Shakespeare’s Most Minor Characters: Their Roles and Functions

An Honors Thesis—HONRS 499

by

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Purpose of Thesis

So much has been said about *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the Dane that, even for those who are only casually acquainted with the play, a character such as Horatio has practically become as familiar a name as that of the tragic Prince of Denmark himself. Concerning Horatio, Alex Newall has perhaps pointed out the obvious when he writes, "... although Horatio is a minor character, that does not mean that he has minor significance" (Charney 153). The same claim may—and should—be extended to a different class of Shakespeare’s minor characters who are usually less memorable than Horatio, yet who are, from the perspective of Shakespearean scholarship, of no less importance to the drama.

Frequently, these characters are not given names *per se*. Often they are identified by the social positions they occupy within the world of the play: Servant, Messenger, Officer, Soldier, and Shipmaster, to name just a few. My thesis, however, is not concerned exclusively with this class of “nameless” characters. Similarly minor characters—Osric in *Hamlet* and Agrippa in *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example—are formally named but function in some of the same ways as servants, messengers, and the others. Therefore, this thesis explores the functions, and thus the importance, of this special class of minor characters as a whole, a class hereafter referred to as “bit characters.”

Following some introductory remarks, my thesis begins with a general commentary on Shakespeare’s characters, for the purpose of defining the ones pertinent to the discussion. The last four sections then focus on the specific ways in which bit characters function in Shakespeare’s drama.
About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong. Whether Truth ultimately prevails is doubtful and has never been proved; but it is certain that nothing is more effective in driving out error than a new error.

—T. S. Eliot

The following thesis is founded upon assumptions about the making of meaning in literary texts—or, as the structuralist might say, "how language works"—which have been seriously and repeatedly questioned since the beginning of this century, and essentially abandoned by many critics within the past thirty years. The recognition of this fact was initially a disruptive realization because it was made long after I had chosen not only the subject matter for this project, but also, unknowingly, a critical method by which to explore it. Subsequently, I have discovered that both my choice in subject matter and critical method is representative of a great many values which, originally, I did not know I would be espousing in the writing of this thesis. I was surprised to find that my choices were reflective of values that, in many ways, I never knew I possessed.

Consequently, it would be inaccurate to claim that this project is absent of any sort of agenda. If nothing else, this thesis is a statement of the fact that I, as the author, find the literature of Shakespeare to be valuable to at least one sector of society, and that the ongoing criticism of his literature to be worth doing and
studying. At the same time, it is also a statement of which critical tools I find best-suited for the work. Unfortunately, this latter admission in particular is primarily influenced by the fact that, because I am only an undergraduate English major, there are as yet only so many critical tools to which I suspect my hands are adequately fitted at the present time. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that my "choice" in method is as much an expression of my own values as the choice of subject matter: that I have chosen to study Shakespeare over a multitude of other writers.

My thesis, then, is not an assertion toward the claim that Shakespeare is the greatest writer of literature that the world has ever known, nor that his work, as Macbeth says, is "the be-all and the end-all" of literature, Western or otherwise. Similarly, this thesis does not propose that the formal critical tools which are here employed are by all means the most satisfactory or appropriate tools by which to study Shakespeare today. The most sensible claim I think I can safely make is that Shakespeare is the most important writer I have encountered thus far in my study; or, perhaps more accurately, that Shakespeare is the author whom I have found, at this point in my literary activities, to be most interesting and valuable to study.

If there is truly any contemporary approach employed in this thesis, it might be that my study takes a look at characters who have traditionally been "marginalized" in the field of Shakespearean criticism. Earlier this year, however, I was surprised (and somewhat disappointed) to find that this situation had suddenly changed. In January, I learned that a new book called *Bit Parts in Shakespeare*, by Molly M. Mahood, had recently been published by the University of Kent. My own
project with bit characters has been in the making for nearly a year, but it is clear that Mahood conceived a similar study long before I did. Although I plan to read Mahood’s book, I have not seen a copy of it and therefore did not use it in the writing of this thesis. It was difficult enough to express all my thoughts on this subject without wondering if Mahood’s book might somehow disturb the direction of my own project. Consequently, this thesis must be presented as a work in progress. Any further critical endeavors concerning Shakespeare's bit characters must take Mahood’s book into account.

It is my hope, however, that in the following pages, I make some points which complement Mahood’s book in some interesting and valuable ways. If so, there are several people who certainly deserve a note of thanks, for sharing their knowledge, time, and enthusiasm:

— Dr. Richard G. Brown, in whose Humanities 202 course I studied *Hamlet*, Spring 1990;

— Dr. Donald E. Heady, who cast me in a bit role for a Ball State University production of *The Tempest*, Spring 1991;

— Dr. Judy E. Yordon, whose insight into Shakespeare was always a privilege to receive in a Shakespeare Interpretation class, Fall 1993;

— And finally, Dr. William T. Liston, my thesis advisor, who never hesitated to encourage or assist me during the entirety of this project. His comments and advice have been valuable at all times, and his interest in my work was deeply appreciated.

Briefly, I must also acknowledge the patience and support of my good
friends. They know who they are—all too well, I'm afraid.

Matthew Collins
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1. Shakespeare's Characters

It is not as though Shakespeare portrayed human types well and were in that respect true to life. He is not true to life. But he has such a supple hand and his brush strokes are so individual, that each one of his characters looks significant, is worth looking at.

—Wittgenstein

Concerning Shakespeare's dramatic style and overall literary knowledge and value, his earliest commentators, critics, and editors found numerous points of continual contention. On the much-questioned issue of the quality and degree of Shakespeare's education, John Dennis stated, "his Faults were owing to his Education, and the Age that he lived in... if he had had the Advantage of Art and Learning, he wou'd have surpass'd the very best and strongest of the Ancients" (Kermode 61), to which Alexander Pope was probably replying when he said, "as to his Want of Learning... 'tis plain he had much Reading at least, if they will not call it Learning" (Hammond 162). With respect to genre, Nicholas Rowe disliked Shakespeare's mixture of tragedy and comedy—"Trage-comedy"—remarking that "the severer Critiques among us cannot bear it" (Kermode 50), while Samuel Johnson praised Shakespeare for having "united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition" (Warner 118). Johnson, meanwhile, criticized Shakespeare's fondness for puns, maintaining that "A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth" (Warner 127); Rowe, on the other hand,
had pardoned this aspect of Shakespeare’s style when, years earlier, he had said, “As for his jingling sometimes, and playing upon words, it was the common vice of the age he liv’d in... perhaps it may not be thought too light for the Stage” (Kermode 53-4). Not even the most simple consensus for Shakespeare’s literary merits could be agreed upon: “I love Shakespeare,” confessed John Dryden while comparing him to Ben Jonson (Ker 83), but Voltaire, believing that Shakespeare violated numerous rules of theatrical and social decorum, once wrote in a letter that “the great Merit of this Dramatic Poet has been the Ruin of the English Stage” (Voltaire 125).

These remarks only refer to a handful of the many critical disputes which Shakespeare’s work elicited in the first century and a half after his death. But at least one point upon which most of these writers—even Voltaire—probably could have agreed was that the quality and variety of Shakespeare’s characters was consistently worthy of acknowledgment. Margaret Cavendish, herself a poet and a wife to a general under Charles I (Kermode 41), summarized Shakespeare’s ability to create great dramatic characters when she wrote in a letter:

SHAKESPEAR did not want Wit, to Express to the Life all Sorts of Persons, of what Quality, Profession, Degree, Breeding, or Birth soever;... and so Well he hath Express’d in his Playes all Sorts of Persons, as one would think he had been Transformed into every one of those Persons he hath Described; and as sometimes one would think he was really himself the Clown or Jester he Feigns, so one would think he were the most Valiant, and Experienced Souldier...” (Kermode 42)

Neoclassical critics echoed Cavendish’s opinion. Dryden wrote that, with the exception of Jonson, “no man ever drew so many characters, or generally distinguished ‘em better from one another” (Ker 219). Pope, speaking on
Shakespeare’s “life and variety of Character,” stated, “His Characters are so much Nature her self... every single character in Shakespear is as much an Individual as those in Life itself” (Hammond 158). Johnson agreed: “Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other” (Warner 116).

Romantic-era critics similarly spoke in glowing terms about Shakespeare’s characters. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, known for his rather excessive praise of Shakespeare in the face of prevailing Neoclassical views, called Shakespeare’s characters “ideal realities... abstracts of the things, which a great mind takes into itself, and there naturalizes them to its own conception” (Raysor 125). William Hazlitt, roughly a contemporary of Coleridge, perhaps clarified Coleridge’s notion of this “great mind” by speculating on the relationship between Shakespeare’s imagination and the characters it produced:

> When he conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he not only entered into all its thoughts and feelings, but seemed instantly, and as if by touching a secret spring, to be surrounded with all the same objects, “subject to the same skyey influences,” the same local, outward, and unforeseen accidents which would occur in reality... It is not “a combination and a form” of words, a set speech or two, a preconceived theory of a character, that will do this: but all the persons concerned must have been present in the poet’s imagination, as at a kind of rehearsal.” (Kermode 119-20)

Essentially, this praise of Shakespeare’s characterization amounts to a tribute to Shakespeare’s imagination. Through his “secret spring,” Shakespeare was able to portray his characters distinctly, vividly, and realistically.

1 Measure for Measure (3.1.9)

2 Hamlet (3.4.60)
The opinions of these early commentators are particularly useful for a discussion of an aspect of Shakespearean drama as general as characterization because it was not until Coleridge delivered his Lectures that Shakespearean criticism began to concern itself more often with specific plays, and less with general aspects of Shakespeare's drama. What is not clear, however, from these remarks (and many others like them which could be mentioned) is whether, by the term "character," Shakespeare's earliest commentators truly meant all characters, or merely the ones with whom we have become so familiar today, the ones with the drama's leading roles and the majority of lines: Hamlet, Falstaff, Angelo, Richard III, and so on. Cavendish, as was cited earlier, speaks of "the most Valiant, and Experienced Souldier," possibly referring not only to such famous Shakespearean soldiers as Antony and Octavius Caesar, but also, for instance, to the unnamed sergeant who hobbles off the stage in Macbeth after describing the state of the battle as he has just left it (1.2). Johnson seems to have been including minor characters in his praise of Shakespeare's "distinct personages" when, referring to the Clowns in Hamlet (5.1), he proposed that even "the Gravediggers themselves may be heard with applause" (Warner 121). But it is a different case with Pope. After calling "every single character in Shakespear... as much an Individual as those in life itself," and adding, "... it is as impossible to find any two [characters] alike; and such as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be Twins, will upon comparison be found remarkably distinct" (Hammond 158), Pope appears to have contradicted himself when, to note only one example from his edition of
Shakespeare, he admitted to having “confounded and mix’d” the roles of two minor characters, Egeus and Philostrate, into one role in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Hammond 166). Coleridge, it is true, mentioned the Gravediggers as an example of Shakespeare’s characters being “ideal realities,” but Coleridge also said that Shakespeare’s characters were “never introduced for the sake of his plot, but plot arises out of his characters” (Raysor 252). This claim, I hope to show in section two, is not necessarily an accurate one, as I think an analysis of some of the minor characters from the comedies will point out.

My intention here is less to expose what may seem to be a few relatively petty inconsistencies made by Pope or Coleridge on the subject of Shakespeare’s characters as it is simply to raise some questions about minor characters. In general, I would agree with the previous remarks, from Cavendish to Hazlitt, while adding that their claims could often be extended likewise to his minor characters, even those which typically seem to be the most insignificant ones in the drama. But in what ways might these minor characters be, to use Pope’s and Johnson’s adjectives, “individual” and “distinct”? And if they are indeed as unique as the major characters, what significance, if any, do they have? Answering these questions and a few others that arise along the way is the task of this thesis.

Harry Levin has provided, of all things, some interesting and valuable mathematical information to the field of Shakespearean scholarship by calculating that the average number of roles in Shakespearean drama amounts to eighteen in the comedies, twenty-seven in the tragedies, and thirty-five in the histories (Levin 19).
However, in the First Folio of 1623, the list of "The Names of the Principall Actors" preceding the plays shows only twenty-six names, which means that in the majority of his plays, Shakespeare wrote more characters into his scripts than he had actors to play the roles. Of course, in such plays as Richard III and Henry V, in which there are more than forty roles, several of the actors would have been forced to play multiple roles, especially (and probably exclusively) those of minor characters. But when we consider that no Shakespearean play truly has more than a handful of major roles—perhaps ten or twelve at the most—it is obvious that most of the roles belong to minor characters. With only twenty-six actors at his disposal, why should Shakespeare have written so many more minor characters into his plays than he had actors to perform their roles?

In light of this question, it is actually remarkable that Shakespeare used as many characters as he did. Although many of us might prefer to see or read the plays in their unshortened and unedited entireties, it is not inconceivable to imagine a Hamlet without Reynaldo (2.1) or a Richard II without the Gardeners (3.4). In fact, it is not surprising to see contemporary productions of these plays in which these roles, and others like them in other plays, are cut from the script for the sake of abbreviating the total performance time. On the other hand, it would hardly be the same Hamlet without the Gravediggers or the same Antony and Cleopatra without the worm-bearing Clown. Regardless, in numerous instances (especially in the history plays), Shakespeare obviously did not allow the limited number of available actors to limit the scope of his drama. Whether it was an ambitious artistic or theatrical
device on his part or mere common sense, Shakespeare was at least intuitively aware that if he were going to produce "a kingdom for a stage" (*H5*, 1.1.3), he would need a good number of characters—more characters than he had actors to portray—in order to make the drama as effective as possible; or, as the Prologue to *Henry V* puts it, to assist in making the play "ascend / The brightest heaven of invention" (1.1.1-2).

The famous introductory lines from *Henry V* indicate that Shakespeare was probably somewhat conscious of the inherent difficulty in making any play, historical or otherwise, suitable for a theater-going audience:

```
But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O pardon! (1.1.8-15)
```

Shakespeare seems to have recognized the limitations that Elizabethan stage conditions and practices imposed upon the project of presenting a history play realistically, and therefore believably. I would argue, though, that one way Shakespeare was able to counter these unavoidable limitations was through the use of minor characters. Shakespeare, for instance, could apparently see that minor characters were valuable for creating a sense of verisimilitude to a particular scene or dramatic circumstance. If he were going to set a scene on a battlefield, a ship, a cemetery, or in a court of royalty, he would need, respectively, to use soldiers; sailors and shipmasters; gravediggers; and servants, messengers, and lords. Therefore, in the histories and tragedies, but even in the comedies as well,
Shakespeare uses minor characters to flesh out, both literally and figuratively, the atmosphere in which a given scene is occurring. In the histories in particular (and in the tragedies and comedies which are also "historical"), doing so has the effect of making the world of the drama more credible. Of course, it is not as though Shakespeare was overly concerned with matters of historical accuracy, as we know from the way he conveniently changed the ages of Arthur in King John, Isabella in Richard II, and Hotspur in 1 Henry IV, to suit his special dramatic intentions; nonetheless, it is still important to realize that Shakespeare was accurate, in quite another sense—to his scenes—and that minor characters were useful for enhancing the overall plausibility of a given play.

I have tried here to identify what I think is the foremost function of certain Shakespearean minor characters, who are, with their many functions, the subject of this thesis. This function, of completing the world of the drama, is an important consideration to make at the outset because it serves as a reminder that Shakespeare was writing more for a performance-viewing audience than a play-reading audience. Today we know that only eighteen of Shakespeare's plays—close to half of them—were published in quarto editions before the appearance of the First Folio. Assessing this situation has led G. Blakemore Evans to state that "there is essentially no evidence that Shakespeare was himself at all concerned with preserving an authoritative text of his plays for future readers," nor, consequently, "that he interested himself in the publication of a single one of his plays." Evans concludes that once the plays were initially completed, "[Shakespeare's] attitude toward his
plays... was more that of a practical man of the theatre, interested in performance and the box-office, than that of a man with deeply-felt literary pretensions, like Jonson, bent on preserving his works in authoritative texts for posterity” (Evans 27). In other words, it appears as though for Shakespeare, as well as for Hamlet, “the play” was indeed “the thing,” the primary means by which the minds of his audience could be engaged, entertained, and, we would hope to think, challenged as well.

Fortunately, at least for literary scholars, more than eighteen of Shakespeare's plays were preserved, and although it seems likely that Shakespeare never would have anticipated the degree of scholarly investigation his work has inspired, perhaps, apparently unlike Jonson, Shakespeare never meant for his plays to be studied on the page as much as (or more than) from a seat in the theater. I plan to implement both perspectives individually but hope that by doing so I will not be applying the two perspectives indiscriminately. I expect it will be apparent that some functions of minor characters are more easily recognized from the angle of studying the text, others from stage performance.

To consider, once again, Shakespeare's characters in general for just a moment, it is clear that there are varying degrees by which we could call Shakespeare's characters major or minor. To illustrate this point, we might try envisioning a continuum with minor characters on one side and major characters on the other. Many of Shakespeare's characters are positioned somewhere between the extremes in this continuum. Enobarbus, for instance, is obviously a major character in
Antony and Cleopatra, but it is unreasonable to say that he is as major of a character as Antony, Cleopatra, or Octavius, even if we never bothered to count both the number of lines Enobarbus has and the scenes in which he appears, then compare the totals to those of the play's three leading figures. Although Enobarbus is, it appears, Antony's best friend and provides important commentary on the nature of Antony's relationship to Cleopatra (following one of the most famous passages of the play: the description of Cleopatra's barge [2.2.191-232]), Enobarbus remains a major character of a lesser magnitude than the others mentioned. And although Enobarbus' death is certainly tragic in that it might arouse our pity, this play, as the title informs us, is not his tragedy.

An identical situation arises with Shakespeare's minor characters. If we take Hamlet as an example, we might tenuously establish the play's major characters as Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia, leaving characters like Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern in minor roles. But this general distinction, arguable as it may be, tells us little, if anything, about the differences as minor characters between Horatio and, as a unit, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As it turns out, Horatio has (by my count) nine scenes and one hundred nine lines, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern together appear in eight scenes and have merely forty-seven and twenty-eight lines, respectively. In the case of this play, it just so happens that the number of scenes and lines each of these characters has corresponds to their hierarchal value to Hamlet, and therefore to our reaction to the process of his death. Horatio, Hamlet's best friend from Wittenberg, is more significant to Hamlet’s
character than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a pair of friends from Hamlet’s childhood days, outsiders to Elsinore who are essentially brought in by Claudius to keep an eye on Hamlet; and obviously, we know whom Hamlet finds more worthy as a friend: He dies in the arms of the broken-hearted Horatio after arranging the deaths of the unsuspecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Still, in terms of minor characters, there is clearly some difference between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and, say, Francisco, who has eight short lines during his sole stage appearance in the opening scene and permanently leaves the stage only eighteen lines into the play. Francisco, then, would seem to be more minor a character than either Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and indeed he is, in terms of his number of lines and stage appearances. From this example, it might seem as though we could use this sort of statistical information in order to establish a set of objective criteria for distinguishing one minor character from another. For instance, we might determine that, given any more than twenty lines, a minor character is no longer of Francisco’s “caliber,” but is more that of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s. Or, using a similar approach, we might decide that if a minor character appears in any more than three scenes, as do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that such a minor character is “more major” than a minor character who appears in fewer than three scenes, as is the case with Francisco.

As it turns out, however, the application of this statistical criteria, in the way I have used it, is misleading for the purpose of distinguishing minor characters. Guildenstern, as I pointed out, makes eight appearances and speaks twenty-eight
lines, but one of the Gravediggers (identified as “First Clown”) speaks a total of thirty-three lines in his only appearance in the play (5.1). Suddenly, in terms of number of lines spoken, it could be argued that the First Clown is more major of a character than Guildenstern—a contention which, I think, most of us would agree is simply not accurate. The same problem occurs if we choose to use the number of stage appearances for distinguishing degrees of minor characters. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus’s servant Lucius (with twenty-seven lines) has four rather lengthy but not particularly memorable appearances (2.1, 2.4, 4.2, 4.3), while Artemidorous, who reveals that there is a leak in the plot to kill Caesar when he reads out the names of the conspirators (2.3), has only one other appearance: when he tries to warn Caesar of the imminent danger in visiting the Capitol on the morning of the Ides of March (3.1). Is Lucius a “more major” character than Artemidorous? Certainly not, when we consider that Caesar’s very life hinges upon the information that Artemidorous is willing yet unable to disclose.

Consequently, we must search for some other set of criteria for differentiating minor characters and, more specifically, for defining that special class of minor characters known as bit characters. What I have in mind is not so much a “set of criteria” as it is a group of common trends, which is why the kind of statistical information previously considered is still useful: Generally speaking, bit characters can in fact be distinguished for having relatively few scenes and lines. Lady Faulconbridge in *King John* and both the Duke of Burgandy and the King of France in *King Lear* have only five lines in their brief participation in the first acts of these
plays. In this respect, these three characters have much in common with the First Clown and Francisco in Hamlet and Lucius and Artemidorus in Julius Caesar. What is important to remember, however, is that neither the number of spoken lines nor the number of scene appearances cannot exclusively determine to what degree a given character is minor.

Another useful but by no means exclusive way of determining bit characters from other minor characters is by looking at their names. The minor characters in question earlier from Hamlet all have individual proper names: "Horatio," "Rosencrantz," and "Guildenstern." The Gravediggers, however, do not. They are merely called, in the stage direction preceding their lines, "Two Clowns." In general, if characters are not given proper names of their own, the chances are good that these characters play bit roles. There are numerous examples from all four of Shakespeare's genres: the Captain in Twelfth Night (1.2), the Knight in King Lear (1.4), the Sheriff in 1 Henry IV (2.4), and the Shipmaster in The Tempest (1.1, 5.1), just to name a few. In these cases, the "names" of the characters do carry some sense of that character's individual identity, but more specifically they indicate the social position that these characters occupy within the world of the story. Usually, such social designations simultaneously indicate a bit role. I say "usually," of course, because a few exceptions do exist, most notably the Fool in King Lear and the Provost in Measure for Measure. We never learn the "real names" of these characters, yet this fact is in no way indicative of their being bit characters, and in fact the Fool and the Provost are anything but minor characters. Conversely, having a "real name" gives
no guarantee that a character’s role is not that of a bit character: As mentioned, Artemidorous and Lucius in *Julius Caesar* are good examples of bit characters who have formal names. The point I wish to make, however, is that more often than not, a character’s name (or lack thereof) will tend to designate a bit role.

Bit characters, then, may differ widely in how often they appear and speak, and they may or may not have formal names which tend to indicate a bit role, yet they are closely united as a class of characters in a more fundamental way. Typically, they are what an English or Theatre instructor would call “flat” or “static” characters, as opposed to being “round” or “dynamic” characters. In comparison to major characters, but also to such minor characters as Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, bit characters do not change very much. They have little time to do so because they are not usually on stage long enough for us to get to know them as much as the major characters. Their development as individuals is limited by the general infrequency of their appearances and relative lack of participation in the events of the play.

In an article to which I will be referring again later, Dennis R. Preston points out that in *Twelfth Night*, Antonio and Fabian are two minor characters who have “significant parts both as characters and contributors to the action” (176). He discusses these characters as part of a cast of minor characters which, it should be added, is otherwise composed of bit characters: Curio, Valentine, the Captain, a messenger, and the Two Officers who arrest Antonio. Preston states that in *Twelfth Night*, “all the speaking parts can be dramatically justified” (176), and by implication
these speaking parts include those of the bit characters. What distinguishes these characters, however, from Antonio and Fabian—who are akin to the Horatios, Tybalts, and Stephanos of other minor-character cast lists—is that a bit character, to use Preston’s words, do not in comparison play an equally significant part as both characters and contributors of action. It is this trait which, more than any other, separates the bit character from the “more major” minor characters, and it is the characters in Shakespearean drama who display this trait who will be introduced and examined from this point forward.
2. Dramatic Functions of Bit Characters

Dromio of Syracusa speaks a significant couplet in The Comedy of Errors when, after being paged in the midst of the play's confusion, he seems to say with a shrug, "Thither I must, although against my will, / For servants must their masters' minds fulfill" (4.1.112-3). Dromio's clever remark adds something to the bit character description with which I concluded earlier. The phrase "against my will" is more than merely two iambs filling space to help produce a witty couplet; it suggests a fundamental trait of the subservient bit character. Such characters possess no true freedom in the application of their individual wills. The reason that they "must their masters' minds fulfill" arises from the implicit fact that if they were to do otherwise, they might be out of a job or, even worse, susceptible to punishment or death. Consequently, such bit characters, and most minor characters in general, are certainly of a different class than the drama's central figures. What largely makes tragic heroes tragic, from Richard III to Coriolanus, is that they arrive at their destinations by their own hands, guided by the intuitions which shape their own, self-determined wills. Bit characters, of course, never face such situations.

Dromio's couplet also describes the primary function of a good many Shakespearean bit characters: that of moving the plot from one major development to another. Dromio, then, has a "dramatic function" in that he helps connect points of the plot based on the decisions of a major character. I use the word "dramatic" in the title of this chapter to indicate basically those functions of bit characters which
have some degree of pertinence to the plot of the play—the specific series of events which shape the play’s structure and outcome. Indeed, from the standpoint of Shakespeare as a dramatist, bit characters like Dromio are necessary for showing the audience that servants are indeed fulfilling their masters’ minds—that news, for instance, is being taken to another king, or that guests have arrived at the palace. In Preston’s words, these roles “fulfill such obvious functions as bringing a letter, performing a service, or announcing an arrival” (167), but without the performance of these small tasks, Shakespeare’s plots would never leave the first act. Both on the page and on the stage, servants, attendants, and messengers are often responsible for carrying the small but essential pieces of plot action from the end of one point to the beginning of another.

A simple illustration of this function occurs in The Two Gentlemen of Verona. Once her “true love” leaves for Milan, Julia suddenly decides to “undertake / A journey to my loving Proteus” (2.7.6-7). Lucetta, Julia’s waiting-woman, warns that “the way is wearisome and long” (8) and that it would be best for Julia to “forbear till Proteus make return” (13). Lucetta’s counsel—that the plan extends “above the bounds of reason” (23)—makes sense: Julia has apparently never been to Milan, and to suppose that she can find her way and make the trip safely seems farfetched, particularly with the sorts of bandits we meet in the fourth act meandering the woods near Milan. Despite Lucetta’s warnings, Julia proceeds to Milan, and we next see her in the fourth act disguised as a boy named Sebastian. With her is a “Host,” who assists “Sebastian” in finding “the gentleman that [she] ask’d for” (4.2.31-
2)—namely, Proteus. Much to Julia's dismay, Proteus is busy wooing another woman (Silvia), which is exactly what Shakespeare, through the Host, wants Julia to observe. Through the Host, at whose inn "Sebastian" is apparently lodging, Julia is able to locate Proteus in a fashion which might strike an audience as being somewhat likely. The Host, therefore, helps keep the plot in motion while bringing a much-needed dash of verisimilitude to a play which is otherwise lacking it: Instead of having Julia wander her way to Milan and, by happenstance, find the unfaithful Proteus, Shakespeare uses a bit character to help continue the plot while also making the process of Julia finding Proteus seem quite plausible.

One could argue, I suppose, that the Host helps alter the plot of the play: Without his assistance to Julia, the play would never finish according to plans, and in fact, messages would never be delivered, nor commands performed. Perhaps bit characters, then, are the true agents of the plots in Shakespeare's plays, and in *Romeo and Juliet*, we see the consequences that arise when these fundamental functions, normally taken for granted, go unfulfilled. Eventually, the survival of Romeo and Juliet hinges exclusively on the assumption that Friar Lawrence's letters will reach Romeo in Mantua so that Romeo may know the "drift" (4.1.114) between Juliet and the Friar. Without those letters, Romeo will not know that when he returns to Verona, the Juliet he finds should not be mistaken for being dead. However, Friar John, the messenger employed by Friar Lawrence for the speerings, returns the letters to Verona. Being suspected of having "the infectious pestilence" (5.2.10) prevents Friar John from delivering the crucial message. Before Romeo can learn the
truth, he drinks the fatal poison in the Capulet tomb, which triggers Juliet’s immediate suicide. Unfortunately, Friar John could not, we might say with Dromio, his master’s mind fulfill. And it is this failure by a bit character to perform his singular, news-bearing task which clinches the imminent tragedy.³

Next to Friar John, one of the most drastic examples of a Shakespearean bit character utterly changing the direction of the plot is Marcade in Love’s Labor’s Lost. As the proverbial bearer of the bad news, he brings information that is of urgent importance. But his entrance is preceded by a humorous confrontation between Costard and Armado, during which time “the hilarity,” as Anne Barton says, “rises to its climax” (Calderwood 219). Unexpected as it may be, Marcade’s message—that the King of France is dead—suddenly and radically alters not only the direction of the plot, but the entire mood of the story. In that moment (5.2.716) when the entire play turns upside-down, what happens has quite beautifully been summarized by Barton:

The other people in the play are so concerned with Armado’s predicament that no one notices that someone, in a sense something has joined them. His entrance unmarked by any of the other characters, materializing silently from those shadows which now lie deep along the landscape of the royal park, the Messenger has entered the play world. ... There is perhaps nothing like this moment in the whole range of Elizabethan drama. In the space of four lines, the entire world of the play, its delicate balance of reality and illusion, all the hilarity and overwhelming life of its last scene has been swept away and destroyed, as Death itself actually enters the park, for the first time, in the person of Marcade. (Calderwood 219)

The sudden presence of Death transforms a jovial and festive atmosphere, with

³ The effect produced by this rather arbitrarily unfulfilled function is a disturbing one. It is more difficult to pinpoint some sort of practical lesson or “moral” to the play when its climactic action is induced by a perfectly random and indiscriminate force: “the searchers of the town” (5.2.8).
which we would expect the play to end, into a pensive, somber place. At its conclusion, the play seems as though it is left reflecting upon itself, in a way that no other Shakespearean comedy does.

One other dramatic function of bit characters is related to this discussion, for sometimes bit characters not only keep the plot in motion, but they set the plot in motion to begin with. The comedies provide several illustrations of this function. Probably one of the most famous bit characters in Shakespeare is Egeus, the overbearing and quick-tempered father of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He is a bit character not only because he has two relatively brief stage appearances and merely seven lines, but also because of the circumstances under which we see him last. After Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus have stumbled upon the two pairs of sleeping lovers in the forest of Athens, Egeus remains disagreeable toward Lysander and demands “the law, the law, upon his head” (4.1.155) to Theseus. Demetrius, who has been Egeus’s choice for Hermia all along, proceeds to explain that although he “wot not by what power” (164), he no longer loves Hermia, and that now “The object and the pleasure of mine eye, / Is only Helena” (170-1). Theseus apparently sees no reason to stand by his previous decision that Hermia marry Demetrius, and he firmly tells Egeus, “I will overbear your will” (179). Without a word in reply, Egeus leaves the stage with Theseus and Hippolyta and is never heard from again. Egeus, then, fails to participate in the conclusion of the drama, and therefore the whole of it—a trait which is particularly typical of bit characters.

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1.1.20, 22-45, 95-8, 127; 4.1.128-31, 137, 154-9.
What is so significant about Egeus's departure is that it is prevenient to his absence from the fifth act, when the three couples who are to be married gather to watch the humorously misperformed play enacted by the "rude mechanicals." But contemporary productions of A Midsummer Night's Dream often include Egeus in the grand finale even though his name is not in the script for the fifth act. This choice does make for a rather more "happy ending" because Egeus's appearance should signal to the audience that he has accepted Theseus's decision and supports Hermia's marriage to Lysander. Pope, as I mentioned in section one, made a similar choice when he "confounded" the roles of Egeus and Philostrate, the master of ceremonies, in the fifth act. But such choices do not seem consistent with Egeus's character: Egeus, aggravated beyond words, silently leaves the stage after Theseus's line at 4.1.186, and Philostrate, a cordial servant to Theseus, says he has seen the play rehearsed (5.1.68), an activity which does not fit the impatient and absolute disposition of Egeus.

My interpretation of Egeus as a bit character is that his primary function is to set the entire plot of the play in motion. If Egeus did not oppose the love between Hermia and Lysander, there would be no second, third, and fourth acts as we know them. It is true that Theseus (by agreeing with Egeus) and Demetrius (by attempting to defy the will of Hermia and Lysander) augment the conflict which triggers the play. However, without the initial, dissenting voice of Egeus, Demetrius would have an even less unfounded stake in marrying Hermia than he already has at the beginning of the play, and Theseus would have no reason to oppose the love that
Hermia and Lysander share for each other. In short, if Egeus were to relent—to permit Hermia and Lysander the marriage they dearly want—the unhappy couple would never be compelled to run away into the forest for an elopement which, thanks to Puck, does not quite succeed as planned. Egeus, then, serves as the catalyst to the plot of the play, a function which is directly responsible for what is arguably the play’s primary theme, spoken by Lysander: “The course of true love never did run smooth” (1.1.134).

A more obscure example of a bit character catalyzing the plot of a play occurs in The Two Gentlemen of Verona with the character of Panthino. Panthino is a servant to Antonio, the father of Proteus, and it is Panthino’s conversation with Antonio which causes Proteus to be sent to Milan, where the action of the play transpires.³ Panthino tells Antonio that he has been speaking with Antonio’s brother who, concerning Proteus,

wond’red that your lordship
Would suffer him to spend his youth at home,
While other men, of slender reputation,
Put forth their sons to seek preferment out… (1.3.4-7)

One of these “other men,” of course, is Valentine, Proteus’s best friend who has already left Verona “to seek preferment” in Milan (1.1). Antonio is swayed by the advice of his brother as it is reported by Panthino, and shortly thereafter, much to his initial disliking, Proteus is sent to join Valentine in Milan (2.2). Although it is unclear why Shakespeare should not have used Antonio’s brother (who never appears in the play) instead of Panthino, it is nonetheless evident that one of

³ G. Blakemore Evans notes that Shakespeare seems to have been of two minds concerning the locale of the play once the action leaves Verona. See his notes at 1.3.27 and 2.4.76.
Panthino’s chief functions is to direct the plot of the play to Milan, where Proteus proceeds to demonstrate his fickleness in the affairs of love.

I use this example from The Two Gentlemen of Verona to illustrate an analogous scene in Twelfth Night, one which again shows how Shakespeare uses bit characters to instigate the plot of a play. Viola has washed ashore after a shipwreck which, she fears, has taken the life of her brother Sebastian. The ship’s Captain, attended by some sailors, informs Viola that they have landed in Illyria. The Captain also tells Viola of Count Orsino, whom Viola remembers was a bachelor when her father spoke of him (29). The Captain, it just so happens, was “but a month ago” in Illyria (31) and confirms Valentine’s report to Orsino (1.1.23-31) that Olivia, because she is mourning the sudden deaths of both her father and brother, accepts no men as suitors, including Orsino. The Captain’s news gives Viola the idea that motivates her behavior throughout the rest of the play: If she disguises herself as a eunuch, she has a good chance of serving Orsino and, ultimately, winning his love. It is ironic that Julia, somewhat exasperated, had inquired at the beginning of the scene, “And what should I do in Illyria?” (1.2.3). The Captain, as it turns out, gives Viola some good suggestions, ones which shape Viola’s course of action, and thus the plot of the play. Appropriately, Viola tells the Captain at the scene’s conclusion, “I thank thee. Lead me on” (64). Indeed, she has the sea captain to thank for her initial interest in Orsino, and also for her prompt and timely arrival at the Duke’s palace, which occurs onstage.

A bit character akin to the Captain is the First Merchant of Ephesus in The
Comedy of Errors. Although the Merchant does not especially do anything to stimulate the plot of the play, he does give advice which ensures the safety and survival of Antipholus of Syracuse, who is, with his twin brother, one of the play’s major figures. When they first meet, the Merchant tells Antipholus, “Therefore give out you are of Epidamius, / Lest that your goods too soon be confiscate” (1.2.1-2). Like the Captain toward Viola, the Merchant gives Antipholus valuable advice. He warns Antipholus of the hostility with which Syracusans are being received in Ephesus, suggesting that neither Antipholus’s wealth nor life is secure if he fails to “give out” that he is from Epidamius. We have already witnessed the effects of this hostility when, in the opening scene, Egeon—a Syracusan merchant and, as we know, the father of the twin brothers—is brought in as a prisoner before the Duke of Ephesus. The Duke is somewhat sympathetic to Egeon’s misfortunes even before he hears about them, giving Egeon a chance to explain why he came to Ephesus in the first place (1.1.28-30). But even Egeon’s explanation—that he is in search of his long lost sons (36-138)—is not enough to make the Duke relent. The scene ends with Egeon being taken away by a jailer, with the Duke able to offer Egeon freedom only if he can summon one thousand marks as bail. Otherwise, Egeon must remain “doom’d to die” (154).

In light of this opening scene, the friendship which the Merchant offers Antipholus of Syracuse is rather difficult to account for. Antipholus is apparently unaware of how unwelcome Syracusans are in Ephesus, but when he is befriended by the Merchant, in spite of being a Syracusan, it is not clear why the Merchant
would extend such graciousness to Antipholus. By not reporting Antipholus to the authorities of Ephesus, the Merchant is, in fact, failing to abide by the laws of commerce which now govern Ephesus, laws which the Duke articulates to Egeon and ones with which any respectable merchant would certainly be familiar. In reply, Antipholus invites the Merchant to walk the town and dine with him (1.2.22-3), but the Merchant already has plans to meet “certain merchants / Of whom I hope to make much benefit” (24-5). The Merchant proposes cordially that, instead, he and Antipholus meet later at five o’clock, after which time the Merchant will keep him company throughout the evening. It is a meeting, however, which never occurs, and we never see the Merchant again in the play.6 In acclimating Antipholus to his new environment and serving as the first in a series of odd encounters Antipholus will have in Epidamius, the Merchant has performed his function.

These examples, I hope, have made it very clear how bit characters can essentially function as “prime movers” of a Shakespearean play. On the surface, perhaps an acknowledgement of this function is useful only to a director of the play who seeks to ensure a certain verisimilitude is not omitted from his or her production. After all, the dramatic foundation of the play would be awkwardly absent if, for instance, Viola simply showed up in Illyria without any recognizable reason (or “cause”) for doing so. Thanks to the Captain, she has such a reason. But bit characters who catalyze the plot in these ways are also contributing something unique to the genre of Shakespearean comedy. These characters, usually generous

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6 A merchant again appears later in the play (4.1, 5.1), but according to Dyce’s emendations to the First Folio, it is a different merchant, identified as the Second Merchant of Ephesus.
and sometimes a bit mysterious, are instrumental in creating a distinctly comic atmosphere. In Shakespeare’s conception of comedy, benevolent strangers like the Host and the First Merchant of Ephesus are capable of stepping into the story and lending a hand to the major characters, through whom we see the story and feel its effects. In many Shakespearean comedies, the story arises from this world in which anonymous but courteous figures are dependable for assisting the major characters into the limelight of the play.

Many critics have commented upon the general nature of the world Shakespeare tended to create in his comedies, and I am not especially interested in staking out these different claims and comparing them. I would, however, like to mention one particular evaluation of Shakespeare’s comic world that has been made in relation to plot-triggering bit characters. In a book about Twelfth Night, Clifford Leech points out that in the tradition of Terence and Plautus, Shakespeare often follows “a good and sufficient formula” for creating a comedy. Citing The Comedy of Errors, The Merry Wives of Windsor, and Much Ado About Nothing as examples, Leech refers to these comedies as plays which feature “the impingement of characters on one another” in a single locality. Furthermore, when “the playwright’s formula” is “‘Bring them [the characters] together’”—as Shakespeare’s was—then “the play emerges from interaction” (Leech 5). Bit characters, of course, are frequently invaluable for the occurrence of this “impingement” and “interaction,” as illustrated by the Captain and the First Merchant of Ephesus. For Shakespeare, these characters “impinge” on the play’s larger figures and bring them into a common
world, so that the play may transpire as planned. Without the Captain, Viola is stranded on an unfamiliar island and helpless as to what she should do next, and without the First Merchant of Ephesus, Antipholus of Syracuse might precariously wander the town and wind up in the same predicament as his father. Instead, the bit characters in these cases ensure the very survival of the characters that Shakespeare wants us to observe, and it is through “impingement” and “interaction” that this process can begin.

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If we were to imagine the opening scene of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a dinner at which guests arrive to eat and socialize with the hosts, it would be appropriate to say that the Messenger who appears in the scene would likely be the person responsible for setting the table. In his responses to Leonato’s observations and questions, and later to Beatrice’s barbed remarks concerning Benedick, the Messenger prepares the meeting place for the important first encounter between all subjects concerned: Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick, Hero, and Beatrice. For Shakespeare, the Messenger is a necessary device for getting certain pieces of the play in place before this first encounter occurs, and through the Messenger, we hear of the success of Don Pedro’s men, the promotion of Claudio, and the status of the “good soldier” (53) Benedick. Thanks to his conversation with Beatrice, we also hear that she and Benedick lately have not been on the best of terms. As a result, the Messenger has done much of the necessary “dirty work” for the rest of the dramatic action to occur: After only a few minutes of initial participation, the Messenger has
helped, so to speak, put everything in its proper place by the time Don Pedro and his men approach, and thus he has provided the contexts within which we will observe and evaluate the story's central figures.

In Shakespearean comedy, this function of the bit character is not unique to *Much Ado About Nothing*. In *Twelfth Night*, and in much fewer lines, a pair of bit characters are for the most part analogous with the Messenger. Curio and Valentine are somewhat more fortunate than the Messenger in that, whereas Beatrice tends to treat the Messenger as a sort of punching bag which unfortunately bears Benedick's face, Orsino uses Curio and Valentine as sounding boards off of which he may hear himself moan the complaints of an unrequited lover. But an important distinction is to be made between Curio and Valentine, one that Dennis Preston summarizes well when he points out that "[Curio's] sole obligation is to Orsino's character. Valentine too contributes to the Count's character, but... Valentine is [also] called upon to explain the first turn of the action: the love Orsino has described in the first lines of the play must go unrequited" (170). Valentine's function, then, is of a more complicated nature than Curio's, because Curio "speaks his lines before any plot has developed" (170). With this dual function, Valentine and the Messenger are quite similar in that both of them help explain the initial situation and also assist in the development of major characters, a double responsibility which distinguishes them from Curio.

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7 For an interesting look at how much of Valentine's character may be determined from his name and how he speaks his lines, see Preston's remarks on p. 169 of his article. Preston's analysis is especially useful for the Shakespearean bit-part actor who might suppose that, because bit characters have such small roles, there is little of the character's "character" to be extrapolated from Shakespeare's text. Preston convincingly shows that quite the contrary can be true.
In these ways, bit characters are valuable to Shakespeare for establishing the introduction of the play and participating in it—a third and very important dramatic function of bit characters which rather indirectly relates to the direction of the plot. In terms of the comic genre, however, the cases of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* are two exceptions to the rule in that the Messenger, Curio, and Valentine, by virtue of the important and necessary information they either disclose or help to reveal, have quite substantial roles in these comedies’ opening scenes. In Shakespeare’s other comedies, such bit characters, with one exception, are altogether missing. *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* are akin to *The Comedy of Errors, Measure for Measure, A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost* in that all of these comedies begin with the dukes of the plays’ settings uttering the first words we hear. Otherwise, bit characters are not involved whatsoever with the beginning of the play.

The same is true in Shakespeare’s other comedies. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, All’s Well That Ends Well, The Taming of the Shrew,* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* at least two of what prove to be the play’s major characters are the first characters we witness on stage: Valentine and Proteus; the Countess, Bertram, and Lafew; Lucentio and Tranio; and Justice Shallow, Slender, and Sir Hugh Evans. It is true that Adam appears in the opening scenes of *As You Like It,* but in terms of advancing the play, his three lines (26, 63-4, 82-4) are not particularly relevant. As for

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*Egeus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.*

*Leonato, in Much Ado About Nothing, is actually not a duke but the “governor of Messina.”

*a bit character, incidentally, whom Shakespeare himself played.*
The Merchant of Venice, Antonio, a major character, shares the play’s first fifty-six lines with Salerio and Solanio, but the two of them can hardly be seen as bit characters. Salerio appears five other times in the play (2.6, 2.7, 3.1, 3.2, and 4.1), and together they have two highly significant scenes: In the first (2.8), they primarily describe the compassionate manner in which Antonio and Bassanio, “with affection wondrous sensible” (48), parted ways, and in the other (3.1), they discuss Antonio’s sudden sea losses and later antagonize Shylock, triggering the “old carrion[‘s]” (35) famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech. Furthermore, in that Salerio and Solanio do not especially participate in the events which comprise the play’s conclusion, they are not so much bit characters as they are minor characters of an identical type and degree as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as was discussed earlier.

What is most noteworthy about the Messenger, Curio, and Valentine is not so much a matter of how their roles somehow reflect an approach to comedy on Shakespeare’s part that makes Much Ado About Nothing and Twelfth Night remarkably different from the other comedies. Dramatically, these three roles do distinguish these two plays on a fundamental, structural level. Instead, the point I wish to make is that the cases of Much Ado About Nothing and Twelfth Night reflect an implementation of bit characters which is more common in Shakespeare’s tragedies than his comedies and, for that matter, the history plays as well. With the exception of three tragedies—Titus Andronicus, Othello, and King Lear—Shakespeare uses bit characters in the expositions of his tragedies in some of the very same ways that he uses the Messenger, Curio, and Valentine.
3. Opening Scenes of Tragedy

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

—T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

There is, we might say, "no doubt" that Eliot possessed a clear conception of a Shakespearean bit character when, at the turning point of his famous poem, he likened his famous Prufrock to "an attendant lord." Prufrock contends that he is "not Prince Hamlet"—an arguable claim because a good many twentieth-century readers have found him to be tragic—but specifically in terms of Shakespearean drama, Prufrock is exactly right: Attendant lords are not princes, nor were they meant to be. Their function is not, like Prince Hamlet's, to be the articulately-minded central character of an important, complicated, and tragic story, but instead, as Prufrock notes, "to swell a progress," "start a scene or two," "Advise the prince," and "to be of use." These functions, as it happens, are all ones which Shakespearean bit characters fulfill. "Swelling a progress" and "starting a scene" are two functions discussed in this section; "Advising the prince" and "being of use" are explored in the next.

I concluded the previous section with the term "exposition," and for the use
of this term, I suppose we all have A.C. Bradley to thank. His original and insightful work in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) is still important for its cogent explanation of the basic “form” of Shakespearean tragedy, and today, for anyone accustomed to discussing Shakespeare, “exposition” has virtually become a commonplace term, as have Bradley’s remarks on the subject. According to Bradley, the first part of Shakespearean tragedy “sets forth or expounds the situation, or state of affairs, out of which the conflict arises; and it may, therefore, be called the Exposition” (Kermode 367). Earlier, I spoke of “the necessary ‘dirty work’” for which characters like the Messenger, Curio, and Valentine are frequently employed. If we are to have a play which features, as one of its plots, a verbally turbulent but charming courtship (Beatrice and Benedick) or a somewhat painfully slow fulfillment of one man’s unyielding love for a wealthy but coy countess (Orsino and Olivia), it is an inevitable fact that the characters comprising these plots must, at some point, be characterized and introduced. Bradley, I think, well describes this necessary process. “The main business of the Exposition,” he writes,

is to introduce us into a little world of persons; to show us their positions in life, their circumstances, their relations to one another, and perhaps something of their characters; and to leave us keenly interested in the question what will come out of this condition of things. We are left thus expectant, not merely because some of the persons interest us at once, but also because their situation in regard to one another points to difficulties in the future. (Kermode 368)

Bradley also explains what the intentions of the dramatist must inevitably be during the exposition:

The dramatist’s chief difficulty in the exposition is obvious. ... He has to impart to the audience a quantity of information about matters of which they generally know nothing and never know all
that is necessary for his purpose. But the process of merely acquiring information is unpleasant, and the direct imparting of it is undramatic. Unless he uses a prologue, therefore, he must conceal from his auditors the fact that they are being informed, and must tell them what he wants them to know by means which are interesting on their own account. (Kermode 368)

A good example of what Bradley means is apparent in the dialogue between the Messenger and Beatrice, whose interaction, as Bradley would say, is essentially "undramatic." The Messenger permanently disappears after the opening scene, and thus his relationship with Beatrice remains undeveloped; however, with such exchanges as the following,

Mess. I see, lady, the gentleman [i.e., Benedick] is not in your books.
Beat. No, and he were, I would burn my study.

(1.1.78-80)

it is clear that Shakespeare is accomplishing his purpose: indirectly informing the audience of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick. Furthermore, Shakespeare is doing so in a way which is indeed, as Bradley says, "interesting on [its] own account"—humorous, in this case. Bradley concludes:

These means, with Shakespeare, are not only speeches but actions and events. From the very beginning of the play, though the conflict has not arisen, things are happening and being done which in some degree arrest, startle, and excite; and in a few scenes we have mastered the situation of affairs without perceiving the dramatist's designs upon us. (Kermode 368)

Bradley does not state it explicitly, but Shakespeare generally opens his
tragedies with bit characters and other minor figures. As we would expect, however, Shakespeare greatly varies his implementation of bit characters in these opening scenes. In Antony and Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Romeo and Juliet, the dramatic action itself is initiated and, for differing lengths, sustained by bit characters before the appearances of such variously more major characters as, respectively, Antony and Cleopatra; Caesar, Brutus, and Cassius; and Tybalt and Benvolio. In the first two cases, that of the Roman tragedies, these bit characters proceed to conclude the scene, while in Romeo and Juliet, they pass the action on to the major characters, then stand to the sides for a moment before leaving the scene. But in all three examples, these characters have concluded their participation in the play by the final words of the opening scene, a pattern which also accounts for the Sergeant in Macbeth and Francisco in Hamlet. In Timon of Athens, on the other hand, the four bit characters, as citizens, not only open the play, but later go outside Athens to visit the disillusioned Timon (5.1). Similarly, in Coriolanus, the Roman Citizens who open the play later make significant appearances, once in contributing to Coriolanus’s loss of the consulship and subsequent exile from Rome (2.3), and later in expressing the justified fear of his return (4.6). These ever-selfish, unruly, and usually short-sighted Plebeians, in the form of a mob, are also present in Julius

11 In Titus Andronicus, Othello, and King Lear, the characters who open these plays—Saturninus, Bassianus, and Titus; Roderigo and Iago; and Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund—can hardly be called bit characters, in any context. But Shakespeare probably had good reasons for beginning with these major characters, particularly in Othello and King Lear, for these characters comprise the sub-plots of their plays, and in such plays as Coriolanus, Macbeth and Timon of Athens, no such sub-plots exist. In other words, for the sake of expediency, it would not have worked to Shakespeare’s advantage to begin King Lear and Othello with bit characters: With two plots at work, there would be little to gain from beginning the play with bit characters.
Caesar, but not, admittedly, in Antony and Cleopatra. Yet in both Coriolanus and Julius Caesar, as members of the unreliable populace, they are quite similar in Timon of Athens to the Poet, Painter, Jeweller, and Merchant, who likewise prove fickle and untrustworthy. Unlike the Roman Citizens, bit characters like the Sergeant in Macbeth, Francisco, Murellus, and Barnardo in Hamlet, and Philo and Demetrius in Antony and Cleopatra have peripheral yet rather lofty social positions in their plays' kingdoms. Including Sampson and Gregory in Romeo and Juliet, these characters also have only second-hand sorts of relationship with the major characters.

With this wide range of differences and variations in mind, it may be impossible to make any sweeping conclusions about the function of bit characters in the exposition of Shakespearean tragedy. It is my conviction, however, that as various as Shakespeare’s intentions might be, such characters are primarily used for helping to create the important, initial impression of the state of affairs in which the tragedy begins. In some tragedies, this initial impression might be focused upon a single character, a particular situation of conflict, a mood or tone, or any combination of these three focal points. For the next few pages, I wish to discuss five tragedies and show how the use of bit characters in the early moments of five expositions influences the components of these plays' initial impressions.

In Macbeth, after a brief appearance by the Witches, a bit character identified by Malcolm as “a good and hardy soldier” (1.2.4) comes forward to tell his “knowledge of the broil” (1.2.6) to Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, and others. Like the Messenger in Much Ado AboutNothing, the Sergeant lays the groundwork for the
play as he reports the news of the wars in the islands west of Scotland. But most importantly, he opens the discussion of the character for whom the tragedy is named. Impassioned, the Sergeant first tells how Macbeth, earlier in the day, has annihilated “The merciless Macdonwald” (9):

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
(Like Valor’s minion) carv’d out his passage
Till he fac’d the slave;
Which nev’r shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops,
And fix’d his head upon our battlements. (1.2.16-23)

Moments afterward, the Sergeant also recounts how Macbeth, with Banquo, was “As cannons overcharg’d with double cracks” (37) when later attacked by the Norweyans. The Sergeant limps off the stage in the arms of the king’s attendants, but his important function has been completed. Ironically, Duncan hears the Sergeant’s news and praises Macbeth as a “valiant cousin” and “worthy gentleman” (24), pronouncing the title of Thane of Cawdor on Macbeth at the end of the scene. It is these impressions of Macbeth which Shakespeare, through the Sergeant, wants to create so that Macbeth has a tragically “valiant” starting point on the path of his gradual but utter moral fall.

In the exposition of Hamlet, a very specific atmosphere, one which lingers until the final bloody moments, is immediately imposed upon the play. The opening scene depicts a Denmark which is unsteady and tense: The night is dark, the air is cold, Fortinbras is a threat, and the ghost of King Hamlet continues to visit the castle. Clearly, affairs at Elsinore are not proceeding very smoothly, a
circumstance which is demonstrated in the very first lines by Francisco and Barnardo.

Bar. Who's there?
Fran. Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
Bar. Long live the King!
Fran. Barnardo.
Bar. He.
Fran. You come most carefully upon your hour. (1.1.1-6)

It has been proposed that the significance of these lines is that the scene, and therefore the play, opens with a question—an appropriate curiosity because *Hamlet* is indeed a play of many questions, concerning the nature of conscience, moral action, sanity, love, and whether, of course, “To be or not to be” (3.1.55). Although this interpretation is an interesting one, what is perhaps more significant is that the question “Who’s there?” is actually spoken by the wrong person. Commanding the watch is Francisco. Barnardo is not on duty and is coming forward to replace Francisco. So it is Francisco, and not Barnardo, who should be asking, “Who’s there?” because Francisco is the sentinel on duty, watching out for anything strange. In the process, he himself is called out for being a stranger. Thus, the play begins off-balance, and the momentary confusion between Francisco and Barnardo is representative of the notion that something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark.

If we suppose that bit characters can, in fact, be important for pointing out the significance of questions in the play, as some would have it toward *Hamlet*, we can turn to *Julius Caesar* for an even better example. Opening the play is Murellus and Flavius, a pair of bit characters who, a few scenes later, are reported to be dead, yet the two of them do manage to give us the first in a series of important glimpses at the
mentality of the Roman mob. Encouraging them to remember how god-like Pompey once seemed to them, Murellus asks the Plebeians, “Knew you not Pompey?” (1.1.37). Instead, the common Roman, on “a laboring day” (1.1.4), is running free in the town, celebrating the victorious return of Caesar in his battle with Pompey’s sons. By the end of the play, we know that these “slippery people,” as they are later called in Antony and Cleopatra, are fickle and unreliable. As Antony’s “Friends, Romans, countrymen” (3.2.73) speech shows, the common citizens are persuaded by an appeal to their flexible emotions and basic material existences, and not with an appeal to reason through the intellect—the strategy which Brutus erroneously employs.

This depiction of the mob is central to developing one of the main issues in Julius Caesar. One question that the play surely provokes is whether Brutus is truly a better leader than Caesar. The portrayal of the mob is important in helping us to raise this question. At the start of the play, the mob of commoners—as represented by the carpenter, but especially the cobbler—seem likable enough characters, as charming yet not as dull as the “rude mechanicals” in A Midsummer Nights Dream. Concerning the name of his profession, the cobbler good-naturedly puns with Flavius, so cleverly that Flavius and Murellus are made to appear unreasonably hostile toward the people. Once Caesar is dead, however, the warm, innocuous side of the mob’s personality fades, and it becomes evident that Flavius and Murellus were correct in their original assessment of the common populace. Once the mob drags off Cinna the poet only because he has the same last name as one of the
conspirators (3.3), it is obvious that the Plebeians are out of control, dangerously impressionable and irrational when incited into action. Cinna's innocence paired with the mob's ruthless behavior first helps to suggest that had Caesar not been killed, Cinna's death, along with those of other innocent Romans, would never have happened. Furthermore, however, we must wonder if perhaps it was better that Brutus, a poor decision-maker with a melancholy disposition, had never aimed at conspiring against Caesar in the first place. Without Caesar's death, there would have been no riots or other demonstrations of unrest.

The opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra* is similar to the one in *Julius Caesar*. The play begins with a debate between two bit characters, Demetrius and Philo, who argue about what has become of Antony since he has fallen in love with Cleopatra. Demetrius does not actually speak until Antony and Cleopatra have left the stage, refusing Caesar's messenger, but it is obvious that just before the play begins, he has stated an opinion of Antony with which Philo disagrees. Philo begins:

\[\text{Phi. Nay, but this dotage of our general's}
\text{O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,}
\text{That o'er the files and musters of the war}
\text{Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn}
\text{The office and devotion of their view}
\text{Upon a tawny front; his captain's heart,}
\text{Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst}
\text{The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,}
\text{And is become the bellows and the fan}
\text{To cool a gipsy's lust.} \] (1.1.1-10)

Obviously, Philo is convinced that Antony's integrity, in the form of his "goodly eyes" and "captain's heart," has diminished because of the tawny-faced Cleopatra. Although Demetrius does eventually come around to seeing Philo's point—"I am
full sorry / That he [Antony] approves the common liar" (1.1.59-60)—he remains sympathetic with Antony. Thus, in many ways, the debate between these characters previews the larger debate which will later occur between Caesar and Lepidus.

Caesar, like Philo, finds Antony’s recent behavior to be intolerable; Lepidus, like Demetrius, wants to give Antony the benefit of the doubt. Is Antony still noble? Should he any longer be admired? Has he damaged his status as a great Roman leader by spending “idle” time with Cleopatra? The debate between Philo and Demetrius revolves around these questions, as does the debate between Caesar and Lepidus. Most importantly, Caesar’s inflexible opinions on the matter later lead him to take action against both Lepidus and Antony.

In both Macbeth and Hamlet, Shakespeare seems to have used the exposition for creating a dark, gloomy atmosphere, one agitated by military conflict and the domestic unrest it has caused. With a different kind of domestic unrest in the exposition of Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare creates a similar kind of atmosphere. Once Abram and Balthasar of the Montague household arrive on the scene (1.1.33 s.d.), Sampson and Gregory immediately go to work in initiating a confrontation with their foes:

Gre. I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.
Sam. Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it. (40-3)

Sampson offers the Montague servants a social ultimatum: Either they respond to the challenge of Sampson’s gesture, or else they are “disgraceful” cowards. But
Abram is careful in handling Sampson’s gesture and skillfully fields an equivocal remark Sampson makes:

*Abr.* Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

*Sam.* I do bite my thumb, sir.

*Abr.* Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? (44-6)

Obviously the crux of Abram’s question is the phrase “at us,” for if Sampson admits that his gesture is directed at Abram and Balthasar, then the Capulet side will clearly have thrown the first punch. Sampson, meanwhile, is aware of his sudden disadvantage but unsure how he should proceed.

*Sam.* (Aside to Gregory.) Is the law of our side if I say ay?

*Gre.* (Aside to Sampson) No.

*Sam.* No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir. (47-51)

Sampson’s reply to Abram is unmistakably a lie, which Gregory apparently senses. By essentially changing the subject, Gregory wastes no time in coming directly to Sampson’s aid, trying to suggest that it is the Montague servants who are causing the present trouble.

*Gre.* Do you quarrel, sir?

*Abr.* Quarrel, sir? No, sir. (52-3)

Abram succeeds in keeping his hands clean of the matter, and it seems too much for Sampson to bear:

*Sam.* But if you do, sir, I am for you. I serve as good a man as you.

*Abr.* No better?

*Sam.* Well, sir. (54-7)

Abram’s remark is clever. Without incriminating himself, he offers Sampson a tacit
challenge which cannot be ignored. Benvolio then enters, and the Capulet servants, no longer hiding their intentions, finally upset the tottering balance which has thus far remained precariously level:

Gre. Say "better," here comes one of my master's kinsmen.
Sam. Yes, better, sir.
Abr. You lie. (58-61)

The resultant fight accomplishes at least one very definite necessity for Shakespeare. If he is going to write a tragedy in which "A pair of star-cross'd lovers" (Prologue 6) commit suicide after un成功ly trying to escape the mutual hatred of their families, Shakespeare first needs to show this conflict between the families that will trigger the lovers' fatal elopement. Strictly in terms of plot, the scene's bit characters are not particularly important: The fight between the families is not the first such fight, and it is certainly not the last, nor is it directly responsible for the ensuing brawl which brings the deaths of Benvolio and Tybalt. But aside from the plot, these characters are important for the establishment of something else that is vital to Shakespeare's dramatic project. With spiteful conversation and swinging swords, these bit characters create a bellicose, anger-charged environment which will later be contrasted with the presence of hope and love created between Romeo and Juliet.

In Macbeth, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, and Romeo and Juliet, bit characters are temporary figures who give the play its important first appearance. Shakespeare often employs bit characters for the establishment of the tragedy's initial atmosphere, and from many different expositions, we can identify a line, an
action, or an occurrence which proves central to the action which follows. With these details in place, Shakespeare may proceed to do many things. Often, as in Romeo and Juliet, he uses contrast to give the play more depth and build our opposition toward the evil in the play, and thus Macbeth begins as a great war hero but ends as a scourge upon his own country. Such first appearances, then, are important. But we can no longer avoid mentioning what has now become obvious: Bit characters have short but tremendously important relationships with the major characters. Not only do bit characters like Philo and Demetrius or the Sergeant prepare us to meet the tragedy's central figures; they also have brief face-to-face encounters with those figures, and in those meetings, it is a rare occasion when Shakespeare fails to use the encounter as a way of commenting in greater detail on his play's leading figures.
4. Developing Major Characters

Underneath the fallen blossom
In my bosom,
Is a letter I have hid.
It was brought to me this morning by a rider from the Duke.
‘Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Harwell
Died in action Thursday se’nnight.’
As I read it in the white, morning sunlight,
The letters squirmed like snakes.
‘Any answer, Madam,’ said my footman.
‘No,’ I told him.
‘See that the messenger takes some refreshment.
No, no answer.’
And I walked into the garden,
Up and down the patterned paths,
In my stiff, correct brocade.

—Amy Lowell, “Patterns”

In this excerpt from Amy Lowell’s poem, the narrator’s messenger, also called her “footman,” essentially has at least two roles in his brief but important encounter with his “Madam.” Most importantly, the messenger brings word, both to the narrator and to the reader of the poem, that the lady’s husband has “Died in action.” This piece of information is then responsible for the direction of the poem as it develops from then on, a function discussed earlier in the second section. But because this poem is, in some fundamental ways, a dramatic monologue, the interest of the reader lies primarily on the character of the narrator, and in light of this interest, we could identify the messenger as one of the devices Lowell uses to depict and develop the character of the narrator. Frequently, Shakespeare also uses messengers and other bit characters in this same way.
Concerning *The Tempest* and its infamously difficult opening scene in terms of theatrical production, Anthony B. Dawson has written, "An obvious problem with producing the play is that actors swaying and lurching on an adamantly stationary stage floor are unlikely to persuade us of the storm at sea—despite the help of gauze and scrim, creaking rigging, or screaming winds over which the actors have to shout their inconsequential and usually inaudible lines" (Charney 67). Certainly, the play's opening scene is a challenge to perform successfully without sacrificing the elements of verisimilitude that make the scene indeed tempest-like. But to call the lines "inconsequential" is to pass a hasty judgment on the importance of the scene's bit characters: the Shipmaster, the Boatswain, and the Sailors. Perhaps Dawson strictly means that the lines of the characters are "without consequence" because the ship's passengers, regardless of the crew's efforts, are fated to crash on Prospero's island. The roles of the crew members are capable of demonstrating the force and severity of the storm, thereby giving us a sense of how awesome Prospero's power truly is, and if many productions of *The Tempest* fail to convey this "tempestuous" introduction, we may still defend the bit characters from being "inconsequential" by looking at how they function in relation to the play's major characters. It is this unique function which is the subject of this section.

In the opening scene of *The Tempest*, to call the lines of the characters "inconsequential" is overlooking what must certainly have been one of Shakespeare's reasons for writing the Shipmaster, Boatswain, and Sailors into the script. As I said, these characters are useful for establishing the storm as a fact in the
play, but even if contemporary performances cannot enact the great tempest without 
ruining the clarity of the scene, we may still say that because of the crew, we learn a 
good deal about the king and his court, who twice come out from below to 
unknowingly distract the crew, which is busy trying to save the ship. In particular, 
along with Alonso, we meet Antonio and Sebastian, who display the characteristic 
marks which signal their impending villainy.

When the Boatswain announces that the Duke and his attendants should not 
be on deck, the Boatswain fails to receive complete cooperation.

_Alon_. ... Where's the master? Play the men.  
_Boats_. I pray now keep below.  
_Ant_. Where is the master, bos'n?  
_Boats_. Do you not hear him? You mar our labor.  
Keep your cabins; you do assist the storm.  
_Gon_. Nay, good, be patient.  
_Boats_. When the sea is. Hence! What cares these 
roarers for the name of king? To cabin! Silence! 
trouble us not. (1.1.9-18)

Soon after, Alonso obeys the Boatswain's commands by permanently leaving the 
deck. I think this behavior reveals something startlingly true about Alonso in that, 
when Alonso expresses an unwarranted resolve to help manage the failing ship, his 
actions parallel his unbeknown wrongdoing in managing Milan in place of the 
rightful Prospero. At the end of the play, once it is has been revealed that Prospero 
is truly "The wronged Duke of Milan" (5.1.107), Alonso is quick to stand forward 
and offer his illegitimate position of authority to Prospero. In a similar fashion that 
is consistent with his character, Alonso also complies with the requests of his 
superior—the Boatswain—when he leaves the deck of the ship and does not return.
Clearly, Alonso is not an unvirtuous king.

Not unexpectedly, the scene with the Boatswain similarly establishes the villainous natures of Antonio and Sebastian, both of whom return, with Gonzalo, to the deck after the Boatswain has ordered them below. Neither of them has any business on the deck of the ship and, as with Alonso, I think there is a parallel suggestion here that as Antonio and Sebastian are unruly and unreliable even during a crisis at sea, so are they disruptive and untrustworthy in the political world of Milan. Both Sebastian and Antonio unleash an onslaught of unreasonable insults and curses upon the Boatswain after he reprimands them for their unwanted return to the deck:

[Boats.] Yet again? What do you here? Shall we give o'er and drown? Have you a mind to sink?

Seb. A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!

Boats. Work you then.

Ant. Hang, cur! hang, you whoreson, insolent noisemaker! We are less afraid to be drown'd than thou art. ...

We are merely cheated of our lives by drunkards.

This wide-chopp'd rascal—would thou mightst lie drowning

The washing of ten tides!

(1.1.38-45, 56-8)

In case it is not already obvious who the play’s villains will be, Shakespeare gives Sebastian one final incriminating remark. After the Mariners enter and declare, “We split, we split, we split!” (62), Antonio says, “Let’s all sink wi’ th’ King” (63). But Sebastian’s prompt reply shows that he has no interest whatsoever in sinking with the King: “Let’s take leave of him” (64). In a sense, Sebastian’s remark foreshadows his attempt, with Antonio’s strong encouragement, to take the ultimate “leave” of
Alonso: plotting to take his life.

For these reasons, it is hasty to summarize the opening lines of *The Tempest* as being "inconsequential," and the same claim could be extended to other bit characters. For example, Charles and LeBeau in *As You Like It* are both bit characters whose participation in the first two scenes of the play is geared toward characterizing Orlando and establishing his relationship with Rosalind. Although Charles and LeBeau do not directly interact with each other, as do Philo and Demetrius in the process of discussing and characterizing Antony, it is the occasion of the wrestling match for which both characters briefly come to the forefront of the action in order to reveal some dimensions of Orlando's nature. Before the match, Shakespeare already has the audience sympathizing with Orlando as Oliver coarsely antagonizes his younger brother, whom he later admits privately is "gentle, never school'd and yet learned, full of noble device," and "of all sorts enchantingly belov'd" (1.1.166-8). But in spite of Orlando's unassailable disposition, Oliver maintains that "I hope I shall see an end of him" (164-5). We have witnessed no reason, of course, why Oliver should so strongly despise Orlando, so that when Orlando finally faces Charles in the wrestling match, there is no question as to whom we want to lose: Charles, implicitly equated with Oliver by virtue of the arrangement they make, is the clear foe in the fight that wins Orlando the sweet affection of Rosalind. Shakespeare sometimes uses bit characters more indirectly in order to characterize the play's central figures. One of the best examples of this indirect
characterization occurs in *King Lear* with the character of France. For the producer of the play, it is critical that from the beginning, France be portrayed as a character of good standing. In an honorable fashion, he chooses to marry Cordelia though she has been severely chastised by her father, commanded into exile, and rejected by Burgundy. Considering that Cordelia herself must appear somewhat sweet and innocent if Lear's hasty decision to alienate her from the inheritance is to have its deepest tragic effects, it would help this depiction of Cordelia if France, as a foil, is presented as a man who is not prone to the same errors in judgment as Burgundy. Meanwhile, France's willingness to take Cordelia as a wife signals that, unlike Lear, he has the ability to see Cordelia for the honorable daughter that she is.

At this point, I would like to introduce and discuss two very similar scenes from *Richard II* (3.4) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.5) which indicate that Shakespeare was possibly employing a conscious strategy with bit characters to make significant statements about his major characters. It is difficult to read these two passages and not wonder if Shakespeare, years later, had a copy of *Richard II* next to him as he wrote *Antony and Cleopatra*, for the garden scene in the former has some noticeable similarities to a scene in the latter. Three bit characters—the Queen's lady, the Gardener, and the Gardener's man—are involved in the first scene, and one bit character, a messenger, participates in the scene with Cleopatra.

Both Isabella and Cleopatra are troubled by the absence of their lovers and ask their attendants how the time may be passed.

1. *Lady.* Madam, we'll play at bowls.
   *Queen.* 'Twill make me think the world is full of rubs,
   And that my fortune runs against the bias.
1. Lady. Madam, we'll dance.
Queen. My legs can keep no measure in delight,
When my poor heart no measure keeps in grief;
Therefore no dancing, girl, some other sport.

1. Lady. Madam, we'll tell tales.
Queen. Of sorrow or of joy?
1. Lady. Of either, madam.
Queen. Of neither, girl;...

1. Lady. Madam, I'll sing.
Queen. 'Tis well that thou hast cause,
But thou shouldst please me better wouldst thou weep. (3.4.2-12, 19-20)

Perhaps the reason Isabella suddenly hides in “the shadows of [the] trees” (25) is that
it is the best “sport” she can “devise... / To drive away the heavy thought of care” (1-2).
But compared to Isabella’s rather docile tastes of lawn bowling, dancing,
storytelling, and singing, Cleopatra prefers the “moody food” of music, along with
billiards, fishing, and later mandragora.

Cleo. Give me some music; music, moody food
Of us that trade in love.
Omnes. The music, ho!
Enter MARDIAN the Eunuch.

Cleo. Let it alone, let’s to billards. Come, Charmian.
Char. My arm is sore, best play with Mardian.
Cleo. As well a woman with an eunuch play’d
As with a woman. Come, you’ll play with me, sir?
Mar. As well as I can, madam.
Cleo. And when good will is show’d, though’t come too short,
The actor may plead pardon. I’ll none now.
Give me mine angle, we’ll to th’ river... (2.5.1-10)

Shakespeare varies Cleopatra’s preferences in order to make her character more like
a “lusty gipsy” than a young English queen. What’s more, Shakespeare adapts
Cleopatra’s character in that she changes her mind toward her own suggestions
before her servants can begin to perform them, while Isabella, in the fashion of an
idealistic young lover, refuses to hear the entertainment that her lady proposes.
Clearly, if Isabella's discussion with her lady served as a model for the scene with Cleopatra, it is easy to see how well Shakespeare adapted Cleopatra for the later role.

Both scenes, then, illustrate the two queens' deliberation over how they should entertain themselves while separated from the men they love. But what is also similar about these two scenes is that their activity is the prelude to especially bad news for Isabella and Cleopatra. In Richard II, Isabella learns that the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, and Green are dead and, most importantly, that "Bullingbrook / Hath seiz'd the wasteful King" (3.4.54-5), Isabella's husband. Predictably, the Gardener's news enrages Isabella: "How dares thy harsh rude tongue sound this unpleasing news?" (74). She calls the Gardener "thou little better thing than earth" (78) and that for his news, she wishes that "the plants thou graft'st may never grow" (101). Isabella, unfortunately, does not have the maturity to understand that she was bound to hear the bad news sooner or later.

Apparently, neither does Cleopatra. Immediately after a messenger reports that Antony is "married to Octavia" (2.5.40), Cleopatra strikes the Messenger twice, grabs him by the hair, and finally draws a knife on him, proclaiming, "Rogue, thou hast liv'd too long" (73). We are relieved when Charmian finally states the obvious—"The man is innocent" (76)—and even Cleopatra concedes to the cowering messenger when he returns before her, "Though it be honest, it is never good / To bring bad news" (85-6). But Cleopatra, like Isabella, still cannot conclude her encounter with the bearer of "ill tidings" (72) by pardoning him or apologizing.
Meanwhile, the poor messenger has been forced to repeat his news three more times, helping to demonstrate not only Cleopatra’s fondness for theatrics, but also her strong affection for Antony. Similarly, Isabella’s outbursts, triggered by the Gardener’s news, indicates that she is a woman who obviously loves her husband, making Richard’s outcome more tragic when he is later deposed and separated from the Queen.

Finally, as further evidence that Shakespeare could give even the smallest bit characters very definite personalities and dispositions, there is the content and manner of the mere three lines spoken by Marcade in Love’s Labor’s Lost. His first words to the Princess of France are direct but sincere: “God save you, madam!” (716). He knows that the news he brings will be difficult for the Princess to bear, and he does not clutter his simple message with the sorts of “Taffata phrases” or “silken terms precise” (5.2.406) which the embarrassed Berowne has earlier forsworn. Marcade’s manner is so direct, in fact, that the Princess is able to guess the reason for his appearance, as if she were reading a copy of the message for herself.

Prin. Welcome, Marcade,  
But that thou interruptest our merriment.  
Marc. I am sorry, madam, for the news I bring  
Is heavy in my tongue. The King your father—  
Prin. Dead, for my life! (5.2.716-9)

Significantly, Marcade replies, “Even so: my tale is told” (720), and then speaks no more. Unlike Navarre and the other men (including Holofernes, for that matter), Marcade is plain in his use of words and does not, we might say, “trust to speeches penn’d, / Nor to the motion of a schoolboy’s tongue” (5.2.402-3). Following the
ridiculous behavior of Ferdinand and his men, who continually tangle themselves in their own vows, Marcade’s message is refreshing for its brevity and simplicity.

What is perhaps most crucial about Marcade’s appearance is that it triggers an important reaction in the Princess of France. The women seem to have pardoned the men for their strange but amusing behavior as the performance of the Nine Worthies is enjoyed by everyone, but the news of the king’s death ends any speculation concerning the future of the courtships the men desire. “How fares your Majesty?” (726) Ferdinand asks the Princess, but she does not even seem to notice: “Boyet, prepare,” she says, “I will away to-night” (727). Not for a moment does the Princess question what she should do. Her loyalty toward her father and his kingdom is foremost in her mind. Berowne attempts to confess the men’s true love for the women, when Ferdinand suddenly urges, “Now at the latest minute of the hour, / Grant us your loves” (787-8). The Princess replies with a wise observation: “A time methinks too short / To make a world-without-end bargain in” (788-9).

In light of this information, I hope the functions of the Messenger in Much Ado About Nothing can now be more broadly understood. For the audience, it is not particularly noteworthy that the Messenger moves to the background after the first scene and never comes forward again. The Messenger is not needed to facilitate any further development in the relationships between the major characters; they will take care of that by themselves. However, this fact does not suggest that the Messenger has no significant sort of relationship with the major characters. The Messenger is useful for establishing Don Pedro’s valorous and noble disposition (7),
Benedick's dubious but generally likable nature (37-8, 48-9, 53), and, perhaps most significantly, how Claudio may be likened to both a lamb and a lion (15), as he so drastically proves himself in the marriage scene (4.1). The Messenger is also valuable for characterizing Beatrice, but in a way which is much more direct than with Pedro and Benedick: He converses with Beatrice and, in doing so, serves as a sort of innocent bystander to the lashings of Lady Tongue's caustic wit. The Messenger, then, by directly interacting with Beatrice, helps to establish something of her spirit and nature. It might seem redundant to say that the Messenger characterizes the major characters, but in plain terms, that is what he does, along with many other bit characters.
5. Rhythmic Functions

To this point, my discussion of the functions of bit characters has neglected a few of whom are probably the most famous bit characters in Shakespearean drama. They include the Gravediggers in *Hamlet*, the Porter in *Macbeth*, and the Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is not that these characters have no function worth mentioning, but instead, I have saved them for the end because of a unique function which they all share: comic relief. A much more lengthy discussion of these and many other characters could be pursued on this subject of comic relief in Shakespeare, but in the meantime I would like to offer a succinct outline of what I think happens when these characters momentarily take the stage.

In reality, comic relief exists within a larger class of functions which we could identify as being "rhythmic" in nature. Shakespeare sometimes uses bit characters for a series of lines or an entire scene, and such blocks of time, if only for a few moments, temporarily take our attention away from the major characters. This brief change of focus can be very useful for a dramatist because it gives an audience the opportunity to see a major character differently when he or she next speaks or appears in the play. Perhaps the most extreme example of this change of focus in Shakespeare occurs in *Timon of Athens*. Timon calmly orders his servants to ask his "friends" for money (2.2), but a few scenes later, once Timon's flatterers have turned all the servants away, Timon enters "in a rage" (s.d.3.4.78), and his equanimity never returns. I do not mean to point out the obvious, but the action occurring away from
Timon (performed mostly by bit characters) makes the sudden contrast in his disposition startlingly real. During Timon's rather lengthy absence between 2.2 and 3.2, bit characters occupy the stage, so that Timon's sudden, "enraged" appearance can mark a powerful contrast between his previous and present demeanors. In a good many Shakespearean plays, bit characters may be interpreted as performing this type of rhythmic function, but if nothing else, without bit characters and other minor figures, we would see and hear the major characters at all times. Shakespeare seems to have tried avoiding this "technique" and managed, in the words of Enobarbus, not to cloy the appetites he was feeding: those of the audience.

One of the rhythmic devices by which minor characters are often employed is in the creation of suspense. If the dramatic action, while in the midst of conflict, is briefly directed away from the major characters, suspense can result. Such is the case with the graveyard scene in Hamlet, when Ophelia's funeral and other points of conflict are temporarily suspended. Edward Quinn writes of this scene:

Right before the catastrophe in Hamlet we are suddenly treated to a clown show, with random reflections on death, burial, and preservation of corpses. A skull is turned up... and the plot seems to stand still at a moment of great excitement, when Hamlet has just miraculously returned from his fated voyage to England. [The play's] much-needed explanations are put off until the beginning of the next scene, while the gravedigger and his assistant, Hamlet, and Horatio engage in witty repartee and philosophical speculation. (Quinn 126)

Clearly, one of the functions of the Gravediggers is to perpetuate our interest in Hamlet's imminent return. In particular, we are interested in his reaction to the news of Ophelia's sudden death. The activity of the Gravediggers, however, delays the satisfaction of our curiosity.
A similar function is served by the two Watchmen in Coriolanus. In the previous scene (5.1), Cominius has just informed Menenius that Coriolanus “would not seem to know me” (5.1.8) when Cominius visited Coriolanus on behalf of the desperate Romans. We then become curious as to whether Menenius, a defender of Coriolanus earlier in the play, can persuade the single-minded “chief enemy to the people” (1.1.7-8) to spare the city. Immediately thereafter (5.2), we are introduced to two watchmen who spot Menenius outside Coriolanus’s camp, ask him his business, and repeatedly tell him to leave. Fifty-eight lines later—without the watchmen yielding to the requests of Menenius—Coriolanus finally appears and, of course, turns Menenius away. In this and the previous scene from Hamlet, Shakespeare lengthens the period of time between points in the plot—points of potential development or resolution—and thereby suspends our experience of the outcome of one particularly important event. Shakespeare, at least unconsciously, seems to have known what every good mystery writer knows: Suspense can be used for sustaining the attention of the audience.

In the process, suspense can also build or intensify our reactions to those points of potential development and resolution, which is what Shakespeare, as a writer for the public stage, probably wanted to achieve. A rather obscure version of this phenomenon occurs in Romeo and Juliet (4.4) with the Capulet servingmen. We have already met the Second Servingman, who offers old Capulet some small talk about some cooks who will prepare the wedding meal, just before Juliet arrives to announce she has, as she puts it, “repent[ed] the sin / Of disobedient opposition”
Two scenes later, the Second Servingman and others return to make final wedding preparations, under the command of old Capulet. But all this activity is merely the light-hearted prelude to the discovery of Juliet's "dead" body by the Nurse only minutes later. The scene with the servingmen, then, offers a final moment of humor and frivolity before the direction of the play turns suddenly and permanently serious.

In a very short scene in *Julius Caesar* (2.3), Artemidorous, without using any humor, delays our anticipation of Caesar's visit to the Capitol while revealing that there is a leak in the Ides of March conspiracy. Artemidorous has a list of the names of all the conspirators, and when he tries to warn Caesar of the plot against his life (3.1), Caesar turns Artemidorous away. It is yet another example of how Caesar often can be not only hard of hearing, but hard-headed. Calphurnia, like the Soothsayer, warns Caesar against going to the Capitol and even goes to her knees begging him to stay (2.2), but Caesar changes his mind at the last minute. Then, when the most concrete and direct evidence of his doom comes to him in the form of Artemidorous, Caesar still refuses to hear it. As a result, Artemidorous joins the Soothsayer (a bit character), the Servant (another one) via the priests (2.2), and Calphurnia in the group of people Caesar carelessly disregards because he is so preoccupied with the prospect of being named Emperor. Later in the play, as the motivations and intentions of the murderers become increasingly questionable, it is strange how significant the appearance of Artemidorous truly becomes: If Caesar could have given a moment's attention to Artemidorous, his life—and domestic
tranquility in Rome—might have been preserved.

Aside from the presence of bit characters, what these scenes have most in common with those typically classified as “comic relief” is that they are positioned at very important times, ones which Shakespeare probably did not select arbitrarily. In Macbeth, the scene with the Porter occurs at a crucial moment in the play: Macbeth has just “done the deed” (2.2.14), and Macduff is knocking on the castle door. Apparently Shakespeare had committed himself to the fact of Macduff’s arrival by making it prominent in the lines between the Macbets (e.g., 2.2.54-5), and we will never know if the Porter scene was rather hastily inserted only to bring Macduff into the picture in a plausible fashion. Coleridge evidently thought the scene was senseless, while DeQuincey defended the knocking for signalling that “the pulses of life are beginning to beat again” (Kermode 543). DeQuincey’s praise—“O, mighty poet!”—is perhaps too elaborate, but it can be justified if the focus is put more on the Porter and less on the knocking itself.

Excluding his drunkenness, it is anyone’s best guess why the Porter appears and suddenly wonders what it would be like to be the gatekeeper of hell. In addition, the Porter gives Macduff a short treatise responding to the question, “What three things does drink especially provoke?” (2.3.26-7):

Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine.
Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuade him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him. (28-36)
The Porter's lines are indeed funny. But this instance of "comic relief" makes some very serious suggestions toward the play's main characters. By pretending that he is the porter of hell, the Porter is characterizing Macbeth's castle as hell on earth. On this level, the murder of Duncan is an act so evil that the castle has instantly been transformed into the sovereign seat of evil. After hearing several knocks, the Porter finally says, "I'll devil-porter it no further" (17), and who should be at the door but Macduff—Macbeth's eventual killer. On the metaphorical level, the Porter is admitting into the hellish castle a force of moral goodness, one which will later purge Scotland of its evil king.

Not even "comic relief" is always funny, however, which accounts for a potential misunderstanding of the term. "Comic" is less a statement of how humorous the "relief" is than it is a description of what kind of characters are participating in this "relief." More specifically, a "comic character" is not simply a character who has a role in a comedy, but a specific kind of character, one who is of a considerably lower social class than most everyone else in the play. Regardless of how humorous their lines may be, this lower-class—or "comic"—quality is what, more than anything else, makes the Gravediggers and the Porter examples of comic relief. Cemetery workers and drunken doormen do not, in Shakespeare's day or in ours, occupy what are considered to be professions of great social importance, which explains the economic status and class standing of these people in Shakespeare's drama. Such figures are "comic characters."
As in the previous examples, it is probable that the moment of entrance for the Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra* (5.2) was not randomly chosen by Shakespeare. Unlike the Groom, however, in *Richard II* (5.5), the Clown, with the Gravediggers and the Porter, does not seem to recognize the magnitude of the character he is encountering. The Clown chats easily—perhaps too easily—with Cleopatra, replying with conversation each time she tells him “farewell” (259, 261, 264, 278), and it begins to look as though the Clown is disrespectful of authority. But such behavior is merely an implicit suggestion that the Clown and his class of characters are not thoroughly familiar with the rules of social decorum. They seem, as children, not to “know any better” than to act as they do, even in the presence of a Scottish lord, a Danish prince, or an Egyptian queen. The Clown’s simple “I wish you joy o’ th’ worm” (279) is ironic not only because it equates “joy” with the death that is to come with Cleopatra’s “Immortal longings” (281), but because for the Clown, it is the most formal remark that he makes in his encounter with Cleopatra. As a result, the Clown, at his moment of best behavior, is essentially wishing Cleopatra a good death.
Post Script

Throughout this study, I have tried not only to illustrate and explain the functions of bit characters in Shakespearean drama, but also argue for the significance of these characters and functions. At one time I even suggested that bit characters were “the true agents of the plots in Shakespeare’s plays,” largely because I do not think that major characters are truly “agents” of plots. Instead, I think of major characters as the raison-d’être of the drama, for without them, there would be no play worth reading or watching. In light of this information, it is not amazing that a bit character like the First Gravedigger can gain prominence in Shakespearean drama because of the shoulders of the giant—Hamlet—on whom he is standing. Many times, however, these bit characters are capable of standing out on their own.

Additionally, I have never meant to imply that Shakespeare, at all times, had a conscious and specific strategy concerning the various ways in which bit characters could be implemented. But considering how Shakespeare himself played small roles like the Ghost in Hamlet and Adam in As You Like It, it is probable that he gave some consideration to the question of how bit characters could best be used. This probability is as close as we can come to assembling any evidence for the notion that Shakespeare wrote the roles of bit characters carefully. Perhaps if he knew what it was like to play such roles, he gave close attention to the words and actions he gave these characters. But even without such evidence, it remains that “minor characters” in general, and “bit characters” in particular, do not suggest “unimportance” or
"insignificance." I think it is evident that quite the opposite is true.
Works Cited


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