*Chapter 1*

# Character

## Juliet's balcony, Verona

In the Italian town of Verona, the tourist authorities have taken Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and in particular the character of Juliet, to their hearts. Despite the historical tenuousness of the association of Juliet with Verona, a suitable medieval townhouse has been designated Juliet's house, and a balcony was added in the 1930s to make the setting photogenically consonant with the play's most iconic moment, when Juliet calls down from her balcony to her new lover. Streams of visitors add lovestruck graffiti to the walls, gain luck from stroking the right breast of a modern bronze statue of Juliet, and apparently address numerous letters requesting help in matters of the heart (rather oddly, since Juliet's wasn't an entirely successful love affair to aspire to) to 'Juliet, Verona', which are duly answered by a multilingual team of agony aunt volunteers known as the 'Juliet club'.

While the curious afterlife of Juliet in Verona is an extreme case, it nicely illustrates two aspects of our abiding interest in, and attitude to, Shakespeare's characterisation. Firstly, projecting a real person from the words of

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Shakespeare's plays involves an extreme effort of will. We desperately want to believe that Juliet is a real person – a desire bound up here with narratives of travel, of holiday snapshots as consumption, of a sentimental version of romantic love, of the modern vestiges of pilgrimage – and thus the tourist offices provide what we want, complete with medieval-effect balcony and a substitute Juliet in the form of a statue. We might compare this effort to the effort we habitually make in reading or watching plays, by which we supply missing details or smooth over inconsistencies in the name of realism or of helpfully suspending our disbelief in order to help the play along. And secondly, this desire and our exertions to satisfy it postdate the plays, by a long way. Inventing Juliet in this form – as a real person in a real house in a real city, rather than a collection of words written on a page – is a twentieth-century tail on a sixteenth-century play. It's the interpretative equivalent of that Mussolini-era balcony tacked onto the medieval house.

We could therefore argue that Shakespearean characters are *writing* first, *people* second – just as the meanings of the very word 'character' have shifted from its earliest meaning as 'impression' or 'graphic sign or symbol' to the now dominant meaning, first registered after Shakespeare's death, of distinctive individual personality. When they were first printed, Shakespeare's plays had no character lists or *dramatis personae* as we are now used to in modern editions. There was therefore no obvious sense in which the persons of the play pre-existed the words they speak in it. We can see dramatic characters in this way as a product of the language which, strangely, they seem themselves also to produce. Rather than articulating their own words, they are articulated by them. One of the beguilingly circular argumentative movements of character study has been to derive from the characters' speeches an idea of their personality which is then used to interpret and underwrite those same speeches.

Character study – how characters are depicted in the drama, why they behave as they do, and the modes of reading or viewing which encourage empathic identification with them – has been a dominant mode of Shakespearean criticism since its earliest days. In fact, the first appreciations of Shakespeare tended to praise his characterisation above all other aspects of his work, particularly as an antidote to the datedness of his language or to the perceived irregularity of his plotting by classical standards. In recent academic writing, however, the whole notion of 'character' has been placed under question. Critics have argued that personality as a distinctive inner quality would have been less recognisable to Shakespeare's first audiences than it has become for us, and that therefore character study is based on an anachronistic premise. We tend to think that how people perceive themselves and others has been a historical constant across all time; historicist criticism has challenged this assumption

and drawn usefully on changing ideas of privacy and the personal, as well as on dramatic technique, in the early modern period. (See 'Where next' for further reading on this topic.) But readers, viewers and performers of Shakespeare have been resistant to this apparent undermining of one of their primary sources of pleasure in the plays. So this opening chapter traces the critical debates about character, aiming to develop and interrogate, rather than entirely to reject, what often seems most appealing about those apparently lifelike personalities such as Hamlet or Falstaff or Beatrice in Shakespeare's plays.

## Shakespeare's realism?

Alexander Pope's assertion that 'every single character in Shakespeare is as much an individual, as those in life itself' expresses the claims for psychological verisimilitude often made for Shakespeare's powers of characterisation. When we say that we relate to, or recognise, aspects of Shakespeare's characters, we are willingly entering into a relationship with them in which we endow them with human form, and compare their actions with our own and those of people around us. Thus the characterisation of Beatrice and Benedick – the unwilling lovers of *Much Ado About Nothing* who spend much of the play denying what is plain to all their friends, that they are a passionately compatible and unorthodox romantic couple – is bolstered by our recognition of these kinds of behaviour in the real world; perhaps we think we have all known people whose protestations that they cannot stand each other are a thin cover for deep feelings hidden through habit or fear of hurt, and those people combine in our mind with Shakespeare's characters to give an illusion of verisimilitude. Often Shakespeare presents us with individuals undergoing particular life events which are likely to chime in with readers' own experience: the death of a parent in *Hamlet*, for example; the adolescent search for an adult identity in unfamiliar surroundings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the suffocating burden of parental expectations in *1 Henry IV*; the heady experience of first love in *Romeo and Juliet*; the clash between private conscience and public duty in *Julius Caesar*. In measuring the plays against our own experiences – and, in some cases, vice versa – we do some of the work to animate Shakespeare's words into the shapes of sentient, moral agents like ourselves. Using the language of emotional empathy – identification, sympathy, recognition – literary criticism has often seemed to teach that fully to engage with the plays we have to reach out a hand to their characters.

There are lots of ways in which Shakespeare's works encourage this kind of psychic rapport. We might, for example, adduce those wonderful moments when a single remark gestures towards a whole back-story for a character – as

when the foolish gull Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* sighs 'I was adored once' (2.3.153), or when Lady Macbeth says that she would have killed King Duncan herself, 'had he not resembled / My father as he slept' (2.2.12–3). Such information does not really help the plot along; rather, it serves to create the illusion of a broader psychological history of which the current play can only be a segment. There's more to me than I get the chance to say here, these lines seem to signal; they're like a marker flag saying 'look at me again'. Shakespeare gestures to a world surrounding, but not articulated in, the play, rather as he does in his habitual device of opening his plays in the middle of a conversation we are to suppose was going on before we came in on it: with 'Nay, but this dotage of our general's / O'erflows the measure' (1.1.1–2), Philo begins *Antony and Cleopatra* with a response to an unheard and unrecorded remark by his Roman interlocutor Demetrius (the term for this is *in medias res*, literally, 'into the middle of things').

If gesturing to a more complete back history is one of Shakespeare's approaches to realistic character presentation, another is to endow characters with recognisable emotions. Thus when Capulet and his cousin discuss the passing of time in *Romeo and Juliet*, they suddenly emerge as recognisable older people at a family reunion: 'His son is thirty.' 'Will you tell me that? / His son was but a ward two years ago' (1.5.38–9). Of course this has a thematic relevance to a play about speed, and particularly the speed with which young people grow into adulthood, often unnoticed by their elders, but significantly it is a brief moment in which the play sees that process not from the point of view of the children but sympathetically from that of the parents. This part of the scene isn't directed at anyone who's been treated as the child they no longer are by relations at a family party; instead, it's for the people who, seeing strapping young adults in place of the chubby infants preserved in their memory, have to realise that they too have aged.

## Shakespeare's 'unreal' characters

These examples, and numerous more like them, could be cited in support of Pope's assessment of Shakespeare's verisimilitude. But there are ways in which seeing Shakespeare's characters as people blinds us to other possibilities and limits our understanding of the way the plays work. It is important to register, for example, that elsewhere characters in Shakespeare do not approach this recognisability: they do not gesture towards a knowable past. Sometimes these are 'minor' characters; sometimes it's necessary to the plot that they lack the apparent verisimilitude lavished on some of their peers. Take Mariana, for

example, in *Measure for Measure*. This play works by juxtaposing two inter-rupted marital unions. The first is that of Claudio and the pregnant Juliet, who maintain that they are married 'save that we do the denunciation lack / Of outward order' (1.2.9–10) – meaning, apparently, that they have undergone a kind of private, rather than church, wedding – and are to be punished by the new governor of Vienna, Angelo, for unlawful fornication. The other, parallel couple are Angelo himself and Mariana the 'affianced' bride he abandoned when her dowry was lost at sea. *Measure for Measure*'s presiding organiser, the Duke of Vienna who is disguised as a friar, plots to deliver both couples, and devises a so-called 'bed trick' by which Angelo can be brought to have sex with Mariana, thinking it is with Isabella the sister of Claudio, and thus by consummating his relationship with Mariana he be brought to recognise his marital obligations. With me so far? The point is that Mariana completes a situation of parallels which is crucial to the design of a play titled after a paral-lel, 'measure for measure' (editions of the play often have a cover illustration of a set of scales), in which the notion of equivalence – ethical, legal, moral, dramatic – is insistently interrogated.

Because this is her role – structural, rather than personal – Mariana is hardly characterised at all. She isn't even mentioned until Act 3 of the play and first appears in Act 4. She substitutes for Isabella in Angelo's bed – an action seem-ingly requiring the complete abdication of individual personality – and goes on to play out the role the puppet-master Duke has scripted for her as the means by which Angelo's hypocrisy and harshness will be punished. It is thus inappropriate to ask of her, as we might of a 'real' person: why does she want to marry the awful Angelo after the way he's treated her? why does she go along with the Duke-Friar's seedy plan? why is she still mooning around her 'moated grange' thinking about her worthless fiancé? The answer to these questions is not primarily psychological but dramatic: because the play requires it.

There are lots of other examples of characters whose purpose in their play is functional, structural or thematic, rather than to be uniquely themselves: we might think of Hotspur as the foil to Prince Henry – the king expresses the wish that the two boys had been swapped in the cradle, just in case we don't understand that they are meant to be conceptualised as two sides of the coin – in *1 Henry IV*, or Sebastian, the twin of Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Rather akin to Mariana, Sebastian's own role is also a sort of pre-sexual 'bed-trick': having fallen for Viola who has been dressed as a male page Cesario, Olivia vows to marry him. No one in the playworld knows of Sebastian's existence, so his arrival at Olivia's coincides with her rush to the altar and, bewilderedly, he substitutes for his sister and marries a woman he has only just met. As a figure whose

purpose in the play is to substitute for someone he looks just like – his own twin – it is appropriate that Sebastian has relatively little personality of his own. He's a plot device, although we could argue that a couple of scenes with his devoted companion and rescuer Antonio are unnecessary by this estimation, and serve to establish Sebastian as a character who can himself inspire affection, rather than just mop it up by appearing in the right place at the right time.

## Reading Shakespeare's characters on the page

So looking at Shakespeare's characters as if they were, and with the expectation that they can be explained as, real people, may be more appropriate to some characters than others. It may also confine us unhelpfully or lead to questions the text is not supported to answer. A good example might be the issue satirised in the title of L. C. Knights' article 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' (1933). The title refers to the scholarly controversy prompted by the fact that while Macbeth and his wife apparently have no offspring, there *are* references to a child, particularly in Lady Macbeth's startling image designed to strengthen her husband's resolve to kill King Duncan:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
> And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
> As you have done to this.               (1.7.54–9)

So Lady Macbeth has 'given suck' and yet Macbeth sees he has achieved a 'barren sceptre' since he has no heir. One of the most influential character critics of Shakespeare, A. C. Bradley, devoted a section at the end of his *Shakespearean Tragedy* (first published in 1904) to this problem, along with other questions including 'Does Lady Macbeth really faint?' and 'When was the murder of Duncan first plotted?' The form of the questions suggests that there are absolute and knowable answers if only we can interrogate the play skilfully enough to make it confess them. The play is withholding information which we need to uncover. (The terminology is appropriate: the connotations of the interrogation cell are disturbingly present in this interpretative model.) This again puts the onus on us as readers, performers, or viewers to do that work the play does not do for us – mentally to supply the unwritten scenes in which the answers to our questions are provided – but it may be that it is the questions themselves which are unnecessary.

Because Knights' approach, in contrast with that of Bradley, is to see *Macbeth* not as a drama of real, autonomous protagonists but rather as a linguistically and thematically integrated poetic whole, he sees this image as part of a cluster of references to unnaturalness with which the play is structured. Unnaturalness is the keynote of the play's sustained inscription of how bad it is to murder a lawful king, the crime that haunts Macbeth's illegitimate rule in Scotland, and thus it is not associated with, or derived from, particular individuals in the play. It is the play's own timbre, a tone suffusing all of its language. Therefore Lady Macbeth's image is not about a 'real' child: it demands attention not alongside the family situation of the Macbeths but alongside imagery voiced by other characters, such as that of the Old Man (the absence of any semblance of individual characterisation in his name is indicative in this context): 'On Tuesday last, / A falcon tow'ring in her pride of place / Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed' (2.4.11–13). For Knights, therefore, the search for the 'truth' of this image, the attempt to reconcile the Macbeth's childlessness with this perverted image of maternity, is an unnecessary one resulting from a misrecognition of a poetic pattern as lines requiring psychological and realistic explanation (we return to this kind of interpretation in chapter 4, 'Language').

## Embodying Shakespeare's characters on stage

It's a significant part of Knights' argument that he calls the drama of *Macbeth* a 'poem'. If we step back from character as a way of interpreting Shakespeare, we are left with a sequence of lines, images, words susceptible to the same kinds of analytical interpretation we might want to perform on the poetry of, say, Wordsworth or Dickinson. For those whose concern is with the play as theatre, however, dismissing the denigrated question about Lady Macbeth's children is not really sustainable. Poems don't tend to come over very well on stage; people do. In order to understand the character, in order to make sense of his or her lines and give them authority in the theatre, the performer often has to imagine motivations and events not explicitly present in the text. In her account of her preparation and performance of the role of Lady Macbeth opposite Antony Sher, directed by Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1999, Harriet Walter discusses this missing child, appearing in the text only as a kind of metaphor, in surprisingly material terms: 'it could have been a boy who died. This seemed to us the most likely and contained the richest theatrical juice . . . to create the highest stakes possible for the couple in this short but pivotal scene [1.7], we decided that the couple

had not spoken of the child since its death and that, for whatever reason, they could not have any more.'

This tells us as much about dominant modes of classical acting in the UK, perhaps, as it does about Shakespeare. The idea of the Macbeths as bereaved parents, however, does chime interestingly with the specificity of Macbeth's most brutal order, for the massacre of Macduff's family – 'give to th'edge o'th'sword / His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line' (4.1.150–2) – and with the repeated imagery of children throughout the play. The attempt to find a psychological rationale for characters' behaviour, often through constructing a back-story or history for them which is barely legible in the play itself, is a standard technique when actors work to bring Shakespeare to life on the stage. It develops Bradley's style of questioning into something less absolute and more provisional: as chapter 2 on 'Performance' discusses in more detail, we can answer 'Does Lady Macbeth really faint?' in relation to particular productions, even while we can't do it in relation to the text of the play itself.

## Doubling on the early modern stage

Harriet Walter's account of her interpretation of Lady Macbeth reveals how modern theatrical practices shape our encounter with Shakespeare's characters on stage. There are a number of rather different protocols operative in the Elizabethan theatre, however, which have an intriguingly different impact on notions of character. Two particular features of early modern theatre practice seem relevant here: the habitual practice of doubling, and the fact that Shakespeare wrote for particular actors.

As a commercial playwright with a clear sense of the medium for which he wrote, Shakespeare constructed his plays with an abiding consciousness of business discipline. Plays needed to be performable by a company of approximately fourteen actors who between them would take up to forty roles. To give some specific examples, *Antony and Cleopatra* lists thirty-seven named speaking parts and in addition calls for supernumeraries such as servants, soldiers and messengers; *1 Henry VI* has thirty-five named speaking parts; *Cymbeline* has thirty-three named speaking parts; *The Merchant of Venice* has nineteen; even *The Tempest*, set on what is misleadingly labelled an 'uninhabited island', has eighteen. This disparity between the number of actors and the number of roles was bridged by the customary practice of doubling, in which actors took on more than one role in each play.

Doubling may have been initially a logistical convenience, enabling plays with ambitiously large casts to be staged within reasonable financial constraints, perhaps with extras drafted in for supernumerary parts. Some of the stage directions in the early texts seem deliberately permissive in this regard, and give us a glimpse into the contingent practices of the early modern theatre: *Titus Andronicus*, for example, has a stage direction in Act 1 which lists the entrance of all the play's principals and then adds 'and others as many as can be'. But rather than considering doubling merely as a practical necessity, there are some suggestive ways in which to see it as integral to the structure of the plays and as offering significant inflection of our understanding of dramatic character.

As soon as we have one actor playing more than one role, something of the autonomy of individual, unique character is broached. A relationship – visually, at least, but perhaps also thematically or even psychically – between the characters played by the same actor is implied. Sometimes this is a feature of apparently minor characters. Thus in *Henry V*, the play depicting the scapegrace Prince Henry's reformation on his accession to the throne, we begin to see that Henry repeatedly encounters groups of three potential antagonists: the three traitors who have allied with the enemy France; the three disreputable foot-soldiers who are remnants of his riotous youth with Falstaff; the three named English soldiers he meets while in disguise the night before the decisive battle of Agincourt. Doubling may well mean that these trios were all played by the same group of actors – perhaps they also played the French noblemen – and that thus they offer a cumulative, almost choric, locus of resistance to Henry's idealisation. Taken in isolation the roles are minor; cohering around the reiterated physical presence of the same actors, they look more significant: to be sure, Henry keeps besting these trios, dispatching the conspirators with considerable theatrical élan, marginalising the soldiers' concerns, knocking the proud French into a cocked hat, but what is significant is that the play keeps reviving them to provide another, differently costumed but structurally similar challenge.

A more famous example is that of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear*. The two characters never appear on stage in the same scene (an obvious prerequisite for doubling), and the idea that the same actor played both parts may help us with the unremarked disappearance of the Fool in Act 3. Perhaps this conundrum needs to be resolved practically, rather than thematically: he has to disappear not because Lear has now become his own Fool, or because his role as Lear's conscience is completed as Lear enters his final madness, or because he has been captured by the forces of Gonerill and Regan, or some other such realist or

psychological explanation, but rather because he has to change into Cordelia's costume for her return to the play in Act 4. Lear's apparent association of the two characters when he notes on the death of Cordelia that 'my poor fool is hanged' (5.3.279) adds to the parallels between them. We don't need to complicate this connection by literalising it and hypothesising that Cordelia has actually disguised herself as the Fool in order to remain close to her father, as has sometimes been suggested in modern productions. Instead, we can use the interconnectedness of the two truth-telling roles to explore structures of correspondence in the plot, as Cordelia's scenes with Lear are visually and emotionally echoed and pre-empted by those of the same actor in his role as the Fool.

In this case doubling works to refract a single role across two 'characters'. This isn't to deny Shakespeare's interest in psychology, but rather to disrupt a one-to-one association between dramatic character and individual personality. And there are any number of roles in Shakespeare which, once we recognise that they would have to be doubled, activate a kind of ripple-effect across the surface of their play. Take the ghost of Old Hamlet, for example, who appears in only four scenes of the play, and is therefore apt to be recast elsewhere. It is interesting to consider the different effects of doubling the ghost with the character of Fortinbras who strides onto the stage to assume the throne at the end of the play, or with the Gravedigger, who, as he prepares Ophelia's burial place, may also share with the ghost the trapdoor region below the stage, or with Laertes, or with Claudius, or with the Player King. Or we might consider the parallel human and fairy worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play which moves from the Athenian court of Theseus and Hippolyta to the magical woodland world presided over by the warring Oberon and Titania. The human and fairy sovereigns never appear on stage together, and thus it's quite likely they would have been played by the same actors – Peter Brook's famous production in Stratford for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1970 is a prominent modern example of this practice. Similarly, it's likely that the play's 'rude mechanicals' (working men of Athens) and the fairies would have been doubled, which may challenge our assumption that these two categories would be physically dissimilar. Doubling gives us a way of conceptualising the relationship between the real and dream worlds, as if Oberon and Titania represent the dream versions of Theseus and Hippolyta engaged in the risky personal and sexual freedoms the wood seems to symbolise in the play. The 'dream' of the title thus becomes a more obviously Freudian one, in which repressed or sublimated sexuality expresses itself in dangerously surreal ways.