Playing Bit Parts in Shakespeare

M. M. Mahood

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Playing bit parts in Shakespeare is a unique survey of the small supporting roles—such as foils, feeds, attendants and messengers—that feature in Shakespeare's plays. M.M.Mahood explores the different functions of these minimal characters and the ways in which they extend the audience's knowledge of the social world of the plays. She also describes the entire corpus of minimal roles in *Richard the Third, The Tempest, King Lear, Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The paperback edition comes enhanced with an Appendix, 'Who Says What?', especially designed to aid directors in making decisions about the speaking parts of the minimal characters. The five hundred or so characters and groups discussed in the book are indexed for quick reference.

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Preface

The publication of this book in paperback will, I hope, bring it within easier reach of the people I had most in mind when I wrote it: playgoing lovers of Shakespeare; students, especially students of drama; and all those involved in any way with the staging of his plays. The slight change in the book's title reflects this hope. So too does the addition of an Appendix which, by attempting to sort out the distribution of lines in the bit parts, may prove of use—if only by stimulating disagreement—to theatre practitioners, in particular directors of school and university productions.

The addition of this Appendix has also given me the opportunity to draw attention to recent views on the question of Shakespeare's possible revisions of his own work. Opinion has moved fast in the short time since this book was written, and where once only the theory that we possess two authorial versions of *King Lear* won wide (though not universal) assent, the revision theory was for a time so popular that it threatened a return to the nineteenth-century belief that the so-called Bad Quartos represented Shakespeare's first attempts. And although Kathleen O.Irace's computer-assisted analysis of six of these short plays (*Reforming the Bad Quartos,* 1994) has convincingly confirmed the twentieth-century view that they are memorial reconstructions, some of their departures from the more familiar versions suggest that Shakespeare had made changes of his own when, or after, the play went into its first *London* production. Moreover, the special circumstances which appear to have been responsible for the Quarto of *Richard the Third* hint at the possibility of Shakespeare himself sometimes having cooperated in an abridgement of one of his plays. People involved with the theatre will be glad to find that, whereas editors once aimed at printing a text of a play as they conceived it to have come from Shakespeare's brain, they now perhaps aim rather to present the play as the actors (including Shakespeare) played it on its first production, and also to take account of changes his company may have introduced at a later date.

Over and above my gratitude to these textual scholars for their findings, I would like to record here the more direct help I have received from several fellow-workers. The first of the many debts accumulated by any writer on a Shakespearean topic is to the librarians and archivists who care for and make available the basic materials of such a study. I recall with gratitude the helpfulness of Susan Brock, Librarian of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon; of Sylvia Morris and the late Mary Foakes at the library of the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford; and of Margaret Wheare, Custodian-in-charge of the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum in Smallhythe.

At an early stage in my exploration of the opportunities Shakespeare offered bit-part actors, I listened enthralled to the late J.C.Trewin as he recalled individual performances from seventy years of playgoing. The late Maurice Daniels, David Bradley and Lois Potter all helped me from their store of theatrical expertise. Individual chapters received very effective comments from Guy Butler, Peter Davison and Lotte Troupp. Peter Davison has also given me valuable help with parts of this new edition, as have Ernst Honigmann and S.Viswanathan. The latter, together with his co-editor, S.Nagarajan, and the publisher, Oxford University Press, Delhi, have kindly allowed me to draw copiously for my eighth chapter on a paper I contributed to *Shakespeare in India* (1987). My biggest debt is to John Russell Brown for the interest he has taken in this book, for the care with which he has read successive drafts and for the theatrical wisdom and critical insight of his comments.

Finally I would like to put on record my thanks to Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press for her continuing interest in a book she skilfully and patiently guided through its first production, and to Belinda Dearbergh of Routledge for her help in casting it into its new form.

M.M.M.

1 Entities and nonentities

An American veteran of Shakespearean production once took on, in England, the task of directing *Henry the Eighth* with a cast of eight hundred drawn from the Women's Institutes. I know exactly how Margaret Webster[1] must have felt on the eve of that performance, for I have a cast of about the same size massed for entry into the following pages. Among them are numerous First, Second, and Third Messengers, Citizens, and Soldiers; a host of gardeners and gaolers, knights and heralds, ladies-in-waiting, murderers and mariners; the odd day-woman, haberdasher, poet, vintner, hangman, scrivener, king, cardinal and goddess; John Bates, Tom Snout, George Seacole, Simon Catling, Peter Thump, Neighbour Mugs; and four men who are all called Balthasar. These and many like them have provided me with wonderfully good company over the last few years. But the attempt to muster, within the limits of a book, so multitudinous a company of Shakespeare's minimal characters does seem to call at the outset for at least some brief justification.

Every reader has come to value moments when Shakespeare brings his vision to bear with laser-like concentration on one or other of these bit parts: the moment when the Porter in *Macbeth,* say, or Richard the Second's Groom, takes the centre of our mental stage. But in the act of reading, the mind, like a medieval painter, magnifies some figures and diminishes others, so that the stage presence of minimal characters, and especially of supernumeraries, is only too easy to forget. Indeed, some of them appear to exist on the periphery of Shakespeare's own imagination. But their attention and responses are still part of a scene's effect, and cumulatively may be an important part. In *The Merchant of Venice,* the scene in which Bassanio makes his momentous choice owes much of its spiralling exhilaration to the joy of Portia's attendants as they realise he is going to open the right casket, as well as to the surprise and delight of his own followers when it proves to contain Portia's picture. Though the full effect can be experienced only in the theatre, a reader who is alert to these presences can share some of their excitement.

Leonardo is one of these followers. He first appears in the previous

act,where he responds to Bassanio's orders concerning the voyage with a deferential 'My best endeavours shall be done herein'. Then, *Exit Leonardo* (2.2.174)—though an encounter on his way out with Gratiano, who is in search of Bassanio, gives him the chance to add 'Yonder, sir, he walks'.[2] It is not a part to raise an actor's spirits, and this book will have fulfilled one of its purposes if here and there its interpretations are of help to those called upon to play Leonardo and his like. Just how lost and despondent such an actor may feel, even when entrusted with a far more promising role, emerges from a diary kept in the 1960s by a small-part player at Stratford:

> Four lines in which to create a character. Confused. Am told at one moment, Reynaldo's a spy, symptomatic of general unrest in the state of Denmark; at another, he's old; at another, he's swift. Again, he's slow. Am confused. Never mind. All healthy experiment. Nevertheless, producer not pleased—I don't think.[3]

The producer was certainly not pleased: he cut out Reynaldo. The actor could tell himself that worse things happen at sea, but Reynaldo's removal mutilates the play. The same actor fared much better in *As You Like It,* working with a director who was able to bring home to him the contribution he could make to the comedy's effects even in a supernumerary role: 'With nothing to say, one still has a function, or meaning, a place in the play…We provide the texture of the tapestry which throws the principal parts into relief.'[4]

Clearly the director is the key figure in establishing the nature and the prominence or otherwise of a bit part, and I should be very happy if the heed here paid to 'unnecessary' parts in Shakespeare's plays had the effect of just now and then stopping the directorial blue pencil in mid air. A century or more ago, cuts were for the most part made with an eye to the audience's endurance and the actors' payroll. Today's simpler and more fluid staging has done away with the need to allow time for scene-shifting, while the restored practice of doubling has reduced the need to cut out parts on economic grounds. When, however, John Kemble replaced several of Brutus's friends in the last part *of Julius Caesar* with conspirators from the first part, he was not just being economical: he was seeking to bring the tragedy into line with the contemporary notion of a wellconstructed play. Such 'conceptual cuts', as they have been called,[5] continue to be made, although today they are more likely to reflect the director's idiosyncratic views than any critical consensus. Admittedly, the director sometimes is following a sound instinct in recognising that a bit part is at variance with the overall character of the play. Hecate in *Macbeth* is the obvious example, and in her case we have other indications that she was no part of Shakespeare's intentions. There is no reason to think that the Senators in

Cymbeline are non-Shakespearean, but with their air of having wandered in from *Coriolanus,* of which the original audience perhaps liked to be reminded, they have struck most directors as expendable. *Hamlet* without Fortinbras is, however, a different story.

If, on the one hand, this study argues the *raison d'être* of some small roles that are liable to be cut, it also argues for a freedom in handling and distributing bit parts such as Shakespeare bestowed upon the bookkeeper, or himself exercised in instructing the actors, long before the lines of his plays congealed into our modern standard texts. While theatrical critics still cling to the 'authority' of such texts, directors have for some time gone behind them to Quartos or Folio. Thus a critic is heard to declare that a certain director has split the Gardener's assistant in *Richard the Second* into two; in point of fact the Folio specifies that the Gardener is to have two servants, and the undefined speech heading 'Ser[vant]' allows them both to speak, should the director so decide. Critics who in 1962 raised a storm of protest at Peter Brook's 'omission' of the servants' comments on the blinding of Gloucester based their idea of *King Lear* on modern conflations of the Quarto and Folio, whereas Brook was exercising the choice that these two texts afford between two versions of the play, and chose to follow what is probably the more mature version. Scholarship and theatrical skills here went hand in hand. The belief that they can and should do so has not, I hope, lulled me into forgetting that an actor who has lived with a bit part through weeks of rehearsal and a director who has devoted months to a play's realisation must know more, by orders of magnitude, about that part's theatrical possibilities than can a critic without stage experience. In other words, I have tried in the ensuing discussion to refrain from hints on egg sucking. Though this book at times recalls memorable and original interpretations, it does not presume to say what the actor ought to make of this or that small part. There is audacity enough in its main purpose, which is to try to show what Shakespeare himself made of a fair number of the minimal roles in his plays.

'Minimal' can mean very small indeed. The shortest *scripted* part in the canon is the Second Senator in *Cymbeline,* who says 'Ay'. At least the brevity of this appearance allowed the actor to perform more interesting roles elsewhere in the play. His lot was therefore less unhappy than that of the two Lords who, with the voluble Boyet, attend upon the Princess of France and her ladies throughout long stretches of *Love's Labour's Lost* during which they utter in all seven words. Yet sometimes a bit part four words long can be pivotal to a play, as I hope to show happens in *King Lear*. Even in what may have been his first play, written when Shakespeare was still close to his own bit-part days, a character can spring to life in a single

line, as Old Talbot's servant does with his cry, 'O my dear lord, lo where your son is borne!' (*Henry the Sixth, Part One* 4.7.17).

Smaller parts still are those collective noises of assent or hostility which, like the Lion's role in *Pyramus and Thisbe* as first conceived, could be extempore. Sometimes, however, Shakespeare takes advantage of the clarity that cries have on a platform stage (a problem for today's directors: the more spontaneous a shout, the more anachronistic it is likely to sound) to specify words with a particular dramatic resonance. When the order to cut boughs as camouflage is given to the army of liberation in *Macbeth,* the soldiers respond with 'It shall be done' (5.4.7), and if the cry is taken up *diminuendo* behind the scenes, as if by company after company, one of the play's most important key-words reverberates to new effect: what Macbeth has done is at last in some measure to be undone.

The number of words or lines spoken is in any case an unreliable guide to the importance of a bit part. So much can depend on what is said about the character by others and on the non-verbal responses he makes to what is said to him. The build-up of a character through others' talk was a skill that Shakespeare mastered early in his career. Usually anticipatory, as with Romeo's description of the Apothecary's shop, it can also be retrospective, as when Antipholus of Ephesus complains about his treatment at the hands of 'A needy, hollow-eyed, sharp-looking wretch,/A living dead man' (*Comedy of Errors* 5.1.241–2), and so helps to fix in our memory the twelve-line part of Dr Pinch. Bit-part players rightly attach great importance to costume and make-up, knowing that half the impact of their role may be made before they have spoken a word: witness the bleeding Captain's long stagger downstage in *Macbeth* 1.2; or, near the end of *Love's Labour's Lost,* the equally long entry of Marcade, whose expression, bearing, and black travelling garb so startlingly contrast with the carnival silks and satins around him:

> *Marcade* I am sorry, madam, for the news I bring Is heavy in my tongue.
> The King your father—
> *Princess* Dead, for my life!
> *Marcade* Even so: my tale is told. (5.2.718–20)

Even without the advantages of a build-up and a good entry, many actors of Shakespeare's minimal characters find themselves with a bonus in a part's inherent opportunities for 'business' such as the Executioners' activity around the brazier in *King John*. In *Richard the Second* 2.2, York's servant has a few unremarkable lines as a gentle bearer of bad news, but everyone remembers his bewilderment as the Man with the Boots in 4.2, when York needs the boots in order to ride to Court with a warning of

Aumerle's plot, and the Duchess 'is determined that he shall not have them. Comic business is very welcome to the audience at this point, and the more of it that can be sustained by the servant without his rendering his master ludicrous, the more useful he is to the actor of York, whose part disintegrates if its occasional absurdity is over-exploited. One wonders whether the original actor in this role achieved such a good comic effect that Shakespeare gave him the chance to repeat it in the first part of *Henry the Fourth* when the drawer, Francis, 'stands amazed, not knowing which way to go' (2.4.79). This at least is a possible, though not verifiable, explanation of a scene that has troubled critics by reason of Prince Hal's apparent unkindness. Another glorious chance for stage business is granted to Mistress Ford's two servants in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Her order to them to carry the buck basket 'without any pause or staggering' (3.3.12) and her exclamation 'Look how you drumble!' (147) are Shakespeare's oblique directions for much staggering and drumbling when the men try to pick up the basket with Falstaff inside it. Even better is their time-honoured comic routine, in 4.2, of gritting their teeth and flexing their muscles before they again lift the basket, which this time bounces into the air.

Because body language is of such importance in a minimal role, this study makes no sharp distinction between bit and walk-on parts. In any case, the intensely aural nature of Elizabethan drama means that totally mute parts are rare. One such rarity is Antenor, the Trojan exchanged for Cressida, who does no more than literally walk through several scenes. Shakespeare may have kept him silent so that his pleasure at being back in Troy should not undermine the effect of Cressida's distress. But even a mute can have greatness thrust upon him, as when, in the third part of *Henry the Sixth,* the king's words about 'England's hope' (4.6.68) shed an almost Messianic light around the head of young Richmond.

The actor of a walk-on part can comfort himself with the thought that at least he is not one of those characters whom Shakespeare, out of practical considerations, keeps behind the scenes, where their words may be supplied by any actor who happens to be in the tiring house or even by the bookkeeper. Besides several who are designated as speaking 'within', others are plainly meant to do so. In *Julius Caesar* 4.3.33–6, Brutus, at the head of his army, gives the command: 'Stand ho! Speak the word along', and this is followed by three unattributed cries of 'Stand!' Editors supply speech headings for a First, Second and Third Soldier. But though there must be a few soldiers on stage with Brutus's drum and colours, the orders surely come from the tiring house, whence, in the manner of the soldiers' shouts in *Macbeth,* each cry sounds fainter and higher than the last, to suggest the offstage presence of a whole army.

Another kind of economy is exemplified in the third act of *The Comedy of Errors,* at the point where Antipholus of Ephesus finds his own door barred against him by, among others, the serving-maid Luce. The people inside apparently make no attempt to look out, and for this reason most editors from Rowe onwards have indicated that Luce, although the text gives her an entrance at line 47, speaks 'within'. This was found theatrically awkward by Dover Wilson, who wanted Luce to appear on a balcony; and the New Cambridge edition suggests other means of staging the scene which allow the audience to see both sides of the door to Antipholus's house.[6] But such devices impose upon the tireman the hard job of padding out a 'little scrubby boy' in order to present Luce as the mountain of flesh that Dromio of Syracuse is to describe for us in the next scene. Luce's size is much better left to our imagination, as it can be if all of her we ever see is her head at a window or round the side of a door. The boy actor of the part has then only to change his headgear to order to come on again as the Courtesan, or perhaps as the Abbess. A similar Punch-and-Judy device is used, I believe, in a serious context, at the siege of Orleans in *Henry the Sixth, Part One,* when two of the four Englishmen observing the city from behind a 'grate' in a tower are killed by a cannon-ball. If only their heads are visible, the actors can soon reappear in other parts with the minimum change of costume.[7]

In a yet farther orbital of a Shakespearean play there move characters who are neither heard nor seen but who have a claim on our interest as denizens, and sometimes powerfully influential ones, of the social world the dramatist creates in each play. A few have so haunted the imaginations of directors that for centuries they have figured on stage as mutes: Jane Shore who is much talked of in *Richard the Third,* Romeo's first love Rosaline, and the Indian Boy over whom Titania quarrels with Oberon.[8] Others are too multitudinous to have appeared in any but the most literal-minded and lavish of nineteenth-century productions, but their names alone supply a social dimension. Italian town life is evoked by Old Capulet's invitation list of Veronese notables, and the international roll of names—Spurio, Sebastian, Corambis, Jaques and the rest—so eagerly divulged by Parolles in *All's Well that Ends Well* 4.3 creates the atmosphere of a military campaign of the time, to which gentlemen adventurers would flock from all parts of Europe. The swinge-buckling companions of Shallow in his Clement's Inn days are conjured up from an even further distance: most of them must be dead by the time Falstaff comes recruiting in Gloucestershire. But Elizabethan society was, to a far greater degree than our own, a community of the living and the dead, so that personages who are no longer alive can rightfully contribute to a play's action and atmosphere. Duncan's queen, 'Oft'ner upon her knees

than on her feet' (4.3.110), adds as clear a note to the counter-theme of sanctity in M*acbeth* as does the unseen but still living Edward the Confessor. The Indian Boy's mother, who 'of that boy did die', is made so vivid by the poetry of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that she becomes a significant part of a play which is as much concerned with the perils of marriage as it is with its joys. And in other comedies, defunct fathers, as psychologists have been pleased to note, keep a lasting ascendancy over the actions of their children.

Small parts, then, shade off at one end of the scale into unheard and even unseen figures. At the other end, they merge into minor characters, so that any attempt to designate roles as minimal in a particular play quickly brings up the problem: how big can 'small' be? The question cannot be settled by counting a character's lines. The four or five subsidiary parts which an Elizabethan actor could play in an afternoon without exceeding the normal workload[9] might vary considerably in length yet all be felt to be minimal. The fluidity of Shakespeare's writing method means that sometimes a character grows and blossoms under his pen until he or she becomes much more prominent than at first intended. Characters to whom this appears to have happened include the murderers of Clarence, old Antonio when he is stung into defending the family honour in the last act of *Much Ado,* and Michael Williams in *Henry the Fifth*. But the youngest Jones remains Jones Minimus, even if he happens to outtop Jones Minor.

That there are factors more important than length to determining whether a part is more than minimal can be illustrated from *Richard the Second.* Besides the major roles which require nine actors, the play has a considerable number of smaller parts averaging about thirty-five lines each. Among these the Gardener speaks upward of fifty lines, while the 'parasites' Bushy, Green and Bagot, and Bolingbroke's adherents Ross and Willoughby, all have fewer. Yet of those named, only the Gardener's role would be called a bit part by most readers and actors. This suggests that one criterion we tend to apply without being aware of it is social status; traditionally a bit part is thought of as a plebeian character. Another closely linked factor also exemplified in the Gardener's part is the centrality, or marginality, of the character to the main action. A bit part is marginal as a general rule, because one of its most important functions is to shift attention to social groups other than the central figures. The same notion of an isolated 'turn' links social status with another factor liable to enter any attempt to distinguish bit parts, and this is the number of times a character appears. In contrast to the garrulous Gardener, Richard's and Bolingbroke's supporters make repeated appearances in order to serve as dramatic reflectors of the two chief characters.[10] On such a reckoning, the Gardener, although I hope in due course to show that he is pivotal to our emotional

responses, is a minimal character; whereas—to instance a character with roughly the same number of lines—the Bishop of Carlisle, by virtue of his three appearances (one silent, but giving scope for the body language already discussed) and the authoritative overview which makes his outburst in the deposition scene so memorable, is a minor one. But at this point I had better admit that, although this study focuses on truly minimal characters, quite a few of the characters discussed in the following pages could be classed as minor rather than minimal. In weighing the factors so far listed, I have sometimes let my fingers linger in the balance in order to include a favourite character, especially one who has escaped critical notice elsewhere.

A further reason for not distinguishing bit parts by their length is that it is often difficult to decide which lines comprise a particular role. Any attempt to write out a play's small parts *as* parts reveals why the *dramatis personae* in a modern edition is likely to conclude with a Widdicombe Fair gathering of 'Lords, Gentlemen, Attendants, Citizens, Messengers, Soldiers'. Such lists may indicate that the editor has been unable to decide how many of these generically named characters there are or to establish where one bit part ends and another, begins.

There are a number of reasons why this is so. Time and again, when there is an entry for two servants, or keepers, or ladies-in-waiting, the subsequent speech headings are undifferentiated as 'Ser[vant]', 'Ke[eper]', or 'Lady'. The men with the buck basket are called John and Robert, but the speech heading 'Ser.' gives no indication which of them gasps out the palpably breathless 'To the laundress, forsooth' (3.3.153). When there is a permissive stage direction such as 'enter two or three', speeches are commonly attributed to '1' or '2', leaving us uncertain if '3' is meant to be a mute or if Shakespeare has left to the bookkeeper and actors the decision whether or not to employ a third voice. The only place in which, so far as I am aware, Shakespeare offers a choice of speaker is the witchcraft scene in the second part of *Henry the Sixth,* where the conjuration is spoken by whichever of 'Bolingbrook or Southwell' could produce the better approximation to Latin. But choice is implicit in Shakespeare's use of 'All' or 'Omnes'. In rehearsal it would soon become clear that many speeches with these prefixes had to be delivered by a single speaker against a hubbub of other voices, or by several individuals speaking seriatim.[11] We can witness the beginning of this theatrical process in one of the manuscript additions to *The Book of Sir Thomas More* believed to be in Shakespeare's writing, where another hand has changed the heading 'All' to 'LINCO' (for 'Lincoln'). The same manuscript indicates that Shakespeare's practice was to insert speech headings, not always exactly in the right place, after he had completed a

stint of dialogue; and that when he imaginatively experienced a scene he was writing as a leading character's manipulation of a stage audience, individuals in that audience might be vaguely designated as 'Other'. In consequence, some printed allocations may be guesses by intermediaries, whether transcribers, bookkeepers or printers. Any of these, or Shakespeare himself, could create another kind of confusion by the abbreviation of speech headings, leaving us, for example, forever in the dark over which speeches by the two 'famous pirates' in *Antony and Cleopatra* belong to Menas and which to Menecrates.

A similar problem arises when generically named characters make, or appear to make, successive entries. The director has to decide whether York's servant in the second act of *Richard the Second* is also, as I have assumed above, the Man with the Boots in the fourth act; whether the gentleman who accompanies Paulina in the second act of *The Winter's Tale* should reappear, his hair well powdered to indicate the passage of sixteen years, as the Third Gentleman in the last act; and whether the same servingmen, in *The Taming of the Shrew,* can be made to do duty in two different households. These we might call problems of fusion. There are also problems of fission. Is Friar Peter in Acts 4 and 5 of *Measure for Measure* no other than the Friar Thomas whose cooperation the Duke sought in Act 1? Is Emilia in *The Winter's Tale* 2.2 to be identified as one or other of the Ladies in the previous scene? Is Imogen so absent-minded as to call her waiting-woman Helen in one scene and Dorothy in the next? And when Seyton appears in the last act of *Macbeth,* is he one and the same with any of the tyrant's attendants from earlier scenes?

Uncertainties of this kind do not just create problems for the editor and director. Much more importantly, they compel us to face the possibility that Shakespeare himself took minimal interest in many of the minimal parts in his plays. He could not be expected to take a greater one, the argument might run, because the conditions of the Elizabethan playhouse precluded any but the most perfunctory playing of such roles, and because the personages they represent are for the most part without historical or social significance. Such a conclusion would not nip this study in the bud. Our attention would still be claimed by the recognisably great little parts, of which examples spring instantly to mind: from the comedies, the Bosun, Barnardine, Tubal; from the histories, Tyrrel, Davy, John Bates; from the tragedies, Strato, Edmund's Captain, the country fellow with the asps. But limitation to figures such as these would deprive this book of much of the usefulness I have hoped it may have. No production, or reader's thought production, can fail to give the right measure of attention to the characters just named. It is the Attendant Lords and Messengers who get overlooked. This is why the remainder of this chapter seeks to

confront the problem of Shakespeare's possible indifference to many small roles in his plays. It does so, first, by asking what measure of attention is shown by the dramatic records of the time to have been given to minimal roles; and secondly, what positive evidence Shakespeare's own plays yield of his attention to such parts.

Several features of the acting profession in Shakespeare's London seem at first sight to lend weight to the view that minimal roles in Elizabethan plays were perfunctorily acted. Rehearsal time was very short; doubling was extensively practised; and bit-part actors were for the most part subservient members of the company. It is convenient to begin with the last of these, since the question of just who would have played the very small roles gives us the chance to remind ourselves both of the nature of the theatrical hierarchy and of Elizabethan casting practices as far as these can be deduced from published and unpublished plays and other theatrical documents. Casting appears to have been in two stages. The eight to twelve sharers in a company would gather for a reading of a new play and, if it met with their approval, would settle the distribution of its main parts between seven or more of their number together with three or four boys. The script then went to the bookkeeper who, though not a sharer, seems to have been a figure of some authority in that he cast the small parts and annotated the script accordingly. A dozen such, scripts have survived, and vestiges of casting annotations occur in some twenty printed plays. In all likelihood the bookkeeper was also responsible for the Plot, a scene-by-scene list of actors' entrances hung up in the tiring house.[12]

Both these types of theatrical document indicate that nearly all small parts were assigned to the hired men. Only some half a dozen of these waged servants of the sharers would have been employed primarily as actors, so when the bookkeeper had made the fullest possible use of their talents he would have had to call on the services of musicians, stage hands, gatherers (the equivalent of box office attendants), and perhaps also the tiremen, or wardrobe staff. The Plot for example of *Frederick and Basilea,* a lost play of 1597, shows that theatrical 'Attendants', probably stage hands, appeared as Lords, and that from scene 9 onwards the gatherers, who by then would have finished counting the receipts, figured in the play as guards or soldiers.[13] Occasionally a company was stretched beyond its resources, and had to bring in non-professional extras. When, in Charles the First's reign, a spectacular Morality-type play was announced at the Red Bull playhouse, boys would hang around the entrance in the hope of being offered the chance to play the devils. Such employment of underlings and even of outsiders has encouraged the view that many small-part players did not need to exert their acting skills, since they had only to represent

messengers and servants *in propriis personis*: 'individualization among minor characters, especially in the large-cast historical plays, cannot have been expected'.[14]

Against this view it can be argued that even sharers who had undertaken to play a major character were not above adding to it a bit part or supernumerary role. John Underwood, who played Delio in the King's Men's production of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), must at one point have thrown some strange garb over his costume—or taken a lot of it off—in order to appear as a Madman. William Penn, whose main role in *Believe as You List* (1631) was the substantial one of a Merchant, also played a Gaoler; while among the Admiral's Men we find Thomas Towne, a sharer, combining the big part of the Shah in *1 Tamar Cam* (1602) with the small one of an Oracle (unless this was another instance of a voice without an appearance) and the walk-on role of a Tartar in the final spectacle. Another sharer, Samuel Rowley, performed several small or supernumerary parts in *The Battle of Alcazar* (c.1597).[15] This willingness of major actors to take on minor roles has, after all, its twentieth-century parallels. In 1912 Nigel Playfair, having been killed off in the middle of another London play, stepped nightly across to the Savoy to play the Third Gentleman in Granville-Barker's production of *The Winter's Tale*.[16] Sometimes, too, an elderly actor who could not sustain a prolonged part is prevailed upon to bring his skill and experience to the interpretation of a very small one. Martin Holmes speculates that this happened with what we have already seen to be an unpromising part in *The Merchant of Venice*. Played as a stately major-domo, Leonardo could contribute the grey hairs and gravity which are needed if the tone of Bassanio's retinue is not to be set entirely by Gratiano and Lancelot.[17]

Another reason why, in trying to discover how skilfully bit parts were played, we cannot attach much importance to the status of the actors is that the distinction between sharers and hired men was probably far less apparent to the Elizabethan audience than it is to present-day scholars. Again a modern parallel helps: the distinction between the fellows and the lecturers in an Oxford or Cambridge college is of great moment to the individuals concerned, but in undergraduate eyes they perform in the same way, though the lecturers may try harder. In like manner, the actors among the hired men, as well as the boy apprentices, would aspire to the security of 'a fellowship in a cry of players'; and in Shakespeare's company at least most of them eventually got it. Ambition would thus have encouraged the non-sharers to make the very most of such parts as came their way. Nor should we assume that the performances of even the odd-job men were woodenly inept, though they may sometimes have been overacted. The 'stage keeper' who was assigned the role of one of the Guard in the second

act of *Two Noble Ladies,* a late Jacobean play, was called upon to perform some vigorous stage business to show he was bewitched: 'the Guard stand fixed, their eyes rolling from the King to Cyprian, and so to and fro'.[18] There is nothing very subtle here, for most Red Bull plays were robustly simple, but if the stage keeper was anything like the Assistant Stage Manager of a repertory company a generation or two ago, this may have been just the chance he had been waiting for.

The bored extra who neither would nor could involve himself wholeheartedly with the play was a nineteenth-century phenomenon.[19] Shakespeare and his fellow-sharers were hardly ever compelled to employ non-professional extras. Only two of his plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives,* could conceivably be argued to need the services of additional child actors, and both may have had their first production in a great house where the extras would have been choristers, well accustomed to deport themselves in the public eye. Moreover, dramatists from Kyd onwards recognised that an amateur could throw himself zestfully into a part. One such amateur, Blaze in Brome's *The Antipodes* (1638), explains that the man-midwife and the basket-maker whom he represents in the play-within-the-play are both mutes, but that 'A Mute is one that acteth speakingly'.[20] Clearly his were not perfunctory performances.

Doubling such as Blaze undertakes was the accepted practice of Elizabethan companies, and examples abound in dramatic records of actors playing four, five, or more roles in a single play.[21] Playwrights confirmed and strengthened the practice by structuring their plays in such a way that minimal characters appear and disappear in waves. On occasion they may have composed with specific bits of doubling in mind. Shakespeare, it has been suggested, made the insignificant Peto, rather than Poins, Hal's companion in the closing part of the tavern scene (2.4) in *Henry the Fourth, Part One,* because he realised that at this point in the play the actor of Poins would be getting ready to play a rebel part, probably that of Mortimer.[22] There is nothing surprising about this for the modern director or actor. But as luck had it, the prevalence of doubling in the Elizabethan theatre came to be recognised by scholars at a particular time, the early years of the twentieth century, when the practice was regarded as a shameful device, to be concealed behind such programme inventions as Stratford's 'Walter Plinge'. 'Doubling…was an indignity, the mark of an inferior player'[23]—a theatrical hack, it would appear, literally soldiering on from one army to another, with the odd messenger's or servant's lines thrown in but with neither time nor capacity to think through their relevance to the play as a whole.

But what presented itself to these earlier scholars as an imposition can well have struck the Elizabethan actor as an opportunity. Doubling got him off the horns of the dilemma described by Michael Murray in his diary of a bit-part player: how was one to make one's mark with sharers and public when playing feed and servant roles which by their very nature called for self-effacement? If the chance to shine had to be abjured in one part, there was a good chance of it coming up in another. Moreover, doubling involved the actor in the play at a sufficient number of points for him to be able to build his performance on a thorough grasp of the plot and the overall mood. An actor who was 'perfect' in, say, four parts in *Hamlet* would play Francisco with much greater understanding than could a Victorian actor who knocked off for the evening after 'Farewell, honest soldier'. The disparaging name given to the memorial reconstructions of Elizabethan plays by small-part players obscures the fact that they represent a surprising familiarity with the text on the part of the hired men: Bad Quartos presuppose good, or at least committed, actors.[24]

Today, when theatre programmes flaunt the versatility of those who play small supporting roles, critics have begun to explore the potentialities of doubling as a dramatic technique. The suggestion that a special effect can be achieved by doubling Benvolio with the equally faithful Balthasar[25] in *Romeo and Juliet* leads the mind on to play with similar pairings involving a small and a larger role: further protective figures, like the Captain and Antonio in *Twelfth Night,* say; or Gaunt and the Gardener as commentators upon the state of the nation. But there are major objections to this theory of generic doubling. One is that it assumes not merely that we recognise the same actor is playing two characters, but that he expects and even seeks to be so recognised. The first assumption is probably correct. When a very minor figure identifies himself ('Stephano is my name, and I bring word…'), the audience is being told 'You've seen this player before, but now he is someone else.'[26] The second assumption, however, is highly questionable, because the actor's instinct is to make the audience believe his impersonation, and the audience's instinct is to join in the make-believe. A further objection is that no clear examples of generic doubling occur in theatrical documents, whereas there are a number of examples of 'wildly dissimilar roles'[27] being doubled. For like all actors, Elizabethan bit-part players loved to display what has been called their 'dauntless versatility'[28] by moving from role to role and sometimes even sandwiching one role inside another.

Though the theory of generic doubling is open to doubt, its champions have opened a rich vein of speculation. One effect of doubling well worth further enquiry is the resurrection of an actor who has been killed off in a former role. On an open stage, the headless body of Cloten can be very

disconcerting to the spectators of *Cymbeline* and in the theatre one senses a moment of genuine relief when they rediscover, as sometimes happens, Cloten's features in the Gaoler. Mixed too with the instinctual fear that the sight of a corpse arouses there may have been, for the Jacobeans, disappointment that a favourite actor was out of the play; if the actor on this occasion was, as has been thought, Robert Armin, they would have been delighted by his reappearance in what was to prove to be one of the best bit parts in Shakespeare.[29] The audience would have shed no tears for Cloten, but it must have grieved, as we still do, at the death of the child Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*. Today's spectators cannot, however, share the alleviation of grief which would have come to the play's first audience when they realised that the same boy actor had returned in the part of Perdita.[30]

Rather than cast one actor in two roles, the Elizabethan bookkeeper could on occasion conflate both into a 'puddingstone' part, thus helping the player to conserve energy he would otherwise have expended on a change of costume and the assumption of a new persona. If this practice could be shown to be widespread, it would certainly imply a cavalier attitude to minimal roles. But there is nothing to suggest that conflation in the Elizabethan theatre was on the scale it reached in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century productions, or for that matter in the Old Vic's 1957 *Antony and Cleopatra,* which abounded in such characters as Philo Canidius and Alexas Diomedes. When a text gives signs of conflation having occurred, there is usually some artistic justification. In *Henry the Fifth,* the English nobles need to be few and insignificant as a neutral background to the King, the flamboyant French, and the colourful individualists in the English army. Whoever, in putting together the Quarto text for a reduced number of actors, fused Westmorland and Warwick gave a lead which has been followed in most subsequent productions.[31] A similar conflation in a later play, Massinger's *Believe As You List,* results, I suspect, from the bookkeeper's wish to avoid a much worse treatment of minimal roles. This was role-splitting, or the playing of the same part by two successive actors, which has been taken as further proof of perfunctory playing. But the fact that role-splitting, though occasionally found in medieval drama, virtually disappeared from the Elizabethan stage suggests a serious mimetic playing of small parts was the late sixteenth-century norm.

All told, the evidence of Plots and playbooks, though it reveals that sometimes excision or amalgamation had to be resorted to in handling a playwright's more extravagant deployment of characters, also shows doubling to have been the normal answer to casting problems; and doubling was far from being an obstacle to the meaningful playing of

small parts. Under-rehearsing poses a rather different problem. Bernard Beckerman calls the volume of production at the Globe 'staggering', and draws the conclusion that ensemble playing of a naturalistic kind was impossible. Actors of small parts, forced to fend for themselves, would play them as generic types, while the supernumeraries would without direction group themselves ceremoniously and symmetrically upstage of the principal characters.[32] For a number of reasons, however, I remain unconvinced that under-rehearsal meant arbitrary bit-part playing. One is that minor roles were likely to suffer less than major ones from scamped production since the actors of such roles, even though they lacked the modern relief of Walkmans inside their breastplates,[33] had no time to become bored. Another is that one feature of Elizabethan dramatic structure, the circle of dependants around a prominent figure, made possible the separate and if necessary simultaneous rehearsal of scenes in which major actors could coach their juniors in lively ensemble effects. A third point is conceded by Beckerman himself when he stresses that a generic type is more flexible than a stock character because 'he constantly undergoes change according to the demands of the story'[34]—and, one may add, according to the originality of the playwright. Horatian notions of decorum might lay down that soldiers were bold and resolute; Shakespeare's tend to whinge and be frightened. Murderers should be ruthless; several of Shakespeare's are ruthful. Watchmen are expected to be obtuse; George Seacole, in *Much Ado,* is as sharp as a new pin. Individualisation like this kept the actor on his toes.

It is highly unlikely that Shakespeare's fellows tolerated less than total participation on the part of the minimal actors and mutes who filled a scene at the Globe or Blackfriars, for, as Louis Jouvet has said, the inattention of a single super has an effect similar to that of a change in a magnetic field; it can weaken or nullify a whole scene.[35] Whatever the pressures upon it, a company as prestigious as the King's Men would surely be aware of such a hazard. Nothing in the theatrical documents implies that minimal roles in Shakespeare's plays were acted otherwise than with conviction and intelligence. As a leading sharer and experienced actor as well as dramatist, Shakespeare himself was well placed to get from his players the performances he wanted. But we still have to confront the question of just what these expectations were.

We have seen that there are many places in Shakespeare's plays where his handling of subsidiary roles appears casual in the extreme. The numbering of characters may be confusing, as when Plebeian 2 announces at line 9 of the Forum scene in *Julius Caesar* that he is going into the next street to hear Cassius speak, but at line 50 is still shouting his approval of Brutus. Minor

figures are left to decide the moment for their exit, and sometimes the playwright forgets to bring them back from an errand. Benedict's Page apparently fails to find the book his master left in his chamber window, and the Second Clown never brings the Gravedigger's stoup of liquor. Sometimes, too, the conflation of two or three roles without regard for their individuality appears to have been carried out by Shakespeare himself. The brothers Dumaine in *All's Well* are possibly an amalgam of the pairs of Lords, Gentlemen and Captains whose titles persist in their speech headings; that two senior officers should leave the war zone in order to escort Helena home is one resultant awkwardness. In *Timon of Athens,* a play seemingly printed from an early draft, Shakespeare may have intended to conflate the hero's named hangers-on with the Friends or Lords who appear elsewhere. But as the text stands it confirms the impression that Shakespeare worked in discrete scenes, in which the lesser characters take their life from a particular turn in the dramatic action, so that the question 'Did the dramatist mean the Servant in the second act to be the same as the one in the fourth act?' is often unanswerable.

Not all this evidence of indifference to minimal roles is equally valid. Errors in numbering could have occurred after a script had left Shakespeare's hands. 'Permissive' numbering can result from the dramatist not being sure how many hired men might be available, or from his making sensible allowance for the odd absence. It is possible that the first production of *Much Ado* anticipated modern ones by having Benedick's Page re-enter at the wrong moment, thus giving scope for some good comic business. And numerous as these anomalies are, they do not weigh heavily against the positive evidence that Shakespeare did concern himself, sometimes intensively, with the playing of many of his smallest characters.

One such piece of positive evidence is the way the playwright embodies directions for ensemble playing in the text. There may have been scant time in which to rehearse the rehearsal in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.1, but Quince and company are vividly instructed in their response to Bottom's transformation by Puck's report of their panic-stricken flight. So, too, details of the conspirators' behaviour before, during and after the assassination are scattered through the first half of *Julius Caesar.* Two episodes in which skilful ensemble playing is essential are Petruchio's homecoming in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the Cade rebellion in the second part *of Henry the Sixth*. Shakespeare's strategy for both is to make sure that experienced actors, including perhaps some sharers, are kept free to bring their skills into these sequences.

The first of the Cade scenes is entrusted to two actors by name. Such prior casting was one way in which Shakespeare could make sure that a

minor role was played to his liking. An actor's real name in a stage direction can be the result of a bookkeeper's annotation of the script. But an actor's name in a *speech heading* means that the dramatist, as he wrote, was envisaging a certain actor in the part.[36] It is not surprising to find Will Kemp turning up in this way in the part of Dogberry in *Much Ado,* for the clown's special position, half in and half out of a play, would serve to keep his name in the forefront of the playwright's mind. But 'Sincklo', or John Sinclair, never acquired a fame to equal Kemp's. Yet Shakespeare wrote specially for him the part of the Beadle who, in the second part of *Henry the Fourth* 5.4, hales Doll and Mistress Quickly to prison; not only is he named in the speech headings, but the women mock the extreme thinness which may have commended itself to Shakespeare at this point in the play, where a figure resembling a Morality Death is highly appropriate. Shakespeare appears to have taken an interest in Sincklo's career from the early 1590s onwards.[37] He gives his acting a small puff in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew,* where he again appears by name, and he and one Humphrey (probably Humphrey Jeffes) are brought on in the third part of *Henry the Sixth* as the two Keepers who capture the fugitive king. The same play calls for a Messenger to be played by an actor called Gabriel, and he too has been identified: Gabriel Spencer, whose fate it was to be killed some years later in a duel with Ben Jonson.

Another kind of evidence for Shakespeare's awareness of even the most insignificant small parts is worth pausing over. It consists in the many indications that he wrote some of these parts for trainee actors. Next to nothing is known about the way in which the Elizabethan actor acquired his professional skills,[38] and we have to fall back on the supposition that, because an acting company was organised loosely on guild lines, boy apprentices were taught their craft by the sharers. We have no idea who instructed the hired men who joined the company as adult actors, or were temporarily or permanently promoted from backstage employment. But the plays themselves furnish evidence that Shakespeare was aware of the need to help tiro players in their first stage appearances, and that he devised some of the minimal roles in his plays almost entirely with this in mind.

A clue to the possible training function of a part can be found in the marked inequality of lines within some of the duos or trios of generically named characters. Of course there are also inherent dramatic reasons for an even or uneven distribution of lines in such groups: *Two Gentlemen of Verona* 4.1 achieves a burlesque effect by a near-cloning of the three Outlaws,[39] and the two Officers discussing Coriolanus before the Senate meeting must have equal voices in weighing up his merits and demerits. In other episodes again, inequality is inevitable, as when one member of the

group acts as feed to another. But there is no obvious reason for the taciturnity of the Second Lord attending Duke Senior in *As You Like It,* the First Gentleman in *Othello,* the Third Stranger in *Timon of Athens,* or Alexander Court on the eve of Agincourt. Another possible pointer to the inclusion of a training part is the 'Enter two or three' (or 'three or four') formula. This is usually taken to mean 'Bring on three if possible, otherwise make do with two.' But though three actors represent a populace, or an army, more convincingly than two, there are many places in the plays where, as the Second Murderer in *Macbeth* is quick to point out, two could do the job. 'Enter two or three' can then signal 'Two actors are needed here, but a small extra part can be made if you have a novice actor in need of work experience.' When a group of minimal characters comes onto the stage there is often a slackening of the dramatic tension, and such a breathing space afforded the best opportunity to bring on an actor who was beginning to find his stage legs while at the same time giving him the support of more experienced players. The resultant group of two, or sometimes three, skilled men and a learner is after all a normal work group in any undertaking.

The second act of *All's Well* offers an opportunity of this kind at a very simple, mute level. The King has promised to allow Helena to choose her husband from among his wards in court, and there enter 'three or four Lords' whom he describes as 'a youthful parcel/Of noble bachelors' (2.3.52–3). Helena's broken syntax and irregular blank verse indicate her embarrassment. To encourage her, the King breaks into couplets, as if initiating an elaborate game, and she continues in the same verse form. Directors have responded to this patterning of the language by turning the episode into a dance sequence in which Helena, as she approaches each Lord, politely explains to him that he is not her choice, and receives in reply a word of regret and a formal 'courtesy'. Each encounter takes up six lines of verse. The Lords are numbered 1, 2 and 4. This means that if there is a Lord 3 Helena must address to him the first four lines otherwise spoken to Lord 4, and receive a silent bow from him before she passes on to Lord 4 with the remaining two lines. An enraged comment from Old Lafeu, who is out of earshot and thinks that the third Lord has turned Helena down, confirms this. Thus the text allows for the insertion of a fourth non-speaking part which can easily be performed by following the actions of the other three.

Another scene with a part that is unnecessary to the action but valuable as a training part is *Pericles* 3.2, set in Cerimon's house the morning after the storm. It begins by using a number of minimal characters to create a strong image of the great physician. His own servants establish that he is one having authority, the storm victims suggest his philanthropic nature, a

patient's messenger implies the faith that others repose in him; another, whose master is *in extremis,* indicates that Cerimon is no necromancer (an important point in view of later developments), and two neighbouring gentlemen comment on his devotion to the healing art. Next comes the stage direction 'Enter two or three with a chest' (3.2.48). A sea chest has handles and, even with the boy actor of Thaisa inside it, can perfectly well be carried by two men, so we need to put ourselves in the directorial shoes of Shakespeare and the bookkeeper and ask what use can be made of the third man. The answer is, as little or as much as the actor's ability warrants. He can speak one or more of the three brief speeches headed 'Ser[vant]': most probably the first, 'Lo, lift there!', which establishes him as the foreman, or as a household servant who has just taken delivery of the chest at an outer door; the others need to recover their breath before they speak. When the chest is opened, he can be one of those who peer into it, causing the audience empathically to crane their necks. And as the scene begins to take on all the excitement of a soap opera set in a hospital, the third man can help bring fire and blankets from the door leading to the rest of the house, or he can fetch a medicine chest from 'my closet' (81: the curtained alcove?) and hand drugs to the great specialist whose short temper gives away his inner tension: 'The vial once more! How thou stir'st, thou block!' (89).[40] All culminates in the triumph of 'Gentlemen, this Queen will live' (The surgical mask comes down: 'She's going to be all right'). The two neighbours carry Thaisa into the next room, the extra actor perhaps running ahead with the brazier in order to perform Cerimon's command to 'get linen' (108), while his two companions lift the empty chest through the door supposedly leading to the exterior, thus clearing the stage for the next scene. Whatever share he is allowed in all this bustle, the Third Servant is bound to learn from it a great deal about movement, expression and timing in ensemble playing.

The conversation that opens the big tavern scene (2.4) of the second part of *Henry the Fourth* is one of those episodes in which, without being unduly fanciful, we can look over Shakespeare's shoulder and watch him at work. 'Enter a Drawer' he begins, by way of establishing that we are in the Eastcheap tavern, and this piece of walking scenery, as the speech headings show, immediately takes on the features of Francis, who had been a hit in Part One. To let the audience enjoy Francis afresh and to prepare them for the Prince's eavesdropping, dialogue is needed, so the direction expands into 'Enter a Drawer or two': Francis, coming in with a side table, is followed by another Drawer carrying a flagon of wine and a plate of apples. Francis's misgivings about the apples gives this second Drawer the chance for a bit of comic business with the dish and flagon. Francis does not quite approve: it is typical of the way that characters have

aged between Parts One and Two that this character, once at everybody's beck and call, is now apparently the head waiter. He orders his companion to put down everything and go in search of Sneak's Noise, clearly a popular group. A third voice now makes itself heard, one that Shakespeare appears to have introduced to give work experience to a new young actor, for whom he writes 'Enter Will'—probably in the margin, causing it to be misplaced in the printed text.[41] The spectators' curiosity having been roused by sounds of laughter from the supper room, Will gets their full attention for his urgent message: 'Dispatch, the room where they supped is too hot, they'll come in straight.' Francis explains the Prince's plan to Will, who declares they are in for a high old time—'here will be old utis' (19). At the approach of his employer Mistress Quickly, the ever-anxious Francis goes off in further search of the musicians, leaving Will to listen, fascinated, to Doll's hiccups. Falstaff has lingered for his own purpose, and now enters in cheerful mood, breaking off his song to order Will to 'empty the Jordan' (34). Whether Will takes this from Falstaff or goes into the supper room to collect it, the words give him the opportunity to add a comically grimacing exit to an arresting entrance, lively lines, and the opportunity he has had to practise the great art of stage attendveness. Shakespeare seems to have had high hopes of Will.

Once alerted to the existence of such training parts, we find they crop up all over the place. Many are intended to teach boy apprentices their craft and—a secondary concern of most education—keep them out of mischief at the same time. The way a very small boy is incorporated as Moth into *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will repay study, as will the various pages, and a number of 'unnecessary' women. Yet when we have recognised the care with which Shakespeare handles Moth's theatrical début, or devises parts for Sincklo, or distinguishes finely between seven nameless Citizens in *Coriolanus,* there still confront us in each play—all but silently—minimal characters who are indeed walking shadows by comparison with the depth and detail of characterisation lavished on the chief figures. To resolve this contradiction between the playwright's extremes of carefulness and apparent carelessness, we need to shake ourselves free of the lingering notion that a play exists to display characters, the lesser of them by 'thumb-nail sketches', and to hold firmly to the Aristotelian truth that the characters exist for the play's action. Function is all. The function of some minimal characters may simply be 'to create a "pocket" for the lead to light up in',[42] whereas others shine their own brief but penetrative light over the play's central concerns. But whether they are entities or nonentities, substantial or shadowy, specific or generic, all function as meaningful parts of a dramatic whole.

This ordering of a play's components decrees that nothing must distract

the audience from its concentration upon the main emotional focus of a scene. When Romeo first catches sight of Juliet at the ball, he asks a servant who she is and gets the answer 'I know not, sir' (1.5.43). 'Now why doesn't he know?' asks Michael Bogdanov. 'Is he outside catering, or what?'—and goes on to argue that such questions afford a key to the proper acting of this small part.[43] But one must take leave to doubt whether it is really helpful to the scene for the actor of the servant's role to sink himself, Method-wise, into the character, emerging perhaps with the personality of a waiter who has had a long day and has love-problems of his own. Although there is here a small puzzle I try to tackle later, all that matters to the spectators is that the speaker is unable to enlighten Romeo, who therefore moves forward to encounter Juliet in ignorance of what they already know: his greatest love is sprung from his greatest hate. The same principle of due proportion applies to the Forum scene of *Julius Caesar,* where we identify first with the feelings of Brutus and then with those of Antony as each in turn faces a volatile crowd. From the points of view we are sharing, the Plebeians are not the entertaining character roles that Victorian directors conjured out of the text: they are nothing but voices to which, empathising with each orator in turn, we listen for approval and acclaim. Tubal, in *The Merchant of Venice* 3.1, is another part that needs to be kept in proportion to the play as a whole. An over-strong characterisation can throw the entire comedy out of kilter. If Tubal is played as a sharply malicious business rival to Shylock, the audience appears to be invited to deduce from the fact they are two of a feather that 'Jews are all like that', and the play becomes a piece of anti-Semitism. If, on the other hand, he is played as a gently sympathetic friend, the balance of our emotions, already upset by the oafish behaviour of Salarino and Solanio earlier in the scene, is tilted towards the image of Shylock as a noble and suffering Jewish father. Only a gravely attentive but emotionally neutral Tubal can leave our sympathies in the equipoise which is so marked an effect of this play.

Because 'What is this character doing here?' is a question fundamental to both the critical and the theatrical realisation of any and every Shakespearean small role, the attempt I make in this study to explore the whole corpus of such roles in each of a number of plays is preceded by a survey, incomplete though it must be, of the range of functions such figures can perform. Accordingly, the next three chapters concern themselves with the uses served by peripheral parts, first as means to the staging of a story, then as means to the drama's reflection of a society, and finally as means to the construction of a play as an artefact. These are not mutually exclusive categories so much as different dimensions, and if I linger from time to time to locate a particular figure in relation to all three