Chapter 1

Character

Juliet's balcony, Verona

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shakespeare's realism?

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

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

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

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

Shakespeare's 'unreal' characters

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

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

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

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

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

Reading Shakespeare's characters on the page

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

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

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

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

Embodying Shakespeare's characters on stage

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

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

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

Doubling on the early modern stage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing for particular actors

If Shakespeare wrote for doubled casting, he also wrote with particular actors in mind. Chapter 3, 'Texts', discusses in detail the early printed versions of Shakespeare's plays and what insight they can give us into their performance and construction. Here, I want merely to touch on an example from *Much Ado About Nothing* which places against the expectations of character plausibility the exigencies of performance. Unlike many of his contemporary playwrights, Shakespeare's association with a particular acting company – the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later becoming the King's Men – meant that he wrote plays for specific actors rather than scripts for sale to the highest bidder. Thus Richard Burbage played the dominant tragic roles, and was so associated with them that an elegy on his death suggested the parts had died with him: 'No more young Hamlet, old Hieronimo [the tragic protagonist of Thomas Kyd's popular revenge tragedy *The Spanish Tragedy*], / Kind Lear, the grieved Moor [Othello], and more beside / That lived in him, have now for ever died.' Playing the dangerously, psychotically attractive Richard III, Burbage was, according to a contemporary joke recorded by the diarist John Manningham, encouraged to visit a female playgoer who had fallen for him in his stage persona: I'll quote the story, since it's one of the only contemporary allusions to a flesh-and-blood Shakespeare.

> Upon a time when Burbage played Richard the Third, there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him, that before she went from the play she appointed him to come that night unto her by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained, and at his game 'ere Burbage came. Then message being brought that Richard the Third. was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.

Shakespeare's comic roles up to 1599 were written for Will Kemp, a clown with a talent for improvisation. The early texts of *Much Ado* register his intimate relation to the character of the comic constable Dogberry, such that in a number of instances the speech prefix for Dogberry is, in fact, 'Kemp'. The sense that Kemp is playing himself, or at least that he is playing his stock role, is therefore preserved in the very fabric of the play as it's come down to us. Kemp's departure from the Lord Chamberlain's Men after some kind of disagreement in 1599 may explain why another of his famous comic creations, Falstaff, did not reappear in *Henry V* (1599) as had been promised in the Epilogue to *2 Henry IV*. Having

been so profoundly associated with one actor – just like Burbage's starring tragic roles – Falstaff could not be rewritten to be performed by someone else. Rather, therefore, than being a role serially inhabitable by different actors, a character who can be mobilised in different bodies, Falstaff becomes a version, an avatar, of Kemp.

Falstaff: character as individual or type?

Falstaff's own extraordinary popularity at the end of the sixteenth century may give us some insight into what the Elizabethans enjoyed about dramatic character. This irrepressible fat knight, with his preference for drinking sack and for lying down pretending to be dead on the battlefield, first appeared in *1 Henry IV*, where he is the tavern companion of the young heir to the throne, Prince Henry. His popularity seems to have spawned a second episode, *2 Henry IV*, and he also appears uprooted from the Eastcheap underworld of the history plays in a comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He is a character who is literally larger than life, and larger than the plays in which he refuses to be confined. As Shakespeare's own invention – with no real equivalent in his historical source material – Falstaff has been investigated as a kind of vestigial Vice figure – who in medieval drama tried to lure audience and characters into wickedness – as a version of the *miles gloriosus* type of braggart solider, as the Lord of Misrule in early modern festivities, or as a personification of England and an image of greenworld fertility. None of these attempts to account for Falstaff suggest that he is an individual of consummate humanity: rather they offer different ways in which he is a literary or cultural type, as do those readings of *1 Henry IV* which see him as a substitute father-figure or foil to the young prince. Paradoxically, therefore, Falstaff's vitality seems to be exactly because he is not a believable human being, but because he is both more and less than that. He is both stereotype – a locus of a range of influences and archetypes – and individual – a character with a proper name which has become adjectival as a byword for fat, raffish joviality.

Naming and individuality

One of the ways in which character is fixed for us is via that use of a proper name. The experience of a proper name is very different when reading a play – and sometimes, as we'll see, editorial interventions sharpen this difference – from seeing it performed. For example, the second scene of *Twelfth Night* introduces

us to a young woman who has been shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria. She is making plans for what to do next now that her brother is apparently drowned, and hears from her companion the sea captain something about two notable local residents, the grieving Lady Olivia and Count Orsino. If we read this scene rather than seeing it performed, we are immediately introduced in the stage directions and prefixes to the woman as 'Viola'. What's more, she remains 'Viola' in the apparatus of the text even as she dresses as a man and takes on the identity of the page Cesario. This is more than just a convenience for readers: giving Viola a consistent name that she does not share with any other character in Shakespeare is like giving her a consistent, unique and knowable personality to which we as readers have privileged access and one which is unaffected by such provisional matters as a change of clothing. Viewing the play is quite a different experience, however. Since Viola's name is never mentioned in the spoken text of the play until, in the very last scene, she is reunited with her lost brother Sebastian – the only figure in the playworld who *can* name her – she is literally unknown and as mysterious to us as she is to the Illyrians she moves among. When she enacts the role of Cesario, we have no firm sense of the known and consistent femaleness which underlies her disguise; at the first performances when, as usual, female parts would be played by males, this must have been even more unsettling than it is when staged now.

Here, the apparatus of the printed play seems to consolidate individual character identity in the case of Viola. But there are examples of early printed texts denying specific individual identity to particular characters. In *Hamlet*, for instance, Hamlet's uncle Claudius is never called by his personal name by anyone in the play. Speech prefixes and stage directions are univocal in apparently endorsing his claim to the throne, calling him 'King': one stage direction alone gives him the additional name 'Claudius'. Modern editors have almost uniformly preferred to humanise him under the forename 'Claudius' than to leave him named for his hierarchical role as in the early texts. What difference does this make to our expectations of his character? Editors do something comparable with the character we tend to know as Edmund, the Duke of Gloucester's malevolent illegitimate son in *King Lear*, who plots against his legitimate brother Edgar. Edmund is called, without ceremony, 'Bastard', in the early texts of the play, as if his personal identity is less significant than the stereotype of the illegitimate malcontent. Perhaps we raise expectations of realistic psychology by naming him 'Edmund' rather than the descriptive label 'Bastard', and then our character criticism struggles to meet expectations which we have in fact superimposed on the play. (There's more on the way editing pre-interprets plays for us in chapter 3, 'Texts'.) Further, we describe the play as *King Lear*, so that it corresponds to that individualist tragic aesthetic already discussed.

Looking at the earliest printed version of the play published in 1608, we can see that it bears the fuller title of 'True Chronicle History of the Life and Death of King Lear and his Three Daughters': the mention of the king and his three daughters not only means that Lear has to share top-billing, but also allies the play to the genre of fairy story. Once we see the resemblances between *King Lear*'s story of two wicked sisters and a young faithful one, and a familiar folk-tale such as 'Cinderella', we might feel that expecting its protagonists to draw out great psychological reserves is irrelevant to the form of the narrative, and that, for example, any attempt to distinguish deeply between the personalities of Gonerill and Regan is a futile one. (There's more on the sources for *King Lear* in chapter 6.)

One of the difficulties of these suggestions for modern readers and spectators of Shakespeare is that they cut across our categories of aesthetic appreciation. To call characterisation 'two-dimensional' seems a term of abuse, an attribution of dramatic failure, rather than a recognition that some characters are necessarily and enjoyably stock types or plot devices rather than rounded individuals. Sometimes they even know they are: have a look at Keanu Reeves playing Don John, another plotting 'bastard', in Kenneth Branagh's film version of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) for an example of this. When reviewers criticised Reeves for wooden acting, they seemed to ignore the fact that this is a wooden role: part of the way the play insulates us against the potentially destructive energy of Don John's menace, and thus preserves itself as a comedy, is to make this self-confessed 'plain-dealing villain' (1.3.24) so deliciously transparent. One popular early seventeenth-century genre, rather analogous to modern sketch show comedy, was that of 'characters': pen-portraits of recognisable 'types' such as 'a Jesuit', 'a French cook', 'an ordinary Widow', or even, strikingly, 'an excellent Actor'. The idea of the stereotype was not clearly associated with aesthetic failure as we might now think – this is related to the discussion of originality in chapter 6 on 'Sources'– and it is a measure of our own critical preoccupations that those plays where empathetic identification with a central character seems most difficult – *Timon of Athens*, for example, or *Coriolanus* – have tended to be sidelined in criticism and in the theatre.

Characters as individuals or as inter-relationships

If we look down a title list of Shakespeare's plays, one ready distinction between the ways tragedies and comedies are entitled presents itself. Tragedies are eponymous, that is, they are named for a single – or occasionally, a double – protagonist: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*. Comedies, by contrast,

tend to the proverbial, or to evoke a mood rather than reference a person: *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter's Tale*. This apparently banal difference can tell us something about the different importance of character in the two genres. In tragedies, the central protagonist tends to move towards increasing isolation through the course of the play. Thus Macbeth, initially one of King Duncan's favoured thanes, surrounded by allies and compatriots and hand-in-glove with a wife he calls 'my dearest partner of greatness' (1.5.9–10), recognises in the dying moments of his play that 'that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have' (5.3.25–8): the word 'troops' implicitly substitutes for the forfeited loving companions the hostile forces, captained by Duncan's son Malcolm, advancing on Dunsinane castle as he speaks. Macbeth speaks these lines alone on stage – in a soliloquy – and soliloquy, the habit of articulating thoughts to the audience and achieving most authentic self knowledge and realisation when alone, is a trait of tragedy rather than comedy and one which, like the title, represents the protagonist's own isolation. By contrast, soliloquies tend not to be used much in comedy. Instead the protagonists reveal themselves and achieve their identities through dialogue and interaction. Comedies tend to be social rather than individualistic in emphasis, and their characteristic movement towards marriage suggests both that people need to be accompanied rather than isolated in order for the social world to perpetuate itself, and that to achieve these matches they need to talk to each other rather than, as in soliloquy, to us. (Chapter 5, on 'Structure', discusses generic distinctions, and blurring, in more detail.)

This may suggest that characters in tragedy are autonomous, whereas those in comedy are interreliant. But there are many aspects of Shakespeare's characterisation which challenge this. If we take *Hamlet*, for example, the play on which most theories of Shakespearean characterisation have been premised, we can see different modes of characterisation in simultaneous operation. Hamlet, for example, may think himself uniquely individual. Certainly, the family and friends with whom he is initially surrounded are insistently rejected in favour of solitude: as he contemptuously tells his old college friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, 'you would play upon me [. . .] you would pluck out the heart of my mystery [. . .] you cannot play upon me' (3.2.330–1), and they, like Ophelia and Laertes, are marginalised by Hamlet's resolutely centrifugal individualism. Even Horatio, greeted as 'my good friend' in 1.2.162 and thus, as well as a potential ally in the court, a threat to the tragic isolation to which Hamlet is fated and perhaps aspires – cannot reach him.

But at the same time, the play is carefully structured to echo Hamlet's situation as a son avenging a father, and in this structure it contests this view of Hamlet's uniqueness. Perhaps we could say it contests Hamlet's own solipsism.

Laertes and Fortinbras are both sons of dead fathers, both seeking to revenge slights or losses suffered by the earlier generation. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is saddled with the name of his illustrious father, and seeks to recapture the territory lost to Denmark in a previous battle. Like Hamlet, Laertes suffers the violent death of his father and seeks to redress this injury. It seems unlikely that we will interpret this concatenation of avenging sons realistically; rather, the two secondary protagonists act as foils or contrasts or amplifications of Hamlet himself. Thus we might say that the dominance of Hamlet in *Hamlet* is aided by the fact that Laertes and Fortinbras also represent aspects of Hamlet's own dilemma, alternative responses to the experience of early manhood and the loss of a parent. Celestino Coronada's radical 1976 film of the play, which casts twins Antony and David Meyer as two sides of Hamlet's personality and also as Laertes, suggests this very economically: in the final fatal duel between Hamlet and Laertes, we see simultaneously that the mortal struggle is and always has been within Hamlet himself. We might develop this insight to suggest that other characters, too, might be read as aspects of Hamlet's own refracted personality. So Ophelia's madness and her apparent suicide become a representation or a rehearsal of Hamlet's own; the ghost's shared name – in none of Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet* do dead father and grieving son share a name – offers us a way in which the melancholic Hamlet is already restively dead at the start of the play; even the Players already know a play remarkably close to Hamlet's own story, as if they, too, are in his head.

We might want to think of this as another kind of doubling, psychic rather than actual, in which this time it is the characters, rather than the actors, who are doubled up. This sense that maybe a number of the characters represent attributes of Hamlet, or echoes of him – or, put another way, that they occupy overlapping psychic space – links Shakespeare's plays suggestively with the legacy of medieval theatre. Plays such as *Mankind* (*c.* 1470) or *Everyman* (*c.* 1520) presented characters whose very names clearly indicated that they were not complete and autonomous human beings. When, for example, 'Everyman' is abandoned by his fair-weather friends 'Fellowship', 'Kindred', and 'Goods', and only 'Knowledge' will accompany him on his final journey to death, we know that these figures are personifications or externalised symbols of an inner struggle rather than 'real' characters: the technical term for this is *psychomachia*, literally, 'conflict of the soul'. Conventionally it has been argued that Shakespeare, with his fellow dramatists of the 1580s and 1590s, breaks free from this representational schema. But it might be useful to see certain Shakespearean characters in a similar relationship, as representing complementary traits, or as rendering an internal conflict legible by splitting it between different protagonists.

Let's look at Othello and Iago, for instance. Iago, the ensign who plots to destroy his general for reasons the play, unlike Shakespeare's sources, does not make clear, has long been an enigma for character critics. Famously, S. T. Coleridge writing in the nineteenth century, discussed their efforts as 'the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity', and the sense that Iago's wickedness is essentially without motive has itself been used to psychologise him as a psychopath. Even, that is to say, an observation which might seem to mark a failure of psychological plausibility in the representation of Iago – we don't understand why he does what he does – is recast in realist terms. There is, however, an alternative way to conceptualise him: less as a self-contained person and more as a sort of inner voice, or a mechanism, an engine of the plot. In prompting Othello to question his wife's fidelity, Iago functions as the nagging doubt that is part of Othello's own precarious identity as a black man in a white world. Just as later, Shakespeare will rewrite this story of an irrationally jealous husband who needs no external Iago to trigger his rage (in the character of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*), perhaps here he is showing us a version of psychomachia, as Othello's trust in Desdemona is battling with his doubts as externalised and represented in Iago. Iago's strange early line 'were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (1.1.58) registers the uncanny interplay between them. Seeing Othello and Iago as part of a psychomachic presentation of dramatic individuals, rather than as separately realised human beings, enables us to see the way the play uses the technique of externalisation to anatomise an inner emotional struggle.

Character: interior or exterior?

The relationship between Othello and Iago might help us to read the interaction between characters as an externalised representation of an interior psychic dynamic. This question of whether character is an essence, an inner quality, or whether it is a performed or externalised property, is key to recent scholarly debates. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare seems to offer us both a way of perceiving character as the project of the interior, and as something registered externally. At his first appearance, Hamlet stands out from the court by wearing black. By setting 1.2. amid the confettied celebrations of the wedding of Gertrude and Claudius, Kenneth Branagh's film (1996) makes this particularly evident, as Hamlet's costume signals a reproachful contrast to all the visual festivity. He is making a point. Everyone else may have forgotten his father's death, but not Hamlet. In case that point isn't clear to everyone, Hamlet makes it explicit. He admonishes the superficialities of Claudius' debased court – as

he sees it – by arguing that while his conventional mourning clothes of 'inky cloak' and 'customary suits of solemn black' (1.2.77–8) could be usurped by someone who is only playing at grief, in his case they are the correlative of an inner and ultimately inexpressible state. His articulated 'I have that within which passes show' (1.2.85) demonstrates, however, the frustrations of identity in theatrical form: what is within must be externalised in order to be legible; what is externalised necessarily loses something of the authenticity accorded to the inner. Hamlet simultaneously casts suspicion on the validity of exterior appearance while he draws out a continuum between it and the mysterious human interior.

This conflict, between character as expressed internally and externally, is further developed moments later in Hamlet's first soliloquy. Soliloquies have tended to be seen as moments of supreme self-revelation, when the self turns outward in the dubious privacy of the empty stage. As such they are associated with psychological truth, even as they are clearly profoundly unrealistic: soliloquy does not have an equivalent in the 'real' world. Film versions of the tragedies – for example Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* of 1948 – have often favoured the cinematic technique of voice-over as a way of translating soliloquies for the screen: here, another non-realist convention – the actor's voice heard over an extreme closeup of his face or head, suggesting access to an inner dialogue – substitutes for that of soliloquy itself. But in the context of the theatre there is no possibility of being alone: even these private moments are observed by, and perhaps therefore articulated for, an audience – something Hamlet, with his particular consciousness of theatrical forms, might be expected to recognise. Everyone else may have left the stage, but the theatre is full, expectant, and Hamlet, in revealing the torment he can only allude to bitingly in public, does not disappoint:

> O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely. (1.2.129–37)

Here in his first soliloquy his rhetoric is finely balanced between revelation and concealment. The opening 'O' establishes the exclamatory mode of the speech, and its use of rhetorical questions as it continues ('Must I remember?') and of

repetition ('month', 'father') indicate that it is poetically highly wrought. But it also bends with the progress of his thoughts: amid more developed and flowing thoughts we can see the broken and abrupt sentences. One of the preparatory exercises undertaken by classically trained Shakespeare actors includes reading a speech and moving on each punctuation mark to give a sense of the emotional timbre of the speech: more movement tends to mean more emotional strain or mental agitation, and the middle lines of this speech would be a good example to pace out.

As the play continues, soliloquies come to define Hamlet and his unique relationship with the audience. They mark privileged moments when we are alone together: the first soliloquy breaks off at the entrance of Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet's realisation 'break my heart, for I must hold my tongue' (1.2.159). We can also, however, see that this moment of self-articulation is marked with its own loss: even as he privately speaks himself as an autonomous agent, Hamlet defines himself in relation to others. Most obvious in this idea of identity produced through dialogue is the presence of the audience. Identity isn't self-contained: it needs to be witnessed. It's like that old philosophical chestnut which asks 'if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one to hear it fall, has it actually fallen?': the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley argued that it hadn't, and that might work as an analogy with Hamlet. If we do not hear him, does he exist? Can the self exist without an audience to witness it?

Perhaps, then, instead of phrasing our critical questions in the form of 'what is this character like?' or 'why does he or she do what he does?', we should step back and attend to the constructedness, the fictiveness, of the texts we are reading. Asking 'why is this character in the play?' or 'what would happen without him or her?' may be a better route to appreciating Shakespeare's art of characterisation.

Character: where next?

- Some of the challenges to traditional notions of character can be found in Alan Sinfield's *Faultlines* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) and in Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (Routledge, 1991). Katherine Maus' *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1995) offers a historicised rebuttal of Sinfield et al; Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* (Fourth Estate, 1999) is a more combative, common-sensical defence of character study. I cover some of the debates in more detail in the chapter on

'Character' in *Blackwell Guides to Criticism: Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Blackwell, 2004), and that volume also excerpts from pre-twentieth-century commentators on Shakespeare, including Alexander Pope.

- Other 'functional' or structural characters to be investigated might include Feste in *Twelfth Night* or Jacques in *As You Like It*; the function of the tableau of 'a son that hath killed his father' and 'a Father that hath killed his son' in 2.5 of *3 Henry VI*; choric roles such as that of Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* or the women in *Richard III*; characters whose names suggest they are functions or personifications, such as Parolles (words) in *All's Well That Ends Well* or Seyton (probably pronounced Satan) in *Macbeth* or Eros (God of love) in *Antony and Cleopatra*.
- L. C. Knights' article is reprinted in his *Explorations* (1946); Harriet Walter's account of her interpretation of Lady Macbeth is published in Faber's Actors on Shakespeare series (2002) – there are other volumes by Vanessa Redgrave on Cleopatra, Simon Callow on Falstaff, Emma Fielding on Viola, James Earl Jones on Othello and Saskia Reeves on Beatrice. Cambridge University Press's Players of Shakespeare series also collects actors' accounts of particular roles; Jonathan Holmes' book *Merely Players? Actors' Accounts of Performing Shakespeare* (Routledge, 2004), analyses this genre and what it can offer Shakespeare studies. On children and the Macbeths, Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (Routledge, 1992), is a clever and subtle argument.
- Thinking more about doubling and its impact on characterisation could take in *The Winter's Tale*: how might the Bohemia scenes in Act 4 reprise and transform the court of Leontes through doubling? How about the good and bad Dukes in *As You Like It*? Or the twins in *The Comedy of Errors*? Or Caliban and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*? Or the armies of York and Lancaster in the *Henry VI* plays, or of Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra*? In the television production of *Twelfth Night* directed by John Dexter (1969), Joan Plowright played both Viola and Sebastian; in Celestino Coronada's 1976 film of *Hamlet* Helen Mirren played Gertrude and Ophelia; at Stratford in 1969 Judi Dench played Hermione and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*: to what purpose? Relatedly, John Barton's decision to have actors Ian Richardson and Richard Pascoe alternate as Richard and Bullingbrook in his 1973 Stratford production of *Richard II* (pictures and discussion in the 'Histories' exhibition online at http://www.rsc.org.uk/picturesandexhibitions/jsp/index.jsp) used the interplay between actor and character rather differently. Trevor R. Griffiths' *Shakespeare in Production: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), discusses a number of productions which

double Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania (and sometimes Philistrate/Puck).

- The anecdote about Shakespeare and Burbage's sexual rivalry comes from John Manningham's diary, written in the first years of the seventeenth century. This introduction doesn't have much to say about Shakespeare's biography (see chapter 3, 'Texts', for a brief comment on its often specious attractions!), but if you are interested in following this up, Katherine Duncan-Jones' *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (Arden Shakespeare, 2001) and Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (Jonathan Cape, 2004) are recommended.
- The fact that women's roles were taken by male actors has been considered in a range of criticism. Stephen Orgel's *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Jean Howard's article 'Crossdressing, the Theatre and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England' in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988) are recommended. There have been some attempts to reproduce this performance style at the 'rebuilt' Globe on London's Bankside (http://www.shakespearesglobe.org), and more engagingly, in Cheek by Jowl's all-male production of *As You Like It* and productions of *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, among others, by Edward Hall's company Propeller (http://www.propeller.org.uk).
- On editing and the construction of certain sorts of expectations about character, see Random Cloud's stimulating essay on '"The Very Names of the Persons": Editing and the Invention of Dramatick Character' in David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (eds.), *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (Routledge, 1991): Cloud takes up the different speech prefixes for the same character – Mother, Countess, Old Countess, Lady, and Old Lady – in the Folio (see chapter 3 for more on this) *All's Well That Ends Well*, arguing provocatively that 'not only is it not philosophically necessary to ascribe a primary or transcendent unity to the notion of individual, isolated character that so obsesses modern history, but also the text and Shakespeare's nomenclutter [Cloud's playful neologism] resists such appropriation'. Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass's 'The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text' in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993) picks up some similar issues. An online version of Thomas Overbury's *Characters*, a selection of portraits, is at http://www.eudaemonist.com/biblion/overbury.
- The issue of tragic soliloquies and the kind of access they give us to characters might be discussed in relation to Richard II's speech 'I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world' (5.5.1–2): Richard's first and only soliloquy in the play is also the prelude to his death, as

if the assertion and annihilation of self are intimately linked. The same might be said of Coriolanus, a tragic protagonist with fewer than forty lines of soliloquy all in the last third of the play – among the smallest number in any Shakespeare play – where the absence of articulated introspection is clearly defined: Coriolanus' character, like his very name, is public rather than private. On the other hand, Claudius' soliloquy in 3.3 of *Hamlet* may offer a different perspective on the play's events: could the king be an occluded tragic hero in the manner of fellow regicide Macbeth? Other characters for whom soliloquy seems to cut across other axes of sympathy include *Measure for Measure*'s Angelo or Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. And what does Iago's habit of soliloquising – particularly when contrasted with Othello's relative distance – do for his relation to the audience?

- Thinking about how actors develop ideas of character through their physical embodiment of Shakespeare's language is a useful counter to more desk-bound approaches. The classic text, full of exercises and tips, is Cicely Berry's *The Actor and his Text* (Virgin, 1993): other possibilities are John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (Methuen, 1987) or Patsy Rodenburg's *Speaking Shakespeare* (Methuen, 2005).