Shakespeare's Mutes and What They Tell Us

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Both named and unnamed characters appear in Shakespeare's plays. The names may be seen as one of two general means of reference. If we focus on the act of reference, we see that names of characters and the types of reference sometimes change. These changes generally reflect changes in authorial intention and artistic concept, and can be seen more frequently in the cases of minor than of major characters. The mute characters comprise a small group with simple dramatic functions.

As guest editor of a special issue of *Names* in 1987 ("Names in Shakespeare,") Leonard Ashley made a major contribution not only to onomastics but also to the study of Shakespeare. The bibliographies of Coates and Rajec as well as the articles included in that volume illustrate a wide range of interest in Shakespearean onomastics; they have been invaluable in lighting the paths of subsequent scholars. The following study is an attempt to add to this field in terms of both range and type of investigation.

In terms of range, most scholarly research has focused on Shakespeare's major rather than minor characters, even though the textual and conceptual development of the plays might be seen as easily, if not more clearly, in reference to the minor characters. There have been several compendius approaches, including Francis Stokes' standard-setting compilation of all named references (to places as well as characters) in 1924, W.H. Thomson's "Historical Dictionary" of 1951, Murray Levith's catalog of name meanings of 1978, and Kenneth McLeish's list of character analyses of 1992. In terms of method these are similar

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to the studies of major characters since they emphasize the lexical meaning which the names give to the characters, the historical and literary analogues of personages with similar names, and/or, as in McLeish's book, simple character analyses. Generally speaking, onomastic studies have focused on the prior meanings which names bring to characters and have given less attention to what is designated on stage or to names as linguistic symbols. This study will emphasize the distinctions between the linguistic symbols as designators, the characters designated, and the prior meanings of the symbols. The purpose is to trace a little more precisely how Shakespeare's use of language in general, and of names in particular, represents (refers to) what is on stage.

To set a simple analytical framework, I should like to distinguish Shakespeare's references to characters in two ways: as *named* or *unnamed* references, and as references to *mute* or *speaking* characters. The *naming* references include titles, such as *Warwick, Archbishop*, or *Duke* (i.e., high ranking titles that function as surnames and are usually assumed to be inherited in much the same way). The labeled or *unnamed* references include *Lord, Provost, Captain, Mayor, Old Shepherd*, or *Clown* (i.e., general forms of address, position descriptions, or titles that are in some sense earned).

The simplest type of character on stage is one that does not speak, and the rest of this paper will be limited to an analysis of Shakespeare's references to mutes.

There are at least 52 mutes in 20 of Shakespeare's 38 plays (counting four in *Two Noble Kinsmen*). Twenty-nine are named, and twenty-three are unnamed (these are listed in Table 1). Two attributes of the stage characters were tabulated: 1) whether or not they move or take any action while on stage, and 2) the number of scenes in which they appear. Three types of prior meaning were analyzed: 1) names derived from sources (historical or literary), 2) names descriptive of character or function, and 3) names with opaque or uncertain meaning. Occurrences of the names as linguistic symbols were also classified — i.e., in opening stage directions, in internal stage directions, in textual references, or in the *dramatis personae* (if in F1). Significant differences between the quartos and First Folio were also noted.

These distinctions reflect different reasons for the uses or unintended appearances of the mutes: 1) *stage effects* — dancing and music, swelling of scenes; 2) *plot requirements* — e.g., functional servant roles; 3) the *limits on the number of female roles* because of the number of boy actors available; 4) Shakespeare's *initial reliance on sources* in the process of composition; and 5) *possible textual errors*.

Most of Shakespeare's mutes have one very basic dramatic function — to add *spectacle*. This basic function can be seen most clearly in the references to unnamed mutes. Of the 23 unnamed mutes, 15 are referred to in the plural form, such as "Aldermen," "Ambassadors," "Fiends," "French Lords," "Mariners," "Musicians," "Nymphs," "Reapers," "Servingmen," "Soldiers," and "Strewers." Such references are generally used to set the scene and/or reinforce a mood. About half of the unnamed mutes are involved in dancing or moving pageantry. The others — primarily Aldermen, Lords, and Servingmen — appear to take no action and seem to be labeled as one thing or another primarily for the purposes of costuming, thus functioning as scenery.

Most of the references to unnamed mutes in singular form also appear to be used primarily to swell the throng and to present some particular visual effect. These include a "Boy," a "Sea Captain," a "Shipmaster," a "Physician," a "Forester," a "Jailer," a "Doorkeeper," an "Executioner," and a "Headsman." Each of these could be identified by costume, and so in part may be said to illustrate Shakespeare's attention to visual effect. However, as might be expected from their singular grammatical form, most of these are referenced by the speakers and/or take apparent action on the stage. They are thus something more than just parts of the scenery; they also serve as adjuncts to the action of the main characters, as when the Jailer escorts Antonio into the court scene and is addressed by Shylock:

> Jailer, look to him, tell me not of mercy.
> This is the fool that lent out money gratis.
> Jailer look to him. (3.1.1-3)

The unnamed mutes, whether they are referenced in singular or plural form, are fairly simple devices for enhancing spectacle and facilitating the actions of others, and there are no significant contradictions in references to them or confusion about their roles or purposes. Specific references to unnamed mutes do not occur in battle scenes. Shakespeare's battle scenes focus on named characters, with a few shouts from the sides.

The named mutes, by contrast, are used not only for spectacle, but they also show us something about Shakespeare's use of source materials, his composition process, and in at least one case a probable error by modern editors.

The most striking feature is that there are 29 named mutes in only twelve plays. In *Two Noble Kinsmen*, Hymen and Artesius are obviously used for nothing other than spectacle. Similarly, Antonio and Escalus are supposedly glimpsed within a crowd of soldiers. The remaining 25 (except for Violenta and Varrius) relate to Shakespeare's use of sources.

Titus Andronicus, which includes four named mutes, has no certain source (although a likely suggestion is that it was based on a sixteenth century version of a chapbook printed in the eighteenth century), and so little can be said about these names relative to a particular source. The remaining 19 names are found in the parallel accounts of Holinshed or Plutarch, and the obvious supposition might be that Shakespeare often listed characters from his sources and then did not develop them. Nine of these 19 names are listed in opening or internal stage directions and then never referred to again. These may appear to be extra names in the sense that they refer to personages that turn out not to be needed for the dramatic plot, but they might also be included to lend realism as well as theatrical spectacle.

The fact that they appear at all suggests that Shakespeare has greater rather than less respect for the authority of his sources, and/or that he sought to include names and action with which his audience was familiar. Even when his source is in error and he could have known otherwise, he follows his source, e.g., both he and Holinshed report that William Brandon, Henry's standard bearer at Bosworth Field was killed by Richard, but this is not supported by Polydore Virgil and is contradicted by later documents.

Shakespeare's use of named mutes also shows his extrapolation and dramatic enhancement of sources. The Dukes of Brabant and Beaumont, for example, were listed by Holinshed as among those slain at Agincourt. Shakespeare makes a dramatic connection by placing them also at the French King's court before the battle. Similarly, Henry Tudor is placed in *3 Henry VI* for the blessing of Bishop Ely — a dramatically useful foreshadowing but one not found in Holinshed.

The number of names Shakespeare took from his sources and then used only for mutes shows that he did not rely on his imagination for such detail but looked upon those sources as the lumberyard of his imaginative constructions. Especially in his historical plays, he seems to use as many of the names as he can and to use them as much as he can. Nine of the named mutes appear in more than one scene, and 19 are spoken to. Of course, the use of many historical names lends a sense of verisimilitude, and the number of people on stage enhances spectacle.

Shakespeare also uses names for their descriptive imagery, and when named mutes are listed in the stage directions but are not referred to later by others, it is a likely signal of casting limitations and perhaps changed authorial intentions. In *All's Well*, for example, Violenta and three other women — the Widow, her daughter (presumably Diana, but see Hunter and Marcotte, who argue that *Violenta* is the real name of the daughter and *Diana* a nickname), and Mariana — enter the stage at the beginning of Act 3, Scene 5 to catch sight of the returning and victorious soldiers, to warn Diana about Bertram's false intentions, and, as it turns out, to berate Parolles. Mariana has two speeches at the beginning of this scene, the second much harsher, in tone and substance, than the first. It is, in fact, somewhat violent: "I know that knave, hang him! one Parolles, a filthy officer..." (16-17) It is at least possible, if not likely, that this second speech was at first assigned to a new character, *Violenta*; certainly the name would fit this speech as a descriptive tag. However, one of these four women characters had to be eliminated from the script because at line 30, one line after the tirade against Parolles, Helena is brought on stage. In terms of plot, Parolles is less important than the connection of these other women to Helena. Simply adding

Helena to the scene would have made five women characters, and if we count the number of women characters on stage simultaneously in Shakespeare's plays at this time in his career, the maximum is four. By line 96 the speeches by the Widow and Helena indicate only four women on stage although five have been referenced (as noted by Hunter 83). The conclusion would seem to be that Shakespeare's company had four boy actors, and in order to proceed with Helena's story one of the other characters had to be excised. Even if there were other boy actors, the name and the character have no function later in the story and could have been eliminated for the sake of economy. *Violenta* was a fitting tag name with which to attack Parolles but did not fit plot development and casting necessities, and Shakespeare, as usual, did not go back to correct the opening stage directions.

A similar choice was apparently made in *Much Ado* to eliminate the role of the mute Innogen (a name found in Holinshed), who is introduced by the opening stage directions of acts one and two as Leonato's wife. The character of Innogen parallels the plot of Shakespeare's likely source (the twenty-second tale of Bandello's *Novella* by way of Bellaforest's *Histoires Tragiques*). Shakespeare's first inclination is to follow his sources. However, in the first scene of Act 2, at lines 101 and 113, Margaret and Ursula, attendants to Hero, begin their speaking parts, with a total of 128 lines in 45 speeches. They have not been referred to in any stage directions up to this point, but it is here that Don John's strategy begins to include Margaret. Margaret and Ursula are frequently referred to thereafter, while Innogen drops from sight completely. If she had remained in the script, five women characters would have been on stage in this scene. Thus, these references to a named mute point to changes in Shakespeare's artistic intentions, to his adjustment to casting limitations while he wrote, and to his general habit of not going back to correct stage directions.

One example of an *unnamed* character who appears to acquire a name — at least temporarily — is in *Measure for Measure*. In 4.3 the disguised Duke finds the Provost to have sympathies very much like his own. Both have forgiving hearts, even for the murderer Bernardine, and the Provost is so averse to

executing anyone that he suggests they substitute the head of Ragozine, who died of a fever earlier that morning, and he will carry it to Angelo saying it is Claudio's. The Duke agrees, saying,

> Make swift return
> For I would commune with you of such things
> That want no ear but yours (103-5).

The Provost answers him, "I'll make all speed." One of the dramatic points in this scene is the growing closeness of the Duke and the Provost which culminates with the suggestion of a plot to be told in secret. This is important for assuring the audience of a harmless comedy and for building suspense in Act 5.

A little later, after a brief intervening scene, the stage directions introduce a new name, *Varrius*. Since the time of Edward Capell, editors have consistently identified Varrius as a mute character, but all other mute characters in Shakespeare's plays have a clear function or explanation. This particular mute is so labeled without an explanation. However, the reference does make sense if we assume that the Duke now identifies the Provost by that name. The words of the Duke addressing Varrius make a clear link to the last exit of the Provost and the promise of a plot:

> I thank thee, Varrius, thou hast made good haste.
> Come, we will walk (4.5.110-11).

They then leave the stage, presumably to concoct the cabal alluded to by the Duke in the previous scene, i.e., that which is for "no ear but yours."

Such a reference is consistent with the meaning of the name. The name *Varrius* is here attached to a character who is true and has become the means for revealing the truth. Also, there is a special relationship between the Duke and the Provost which is not shared with the other characters. It is an exclusive relationship circumscribed by the nature of their plot and emphasized by the Duke's closing words as they leave the stage: "My gentle Varrius!" (111) A terminal exclamation mark focuses our attention

on the truth that is to be revealed.

After a short, 15-line scene we see the name again in the opening stage directions of Act 5. The First Folio reads, "*Enter* Duke, Varrius, Lords, Angelo, Escalus, Lucio, Citizens *at several doors.*" Most editors then add the words "Provost, Officiers" immediately preceding the word "Citizens" because the Provost is soon mentioned by other characters, first by Peter, who restates the close relationship between the Provost and the Duke as Friar:

> Your Provost knows the place where he [the Friar] abides,
> And he may fetch him (252-53),

and later by both Escalus and Angelo, who, for obvious reasons, do not know his real name. However, all the actions and words of the Provost are consistent with his secret collusion with the Duke and his actual identity as Varrius. Thus, as the First Folio indicates, the Provost, a rather important character, is on stage with a name recognized only by the Duke and, of course, the audience, for whom such private knowledge is fundamental to the sense of comedy. Adding the word "Provost" to the stage directions is a redundancy repeated by editors for the last two centuries because they have been much too serious minded and because they have not looked closely at the references and the thematic function of this name. Of course, it is part of an editor's job to find textual problems, but when a text makes sense as it exists, which this does, no emendation should be attempted.

I should like to add that this interpretation agrees with the suggestion of some editors that Lucio was substituted for the Provost's role in the dialogue with Isabella in 1.4. Lucio's role in Act 1, and throughout the rest of the play, is not a sympathetic one, and such a change may have been made after the Provost was developed into a more sympathetic character in Act 4. However, it would be unusual for Shakespeare to go back in a script to change speech prefixes except in cases that would change staging and production, which this, of course, would.

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Table 1. Named and Unnamed Mutes

Named Mutes		Unnamed Mutes	
NameP	Play/Scene	NameP	Play/Scene
Blunt	2H4,3.1	Ambassadors	1H6,5.1
Surrey	2H4,3.1	Fiends	1H6,5.3
Southwell	2H6,1.4	Musicians	2H4,2.4
Goffe	2H6,4.7	Strewers	2H4,5.5
Mortimer	3H6,1.2	his Men	2H6,2.4
Pembroke	3H6,4.1	Alderman	3H6,4.7
Stafford	3H6,4.1	Mayor	3H6,5.1
Stanley	3H6,4.5	French Lords	AWW,2.1
Henry	3H6,4.6	Gentlemen	AWW,5.3
Innogen	Ado, 1.1	Forester	AYL,4.2
Lamprius	Ant,1.2	Headsman	Err,5.1
Lucilius	Ant,1.2	Boy	H8,5.1
Rannius	Ant,1.2	Doorkeeper	H8,5.2
Gallus	Ant,5.1	Servingmen	MV,1.2
Violenta	AWW,3.5	Jailer	MV,3.3
Antonio	AWW,3.5	Musicians	MV,5.1
Escalus	AWW,3.5	Officers	Rom,1.1
Berri	H5,2.4	Mariners	Tmp,1.1
Brabant	H5,2.4	Nymphs	Tmp,4.1
Beaumont	H5,4.2	Reapers	Tmp,4.1
Varrius	MM,4.5	Nymphs	TNK,1.1
Brandon	R3,5.3	Executioner	TNK,5.4
Alarbus	Tit,1.1	Fairies	Wiv,5.4
Caius	Tit,4.3		
Sempronius	Tit,4.3		
Valentine	Tit,5.2		
Artesius	TNK,1.1		
Hymen	TNK,1.1		
Antenor	Tro,1.2		

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