate novels, shorts stories, films, short films, plays, and every sort of narrative form. Like the character of a real person, characters in narrative are now approached with a number of interesting assumptions. We expect characters to be consistent. A reader shouldn't be completely baffled by a character's actions, because consistency of character (even if it's consistent inconsistency) translates to predictability and, therefore, reasonability. This kind of analysis, though now so familiar as to seem obvious, is possible because characters and the texts from which they originate are often considered to be separate, somehow distinct, fictional constructs. It would seem manifestly ridiculous to suggest outright that character is somehow not a product of text, but, when the contention is made that a fictional character's actions present a problem of reconciliation with the rest of the character's character, such absurd logic is precisely the logic at work. The assumed consistency and abstract nature of fictional characters are only a few of their expected traits; a bevy of other requirements often inform the interpretations of the contemporary reader and critic. “The characters in fiction,” Orson Scott Card writes,

are people. Human beings. Yes, I know you [as a writer] make them up. But readers want your characters to seem like real people. Whole and alive, believable and worth caring about. Readers want to get to know your characters as well as they know their own friends, their own family. As well as they know themselves.⁶⁶

According to Card, characters should be approached as people; they are (or at least should be) invested with all the complexity that can be reasonably expected in their real world counterparts: “human beings.” In other words, characters have a past, which frames and provides a measure of motivation behind their current actions; characters have minds, psychologies, an internality which outwardly expressed forms a consistent personality; characters form and structure the story; story does not determine character; characters shouldn't be stereotypical; they should be interesting, challenging and real.

This understanding of character regularly frames our interpretations of fictional texts, including the oldest and most famous of English literature's personages—Shakespeare's characters:

We're used to the idea that Shakespearean character is something large and personal, that it is distinct from allegorical personage or satirical caricature, that it entails psychology, some sense of a match between our own inner experience and our perception of the fictional being constructed by words and stage action.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Orson Scott Card, *Characters and Viewpoint* (Cincinnati: Writer's, 1999) 4.

⁶⁷ Anthony Dawson, “Is Timon a Character?,” *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 197.

Above all, Shakespeare is known for his characters.⁶⁸ As the passage from Anthony Dawson suggests, Shakespearean characters are praised for their depth, for their accuracy, for their insight into human nature. And it is that depth and accuracy, that “large and personal” feel, that defined them as essentially Shakespearean. In other words, Shakespearean characters are Shakespearean characters *because* they are people. As Michael Bristol observes, “Whenever I teach a Shakespeare play, or discuss one with a friend, or attend a performance, I find myself relating to the characters just as I do with real people. I don't think I'm really confused.”⁶⁹ It seems to be a given that Shakespeare's characters should be approached in this manner; it also seems apparent that if Shakespeare's characters should be approached as people, then Shakespeare must have written them to be approached in that way. In fact, it is a commonplace sentiment to consider the Bard's characters as the very birthplace of the emerging modern sense of character.⁷⁰

An integral part of the modern sense of character is internality—the construction of a fictional mind—and it is this aspect of Shakespeare's characters that is quite often credited as the source of their perceived uniqueness. It is this internality, or inwardness, that is frequently cited as one of Shakespeare's greatest contributions to literature. As Stephen Greenblatt contends:

If Shakespeare had died in 1600, it would have been difficult to think that anything was missing from his achievement and still more difficult to think

⁶⁸ L. C. Knights, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism* (New York: Haskell, 1973) 1.

⁶⁹ Michael Bristol, “Confusing Shakespeare’s Characters with Real People: Reflections on Reading in Four Questions,” *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (New York: Palgrave, 2009) 21.

⁷⁰ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998. Print) 4.

that anything yet unrealized was brewing in his work. But *Hamlet* makes it clear that Shakespeare had been quietly, steadily developing a special technical skill.... By the turn of the century Shakespeare was poised to make an epochal breakthrough. He had perfected the means to represent inwardness.⁷¹

Before all characters, Hamlet is apparently the first to exhibit “inwardness,” a pioneering facet of fictional personages that, Greenblatt asserts, represents an “epochal breakthrough.” Hamlet, then, is the prototype of the modern character. Is this a reasonable claim? This chapter will address that question, challenging, as others have before, this concept of Hamlet. Beginning with Aristotelian concepts of character, I will trace the history of the word, noting, along the way, the philosophical and critical movements that served as catalysts for the word's semantic evolution. Character will also be addressed from a thoroughly material perspective, because, as much as it is avoided, what can be said about a text (and, therefore, the characters within a text) is limited by the material conditions of the text itself; “In an obvious sense, of course,” Anthony Dawson writes, “literary character is a thing made out of words and words alone.”⁷² Since “character is a thing made out of words,” much of this chapter will concern the history of words, the textual conditions of words, methods of textual reproduction and transmission of words, and the stage performance of words. Character and text are inexorably linked, and the history and materiality of the latter cannot be separated from an analysis of the former. (It must be noted that between a few of these contentions exists a measure of tension, but that tension is expected when

⁷¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004) 298-9.

⁷² Dawson, *Timon* 198.

constructing any historically contingent assertion). Most importantly, what this chapter will bring into question is more than whether or not Hamlet can be thought of as the first modern character; it will challenge whether or not the term “character” fits Hamlet—and by extension any Shakespearean personage—at all. And, if Hamlet isn’t a character, then what is he?

Character

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In the previous chapter on Author and the Individual, Shakespeare's connection to the classics was discussed; Shakespeare's plays bear the distinct marks of their ancient predecessors, and his relation to those works is an integral piece of this discourse. “[T]hroughout his career,” Robert S. Miola writes, “Shakespeare used classical authors as direct sources, as books on the desk that he plundered for plots, characters, and language.”⁷³ If Shakespeare “plundered” classical authors for “characters,” then classical authors potentially reveal aspects of Shakespeare's conception of “character.”

In Aristotle's classic work of dramatic theory, *Poetics*, he lays out the six “formative elements” of tragedy, which are “Spectacle, Character, Fable, Diction, Melody, and Thought.”⁷⁴ The “character” to which Aristotle refers is *Eros*, the English word for the Greek concept of the beliefs of an entire people. Interestingly, Aristotle's “characters” aren't synonymous with the “agents” within tragedy; character is a moral device—not a fictional person: “Character in a play is that which reveals the moral

⁷³ Robert S Miola, “Reading the Classics,” *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 176.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, “Poetics,” *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random, 1941) 1461.

purpose of the agents, i.e. the sort of thing they seek or avoid, where that is not obvious—hence there is no room for Character in a speech on a purely indifferent subject.”⁷⁵ Character isn't necessarily tied to the actions or speech of agents; an “indifferent subject,” a pedestrian or mundane topic, leaves “no room for Character.”

This particular concept of character is an odd one for a modern reader; Aristotle treats personage and moral inclination as separate constructs. In conversation, when character is used to discuss someone's personality, their characteristics, those characteristics are generated by the entirety of that person's actions and speech; likewise, when the character being referred to is that person's moral inclinations—“the sort of thing they seek or avoid”—it would seem curious to consider their actions and speech separate from those inclinations. These difficulties regarding Aristotle's discourse on character would hold water if Aristotle had been working with the same set of premises concerning fictional personages; evidently, this was not the case. Character, for him, wasn't necessary for action to take place; in fact, character wasn't necessary at all:

In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of action. So that it is action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing. Besides this, tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without Character.⁷⁶

For Aristotle, the end is all. Action is the essential requirement of tragedy, and it is “for the sake of action” that characters are used. In other words, characters help to

⁷⁵ Aristotle 1462.

⁷⁶ Aristotle 1461.

reveal elements of action; action isn't created in order to reveal elements of character. Plot dictates character in tragedy, and plot needs no characters: "tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without character." An Aristotelian character is a vehicle for the plot and is only as important as it reveals the moral implications and movements within the plot. The classical significance of "character" was in its didactic role: supplementary to the plot, it wasn't necessary; it was explanatory—revealing "moral purpose." Written with this understanding in mind, character becomes a dependent construct, its importance directly correlated with its participation in the central action of the tragedy: "Aristotle, arguing in the *Poetics* that tragedy 'is a representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness' and that 'happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action' ... asserts the primacy of plot over character."⁷⁷

But the classical definition of character wasn't limited to moral device. In *The Characters*, the Greek writer Theophrastus, a contemporary of Aristotle, used the term to describe types.⁷⁸ In other words, Theophrastus was creating "literary portraits"—a list of generic personalities.⁷⁹ Theophrastus' types are a set of personages defined and limited by a general nature; as Marcel and Claude de Grève explain: "Theophrastus' brief text... offers in fragments a gallery of portraits that illustrate condemnable social behaviors ('The Disguised,' 'The Arrogant,' 'The Slanderer') or faults ('The Gossip,' 'The Lout')."⁸⁰ While not employing the same definition of "character," both Aristotle

⁷⁷ Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-system: a Semiotics of Text and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2007) 34.

⁷⁸ Andre G. Bourassa, "Personnage: History, Philology, Performance," *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 85.

⁷⁹ Bourassa 85.

⁸⁰ qtd. in Bourassa 85.

and Theophrastus seem intent on communicating moral instruction through character. For Aristotle, character was the relation of an action's morality, a literary technique that enabled an audience to glean the moral significance of a play's dramatic consequence; Theophrastus used his characters to "illustrate condemnable social behaviors." In either instance, the purpose of character was not the accurate, individual representation of distinct persons (or aspects of persons) but a more philosophical enterprise: the communication of ethics.

Classical "character," it seems, was dedicated to purposes other than is the current convention and was, consequently, dictated by those functions. It is important to note the emphases of those purposes; whether character referred to an entire "literary portrait" or the "moral purpose" of an agent, the principle investment of character was exterior to the personage portrayed. Internality doesn't seem to figure into the characters of *Poetics* or *The Characters*. It was what "character" accomplished, not the nature of "character" in and of itself, that defined the literary construct, what it did for the play or for the audience. The flaws that defined Theophrastus' characters provided social critique, and Aristotle made it clear that character is created to serve plot: "We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the Plot; and the Characters come second."⁸¹

"Character" first made its appearance in the English language in 1314, but the term signified an "engraved letter."⁸² This "character" wasn't derived from the Eros that Aristotle outlined in *Poetics* but, in fact, from another Greek word, *kharactēr*: "The word seems to have entered English both from OF *caractère* and directly from its

⁸¹ Aristotle 1461.

⁸² Bourassa 85.

root, Gk *kharactēr*, ‘an instrument for marking and engraving; an impress or brand stamp.’”⁸³ The word didn't come into dramatic use until two hundred years later. Interestingly, the Renaissance understanding of “character” was one strikingly reminiscent of Aristotelian definition: “The face or features as betokening moral qualities; personal appearance” (II.10). The essential meaning of “character” didn't evolve much from its classical definition to take on this meaning; it remained a symbolic and moral concept, formed from “personal appearance” and relating “moral qualities.” Not surprisingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to supply its contextual use: “I will believe thou hast a minde that suites/ With this thy faire and outward character” (I.ii.51). Even in the Renaissance, the concerns of character seem to be “outward.” To a certain extent, it's ironic that the OED uses Shakespeare as a reference, given how rarely the word appears in his works.⁸⁴ It wasn't until a half century after the Bard's death that the term even *started* being used in the way it is most frequently associated with Shakespeare today: “A personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities, by a novelist or dramatist; also, the personality or ‘part’ assumed by an actor on the stage” (II.17.a.). But the word was hardly popular during this era, and whether it actually signified what the OED indicates or not is dubious.⁸⁵ Even in the Restoration it appears that “character” didn't summon the full dramatic meaning that it now has.

But, perhaps I am getting ahead of myself; a vital question needs to be addressed before the rest of the history of “character” is discussed. If character didn't signify a fictional agent during the Renaissance, then what words were used and what,

⁸³ Martin Harrison, *The Language of Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 51.

⁸⁴ Bourassa 85.

⁸⁵ Harrison 51.

precisely, did those words signify? That is to say, when Shakespeare's audience talked about Hamlet, what would they have called him other than an insane prince? What conceptual framework would they have employed? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Part" was a word used during that period to mean "The character assigned to or sustained by an actor in a dramatic performance; a role. Also, the words assigned to or spoken by an actor in such a character; hence, a written or printed copy of these" (9.a). Part, however, didn't take on *then* the same kind of meaning that character does for us *now*, as the OED's Shakespearean reference demonstrates: "1600 Shake. *A.Y.L.* II.vii.142 All the world's a stage...And one man in his time plays many parts" (9.a). What precisely "part" means in this reference is not entirely clear; the full speech Jaques gives in *As You Like It* makes the inference easier:

All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players.
 They have their exits and their entrances,
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
 Then the whining school boy, with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwilling to school. And then the lover. (II.VII.138-146)

Part, as Shakespeare conceived of it, is a stereotype: "infant," "whining school boy," "lover," etc. Our understanding of character as a whole, coherent "human being" doesn't seem to correspond with Shakespeare's part, a word which doesn't encompass

the entirety of a person, but, rather, a segment or a piece of a life and the role that the person took on during that period. Interestingly, parts didn't serve to differentiate persons so much as unify them; the thrust of Jaques's speech is not that each part individualizes the "men and women," but, in fact, unites them in their shared experiences through each stage. *Everyone* has played *every part*, therefore, no person can claim to embody a part that another hasn't already played or will come to play in the future. Part is essential dividuating—not individuating. The uniqueness implicit in "character" is diametrically opposed to part: a part could be identified as such only because *it wasn't unique*; it was standard. Part was limited by specific, conventional forms. Textually speaking, part was also the "words assigned," so that the discussion of an actor's part could never be far removed from the text that created it. The theatrical word "part" was born from the "written or printed copy" from which it sprang and informed by the conventions of representation.

Role, another word used to refer to a fictional agent, has similarly material origins; the word comes from the literal *roll* of paper on which the script was printed, grounding the abstract literary concept tangibly in ink and parchment. Role was (and is) used to mean "The part or character which one has to play, undertakes, or assumes...with reference to the part played by a person in society or life" (*OED*). It seems that "role" has many of the qualities associated with what is now called "character," but role is more precise in its representational function. Instead of signifying an entire person, a comprehensive identity, role seems to describe a particular position and function that a person would fulfill; role, then, *was* not as full as character *is*. To take on a role would be to assume a standard "part played," but it does

not denote the whole of experience or being. I am a brother and a son, but to use “brother” or “son” to refer to me would be a case of equivocation, because those terms both refer to more than I can be and less than I am. I don’t embody the entire broad concept of “brother,” and being a brother is only part of what I am; it’s only a “part played.”

The French word “Personage” operates in a similar sense, drawing on societal function and position to shape its signification:

The concept of *personnage* developed in an opposite direction [than person]. To play a role, that is, “to wear a mask,” was expressed as *personam induere* (to assume, to take on), as in Descartes, or *personam agree* (to act, to manage). This last expression yielded *personage*, which appeared in 1250 to designate a personality, a distinguished person; that is, someone who played a noteworthy role in a milieu.⁸⁶

“Personage” as a theatrical term denoting a fictional identity has at its semantic roots the same kind of selective representation that qualify both “role” and “part,” forming from the foundational concept of “part played...in society or life” the ideological framework of fictional agents as identifiable by their (inter)relation to and interaction with other parts, not considered individually and holistically.

“Persona,” the root of personage, is another term with a telling etymology. The “term,” which would later evolve into the word “person,” “signified no more than an image for a long time.”⁸⁷ Originally meaning “mask,” the word would be used by the early Christian church to explain the paradoxical multiple incarnations of God, the

⁸⁶ Bourassa 84.

⁸⁷ Bourassa 84.

Trinity, framing Jesus Christ as a persona of God.⁸⁸ This ingenious explanation of a theological crux has interesting implications regarding the concept of fictional—and real—persons. The word, thus derived from the idea of an image or mask, denotes a sense of essential emptiness regarding the self; if Jesus Christ is only a symbol of the one true God, a persona, then persona itself is nothing more than a character (in the engraved script sense), if you will, of a true identity. Persona is the depthless shadow of a full being. As John Parker explains, the word evolved from theological efforts to grasp the mystery of the Trinity and suggests an absence of existence behind the persons of God:

So too with the Trinitarian persons. Boethius does not seem the least worried by the implication that outright revelation—whether Father, Son, or Spirit—should reveal at most a mere persona or that the *ens realissimum* might be exclusively a matter of surface and costuming, three alternating masks the whole of whose substance was encompassed by this ongoing act of self-impersonation. In Boethius...there is literarily nothing behind the masks of divinity (except, perhaps, for another mask). The emptiness is precisely what resonates. It opens, I think, in the Thomistic possibility of equating God with a love so all-embracing as to make him genuinely “selfless.”⁸⁹

“Persona,” and by extension “person,” is a concept that at its core *lacks a core*; it is, in fact, defined as “a matter of surface and costuming.” Etymologically, persona and personage are linked, the latter actually being derived from the former. Thus

⁸⁸ John Parker, “Persona,” *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson, Vol. 2. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010) 593.

⁸⁹ Parker 596.

personage and persona, terms used to designate individuals (fictional or otherwise), are essentially conceptually “selfless.” The operating metaphor behind these words is not unlike the literally *bound* concepts that inform “part,” “role,” and “character,” their very textual semantic roots impressing a history of “impression” into the concepts that establish character. In other words, it is the indelible mark of their symbolic nature that provides the conceptual means to move from characters on paper to characters in fiction that also limits the fictional identities they enable. “Part,” “role,” “character,” and “persona,” such was the semantic foundation of Shakespearean character; whether from “role” that was first roll, part, “a written or printed copy,” the “mask” that made persona, or the “engraved letter[s]” described by character, the words that established the Bard’s persons are much “a matter of surface and costuming.” “This definition [of character],” Jonathan Goldberg writes,

etymologically exact, accounts for the imprinting of the Shakespearean character....The depth of a character is a result of an inscription, what others read on the surface....The styling of character is penned with a stylus, engraving on the wax, so that the being of character (Viola’s concealed “what I am”) is its becoming.⁹⁰

What I want to highlight most from this passage is the connection Goldberg makes between “character” and “inscription”; he links them conceptually, refusing to disengage “stylus” from the “styling of character.” This is an assertion that, as we’ve seen, is “etymologically exact.” It seems fair to say that the Renaissance “character” most likely had more in common with the concrete process of “inscription” than with

⁹⁰ Jonathan Goldberg, “Shakespearean Characters: The Generation of Silvia,” *Shakespeare’s Hand* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003) 32.

the abstract act of psychological description, so that any perceived “depth of character” is only as deep as the ink that sinks into the paper.⁹¹

It would be a hundred and fifty years after Shakespeare before “character” fully settled into its modern definition in the widespread vernacular; the term gained popularity after the inclusion of its definition in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*:

[character’s] use in relation to human beings was initially only as an indicator of external, physical appearance....Its use as the “sum of the qualities which constitute an individual” is a mC17 [middle of the seventeenth century] development. The modern literary and theatrical sense of “an individual created in a fictitious work” is not attested in OED until mC18 [middle of the eighteenth century]: “Whatever characters any...have for the jestsake personated...are now thrown off” (1749, Fielding, *Tom Jones*). “A part played by an actor” is a development of this.⁹²

It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that “character” became synonymous with fictional personage, and it was during this time that character criticism began, where “essays and whole books are devoted to individual characters, and those alone.”⁹³ So, as the modern understanding of the word “character” came into common use, the interest of literary criticism turned to those “individual characters”; a diachronic shift in “character” preceded, very closely, a shift in the character of literary studies.

Naturally, Shakespearean criticism felt the effects of this change. In “The Emergence

⁹¹ Jonathan Goldberg, “Hamlet’s Hand,” *Shakespeare’s Hand* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2003) 113.

⁹² Harrison 51.

⁹³ Brian Vickers, “The Emergence of Character Criticism, 1774-1800,” *Shakespeare Survey* 34 1981: 11.

of Character Criticism, 1774-1800,” Brian Vickers discusses this trend, highlighting some of the curious statements that were the product of a literary era in flux:

Occasionally a critic will even oppose the two [character and plot] in a rather cavalier manner....George Colman, having stated that ‘the nice discrimination of the various shakes of the human mind, the pourtraying of character, was Shakespeare’s excellence,’ went on to argue that ‘his fable is often comparatively defective.’⁹⁴

Character study became an integral part of Shakespearean study, the focus sliding from individual text to individual character, and it was a shift that was concurrent with—yet anything but coincidental—the established meaning of dramatic “character.”

It would take certain philosophical movements to transform a word that originally meant an “engraved letter” into “a personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities” that signified “people. Human beings” and, when explicitly discussing Shakespeare, into “something large and personal, that it is distinct from allegorical personage or satirical caricature, that it entails psychology.” The modern character was the creation (even if indirectly) of an Englishman, no doubt, but that Englishman wasn’t from Stratford-upon-Avon. The Shakespearean character was created by John Locke. Other post-Renaissance philosophers have had a dramatic effect on how Shakespeare has been read. “Born in the same year (1818),” Margreta de Grazia writes,

Jacob Burckhardt and Karl Marx together gave birth to the Renaissance.

Not to the Renaissance as the rebirth of antiquity but to the Renaissance as

⁹⁴ Vickers 11.

the birth of the Modern—the Renaissance, that is, as *Early Modern*—the period that anticipated the future rather than recovered the past.⁹⁵

The boldness of de Grazia’s playful anachronism emphasizes the accuracy of her contention. The Renaissance is what Marx and Burckhardt made it, not what it was. De Grazia contends that the essential paradigm shift Marx and Burckhardt both attribute to the Renaissance was the separation of the subject from the object, persons from property—which amounted to an ideological move “from feudal collectivity to bourgeois individuality.”⁹⁶ In a like fashion, the “large and personal” Shakespearean “character”—in fact, all characters—would have to wait on the 18th century to gain the vital psychology or “inwardness” they apparently had all along, and it was a particularly influential philosopher, John Locke, that “gave birth” to “character” in the Renaissance. But Locke isn’t the oldest philosophical origin of literary “character”; the philosophical work of René Descartes provided the theoretical groundwork for what Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* would later create. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes contends that his existence is proven through his own awareness of his thinking, “*I think, therefore I am,*” an assertion with revolutionary implications regarding the nature of identity.⁹⁷ Descartes’s method of doubt essentially suggests that the most certain one can ever be of anything is of the truth of self-existence—paradoxically, the intangible mind, therefore, is the closest thing one can ever have to material certainty. Much like Marx and Burckhardt’s assertions about

⁹⁵ Margreta de Grazia, “The Ideology of Superfluous Things: King Lear as Period Piece,” *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Maureen Quilligan, Peter Stallybrass, and Margreta de Grazia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 17.

⁹⁶ de Grazia, *Ideology* 19.

⁹⁷ René Descartes and Donald A. Cress, *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998) 19.

the “Early Modern” Renaissance, Descartes’s philosophical propositions were predicated a separation of the subject and the object or, perhaps more accurately, a devaluation of objects in light of the subjectivity of their existence since individual subjects can only be objectively sure of one thing: their own existence.

Locke, influenced by Descartes, continued this line of thought, and, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), he calls this mental self-knowledge of existence “consciousness.” In fact, the OED credits Locke with the first usage of the word to mean “The totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings, which make up a person's conscious being,” and Locke seems to have been one of the first, if not the first, to utilize and certainly popularize the word in the English language (5a.). Building on Descartes’s philosophical framework, Locke asserts in *Understanding* what *Discourse* implies concerning identity, namely, that the immaterial consciousness, not the material body, is the only logical source of personal identity:

Personal identity consists, not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of consciousness....But whatsoever to some men makes a man, and consequently the same individual man, wherein perhaps few are agreed, personal identity can by us be placed in nothing but the consciousness (which is that alone which makes what we call self,) without involving us in great absurdities.⁹⁸

By disengaging “self” from “substance,” Locke’s contentions about the nature of consciousness give the mind ultimate saliency concerning identity, for it is the consciousness alone that, for him, “makes a man.” This philosophy undoubtedly has

⁹⁸ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (New York: WLC, 2009) 253-4.

individualistic implications—though the term “individualistic” wasn’t used until almost a century after Locke.⁹⁹ Locke’s discourse on identity constituted a movement inward, encouraging individual examination through its controversial concepts. It doesn’t seem surprising, then, that such a philosophy would have prompted the kind of changes in literary study that Brian Vickers observes. Locke’s influential observations about the personal identity of real persons would naturally carry over to the portrayal of fictional persons and their study, and that is exactly what happened. It’s only after Descartes and Locke that the word “character” commonly signified “A [fictional] personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities.”

It’s important to detail the philosophical and semantic differences between the newly emergent character and the words that were used more commonly before it. “Part,” “personage,” “persona,” and “role” all designated an element of fiction, but what, precisely, that element was and what “character” had become are not synonymous, however similar their signification appears. The fundamental difference between these terms is the assumptions that they carry. The origins of “part,” “personage,” “persona,” and “role” are very similar to the origin of “character” in their material, in some cases textual, reference. But, as character moved from signifying a literal letter to an individual’s “qualities,” to a fictional identity, it gained something in transition that those other words hadn’t—an aspect of identity that wasn’t present when “part” and “role” were the words used to represent “character.” During character’s semantic development, Locke’s propositions changed basic assumptions about the nature of identity, and that shift is embedded in the word “character” itself.

⁹⁹ Peter Stallybrass, “Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text,” *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992) 594.

It's when a person's being is understood as their consciousness and the word "character" comes to signify that being fictionally that character and consciousness become intertwined.

Since fictional "character" was formulated during a period that began to emphasize the individual, it seems no coincidence that as "character" came into being the study of fictional individuals came into prominence in literary criticism:

What is new in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is that essays and whole books are devoted to individual characters, and those alone. The critics abandon discussion of plot or language and write simply about the people of Shakespeare's creation. This was a decisive change of emphasis, as some of them were well aware. Thomas Whately...declared that 'The writers upon dramatic compositions have, for the most part, confined their observations to the fable'....But, Whately argued, such rules are subordinate to another topic in criticism, 'I mean the distinction and preservation of character, without which the piece is at best a tale, not an action.'¹⁰⁰

In this new method of criticism, this "decisive change of emphasis," character overtook plot as the most important device in a play. If, as I have argued earlier, the notion of "character" is rooted in the notion of consciousness, then character study should have concerned itself, in short order, with the consciousness that founded the concept. More importantly, Shakespearean character study should have concerned itself with consciousness. In his 1811-12 lecture series, Samuel Coleridge set out to discover, among other things, what "Shakespeare mean[t] when he drew the character

¹⁰⁰ Vickers 11. See Stallybrass, *Shakespeare* 594.

of Hamlet.”^[101] Coleridge highlights Hamlet’s perceptive nature as one “[who] sees through the very souls of all who surround him.”^[102] His Hamlet is a distinctly inwardly invested creature, so that Coleridge posits that the “greatness of genius which led Hamlet to the perfect knowledge of his own character...with all strength of motive, was so weak as to be unable to carry into effect his most obvious duty.”^[103] The result of this is a paradoxical character: bright, brave, and discerning, yet so much so that none of these have any bearing on reality. Hamlet is, in other words, too brilliant to do anything with his brilliance. Indecision had nothing to do with Hamlet’s hesitation: “there was no indecision about Hamlet: he knew well what he ought to do, and over and over again he made up his mind to do it.”^[104] Hamlet wasn’t consciously delaying; the very nature of his conscious mind required lengthy deliberation upon a course of action already agreed upon: “and over and over again he made up his mind to do it.” This establishes Hamlet as a character of the mind—a poetic creature completely given over to the “world within himself.”^[105]

Coleridge’s analysis is far less textual than psychological; in fact, Shakespeare for him is not so much a writer of texts as a poet-psychologist:

[Coleridge] has shown that the intricacies of Hamlet’s character may be traced to Shakespeare’s deep and accurate science in mental philosophy.

That this character must have some common connection with the laws of

¹⁰¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. R. A. Foakes. (The superscript surrounded by brackets are the paraphrases of John Payne or other note-takers) (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989) 67.

¹⁰² Coleridge 68.

¹⁰³ Coleridge 70.

¹⁰⁴ Coleridge 69.

¹⁰⁵ Coleridge 70.

our nature was assumed by [Coleridge] from the fact that Hamlet was the darling of every country where literature was fostered.^[106]

The nature of Coleridge's claim about character shouldn't be overlooked. Hamlet's "character" is "traced to Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy"; the "intricacies of...character" are derived and constructed from Hamlet's supposed consciousness. As de Grazia observes, "What happens in the play has no bearing on Hamlet's character. His penchant for thought predates the play's action. Indeed, for Coleridge, it is congenital, having issued from the 'germ' of his character."¹⁰⁷ It's rather puzzling that Coleridge's Hamlet doesn't arise from the text but instead from more ethereal, or at least, immaterial sources. Abstracted and detached as it may be, his Hamlet is the natural outgrowth of the conceptual framework that informs "character"—one whose "germ" is deeply rooted in the stuff of thought instead of the stuff of text. Coleridge's Hamlet is now a literary commonplace: he is unique because of the accuracy of Shakespeare's portrayal of his internality. Hamlet is unlike any character before him in that his "mind" is like a real mind, a notion reflected in the passage referenced earlier from Greenblatt's *Will in the World*:

If Shakespeare had died in 1600, it would have been difficult to think that anything was missing from his achievement and still more difficult to think that anything yet unrealized was brewing in his work. But Hamlet makes clear that Shakespeare had been quietly, steadily developing a special technical skill....By the turn of the century Shakespeare was poised to make

¹⁰⁶ Coleridge 75.

¹⁰⁷ Coleridge 13.

an epochal breakthrough. He had perfected the means to represent inwardness.¹⁰⁸

But it wasn't with Hamlet that "inwardness" was born. It was with "character." Locke provided the philosophical catalyst for the "inwardness" essential to modern character that would be formally established in literary study by influential critics like Coleridge and resonates to this day in the work of scholars like Greenblatt. Considering that character is founded in the concept of consciousness, the concurrent appearance of a "new interest in character psychology" with character criticism is only logical.¹⁰⁹

Interestingly enough, the very word "psychological" was coined by Coleridge *to describe Shakespeare's characters*:

While the first use of *psychological* recorded by the *OED* is from 1812, Coleridge has been using the term in his lectures since 1800 to refer to Shakespeare's singular insight into character: his power to discern "the habits of the mind." He applauds his "psychologic portraiture" (I:126), "psychological" or "psychological" genius (I:306, II:490), and "psychological..mode of reasoning" (I:253).¹¹⁰

Coleridge justifies the creation of this word because "We have no single term to express the Philosophy of the Human Mind."¹¹¹ The fact that the word "psychological" was born out of a necessity to create a "single term to express the Philosophy of the Human Mind" for literary character criticism and not scientific study suggests a conceptual link between the word "character" and the "consciousness" that is the realm of "psychological"

¹⁰⁸ Greenblatt 298-9.

¹⁰⁹ Vickers 12.

¹¹⁰ de Grazia, *Hamlet* 15.

¹¹¹ qtd. in de Grazia, *Hamlet* 15.

research. The two concepts are semantically intertwined; the fictional “character” bound conceptually to “Philosophy of the Human Mind,” its “intricacies” necessitating lexical groundbreaking. In other words, it was more the concept of “character” that required “psychological” explanation than it was Shakespeare’s text *per se*.

To many literary critics, especially psychoanalytic critics, the emergence of “psychological” from the study of Shakespeare suggests that the form of analysis (psychological and later psychoanalytical) was something uniquely required by Shakespeare. Calling upon familiar assumptions about the nature of Hamlet’s character, Philip Armstrong in the appropriately-titled *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* forges a similar bond between the Bard and psychoanalysis:

If *Hamlet* marks something like the inauguration of that notion of the self as an interior space of drama...and if Freudian psychoanalysis aims to take that architecture of the self apart, then it becomes apparent why Freudian theory and *Hamlet* appear to have been made for each other all along.¹¹²

Armstrong’s contention is a provocative one, because if *Hamlet* establishes the “self as an interior space of drama,” then methods of self-analysis would sensibly emerge from the study of such a psychological text; Shakespeare and psychology imply one another. It’s no surprise, then, that such terms would spring from Shakespeare, since they “appear to have been made for each other all along.” It seems far more likely, however, that Coleridge’s manner of textual approach required the coinage. By looking through the framework of “character,” not at the text of Shakespeare, analysis of a “psychological” nature is logically needed, because Coleridge conceived “characters” as inherently psychological.

¹¹² Philip Armstrong, “In Vienna,” *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2001) 41.

Although Coleridge's criticism of Hamlet emphasizes consciousness, there are additional, significant attributes of character criticism that merit discussion. As Vickers explains, character criticism fashioned expectations regarding the shape and purpose of fictional characters, expectations that correlate with the modern notions of character:

There seem to be two main theoretical expectations common to nearly all of these critics:

1. The concern that characters should be consistent – they should be 'preserved,' 'sustained,' or maintained as a coherent whole.
2. They should fulfil some moral purpose: they should seek virtue, avoid or condemn vice, and be rewarded or punished accordingly.¹¹³

"Characters" were projected as "consistent" and maintained textually as a "coherent whole"; characters were conceived as instructional, being moral constructs that "should seek virtue." As Vickers observes, these criteria created "expectations" that were applied retroactively—not just contemporarily. Critics expected not only modern characters to uphold these standards of "character" but also their antecedents in English literary history—not only Hamlet, but Milton's Satan, Chaucer's pilgrims, and others. But, when applied to older texts, including Shakespearean texts, the "characters" within were resistant to this formulation of fictional persons, and the critical reaction to this incongruity reveals the cracks in the retroactive application of these expectations.¹¹⁴ "This demand," Vickers writes,

reiterated in countless modern treatises, was applied to Shakespeare with vigour, and at times ferocity. Hamlet, as a character, was notorious as an

¹¹³ Vickers 12.

¹¹⁴ Vickers 13.

example of the union of the most incompatible qualities...Francis Gentleman...laments that the hero 'should be such an apparent heap of inconsistency' (1770); George Steevens, attacking the hero for delaying his revenge, and the play for not getting anywhere after act 2, enlarged on 'the glaring inconsistencies in the character of the hero' in several essays and notes. The critics who defended Hamlet might have simply retorted that the criterion of character-consistency ought not to be applied in such a severe way. Instead, they accepted the diagnosis of inconsistency, but then sought for an explanation of it within Hamlet's character.¹¹⁵

It's interesting that Hamlet, the "character" that "inaugurated" the modern character, should be found so problematic, exhibiting apparent incongruities both *within* his own "character" and *relative to* critical expectations of character, but it is the critical reaction to this "inconsistency" that is particularly telling. When the text was approached in this manner, the "character" that Hamlet was supposed to be, "expected" to be, was simply not there, and Vickers suggests that the sensible response to this sort of resistance would be to "simply" retort "that the criterion of character-consistency ought not to be applied in such a severe way"; essentially, Hamlet should be excused from adhering to these newly-established characteristics of "character." But such a move would place Hamlet out of the semantic range of "character": if he couldn't be held to the tenets of character then *he wasn't a character*. But, instead, critics opted to seek for an "explanation of it within Hamlet's character." In other words, critics used the "psychological" framework of "character" to enable Hamlet to be seen as a character; the assumed mental depth carried by "character" allowed critics

¹¹⁵ Vickers 13.

to justify the unreasonable, claiming the mysterious complexities and vagaries of the mental landscape as the ultimate explanation: “In this debate on Hamlet’s inconsistency the aesthetic or formalist attack by orthodox neoclassical critics pushed the new critics of the 1780s into a defence [*sic*] by the appeal to Hamlet’s psychology.”¹¹⁶

The reasoning at play here begs examination. First, expectations of character are formulated by critics; then, these expectations are not only applied currently, but projected retroactively as well. When such expectations are not met by older texts, namely *Hamlet*, it is neither conclusively held as a problem with the *expectations* nor the *text* itself. Instead, these irreconcilabilities are reconciled within another projected construct: the “psychological” character. Thus, anachronistically-applied expectations are sated with another anachronism. Approached in this manner, the concerns of literary critics seem free from the literal plot and dialogue presented and become deeply invested in an abstracted entity, the psychology of the character. It is this same alienation from the text and preoccupation with the mysterious incarnations of the internality of character that prompted L.C. Knights in “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” (1933) to make some sobering observations. In a discussion of a work of character criticism by Maurice Morgann, Knights notes similar conceptual errors:

It is strange how narrowly Morgann misses the mark. He recognized what can be called the full bodied quality of Shakespeare’s work—it came to him as a feeling of “roundness and integrity.” But instead of realizing that this quality sprang from Shakespeare’s use of words, words which have a “network of tentacular roots, reaching down to the deepest terrors and

¹¹⁶ Vickers 14.

desires,” he referred it to the characters’ “independence” of the work in which they appeared, and directed his exploration to “latent motives and policies not avowed.”¹¹⁷

The thesis of the literary “character,” with its expected consistency and didactic moral function, is one that has provided problems for critics, and Hamlet’s supposed psychology, his “latent motives and policies not avowed,” have become a handy reconciler in a logical pinch.¹¹⁸ In such cases, as de Grazia remarks, Hamlet’s “‘beautiful inwardness’ pulls him away from compromising externals.”¹¹⁹

Text

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Those “compromising externals” are, however, the words on the page, which are “the main business of the critics to examine.”¹²⁰ It seems that to gain a consistent, moral “character” in Hamlet, the “psychological” Hamlet must be established as well, the inwardness afforded by the framework of “character” providing much-needed “independence” from “the work in which they appeared” and the words within that work:

The formalist critics, then, saw the madness as non-functional, a sign of bad dramaturgy. The character critics of the 1770s and 80s answered that objection by claiming that the madness is not feigned but real. It then becomes an intended effect, not clumsiness, and must be seen as integral to

¹¹⁷ L. C. Knights, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism* (New York: Haskell, 1973) 21.

¹¹⁸ Vickers 14-5.

¹¹⁹ de Grazia, *Hamlet* 17.

¹²⁰ Knights 11.

the psychology of the character. William Kendrick, lecturing in a London tavern in 1774, ‘urged that the character of Hamlet was much more moral and consistent’ (thus satisfying the twin criteria of neoclassical criticism).¹²¹

The consequence of character criticism was the creation of a curious distance between Shakespeare’s “characters” and their texts. As Knights observes, “the bulk of Shakespeare criticism is concerned with his characters, his heroines, his love of Nature or his ‘philosophy’—with everything in short, except with the words on the page” (11). But etymologically, and logically, the word “character” and the text are linked; characters make up words; words make up texts. When referring to the literary character, it would seem entirely sensible to consult the text from which it originates, because “in an obvious sense... literary character is a thing made out of words and words alone.” But holding up the literary construct of “character” to the literal construct that is the Shakespearean text is something more easily posited than it is performed—the main problem being that the Shakespearean text is something of a mess. “The notion of final or complete versions assumed by virtually all modern editors of Shakespeare,” Stephen Orgel asserts,

is inconsistent with everything we know not only about Renaissance theatrical practice, but about the way writers in fact work. Poets are always rewriting, and there is no reason to think that many of the confusions in Shakespeare’s texts don’t involve second thoughts, or amalgams of quite separate versions of a play. I’d want to go a great deal further than this, but

¹²¹ Vickers 15.

the idea of the basic instability of the text seems to me an absolutely essential one.¹²²

The intrinsic “instability” of the Shakespearean text presents a very real problem to literary critics. The textual certainty that is “assumed by virtually all modern editors of Shakespeare” has been, more or less, completely subverted by recent bibliographic study of “Renaissance theatrical practice.” Instead of the “final or complete versions” of Shakespearean texts, multiple divergent quarto and folio editions are found, editions that can vary dramatically in length and content.

Within the past thirty years, critical attention has been paid to this textual insecurity, yielding revised (in a sense *unrevised*) editions of Shakespeare’s plays like Gary Taylor and Michael Warren’s *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare’s Two Versions of King Lear*. The fact that “we know nothing about Shakespeare’s original text[s]” creates nothing short of a crisis of character for many of Shakespeare’s most notable “characters,” Hamlet not least among these.¹²³ In fact, as Paul Werstine notes in “The Textual Mystery of Hamlet,” it seems that Hamlet, more than others, is particularly troublesome:

When revisionist textual critics began to advance the argument that Shakespeare revised *King Lear*, altering the text printed in quarto to become the Folio version, others wondered, with some justification, why Shakespeare would undertake revision merely to adjust the roles of so many secondary characters...and so little, in the course of alleged revision,

¹²² Stephen Orgel, “What is a Text?,” *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, eds. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 87.

¹²³ Orgel, *Text* 87. See Paul Werstine, “The Textual Mystery of *Hamlet*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.1 1998: 11.

with the part of Lear himself. While it is not my contention that Shakespeare must have been responsible for any or all of the variations between Q2 and F *Hamlet*, the same objection would not apply. No role varies so much between these two texts as does Hamlet's.¹²⁴

In a very tangible way, the Shakespearean text is resistant to a consistency of character (literal letter) that precedes the character consistency (fictional personage) normally referred to. That is to say, what de Grazia and Stallybrass call the "materiality of the Shakespearean text" presents some problems to a vision of a singular, coherent part signified by the word "Hamlet," not to mention a coherent "character." To counter this uncertainty, editors have traditionally produced conflated versions of the *Hamlet* texts based on a "notion" that Orgel dispels, a notion that, Werstine observes, "demands that an editor determine what in both texts finally pleased Shakespeare. To discover Shakespeare's pleasure at this late date may, I'm afraid, tax not only an editor's scholarship but also his or her powers of divination."¹²⁵

Even forgoing Shakespeare's intent, the construction of a conflated text presents the editor with some very real choices of "character." To sweep the disparities of the texts under the common rug of Hamlet takes no small amount of textual manipulation, as his motives, "avowed" or not, are not always congruent (or as sensible as they are when read uncombined).¹²⁶ When those incongruities are forced into close quarters, Hamlet's rationale becomes even more mystifying than the character critics of the late eighteenth-century asserted. As Werstine demonstrates

¹²⁴ Werstine 10-1.

¹²⁵ Werstine 14.

¹²⁶ Werstine 4.

with his analysis of the final act of *Hamlet*, a conflated text necessitates suspension of disbelief:

What happens when the Q2 interview with the nameless lord is combined with the Folio Hamlet's empathetic speech in the modern text of *Hamlet*? Quite simply, the modern text doubles up Hamlet's motives for the apology to Laertes before the fencing match and leaves readers and theatre-goers unsure as to how much Hamlet's apology arises from his sympathy with Laertes, how much from a desire to satisfy Gertrude.¹²⁷

It's important to note that this confusion concerning Hamlet's motivations comes from a *singular* play text formed from the second quarto and folio versions of the play. It seems the singular, conflated text required to support a singular "character" Hamlet creates the problems within the character of Hamlet that contradict character consistency (or at least coherence), yet, a divided text creates an ambiguity of reference that splits Hamlet into Hamlets, because "No role varies so much between these two texts as does Hamlet's." This creates a literary catch-22, of sorts. "To readers of the modern combined Q2/F text," Werstine continues,

it could well seem that Hamlet began to empathize, remembered his rage, and finally needed a push from Gertrude to apologize. Readers of the F text can know that Hamlet's empathy alone was sufficient to prompt his kindness to Laertes, for Gertrude does not intervene in F. Readers of Q2 may assess Hamlet's motives in a different way, but with equal clarity.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Werstine 4.

¹²⁸ Werstine 4.

Textually, materially, Hamlet cannot honestly be thought of as a single role or “character.” The name that is most often used to reference the fictional Prince of Denmark refers to a different set of words, therefore, a different “character,” depending on the text in front of the speaker that utters Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Even if the combined text is put aside, Hamlet’s problems remain. The fact that “Read independently of each other, both Q2 and F plot a straighter (though not necessarily a better) course for Hamlet” does nothing to assuage this.¹²⁹ It is precisely because of the “independent” courses texts take that Hamlet can’t be stable. “Historically, that is,” Barbara Mowat asserts in “The Form of Hamlet’s Fortunes,” “we do not have three (or four) *Hamlets* ([Q1], Q2, F, Q2/F), but numerous *Hamlets*, each with its own integrity—even, one might venture, its own Hamlet.”¹³⁰

The “basic instability” of the Shakespearean text only continues even when one text is preferred over another, but it’s an internal instability that editors have also sought to address, by reduction.¹³¹ The beginning of Randall McLeod’s ““The very names of the Persons’: Editing and the Invention of Dramatick Character” includes a particularly revealing prefatory note by one of the most influential Shakespearean editors, Alexander Pope: “every single character in Shakespeare is as much an Individual, as those in life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike;...had all the speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have

¹²⁹ Werstine 5.

¹³⁰ Barbara Mowat, “The Form of Hamlet’s Fortunes,” *Shakespeare: The Critical Complex*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Sean Keilen (New York: Garland, 1999) 98.

¹³¹ Randall. McLeod, ““The very names of the Persons’: Editing and the Invention of Dramatick Character,” *Staging the Renaissance: reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 88-89.

apply'd them with certainty to every speaker."¹³² "But Pope is also quite offtrack," Mcleod maintains,

however unified the interpretation of a Shakspearean role can be made to seem in performance or in modern edition, the very names of the Persons in the earliest Shakespear texts very frequently vary. (That you don't know *what* the hell I am talking about shows how poped your Shakespeare is.)...Pope's fantasy about speech tags is scarcely innocent. In openly praising Shakespeare's artistic coherence, he secretly congratulates his own reductive editing; for Pope played fast and loose with the evidence of Shakespear's text, suppressing the artistic variation of the names that contradicts the editorial notion of unity.¹³³

Pope's premise, that each "character" in Shakespeare's plays is "so much an Individual" that, even if the speech tags were to be removed, "one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker," expresses a measure of faith that was quite actively contradicted by Pope's own editorial practices. It doesn't appear that Pope fully understood the implications of his statements. If he did, then it seems unlikely that he would have regularized Shakespeare's speech tags, an editorial move which seeks to avoid reader confusion as it simultaneously suppresses "the artistic variation of the names"—the "artistic variation" of an artist whose "characters" are apparently *so distinct* "as those in life itself" so that they require no names at all. Clearly, some "fast and loose" rhetoric is at play here, attempting to hide the reductive labors that

¹³² qtd. in Mcleod 88.

¹³³ Mcleod 88-9.

must be present to bring Shakespearean “variation” under control and create “individual” “characters” out of “dividual” roles.¹³⁴

The nominal diversity present in many of the older Shakespearean texts is remarkable indeed, such as the 1623 folio version of *All's Well that Ends Well*, in which what we would regard as a singular “character” is variously identified as “Mother,” “Countess,” “Old Countess,” “Lady,” and “Old Lady.”¹³⁵ In fact, there seems to be a certain logic operating behind these varying designations. In scenes where the “Countess” is referred to as “Old” it seems to be a product of her context, a description of her *role* in a given scene that accentuates the relational dynamic at work within the dialogue, because, when she is labeled “Old,” she is beside someone *younger*.¹³⁶ Additionally, when she is referred to as “Old Lady” within the text, “might we not have felt that the thematic redundancy of tag and dialogue was now less about age than about *Being Female?*”¹³⁷ The shift from “Countess” to “Lady” highlights the scene as primarily occupied with concerns of *femininity* rather than *nobility*.¹³⁸ We see an analogous nominal shift at work in Q2 of *Hamlet*, where in the “play within a play” scene (and before), Gertrude is referred to as “Queen” (or “Quee”) when in the presence of the players and, perhaps more tellingly, the King; yet later, in the bedroom scene with Hamlet, she is designated “Ger” (Gertrude), and then, in a following scene with “Horatio” and “Gentlemen,” her tag returns to “Quee” (Shakespeare 27,31,37). This is an interesting bit of nominal fluctuation indeed. But it stands to reason that this variation was purposeful, rather than accidental,

¹³⁴ Mcleod 88.

¹³⁵ Mcleod 90.

¹³⁶ Mcleod 91-2.

¹³⁷ Mcleod 92.

¹³⁸ Mcleod 92.

emphasizing the *current* relationship between the Queen/Gertrude and the roles of the players that surround her: “The redundancy of the new tag and the dialogue it ushers in is thus *selective* redundancy; and selective redundancy between such internal textual categories as tag and dialogue externalizes itself as *interpretation*.”¹³⁹ Perhaps Shakespeare felt that the speech tag “Queen” no longer suited her role when in close quarters with Hamlet in the bedroom—that her intimacy with him in that scene required her given, more personal name, rather than attaching a courtly feel to the scene by insisting on “Queen” to preserve nominal continuity but contradict her current scenic *role*. The editorial impulse to destroy these varying designations is one that ostensibly desires character coherence over the instability and diversity of textual role, requiring uniformity to bring unity even if that unity is something forcefully applied instead of so obvious that even “had all the speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons” it could be clearly seen.

Speaking of editorial alterations, the convention of the dramatis personae list is an editorial addition, not a Renaissance practice, one which substantially alters the reader’s perception of the text:

In a modern edition of a play, the list of dramatis personae precedes the play, suggesting that characters preexist their speeches. Shakespeare’s first readers, however, received no such suggestion, for none of the quartos published in his lifetime featured lists of characters; the Folio includes lists for only seven out of thirty-six plays, and in every case the list appears *after* rather than *before* the play.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Mcleod 91.

¹⁴⁰ Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” *Shakespeare:*

Therefore:

Readers had to arbitrate for themselves the boundaries of identity, constructing (or failing to construct, or refusing to construct) “individual” characters in the process of reading. Quite literally without a program and therefore not programmed to encounter a group of unified characters, they instead had to negotiate an array of positionalities relating to rank, family, gender, age, and even specific personnel of the theatrical company.¹⁴¹

Without a uniform system of speech prefixes or a *dramatis personae* list, the Renaissance reader of Shakespeare would have encountered a very different text than the one modern readers (and modern critics) are accustomed to dealing with. Their constructions of “characters” would have most likely been much more fluid, variable and (un)defined by this textual un-fixity. They would have been negotiating “an array of positionalities” in flux. It is clear that an emphasis on the continuity and coherence of “character” that was the concern of eighteenth-century character critics like Morgann and editors like Pope wasn’t present in the early modern text, because textual devices like speech tags and *dramatis personae* lists did not exist. Instead of the continuity afforded by speech prefixes, discontinuity is found. Labels change. “Countess” becomes “Old Lady”; “Queen” becomes “Gertrude”—then back to “Queen.” Instead of identifiable, distinct names that frame the play in the form of *dramatis personae* to clear up confusion, the indistinction of the tags is the only “character” distinction to be found—an identifying construct that seems more relative to scene than it does to some coherent, abstract sense of character.

The Critical Complex, ed. Stephen Orgel and Sean Keilen (New York: Garland, 1999) 13.

¹⁴¹ de Grazia and Stallybrass, *Materiality* 13.

Flexible as they may seem, the importance of the names of Shakespearean “characters” should not be overlooked; as Stephen Orgel suggests in “What is a Character?,” it is often their very names that communicate their *character*: “Malvolio is one of a large number of Renaissance dramatic characters whose nature is defined, encapsulated, determined by their names—Lussurioso, Black Will, Sir Epicure Mammon, Sir Beauteous Ganymede, the immortal Supervacuo: the point is obvious, the list extensive.”¹⁴² Malvolio means, of course, ill will, and his “character” conforms to that name rather well.¹⁴³ The fact that the nature of a “character” is so tied to the name assigned that “character” moves these Shakespearean roles closer to medieval Personification and away from the vibrant, vivid depth of modern character that critics like Anthony Dawson contend “we’re used to” when discussing the “large and personal” “Shakespearean character.” Instead of adding complexity, the name of the “character” that the text presents simplifies the role. Name designates “character” as a type in a way that’s similar to, not removed from, what Dawson decries as “allegorical personage or satirical caricature.” Even Hamlet cannot escape the limitations of his name. As de Grazia suggests, it is Hamlet’s desire for his propertied and titled inheritance and frustration over its usurpation that drives his “character,” an investment in land and property that is communicated in his name: “it is tempting to connect the landless Hamlet with the humble unit of land whose name he shares. A hamlet is a diminutive *ham*, the Saxon word for a settlement, often marked off by a ditch, with too few dwellings to warrant a church.”¹⁴⁴ Names, if anything, often

¹⁴² Stephen Orgel, “What Is a Character?,” *Text: Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1995) 103-4.

¹⁴³ Orgel, *Character* 105.

¹⁴⁴ de Grazia, *Hamlet* 44.

worked to *depersonalize* the “character” in the text, circumscribing their qualities and relating the defining characteristic of the “character.”

Dialogue, what Pope seems to think creates “every single character in Shakespeare...as much as an Individual, as those in Life itself,” evidences much less individuality than editors and critics like Pope would assert. If the Shakespearean text is thoroughly consulted, the “individuality” of “individual” “characters” dialogue is not what is most obviously discovered. Instead, a curious dividuality appears, problematizing the “individual”-framing.¹⁴⁵ Consider the following lines from the 1599 *Romeo and Juliet* text:

Ro. Would I were fleepe and peace fo fweet to reft
 The grey eyed morne fmiles on the frowning night,
 Checking the Eafterne Clouds with ftreaks of light,
 And darkneffe fleckted like a drunkard reeles,
 From forth daies pathway, made by *Tytans* wheeles,
 Hence will I to my ghostly Friers clofe cell,
 His helpe to craue, and my deare hap to tell.

Exit

Enter Friar alone with a basket (night,
Fri. The grey-eyed morne fmiles on the frowning
 Checking the Easterne clowdes with ftreaks of light:
 And flackeld darkneffe like a drunkard reeles,
 From forth daies part, and *Titans* burning wheeles:

¹⁴⁵ Mcleod 89.

Now ere the fun aduance his buring eie,¹⁴⁶

Instead of differentiating between the Friar and Romeo, much of the dialogue assigned unifies these ostensibly distinct “characters.” “That Shakespeare assigned this speech to such very different roles” Mcleod asserts concerning this passage, “suggests that its duplicated words have little to express of the Personal experiences of either of them.”¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the implication of such redundancy is the “*imPersonal[ity]*” of its contents, but the very fact that dialogue can be used so impersonally indicates, strongly, that differentiation, that individuation as a whole wasn’t necessarily in the mind of the Renaissance dramatist.¹⁴⁸ As Mcleod goes on to contend, the dialogue seems “*dramatically or scenically* functional, and not unmediatedly *mimetic* or redolent of the *personal* character.”¹⁴⁹ But the construction of dialogue as related to specific situations, not character, is exactly how playwrighting would have been taught to Shakespeare, and the evidence of this writing practice is at work within *Hamlet*:

Ancient texts also applied familiar patterns of dramatic action, Hamlet and Horatio replay continually Seneca’s [a classic dramatist] *domina-nutrix* dialogue, for example, the conversation between passionate protagonist and restraining confidant; at the end they reverse roles as calm, dying Hamlet restrains the passionate Horatio from the rash action of suicide. The forms and models of classical rhetoric, learned by repetition and rote at school, also shape formal and informal writing in the Renaissance.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Shakespeare qtd. in Mcleod 89.

¹⁴⁷ Mcleod 89.

¹⁴⁸ Mcleod 89.

¹⁴⁹ Mcleod 89.

¹⁵⁰ Miola 183.

The interactions and dialogue of Hamlet and Horatio conform to expectations of the specific situations they are in, not the internality of their character. The conventions of scene and circumstance dictate speech and create character. Many quintessential Shakespearean characters emerged from an adherence to literary conventions. Characters such as Macbeth, Falstaff, and Shylock frequently acted according to literary expectations prescribed through conventions; for example, Macbeth's speech is replete with Senecan rhetoric, his lines often a product of analogical thinking on the part of the playwright.¹⁵¹ Seen in this way, distinct textual character bleeds into the character of the text as a whole, directly serving scenic functions instead of portraying "character."

Indeed, Renaissance writing practices reveal an interesting relationship between role and the dialogue that creates it. Peter Sallibrass makes an inference regarding the nature of the textual practices of playwrights during that period that illustrates this interesting relationship:

Recent character analyses tend to trace the differing consistencies of Albany and Edgar [in *King Lear*] as if they were discrete individuals in Q1 and F1. But that is not, I think, how character emerges in Shakespearean drama. At its simplest, and judging from the Hand D pages of *Sir Thomas More* which most scholars presume to be the hand of Shakespeare, we can suggest the following principle: the assignment of character is belated, a question of how one divides up what is, at its most basic, monologue or

¹⁵¹ Miola 180-1.

dialogue between one, two, or more actors. Hand D seems first to have written the speeches, and then, only afterwards, assigned speech prefixes.¹⁵² Such “belated” designation is quite contrary to “recent” conceptions of “how character emerges in Shakespearean drama”; the boundary lines of “character” seem to be best conceived as the dramaturgical consequence of dialogue, not the catalyst for it. As the discussion of speech tags and the dramatis personae lists already seems to indicate concerning the Renaissance reader, individualities were not necessarily conceived prior to dialogue by the Renaissance playwright—an order of operations that demands a reordering of “recent” Shakespearean “character” analysis.¹⁵³

Similarly troublesome inferences can be drawn from a comparison of some of the earlier *Hamlet* texts. Consider the Q1 and F1 versions of Hamlet’s soliloquy side by side:

Q1	F1
To be, or not to be, I there’s the point,	To be, or not to be, that is the Queftion:
To Die, to fleepe, is that all? I all:	Whether ‘tis Nobler in the minde to fuffer
No, to fleep, to dreame, I mary there it goes,	The Slings and Arrowes of outrageous Fortune,
For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,	Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles,
And borne before an euerlafting Iudge,	And by oppofing end them, to dye, to fleepe
From whence no paffenger euer retur’nd,	No more; and by a fleepe, to fay we end
The vndifcouered country, at whofe fight	The Heart-ake, and the thoufand Naturall fhokes
The happy fimile, and the accuffed damn’d	That Flefh is heyre too? ‘Tis a confummation
But for this, the ioyfull hope of this,	Deuoutly to be wifh’d. To dye to fleepe,
Whol’d beare the fcornees and flattery of the world,	To fleepe, perchance to Dreame, I, there’s the rub,
Scorned by the right rich, the rice curffed of the poore?	For in that fleepe of death, what dreams may come,

¹⁵² Peter Stallybrass, “Naming, Renaming and Unnaming in the Shakespearean Quartos and Folio,” *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality* ed. Andrew Murphy (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 131.

¹⁵³ Peter Thomson, “Rogues and Rhetoricians: Acting Styles in Early English Drama,” *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and John D. Cox (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 324-25.

The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,
 The taste of hunger, or a tyrants raigne,
 And thousand more calamities befalls,
 To grunt and sweat vnder this weary life,
 When that he may his full *Quietus* make,
 With a bare bodkin, who would this indure,
 But for a hope of something after death?
 Which puffes the braine, and doeth confound the fence,
 Which makes vs rather beare those euilles we haue,
 Than flie to others that we know not of.
 I that, O this conscience makes cowards of vs all,
 Lady in thy orizons, be all my finnes remembered.

When we have fhuffled off this mortall coile,
 Must give vs pause. There's the respect
 That makes Calamity of so long life.
 For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,
 The Oppressors wrong, the poore mans Contumely,
 The pangs of dispriz'd Loue, and the Lawes delay,
 The influence of Office, and the Spurnes
 That patient merit of the vnworthy takes,
 When he himselfe might his *Quietus* make
 With a bare Bodkin? Who would these Fardles beare
 To Grunt and sweat vnder a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The vndiscover'd Countrey, from whose Borne
 No Traueller returns, Puzzles the will,
 And makes vs rather beare those illes we haue,
 Then flye to other that we know not of.
 Thus Conscience does make Cowards of vs all,
 And thus the Natiue hew of Resolution
 Is fickle'd o're, with the pale cast of Thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment,
 With this regard their Currants turne away,
 And loofe the name of Action. Soft you now,
 The faire *Ophelia* Nymph, in thy Orizons
 Be all my finnes remembered. (III.i.54-88)

What's most striking about these two passages is not how much they corroborate, how much they work together to create singular character but, instead, how much they *vary*, even if in the sheer number of characters in the speech. The "individual" "character"

of Hamlet, created and sustained by the cumulative effect of successive pieces of dialogue, runs into a bit of a predicament when held up to such examples of the actual, textual Hamlet, a role which is decidedly undecided (by the text, at least). Which second line more fully, more accurately illustrates Hamlet's "internality," Q1's "To Die, to fleepe, is that all? I all" or F1's "Whether 'tis Nobler in the minde to fuffer"? The fact that such a question is even possible poses a serious challenge to the concept—at least the concept of a singular "character" of Hamlet.

Though the disparity between the Q1 and F1 iterations of Hamlet's soliloquy is quite telling, what's also interesting about these passages is *where they corroborate*. In fact, those lines for which this passage is most known are, quite paradoxically, the *least* unique to Shakespeare. Even considering a line as integral to Hamlet's "character" (and therefore Shakespeare as a playwright) as "To be, or not to be," Stallybrass illustrates this very point in an essay discussing Shakespearean originality:

1573 Ralph Lever: "to be or not to bée" (67)

1584 Dudley Fenner: "To bee or not to be" (C1)

1588 Abraham Fraunce: "to bée, or not to bée" (86)

1596 William Perkins: "to be or not to be" (4)

1601 John Deacon: "to be, or not to be" (46)

1603 Robert Rollock: "to be or not to be" (*Treatise* 177-78)

1604 Henoeh Clapham: "to be, or not to be" (A2v)

1604 William Shakespeare: "To be, or not to be" (G2)¹⁵⁴

The memorable "To be, or not to be" is not the only piece of conventional rhetoric at work in this monologue; in fact, much of the soliloquy is created from commonplace

¹⁵⁴ Peter Stallybrass, "Against Thinking" *PMLA* 122.5 2007: 1581.

phrases.¹⁵⁵ In other words, instead of securing Hamlet's "individual" characterization, many of the quotable lines of the soliloquy most characteristic of Hamlet are also those lines that are the most referential, the most derivative. The conventionality of his lines secures Hamlet's role within a network of familiar reference. In fact, I would posit that it is precisely because of the derivative nature of Hamlet's soliloquy that his soliloquy is able to generate his role effectively. As has been discussed through much of this paper, the Renaissance concept of persons, dramatic or otherwise, seems to be much more concerned with their interrelation with other persons and property than it does with autonomy. It isn't through description of complex internal characteristics that the Renaissance *individual* appears; instead, it is through subscription to these various methods of identification that the Renaissance *subject* begins to emerge. What distinguishes subjects from individuals is the manner of consideration that each warrants. To discuss something individually is to address the thing itself; an individual is consequential in and of itself. Subjects, however, can only be appropriately conceptualized relationally; subjects are what they are given what they are *subject* to. Subjects, in other words, are only as understandable, definable, and coherent as they are referential, and subjects seem to be precisely what Renaissance persons considered themselves to be. As Stallybrass concisely observes, "historically the subject *precedes* the individual."¹⁵⁶ Clothing, property, and family demarcated the borders of identity. The Renaissance theatrical person is similarly defined. Individual, unique lines would, in a way, serve to alienate the audience or reader from the "character"; if Hamlet's soliloquies were unique to him rather than woven of proverbial phrases, his originality

¹⁵⁵ Stallybrass, "Against" 1581.

¹⁵⁶ Stallybrass, *Shakespeare* 593.

wouldn't serve to distinguish his role [dramatic] or illustrate a unique individual so much as it would efface its *referential* significance. The efficacy of Hamlet's "character," to a certain extent, depended on the conventionality of his dialogue. What for a modern audience would destroy the distinction of character would for a Renaissance reader mostly likely secure its significance.

Yet it must be admitted that to consider the Shakespearean "character" as exclusively the product of the printed text is to forego perhaps the most essential element of Shakespearean plays, namely, that they were performed. "Character for me, therefore," Andrew James Hartley notes,

is the hybrid production of actor and scripted role, something that cannot inhere merely in the material document (the play in the book) and requires the equally material conditions of the stage in order to come into being. Without the actor's body, character only exists *in potentia*, an infinite "hypothetical" requiring the actuality of performance for specificity, immediacy and limit.¹⁵⁷

He concludes the paragraph with this terse comment: "Character is an embodied phenomenon."¹⁵⁸ Randall Mcleod agrees:

Understandably, an actress of this role is liable to be focused (in a way Pope would understand intuitively) on her own *character*; she may most readily come to conceive an individual identity (especially before

¹⁵⁷ Andrew J. Hartley, "Character, Agency, and the Familiar Actor," *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 159.

¹⁵⁸ Hartley 159.

rehearsals) from the inside out, as it were—from reading all the dialogue assigned to her, as if she is centered in what she says.¹⁵⁹

So, the question now becomes not whether the term “character” fits the constraints of the Renaissance text, but whether it fits the performance practices as a whole. Does the individual, consistent, and psychological dramatic structure signified by “character” seem to be the term that best describes a Renaissance player embodying a Shakespearean role? Apparently not, as Stallybrass observes:

Mucedorus tells us that ten actors can easily play all the parts, which means that ten actors will have time to put on as many costumes as the parts require....We also know from the 1631 promptbook of Massinger’s *Believe as You List* that single parts could be divided up between two or three players. To put it another way, Renaissance theatrical conventions might require not only that one body wear many different costumes but also that many bodies fit into a single costume.¹⁶⁰

Such practices clearly represent the inverse of individual expression of character. Instead of providing a single person with which the audience can relate to as assuming a single part, this realization of “character... *in potentia*” was quite possibly dispersed and diffused by the multiplicity of role switching being undertaken by the players. As “two or three players” embodying a single role would communicate anything but the singularity of that role, so one actor assuming several roles would relay a certain amount of connection between the various parts—blurring “individuality.” These practices portray a flexibility and volatility of the Renaissance performance identity,

¹⁵⁹ Mcleod, *Names* 91.

¹⁶⁰ Stallybrass, *Naming* 110.

not solidarity. “Onstage the doubling of actors might also have destabilized character.”¹⁶¹

Such doubling was possible because of the role of costumes within a play. Costumes determined role: “The simplest, and most theatrical, way of thinking about how many characters there are in any one play is to ask how many costumes the play requires.”¹⁶² Costumes assumed the weight of dramatic role; costumes informed the audience of “character” more than even the actor within the clothing in a way that is hard to understand, so that “If two actors step into identical costumes, they have usually within the conventions of the Renaissance theatre stepped into the ‘same’ body.”¹⁶³ The Shakespearean theater conceived a player’s role in the most superficial of ways, in some sense disengaging the very body of the player from the performance of “character.” But, all this isn’t to say that a Renaissance audience wasn’t at all aware of the actor in costume; the fact that they were quite aware of the man beneath breaks up a bit of the coherence afforded to the personated “character.” In other words,

The process of personation does not necessarily involve the effacement of the actor. After all, performance of a variety of roles on successive days was part of an actor’s conditions of employment, and actors seem to have drawn upon established social and performative traditions to convey specific situations and emotions....according to Susan Cerasano, a player “did not attempt to *become* a character, but to *represent* a character.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ de Grazia and Stallybrass, *Materiality* 269.

¹⁶² Stallybrass, *Naming* 110.

¹⁶³ Stallybrass, *Naming* 109.

¹⁶⁴ Leanoire Lieblein, “Embodied Intersubjectivity and the Creation of Early Modern Character,” *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Jessica Slights and Paul E. Yachnin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) 123-4.

This awareness of the person of the actor coupled with the personated “character” unsettles the image of the “character” unified within the live performance of text. This active, dual visibility of the audience taken with the powerful role-assuming quality of the costume presented the Renaissance theater spectator with a complex, layered nexus of identity where actor, role and costume inhabited the same physical space but, perhaps, existed in separate abstract spaces. This is something problematic for an audience that would require a coherent vision of “character,” but symptomatic of a theatrical world that didn’t have one.

But what can be said about the actual performance of “character”? As Peter Thomson has shown, the group rehearsal and assumption of “character” that is practiced in modern theater wasn’t needed for the Renaissance player; experience and fluency with established theatrical conventions rendered such involved preparation unnecessary.¹⁶⁵ The monologues used in plays might be conventional “set piece[s]” that the actor would already know—all that would be necessary would be knowledge of player position.¹⁶⁶ This was possible because the communication of a complex mental state wasn’t the goal of the player; instead, Thomson insists that a purity of emotional significance and its relation through conventional movement was the actor’s ideal:

The individual player’s talk is to enact the instructions embedded in the selected adverb (sinuously; grudgingly; seductively) with sufficient clarity to enable the onlookers to guess the word. To indulge in elaborate,

¹⁶⁵ Thomson 325.

¹⁶⁶ Thomson 325.

individual interpretation is, in all likelihood, to fail in the purpose of the charade.¹⁶⁷

The objective of the player wasn't to create a lifelike reproduction of human emotion and movement, but instead manufacture a performance based on "established social and performative traditions to convey specific situations and emotions" so that "Success...is achieved by an elimination of superfluous movements, distracting twitches, or false emphases."¹⁶⁸ Such performances were eminently tied to and reinforced by the conventions of the theatrical text. "The emotion is signaled by the language," Leanore Lieblein explains, "most especially by that given to the person to be personated, and communicated by the rhetorical tropes the speaker is given in the text."¹⁶⁹ Bound textually and presented traditionally, the "character" represented by a player onstage was communicated as a type, a type signaled textually by name and reinforced performatively by "appropriate gestures" that corresponded to the textual suggestion of "select adverbs."¹⁷⁰

Nevertheless, deviation from the written role did occur. As de Grazia notes, it was not uncommon for an actor, specifically an actor playing Hamlet, to hold "on to the spotlight, as it were, by taking flight from the script and saying 'more than is set down.'"¹⁷¹ This "more" could take the form of jesting that the actor would have recited from jest books.¹⁷² This aspect of performance suggests a curious disengagement from text that, in a way, was liberating, but not liberating in such a way

¹⁶⁷ Thomson 328.

¹⁶⁸ Thomson 328.

¹⁶⁹ Lieblein 127.

¹⁷⁰ Lieblein 127.

¹⁷¹ de Grazia, *Hamlet* 179.

¹⁷² de Grazia, *Hamlet* 179.

that would “deepen” the personation beyond the adherence to textual cues. Instead, such instances exemplify an abandonment of the “character” recorded in the characters of the text for a show of another kind—one predominantly focused on the player, not the role ostensibly being played. Clearly, if this was relatively commonplace, then such “fast and loose” play with the text betrays a lack of respect for the coherence of the “character” and the consistency thereof.

It seems that the Renaissance “character” performed is as unstable as the textual “character” inscribed. If consistency is a salient requirement of character, then the inconsistency of theatrical representation at work on the Shakespearean stage makes “character” a term ill-suited for the part of the player. The single body that serves as the focal point of dramatic characterization is a thing often split among multiple characterizations, or multiple bodies were collapsed into a single role—a diversity undeniably antithetical to character’s singularity and solidarity. Dialogue, as well, that thing which creates “character” (if even *in potentia*), wasn’t adhered to strictly. Players would create their own lines—grandstand, evidencing a theater whose allegiance to the text was anything but rigorous. But such grandstanding makes sense in a theatrical system where a role was considered more a “representative” venture than an immersive, comprehensive “becoming.” The actor wasn’t necessarily invisible to the audience—in a sense, absorbed by his “character”; the reality of his person was part of the complex representation of “character” as well. His identity and the identity of the “character” were not theatrically presented as a whole. There were tears, divergences, fluid and multiple shifts from real person to fictional personage, all contained within the greater conceit of the play. When an actor did hold to the text,

when he was “in character,” as it were, the performance produced not a depth of emotion or a complex inwardness, but conventionally displayed emotions and dispositions in gestures with which most of the audience would be quite familiar.¹⁷³

The Renaissance “character” embodied on stage is a complex dramatic device, but not many of those complexities can be honestly correlated with the fictional literary character that is an integral part of modern Renaissance criticism.

Conclusion

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Coleridge, addressing the towering dramatic figure that is Hamlet, explained in his lectures that his intention was to find what “Shakespeare mean[t] when he drew the character of Hamlet.” A bold intention, undoubtedly, but the framing of the question itself dooms Coleridge to failure. In his essay “What is a Character?,” Stephen Orgel points out the fallacious thinking at work when a character is conceived as being “something different from the lines.”¹⁷⁴ He seems to think it questionable to postulate that a character exists outside of the only hard evidence of its existence: the text. But such an apparently odd postulation must be an accepted proposition if a character’s lines can be critiqued, rearranged, deleted or edited because they seem, if you’ll forgive the term, uncharacteristic. But “character,” at its philosophical roots, demands such thinking. When the word solidified semantically, the concepts of consciousness, coherence and consistency became its defining features. The fact that characters are so delineated maintains their abstraction. The problem isn’t that characters have been

¹⁷³ Lieblein 127.

¹⁷⁴ Orgel, *Character* 105.

considered as “something different from the lines” but that characters were conceived as inherently “something different from the lines.” There is a very good reason why it is difficult to consider “literary character [as] a thing made out of words and words alone”: “It is, of course, very difficult to think of character in this way, to release character from the requirements of psychology, consistency and credibility, especially when those words on a page are being embodied in actors on a stage.”¹⁷⁵ It is challenging to “release” character from these requirements because those requirements are integral to the very nature of character.

To be clear, this is not to assert that characters *actually* have psychologies or that they *actually* exist apart from the text. Literary characters *can* only be constructed from words; characters only exist because of those words and for the work as a whole: “the character is the script.”¹⁷⁶ This isn’t just a discussion of theoretical possibility, of the rational limitations of fictional persons; rather, it is an explanation of the expectations that accompany *literary character*, especially Shakespearean “character”: that it is “large and personal,” that “it entails psychology.” It’s difficult to learn what “Shakespeare mean[t] when he drew the character of Hamlet” not only because Shakespeare is dead and interpretation is hard—those difficulties, alas, will always be with us—but also because to address the “persons” we read in Shakespeare’s plays as “characters” is to misrepresent the “persons” we read in Shakespeare’s plays as, well, persons. We instinctively understand literary characters as persons, and *characters are persons*. They are so by definition. (Given such an understanding, it is worth exploring if it is even possible to create characters). In other words, psychological

¹⁷⁵ Orgel, *Character* 102-3.

¹⁷⁶ Orgel, *Character* 103.

readings of characters are perfectly reasonable, because *characters are psychological*. The real question, however, is whether what Shakespeare created were characters or not. “The categories basic to Shakespeare studies,” Margreta de Grazia explains, “—word, work, character and author—are constructions that post-date the first appearance of the texts they are applied to by almost two centuries.”¹⁷⁷ To apply the term “character” to Hamlet, or to any other Shakespearean role for that matter, is to create expectations, project literary traits that are by necessity bound to fail. This is not quibbling over trivialities. “Character” has invested in it a framework of interpretation that has no temporal relation to the Shakespearean text. Characters are the product of another time, another England, coming philosophies, meticulous editors and clever critics. Whatever his numerous literary accomplishments, Shakespeare wrote no characters.

A new terminology is in order. If “character” doesn’t fit Hamlet as well as his madness (and his madness never really made sense, did it?), then what shall critics call him? In a word, “role.” Semantically, role does what character doesn’t: role gestures towards the whole of the text. “Role” is eminently referential of the greater play from which it comes and defined by that relation. “Roles” are, in a fashion, considered much like subjects, as being dependent on, instead of independent of, other systems and structures. As such, role bears a striking relation to the subjects whom they were often created to represent. Additionally, role carries strong sense of materiality. The word is derived from the “roll” of paper on which a player’s part was inscribed, and, as such, it conveys a textual linkage that is essential when dealing with Shakespearean

¹⁷⁷ Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, “Love Among the Ruins: Response to Pechter,” *Shakespeare and the Editorial Tradition*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Sean Keilen (New York: Garland, 1999) 51.

texts. This sense of material origins is vital given the instability of those origins. To address Hamlet as a role makes no presumptions about his consistency; it doesn't posit a fictional psychology; it doesn't demand singularity of presentation within the text and representation in the theater. Role refers to the textual passages assigned to a particular player or players. Role makes no stipulations concerning consistency and requires no justification with the kind of expectations that character demands. It is flexible. It is indefinite. It is, simply put, exactly all those things that the Shakespearean text requires and Shakespearean "character" lacks.

What, then, can be said about Hamlet? An endless amount. But the fact that the focus of criticism of *Hamlet* is Hamlet reveals the traditional misplacement of emphasis that has hindered the appraisal of the play as a whole. As L.C. Knights remarks, the "most fruitful of irrelevancies is the assumption that Shakespeare was preeminently a great 'creator of characters.'"¹⁷⁸ Indeed, Shakespeare wrote great dialogue, crafted wonderful roles, but to treat those dramatic devices as "independent of the work in which they appear" by appropriating extravagant critical emphasis to them disregards the whole of the text.¹⁷⁹ And Shakespeare, however collaboratively, was in the business of producing entire plays, not individual parts, and it is those plays that demand our attention. Criticism should adopt a vocabulary that reflects such an emphasis. As Hamlet says, "the play's the thing" (Shakespeare [Q2] 22). And indeed it is. So the question isn't "what can be said about Hamlet?" but rather "what can be said about *Hamlet*?"

¹⁷⁸ Knights 1.

¹⁷⁹ Knights 5.

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