CHAPTER 1

# *Introduction: "Slippery people"*

Early modern service seems to have been defined through association with various forms of dependency. Loosely congruent types of subordination and support colored and shaped this social practice. My initial concern with service was more dramatic than social; it grew from a sense that here was a way of explaining why Shakespeare's characters are so often more like potencies than identities. I have never understood these characters as essences or even as rhetorical constructs. They excite me as moving intersections of relationships. Through a process delightful to watch but difficult to describe, Shakespeare can suggest that 'character' is something volatile and often shared because dramatic people seem to construct each other. Instead of assuming that service was necessarily archaic and repressive, a common reaction by enlightened thinkers and politicians for two hundred years, I began to see this mobile and adaptive institution as a way of accounting for distinctive features of Shakespeare's craft.

The study that has evolved from these surmises attempts to balance between an engagement with dramatic and with social questions. Because the practice of service may be unfamiliar to many contemporary readers, its customs must be presented in some detail. Whenever possible, I combine social description with dramatic inquiry; I approach Shakespeare's plays as evidence of how he tested and explored cultural attitudes toward service and dependency. These attitudes, reflecting the pervasiveness of early modern service, are highly variable. They correspond to and were probably modified by plays which feature significant conflicts of obligation involving service. Social practice and dramatic form are mutually illuminating.

Such claims may become more persuasive if I begin by setting out several closely connected issues which have emerged through my research and shaped my analysis of it: (1) using definitions of service commensurate with its symbolic and cultural functions; (2) avoiding narrow, utopian prejudices against subordination in general and work in particular;

(3) adopting models of explanation appropriate for the relational, mobile properties of service roles; and (4) using a critical narrative suited to different genres and to the unpredictable agencies of characters who may be active simultaneously or sequentially in several subordinate groups.

## PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

Shakespeare's use of terms for service is extraordinarily wide in range. Although a sizeable majority of these terms do refer either to the performance of particular tasks or to functions and agencies generally, service terms can also signify courtly love, sexual intercourse, practical joking, religious ritual, and military conduct, not to mention the formulas of politeness. It may be surprising to notice that a majority of his "servant" references apply to work; only a handful appear in respectful forms of address. The verb "serve" usually means to act as an agent or to work. By far the largest number of "service" references also concern work, followed by politeness behavior and military occupations. Few refer to sexuality.[1]

Shakespeare's linguistic breadth corresponds to the breadth of dependency on service by people at every social level during his life-time. Preliminary definitions need to accommodate this linguistic and social scope. In a massive examination of the feudal society preceding Shakespeare's, Marc Bloch suggests that pervasive needs for service as both aid and protection explain why it was defined in particularly broad terms.[2] Another historian, Edmund S. Morgan, observes that "servant" in the seventeenth century could mean "anyone who worked for another in whatever capacity."[3] Morgan instances people who ran an iron foundry, apprentices, voluntarily indentured servants who sold their own labor, and involuntarily enslaved natives and blacks. Today we satisfy needs for work and service through publically defined institutional and professional agencies, as well as through a private array of labor-hiding practices. But well into the eighteenth century, inclusive, un-rationalized definitions of service would have remained applicable.

For help in mapping so broad a field of action I have turned to historical sociologists as well as to social historians like Bloch and Morgan. When Peter Laslett wrote that finding so many people living in households other than those they were born to "looks to us like something of a sociological discovery" (1972), he had already begun to describe the ethos and conditions of service in chapter 1 of *The World We Have Lost* (1965).[4] Laslett and his followers recovered the significance of service as a

life-cycle institution affecting significant numbers of young people and the families they joined. By sending their own adolescent children out to service and employing other people's children, families provided vocational training, shelter, and protection. Laslett added to his revision of *The World We Have Lost* a sharper distinction of the non-permanent master–servant society from the two societies it was "fused" with: husband and wife, parent and child.[5] Other scholars have questioned his statistics or focused on elements of service apparent in different regions, occupations, and economic groups. Nevertheless there appears to be widespread support for his view that the "salience" of servants in households is one of the defining traits of the English family.[6] Where preliminary definitions of service are concerned, this view justifies the expectation that quasi-familial fusions and confusions will create ambiguities and insecurities, both for dependent servants young and old and for masters or mistresses who may have once been servants themselves.

Like Shakespeare's vocabulary, Laslett's discovery shows why definitions of service need to be flexible. He also prepares us to understand why individual servants may not stand out clearly in the records of the past. Kate Mertes remarks in her study of *The English Noble Household 1250–1600* that "Friends, clients, counsellors, retainers, allies, and estate servants can . . . be troublesome to define."[7] Richard C. Barnett points out that the "civil service" organized by William Cecil confused political with domestic status and was "characterized by all the uncertainties of personal relationships."[8] To approach service in Shakespeare's plays, I emphasize "uncertainties" in relationships which develop between public and private, domestic and professional spheres. Encountering servants in Shakespeare's plays can often resemble reading about them in Richard Gough's lively chronicle of *Myddle*; they tend to be both omnipresent and indispensable without arresting much of our attention.[9] Occasionally an individual role will become conspicuous, as with the fall and rise of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* or in Gough's wonderfully eccentric tales of village preferment. References to a variety of service occupations and careers occur every few pages in the *History of Myddle*, revealing the versatility of the villagers and the frequent changes in their fortunes.

Laslett has also argued that no servant "was an independent member of society, national or local"; servants of all ages were "'subsumed' . . . into the personalities of their fathers and masters."[10] This argument may be accurate in describing a system the way that masters themselves would have done. But in Shakespeare's plays, as in Gough's Myddle, subsumption can rarely be taken for granted as an instrument of control. Whether

subordinate roles are repressive or enabling will often depend on how they interact with one another.

## "IN SERVITUDE DOLOR, IN LIBERTATE LABOR"

Gonzalo, the one benign courtier in *The Tempest*, emphatically dispenses with "use of service" (2.1.152) when he tries to imagine a commonwealth without trade or social structure.[11] Suppose, he dreams, that he could institute a utopian "plantation" (144) "Without sweat or endeavor" (161). Suppose that we think for a moment what performances of Shakespeare's plays might be like, were there "use of service none" in their staging. How substantially would these plays be affected were contemporary directors to decide that because early modern service is a lost social discourse, based on practices changed beyond easy recognition, service roles must therefore be adapted or transformed for contemporary audiences? Suddenly, a great many scenes would be set within universities, hospitals, and military camps, indicating not only that a service mentality still thrives in disciplined, hierarchical establishments, but also that it may still be inseparable from urgent human needs for education, care, and security. The persistence of uniforms and quasi-apprenticeships in such institutions suggests that they may continue to resemble the early modern "livery society" so firmly distinguished from our own by Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass.[12] Our professional and familial obligations remain entangled. We are no closer to utopia than was Gonzalo, attempting to distract his king by imposing golden-age equality on an island already dominated by a well-entrenched patriarch, Prospero. Democratic societies still rule and are ruled through 'social services' and 'support staffs' whose responsibilities often motivate public debate. In his novel *The Magus*, John Fowles re-produced Prospero's power for contemporary readers by fusing academy, psychiatric ward, and prison camp.

Much closer than Gonzalo's sense of service to my own is a motto which the traveller Thomas Platter copied down when he visited the palace of Whitehall in 1609. This motto illustrated an emblematic chamber decoration two hounds, one leashed, one coursing a hare and it read, "*In servitude dolor, in libertate labor* [In service pain, in liberty toil]."[13] It implies that although strenuous and unavoidable, voluntary labor should be distinguished from futile, miserable bondage. It uses a gentry sport to question a gentrified association of labor with punishment and pain.[14] I juxtapose Platter's motto with Gonzalo's fantasy, because utopia haunts much more serious discussions of servitude and labor than Gonzalo's.

We find it, for example, in Bruce Robbins' remarkably rich study of service, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below*. Robbins hopes that his book will continue the literary history, begun by Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis*, of an occulted popular "pressure."[15] Behaving subversively, in ways modelled on the clever slaves of classical tradition, his predominantly comic servants gesture toward an ideal community not yet realized. At the same time, however, they generally function as privileged choral commentators who lack engagement with other characters. Here a utopian approach tends to separate the agency of servants from complex and continuing needs, and to occlude the interpenetration of service with other dependent roles. However inspiring as a prophetic, anticipatory vision of political equality, utopia may not always help us to understand how subordination affects action in specific circumstances.[16]

As a non-utopian principle for approaching service and dependency in Shakespeare, I will be relying on Raymond Williams' notion of the inhabited border. Referring to Hardy's Wessex, Williams writes about "that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change."[17] Unlike Gonzalo who plans to be king of his ideal commonwealth, Williams' does not elevate his own position as thinker above the argument he makes. His responsible pastoralism has significant theoretical implications for the following study. First, it obviously questions the use of border metaphor to underwrite an explanatory authority derived from or privileging defense. Williams' border has lost its "fearful symmetry." It functions as a reminder about and warning against the violence of which border-fashioning populations remain capable. But it does not provide a set of authoritative intellectual watch-towers or mine-shafts which might be used to spy upon the center from the margins, or to attack a center so conceived. It implies no necessary allegiance to an avant-garde or to neglected groups. Nor is it an ideological "fault-line," a site for contradictions just waiting to rip apart or explode. Radically ordinary, it suggests that adventure and discovery can be found "where so many of us have been living," that significant agency may occur between and among, as well as above, below, and beyond established social roles or categories.

Second, Williams' "border country" permits dynamic social movement without determining its direction either in or among persons and groups. Optimistic as "love of place" may sound, it scarcely precludes tribalism, snobbery, or nostalgia. Moreover, an explanatory "border" open to a group of movements operating at much the same time produces more understanding than do a series of fixed positions. Apropos of slavery, a

recurrent theme in the following chapters, Orlando Patterson argues that the danger of defining "invariant dynamics" in social systems is the neglect of "limiting" or "borderline" cases which "challenge the conceptual stability of the processes one has identified."[18] Although they participate in a social institution so traditional as to be ancient in some respects, many of Shakespeare's characters can also be treated as exciting borderline cases at work in unstable conditions.

## RELATIONSHIP AND SERVICE

Williams' inhabited border provides a tentative model for describing complex social transactions. It lends theoretical support to the project of approaching service through fluent relationships as well as through exceptional identities or an invariant master–servant paradigm. It keeps open the possibility that subsumed persons can modify their situations through what Williams' has termed "an active practical consciousness."[19] My approach emphasizes dynamic interactions among dependants: servants, children, wives, and friends. It considers elisions or fusions between and among different types of dependency. Ignorance of fine distinctions in early modern minds may well appear as I examine these fusions. Nevertheless, they can be illustrated through many kinds of non-dramatic evidence: letters, diaries, essays, poems, household records, and conduct books.

My approach has influenced my procedure in several ways. Like M. M. Mahood, I will attend to the actual doings of stage servants, but I will also ask how they function together with other subordinate players.[20] For example, how may the parallel subjections of wife and servants in *The Taming of the Shrew* help us to understand the disturbing conclusion of the play? Why does the fusion between friendship and service in *Antony and Cleopatra* prove to be so deadly? In addition I will look at how children, wives and friends use the languages of service. These characters repeatedly reveal their "practical consciousness" of how they behave by drawing upon service terms and symbols. As the brief reference above to Shakespeare's vocabulary suggests, these terms offer us a stimulating social poetry; shifty metaphors and tropes often shape dramatic passages through the border countries where interdependent agents affect one another.[21]

Still another consequence of my emphasis on social relationships is a de-centered treatment of Shakespeare's plays. "Relationship" itself is an eighteenth-century word. It occurs regularly in sociological and historical discussions of service. For example, generalizing about *The English*

*Domestic Servant in History*, Dorothy Marshall insists that "the position of servants has always depended more on human relations than on organization or general conditions."[22] "Domestic service is first and foremost a relationship" writes Sarah C. Maza.[23] And so, too, was the service of the friend or ally who followed a great man, described by Mervyn James as "the relationship of responsible dominance and unqualified submission which good lordship implied."[24] Keith Wrightson and David Levine refer to friendship, aid, and "common service in village office" as "densely interlinked" among the inhabitants of Terling.[25] Even more comprehensively, Ronald F. E. Weisman advocates a Renaissance sociology which takes as the unit of analysis "the *social relationship* that links individuals to each other and to groups," and which thinks of meaning as "situational" or defined by placement in an "interaction network."[26]

Relational categories have often come to the fore in scholarship concerned with how dependent people survive through accommodation. The feminist theorists Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt claim that "Women, like men, appear divided from each other, enmeshed not in a simple polarity with males but in a complex and contradictory web of relationships and loyalties."[27] I believe that dramatic actions can be considered de-centered networks in many respects. By potentially exaggerating the inter-relations of characters, I am also trying to compensate for dramatic criticisms based on the roles of one or two characters or on the assumed reliability of a privileged viewpoint. Beset by suspicion of service, conflict with servants, and shame at his own servility, Hamlet is not always a witness we can trust.

Even students of culture and its many discourses may treat these bundles of custom and ideology like efficient central intelligences guiding us through literary works. A static social cosmos replaces dynamic characters. The extreme passivity of some early modern servants and dependents seems to invite such a totalizing procedure. To understand why, let us look for a moment at Walter Darell's defense of the gentle serving man in his "Pretie and Shorte Discourse of the Duetie of a Servingman" (1578), a complaint inspired by the growing practice among the English gentry of hiring personal attendants with non-gentle origins.[28] Having listed "Godlinesse, Clenlinesse, Audacitie, and Diligence" as the "chiefest ornamentes" of his calling, Darell goes on to say that the word "servingman" "hath great relation to his kind," depending on whether he serves God, prince or country. For Darell, "relation" is fully determined by these all-powerful masters. His "Discourse" dwells on the very vulnerability of such dependants as they attempt to maintain "credit": "the least faulte a

servingman comitteth is greatly remembred."[29] Darell defines his own identity in terms of his master's needs, hoping through "diligence" to eventually become a master himself.[30]

The masterly perspective addressed (and probably flattered) by Darell is a strong cultural force evident in numerous texts. It readily determines that servants must give up any independent will. Ordered by Antipholus of Ephesus to bring bail money from home, the slave Dromio of Syracuse concludes, "Thither I must, although against my will, / For servants must their masters' minds fulfill" (4.1.112–13). Justifiable resistance to a master's command, while allowed by many givers of advice on obedience, is generally treated as an exception, not as a rule. In a letter counselling his twelve year old daughter, Lavinia, on her behavior at the Court of Savoy, Annibal Guasco warns her to so "subdue her will" that she can guess what her Lady desires her to do.[31] Platter copied down a second emblem at Whitehall, a light burning in a glass of oil, accompanied by the motto, "Je me consume au service d'aultruy."[32] Masters could interpret an agreement to serve as removing the servant's will for most practical purposes. Thomas Fossett (1613) argues that even if treated with "mallice and perversenes," a servant cannot simply leave his (or her) place: "they have not power of their own selves, they covenanted with their maisters, tyed and bound themselves to serve them so long, and in such sort."[33] While service lasts, according to William Gouge (1622), both the persons and actions of the servant belong to the master.[34]

How such views concerning the volition of servants might affect their political status becomes evident in Thomas Whately's conviction (1624) that a servant who desires to marry can not have been "called" to the marriage by God. A man may *only* marry "without wronging any other person, that is, when hee is now become his owne man." "God never crosseth himselfe," Whately proclaims; God doesn't send men into house-keeping before they can afford the expense![35] It is important to remember that precisely because many servants were thought to have given up autonomy, they would be excluded from free citizenship by most seventeenth-century English Levellers and republicans as well as by eighteenth-century French republicans, who also disliked their association with aristocratic privilege.[36] In one of his "Devises," Thomas Howell, the household poet attached to the Pembroke family, develops their motto, "Ung ie Servirey" [to serve one] in celebrating single-minded devotion to one prince and one God. "Who serveth more, he rightly serveth none."[37] Male domestic servants only gained the rights and responsibilities of citizens in the late nineteenth century.[38] In this respect, as in so many

others, certain servants could be treated like wives and children, also denied civic responsibility because of their "great relation" to husbands and fathers.

Contemporary readers are no longer likely to accept, much less praise, the docility of servants like Darell. They will feel uneasy with the conclusion reached by Jonas Barish and Marshall Waingrow in their pioneering study of service in *King Lear*. By the end of the play, they believe, the audience functions as "servants of *God*": "we discover the true and whole meaning of service: that by promoting concord between individuals of different rank, it ends by minimizing distinctions of rank."[39] We do? Moses Finley observes that ancient slaves as virtuous and devoted as Seneca and Saint Paul might have wished would have helped to strengthen a malignant system. "Not everyone," he concludes, "will rank the creation of honourable and decent servants as one of the higher moral goals of humanity, or accommodation to enslavement as a moral virtue."[40] If God, according to Whately, "never crosseth himself," what about patriarchs? Why not acknowledge that self-sacrificing servants would have been man-made god-sends and get on with analyzing the destructive contradictions of patriarchy?

In an essay on nineteenth-century domestic service, Leonore Davidoff helpfully suggests that while patriarchy may define an entire society, it may also explain either groups within that society or certain relations in a society which is built upon other norms.[41] As a highly variable part of a network of dependencies, a part which interacts with the functioning of maturation, marriage, and friendship, service reflects and modifies other norms. The early modern churchmen and moralists who rigorously advise selfless obedience do not fairly represent an entire social world.[42] Some prescribers compared the choice of highly valued servants to the choice of friends. While servants were often vulnerable, they were not always passive. They might learn to obey in resourceful, independent ways. As Robert J. Steinfeld has convincingly maintained, early modern people generally distinguished between service and slavery: "One condition was mainly identified in contemporary minds as consensual and limited, the other just as clearly as arbitrary and absolute."[43] *In servitude dolor: in libertate labor*. A totalizing account of contradictions, taking patriarchal service on its own most autocratic, defensive terms, would make it difficult to demonstrate why specific contradictions develop in particular plays, much less acknowledge that tyrannical, saintly and duplicitous motives can ever be qualified or localized.[44] As does a play, the practice of service includes many points of view.

## CRISES OF OBLIGATION

Because they function as mediators, servants often participate in crucial dramatic sequences. If we assume that their actions are always secondary, or brief extensions of traditional roles as vices, fools, officials, and companions, we will miss the full significance of their interventions, whether these turn out to be creative or disastrous. The problems which face historians in defining and describing servants suggest that their positions, irrespective of status level, could be volatile. Whether they provided security or received it from their employers, they flourished by imitating behavior through associations where intimacy and loyalty were prized. Adept at crossing the borders of status (or of dramatic plots) they should have been strong candidates for survival. Mertes believes that servants tended to switch loyalties instead of falling with their lords.[45] But Laslett and Gordon Schochet agree that patriarchal power was exerted more strenuously upon servants who were "strangers to the family" than upon kinsmen.[46] A collapse of family fortunes could leave defenseless servants scrambling to find new sources of income and protection. Jean-Louis Flandrin asserts that a servant could have been helpless when caught in a social breakdown: "he would have liked to escape that which would assuredly come crashing down on his superior, but he could do nothing."[47]

To a servant who had literally lost his or her place, my emphasis above on the potentially dynamic interplay of subordinate positions could well seem utopian. Even an aristocratic officer like Cassio in *Othello* may respond to such a loss with intense anguish: "I am desperate of my fortunes if they check me [here]," he exclaims after Othello dismisses him and makes Iago lieutenant (2.3.331–2). Preparing to "shut myself up in some other course, / To fortune's alms" if his suit for reinstatement in Othello's "service" fails (3.4.121–2), Cassio speaks more like an unemployed servingman threatened with poverty and prison than a talented Florentine strategist who will ultimately replace *his* master as the governor of Cyprus. His language evokes the situation of the masterless man, worse off than a beggar according to one I. M. because "farre from his friendes" and ineligible for the license which kept beggars who had established a residence out of jail.[48]

Several plays represent the suffering of servants who have been cast out of their places when households dissolve.[49] In *Timon of Athens*, Timon's servants, "All broken implements of a ruin'd house" (4.2.16), link Timon's fall with beggary, theft, disease, and death, worrying more about