
SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Shakespeare's characters have always fascinated readers and viewers, yet for the past several decades 'character criticism' has been unpopular among Shakespearean scholars. Recently, although, 'character' has made a resurgence, especially in the context of performance studies. The 18th-century stage presents a good venue from within which to examine this new critical approach, as 18th-century audiences were enamored both with Shakespeare's plays and the offstage lives of the actors they came to see. Building from this fact, this essay examines the influence of the actor/role relationship on popular theories of characterization; in particular, it focuses on the actress Mary Robinson and the character of Perdita. By asking what it meant for audiences to recognize Robinson as 'Perdita', and 'Perdita' as Mary Robinson, the essay provides one example of how attention to performance history can enrich our analysis of Shakespearean characters today.

Keywords: scholars, resurgence, performance, analysis, plays.

Introduction:

Perdita is born in prison, where her father has sent her mother because he wrongly believes she has been unfaithful to him. Paulina takes the baby to Leontes to try to convince him that it is his daughter, but he refuses to believe it. He thinks instead that she is the result of an affair between Hermione and Polixenes, King of Bohemia. He sends Antigonus to leave the infant Perdita on the seacoast of Bohemia. In a dream, Hermione appears to Antigonus and tells him to name her child Perdita, which means "the lost one" in Latin and, in Italian, "loss". He takes pity on her, but is chased away and eaten by a bear. Luckily, a shepherd living nearby comes to see what the commotion is all about. He finds Perdita and also takes the box that Paulina left with Antigonus. It contains jewels and a note and some money, for Paulina knew that if someone found her, they would need an explanation. Perdita is brought back to the shepherd's house and is raised by the shepherd as his own, along with his son.

Early in the play, Perdita is described as being a beauty of conception. Sixteen years later, Perdita has grown into a beautiful young woman, unaware of her royal heritage. Prince Florizel, the prince of Bohemia, falls in love with her and plans to marry her. His father, however, disapproves of the marriage and threatens the couple, so they flee to Sicilia with the

help of Camillo. Prince Florizel disguises himself as a merchant in order to be able to see Perdita. Later on, it is revealed that Perdita is the princess of Sicilia. Perdita is reunited with her father and mother. She lived her life thinking she was one person and found out she was another. She only knew the life of a simple girl. Leontes and Polixines reconcile and both approve of Florizel and Perdita's marriage. It is assumed that Florizel and Perdita lived happily ever after.

Perdita's purity:

- Although there is no doubt that Perdita feels passionate love for Florizel – she is quite willing to admit publicly that she would like to strew flowers over Florizel ‘like a bank for love to lie and play on’ and she knows that he desires ‘to breed by me’ – she is also a model of modesty and chastity
- She even refuses to plant flowers which may owe their colouring to ‘unnatural’ methods of propagation
- While the other shepherdesses desire ribbons, she feels it is wrong for her to be ‘prank’d up’ and might ‘swoon... To show myself a glass’, and she warns her ‘brother’ that the peddler (Autolycus) must ‘use no scurrilous words in’s tunes.’
- She knows that Florizel too is honourable: *neither* of them thinks of a relationship outside marriage. She tells her adoptive father:

Hamlet:

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don’t know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there’s something important he’s not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare’s most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father’s death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle’s guilt before trying to act. The standard of “beyond a reasonable doubt” is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who

he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all of the things with which Hamlet professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

Claudius:

Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, lustful, conniving king who contrasts sharply with the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skilful use of language. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear—the method he used to murder Hamlet's father. Claudius's love for Gertrude may be sincere, but it also seems likely that he married her as a strategic move, to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the king. As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to ever greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude might have been in danger, but only that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

Gertrude:

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply

to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfil her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

Conclusion:

Polixenes, the King of Bohemia, has been visiting his old friend King Leontes in Sicily for nearly nine months but is ready to return to Bohemia. Leontes begs him to stay longer but Polixenes is anxious to go, and declines. When Leontes' pregnant wife, Hermione, succeeds in persuading Polixenes to stay, Leontes becomes obsessed with the thought that his wife has been unfaithful with his friend. He asks his servant, Camillo, to poison Polixenes, Camilla warns Polixenes instead and they flee leaving Hermione and her little boy, Mamillius, to face the King's displeasure.

Leontes imprisons Hermione and she delivers a baby girl there. A lady in waiting, Paulina, takes the baby to Leontes to try and persuade him to accept her. Instead, Leontes instructs Paulina's husband, Antigonus, to take the baby into exile. Leontes puts Hermione on trial and she is vindicated by a message from the Delphic oracle to which Leontes had appealed. Her son Mamillius dies from heartbreak at his mother's imprisonment and Hermione collapses and appears to die. The news of Mamillius' death shocks Leontes back to reality and he becomes remorseful. Antigonus places the baby on a beach in Bohemia but he is killed by a bear and the baby is left there. A shepherd and his son discover the child and take her to their home.

Sixteen years pass, during which time Leontes mourns the loss of his wife and children. In Bohemia, Polixenes' son, Florizel, has met and fallen in love with a shepherd's daughter, Perdita, while she's organising a sheep shearing feast. Polixenes and Camillo, in disguise, attend the feast where they are entertained by dancers and by the rogue Autolycus, who has previously tricked the young Shepherd and stolen his purse to provide himself with knick-knacks to sell at the feast. Polixenes reveals himself, reprimands his son, and threatens the shepherds for promoting Perdita's friendship with the Prince.

References:

- *WT* comes last, following *Twelfth Night* which uncharacteristically ends with a blank recto page, suggesting to Arden editor J.H.P. Pafford there was some hesitation as to where *WT* belonged at the time of printing the Folio. (J.H.P. Pafford, ed. *The Winter's Tale* (Arden Shakespeare) 3rd ed. 1933:xv–xvii.)
- William W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, New York, Macmillan, 1931; pp. 9–13.
- C. F. Tucker Brooke, *the Shakespeare Apocrypha*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1908; pp. 103–26.
- Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* 2004:421: in spite of other scholars' rejection of any parallels between Henry VIII and Leontes, asserts "the parallels are there", noting his article "Shakespeare and History: divergences and agreements", in *Shakespeare Survey* 38 (1985:19–35), p 24f.
- F. E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion 1564–1964*, Baltimore, Penguin, 1964; p. 532.