

Shakespearean Motives

Derek Cohen

*Associate Professor of English
York University, Ontario*

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To Marjorie

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1 Introduction

The variety of approaches to the plays studied in this book will not, I hope, obscure my central interest in characterization. I do not wish to propose definitive criticisms of the plays or the characters I discuss; rather, I offer 'readings' of the characters from different perspectives. In reading, reading about, and teaching Shakespearean drama, I have found myself constantly drawn back to the question of how what happens in the plays – in the many senses of the phrase – is interesting to me chiefly in what it tells about Shakespeare's characters. Thus, despite my discrete emphases in the following chapters upon such apparently incongruous subjects as Shakespeare's use of language, ritual, narrative, psychological and social motivation, I have kept before me at all times the idea that these matters, however vitally evident, are also ways of seeing character. They function, in a sense, as the means through which dramatic character may be critically observed and, in each case, propose a different angle of observation of the same general subject.

It is probably true to say that there are as many different characters inside any of Shakespeare's major and minor characters as there are actors to play them and readers to read their parts. One might take this assertion a logical step further. If each character is seen differently by each reader, it must follow that each character is seen differently by each reader upon each reading. This is surely so because while the character in the drama is forever fixed, the reader of that character is forever changing, and thus his reading of that character's part is inevitably altered by his application of his altered self to the text. This can be easily seen in the more obvious exercise of criticism. A text can upon a reading – first, second, or fifth – seem to yield a meaning and the critic can convey his understanding of that meaning by writing it out in the form of a critical essay. However, the reading of another criticism about the same text can greatly change the once certain understanding just as it can simply confirm belief in the same earlier reading. Less obviously, but no less surely, the critic himself upon his re-reading of the text is an older and slightly or considerably altered critic. The difference in

him between the two readings may not be reflected in his articulation of the reading – in his writing or thinking about the text – but it is undeniable.

The dramatic character, on the other hand, as in one sense a merely mechanically functioning unit in a larger scheme, is ultimately a fixed entity. He is limited in the way that no human being is limited, is typical or, even, symbolic, in the way that no human being can be and is absolutely whole and knowable in the way that no human being is either. The 'knowableness' of the character in a play, while theoretically possible, is nevertheless practically subservient to the infinite variety of those who would know him. That is, while the fixedness of the dramatic character is indisputable, he cannot ultimately be wholly known simply because the lives and experiences of him of those who read, hear or see him are essentially different. He is perceived differently by each 'reading' of him. When, as often happens, certain readings of certain characters or plays take hold, all that is reflected in the fact of the dominance of an interpretation is a willingness of readers to be persuaded by another reader. This willingness can, obviously, stem from a variety of causes such as social climate, social opinion, political and economic necessities, psychological compulsion, to name but a few. The case of Shylock is instructive in this regard. Ages passed when it was normal to read Shylock as the embodiment of villainy and to recognize his Jewishness as merely one more component of it. The nineteenth century, with its romantic and, to some extent sentimental, predilections, discovered another Shylock, the one Shakespeare *really* meant – a persecuted member of an oppressed race. This Shylock was embraced by the age and became the dominant Shylock of the period. Today, in a world which venerates Shakespeare unquestioningly, and which has seen the nearly successful attempt to exterminate the Jewish race in its recent past, that reading of Shakespeare's Jew remains dominant for the reason that anti-Semitism has become unacceptable ideology while in the eyes of readers, audiences and critics Shakespeare continues to be regarded as incapable of moral error. The Shakespeare of today, in keeping with the dominant political value of Western society, is racially tolerant, a feminist, against war. That is, we, his readers, have made him over in our image. Shakespeare's plays have been too subtle for us. It is salutary to recall that these same plays have been pressed into the service of fascist regimes throughout the world as reflecting *their* values. Our typical apprehension of this

'abuse' of the poet is, we need to recall, merely a theoretical position itself. We are arguing that we are right and 'they' are wrong about 'our' poet.

The strong feelings aroused by the question of what Shakespeare means derive from the problem of how he means his characters, and it is in the different 'knowings' of the characters that different interpretations as to the meaning of Shakespeare arise. A dramatic character has no secret, no undisclosed past and no hidden depth though he may assert their presence. Every word he speaks, has ever spoken, will ever speak is heard, overheard and read, every thought recorded. He is, in a concrete sense, a composite of *données*, of words spoken by and about him, of gestures indicated by these words, of relations to others similarly composed. And yet, despite this palpable known existence, we continue to insist by our reading of the dramatic character that he is essentially a mystery, and that the palpability of the character is merely the touchstone of his inner life. Thus, though a character does or says this or that in real measureable terms, the mystery resides in how we understand what he means by what he does or says because we are different from each other. The whole of the character is an aggregate of signs – of single words, speeches, expostulations, ejaculations, movements – and open to a range of understandings that is probably infinite. Certainly one of the practises of criticism is to make sense of some of the variations and combinations of elements which are possible within the scope of the drama in which the character is engaged. Though the multiplicity of variations and combinations is theoretically finite, in practise the possible combinations of relations of elements of the character and the play – say, word to word, idea to idea, gesture to gesture, word to gesture, idea to word *et cetera* – within the play and to the reader, critic, actor and director is unending. Thus, to pluck the heart of the character is problematic not merely because there is no solution to his mystery but because there is no resolution of the fact that those who would subject the character to the laws of comprehension are themselves quint-essentially compounded of different matter.

The problem is demonstrable by reference to the acknowledged difference between flat and round characters. What distinguishes the two types of characters in a narrative is truly a function not merely of their likeness to life or their fullness of personality. Rather the distinction lies quite simply in the way in which we, the readers and observers of these characters, respond to them – in their sheer

and purely subjective interestingness to us: that is to say, in a consensus about the fascination which they hold for us. We may note that as criticism as a profession has burgeoned it has slowly but surely begun to accord those characters in literature who were once dismissed or ignored more and more significance so that they, these marginal characters, are slowly moving into the focus of critical attention and being accorded the kind of deference once reserved for those characters whom consensus declared to be indisputably major or round. What determines a character's flatness is not necessarily anything inherent in the character so nominated, but rather the reader's or the spectator's or the director's decision that the character is flat. After all, surely the only way in which the flat character differs from the round character – as these old-fashioned terms imply – is that there is less of him. But the common agreement of his readers about his function is the final arbiter of his insignificance, and this common agreement is reached only upon the purely subjective decision that he is not interesting to those who read his part.¹ His readers agree that there is no scope for interpretation of the part of the flat character, and they agree upon his function.

In Act IV, scene vii, line 36 of *Hamlet*, a messenger enters with letters and announces, 'These to your Majesty, this to the Queen.' To Claudius's response, 'From Hamlet! Who brought them?' the messenger replies, 'Sailors, my lord, they say. I saw them not./They were given me by Claudio. He received them/Of him that brought them.'² Having handed over the letters the messenger is ordered out of the king's presence never to return. This messenger, a character in *Hamlet*, has delivered in his two lines the whole of himself and, so far as I know, has not ever been the subject of critical interest as even a minor character in Shakespeare. This neglect of him seems to add up to a consensus that his character never escapes from the purely functional and stereotypical limits which his role places upon him. As one of drama's functionaries, he is related by his readers to the type from which he derives – one of life's functionaries: a man of no power or importance in his occupation, he is patronized, ordered about, unnoticed by his superiors, used, abused and neglected. He is allowed no emotional life, no family, no home, no friends. The words he speaks and those spoken to him are the entirety of his life. There is simple agreement about his function and character among all who read his lines or see his part. And there is probably no reader or spectator in any culture whose

philosophical, ethical, or political assumptions are such as to make him perceive the messenger in a different way from that in which he has always been perceived by readers and critics. Even if the messenger is understood to be a lackey of the feudal/capitalist system of the Danish court, his character has never been altered by the assumption. But this is only because he has failed to *interest* those who read him in himself. Indeed, given the highly charged context of the drama into which he is momentarily introduced it is part of his function not to draw attention to himself. And yet, it seems to me premature to assume that the critical neglect to which such 'functional' characters have been subjected up to now is to be their fate for all time. May we not, for example, reasonably make some heavyish weather of the fact that the unseen messenger who provided our messenger with the letters which he received from the sailors who brought them possessed nearly the same name as the king he is presently addressing? Suddenly, and for no obvious reason Shakespeare brings to the forefront of the dialogue a curiously indirect allusion to the *name* of the villain of the play who is physically present. And this allusion – with its dramatic and linguistic consequences – is accomplished by the use of a dramatic character who has no physical existence in the drama.

The protagonist in the play, however, is continuously interesting in precisely the way that the messenger is uninteresting. Because we are provided with a rigidly determined, fixed, unalterable life story, consisting of a complex and varied set of relationships to others, to ideas, roles and functions, we are also provided with the implication of an alternative to each of the aspects of the story. The drama, that is, becomes dynamic in relation only to the fact of the reader or spectator. The event which is fixed by the protagonist's story as it is worked out in the course of the drama calls attention to itself, in part, because its actual occurrence implies an alternative occurrence. So the play is interesting on one level because it suggests the hypothetical existence of another, or several other possible occurrences. And the character is interesting to us individually in proportion to his capacity to evince from us the image of things happening otherwise. Unlike Claudius's messenger, the protagonist, whose life is drawn with large and vivid strokes, absorbs us because we tend egotistically to see aspects of our own lives in his. The story of the life of the dramatic character is the story of that character's identity, as our own lives are the stories of how we wittingly and accidentally determine those structures by which

we define our own identities. As the dramatic character's story is an account of his relationships with others and a consequent and continuous recognition of how his self is reordered and restructured by these relationships, so our own lives are stories of the consequences of the reconciliations and compromises necessitated by social relationships. Our identities are determined by our physical circumstances and the ways in which we adjust to them. We recognize in others around us, as dramatic characters are made to recognize in those around them, that others have identities too. The tendency to categorize those others is a way of simplifying the eternally perplexing matter of the form of that entity we call self. Thus calling Shylock 'the Jew', as almost every character in the play does, is a means of simplifying both his and their existences in the terms by which he relates to the speaker's self. The act of so naming him by reference to what he is rather than by reference to who he is deprives him of the complexity of the humanity by which the speakers define themselves.

But this is only an egregious example of the human tendency, demonstrated in the plays, to comprehend the self through the means of others. When Lear banishes Cordelia, the fury he exhibits derives not merely from the fact that his proleptic fantasy of a quiet retirement has been thwarted, but because the assumptions of his relationship with Cordelia have been redefined. He is made to see that the world around him is not the semi-static social order of his solipsistic imagination, but that it consists, in a way he has not heretofore recognized, of living, breathing human beings who insist, like him, upon the right to fathom their own identities and who refuse, like him, to accept simplifying definitions of themselves. Thus, when Lear faces the crisis of disappointment which Cordelia's refusal provokes, he is seeing her as several simplified personae which together do not explain the events of the present. Cordelia is, and always has been in his eyes, a series of stereotypes: she is daughter, she is favourite daughter, she is subservient daughter, she is marriageable daughter, nursemaid, mother. Notably, she is not a dynamic separate individual but a composite of types which confirm Lear's idea of himself. When Cordelia refuses to cooperate, Lear simply reverses the flat coin to discover its other side, another stereotype, the ungrateful daughter. His rage stems from the violation done to his self, from the discovery that the simplified external world and its relations are mutable and unfixed. Lear's world is a New Critic's text – an ultimately knowable entity –