



## The role of minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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### Abstract

No doubt, William Shakespeare is the greatest creator of characters and his characters have got a wide range. He has maintained a balance between major and minor characters as he himself was a nice actor as well as director of his dramas. The drama *Hamlet* is remarkable for its variety, richness and its fullness of interesting characters major as well as minor. In *Hamlet* minor characters—Polonius, Laertes, Horatio, the Ghost, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Fortinbras play their significant roles. The ghost initiates the action. Rosencrantz & Guildenstern play a dubious role. Fortinbras inspires *Hamlet* to shake off his idleness. In fact, Shakespeare was a man of the world and with his unique artistic gift he wrote plays which are a true replica of our world.

**Keywords:** incestuous, distracted, foreboding, chivalric, fencer, arch-rival, soft society etc

### Introduction

William Shakespeare is the greatest creator of characters and the range of his characters is very wide. His characters range from the most innocent to the most wicked, from the king to the beggar, from the meditative to the jocular, from the most serious to the most comic and from the most ambitious to the most satisfied. In addition to it, he has created the largest number of round or complex characters. The most important thing about him is that he has maintained a balance between major and minor characters. A play is an organic whole and even the minor characters have significant roles to play. If the minor characters are absent or not fully developed, the drama will fail to impress the audience. Shakespeare knew it very well. In fact, minor characters in a play function as nuts and bolts in a big machine to make it function smoothly.

Undoubtedly Shakespeare's dramas have got their linkage with the theatre and that he himself was a good actor and director of his plays. In this connection the following statement of Kenneth Muir clearly is a shining example of the modern attitude of his dramas as well as art of characterization.

Everyone now knows about unlocalized scenes, the fluid construction of the plays, Shakespeare's scenic art, the use of rhetorical patterns, multiple consciousness, direct self-explanation, the use of imagery and so on. One result of this critical revolution is that we have had to modify our views on Shakespeare's method of characterization <sup>[1]</sup>.

After getting maturity, Shakespeare started thinking in a different way regarding the place of an individual in the Universe. According to the traditional way the king or prince was above society but the emergence of Democracy made him think in an innovative way. He said that ordinary people were equally significant. No individual can be important alone without the support of others. Moreover, he needs the company and co-operation of other people in sorrow and

happiness.

Shakespeare's minor characters belong to the social aspect of the individual. The characteristics of the minor characters are given as under:-

1. They form a social group, usually the middle class or lower class. Horatio belongs to the middle class but the grave diggers and soldiers belong to the lower class.
2. They function as comments on the main action of the plays.
3. They accelerate the action of the play. Emilia's stealing of Desdemona's handkerchief presented by Othello accelerates the play's action.
4. They present a variety. The drunk porter in *Macbeth* gives us a comic relief. Edgar's fooling of his father is another example of comic relief.

*Hamlet* is among the very few dramas in the universe in which character plot are satisfactorily co-ordinated and no other play of Shakespeare has got so much acclaim, credit and acceptance as *Hamlet*. The drama is remarkable for its variety and richness, its fullness of interesting characters, each one major as well as minor. The scenes are interchangeably diversified with joy and solemnity. In fact, it is the most fascinating and interesting play in the English Language. In the words of Tillyard, "One is tempted to call *Hamlet* the greatest display of sheer imaginative vitality in literary form, that a man so far achieved <sup>[2]</sup>."

The minor characters portrayed in the opening scene of *Hamlet* are Francisco, Bernardo, Marcellus, Horatio and Ghost of *Hamlet's* father. A mood of evil and foreboding is reflected through the small part played by Francisco in the opening scene. His brief conversation with Bernardo indicates the motif and atmosphere to take place. Francisco's heartsickness is a symptom that anticipates the heartsickness of *Hamlet*. Bernardo and Marcellus are the first persons to witness the

ghost. In the opening scene we come to know about an important person in *Hamlet's* world. Horatio is *Hamlet's* friend and confidant and the scene tells us of his wisdom and skepticism. He will not believe in the existence of ghost till he sees it with his own eyes.

The II scene of the first Act introduces another group of personages and distinguished figures of the Danish Court. Here we come across a number of minor characters- Cornelius, Voltimand, Polonius, Laertes and Gertrude. Gertrude, the queen of Denmark and mother of *Hamlet*, appears to be passive all the time but her character is of great importance. She protests against *Hamlet's* prolonged spell of depressed spirits and mourning for his father.

Thou know'st 'tis common. All that live must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity.

(*Hamlet* Act I Scene II, 72-73)

Gertrude's hasty and incestuous marriage with Claudius is the chief reason of *Hamlet's* distracted mind. It has added fuel to fire for the motive of revenge in *Hamlet's* heart against his uncle. Thus, Gertrude though a minor character plays a vital role in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. This scene too gives a brief account of two courtiers- Cornelius and Voltimand.

Laertes, the son of Polonius and the brother of Ophelia is a minor character but his role in the play is very significant. While leaving for France, he bids an affectionate farewell to his sister, Ophelia. He warns his sister against *Hamlet* and his intention. Though Polonius is a minor character yet the way he plays his role, clearly indicates that he is much more than the minor character. He utters a few precepts for his son, Laertes to follow when he goes to France.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
For loan off loses both itself and friend.

(*Hamlet* Act-I Scene II 75-76)

The Ghost, a minor character is definitely the motive force that puts into motion the action of the tragedy. Without the Ghost's initial revelation of the truth to *Hamlet*, there would be no occasion for revenge in other words, no tragedy of *Hamlet*. Really we see that the supernatural appearance of the Ghost has far-reaching importance with regard to character, plot and atmosphere. The irony of the Ghost's parting words is terrible:

Adieu, adieu, adieu! remember we.

In the II scene of II Act we are introduced to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who have been brought up as playmates of *Hamlet*. These two young men have been called home from abroad to wean *Hamlet* from his sadness, to cheer him by their company and they do it well. They bring the news about the arrival of a company of strolling players who want to offer their services to *Hamlet*. In Act III Scene I they report the results of their spying on *Hamlet* as was asked by the king. They report that *Hamlet* is knowingly holding them at arm's length though they say nothing of the fact. *Hamlet* has made them confess that they are the king's spies. The II Scene of the IV Act moves round these two characters who are working as

spies on *Hamlet* and they are the tools of Claudius hence their role is important.

Fortinbras, the nephew of the old king of Norway is a major character of the play and we are shown this young man going out to risk his own life and the lives of many soldiers. This stirs *Hamlet* to deep thought. Horatio is sensible and unsentimental and has many commendable qualities which *Hamlet* does not have. He makes the prince look into the world of affairs. Laertes considers *Hamlet* as his arch-rival and hates him to the core of his heart. Laertes is obviously *Hamlet's* foil. Laertes is a brilliant fencer. He zealously seconds Claudius treacherous scheme to kill *Hamlet* in a duel by the use of an unabated foil and it reveals the full extent of his depravity- not merely because he is prepared to kill *Hamlet* treacherously but because he purchased poison in case he might have occasion to use it. According to Edward Dowden:

"Laertes is the cultured young gentleman of the period. He is accomplished, Chivalric, gallant, but he accomplishments are superficial, the chivalry theatrical the gallantry of a showy kind... He really falls in with the king's scheme of assassination and adds private contribution of villainy- the venom on his rapier's point <sup>[3]</sup>."

The last scene of the last Act is set in a graveyard where men are preparing for a burial. The role of two clowns is important dramatically also in so far as it makes a clear and notable development in the character of *Hamlet*. Both the clowns are digging a grave with their spades, chatting and singing all the time. Horatio rightly says that the grave digger is no longer sensitive to death and they sing and joke and throw up skulls with the greatest unconcern. Dowden rightly says, "The grave-diggers have a grim grotesqueness; each is humorous jester in the Court of Death; Hail fellow-well met with chap-fallen skulls <sup>[4]</sup>."

The last scene of the last act takes us back to the king's Castle. Horatio learns that two spies are sure to be killed on reaching England. They affect the story and the tragic action of the play by intervening the affairs between the two dangerous opponents- *Hamlet* and the king and finally meet their doom. Osric, another minor character appears on the scene while talking to the Prince he uses unusual phrases such as "Calendar of gentry", "soft society" and he brings a message from the king that *Hamlet* and Laertes may forget their differences and become friends with each other and to attain aim they may play a friendly match of fencing. But his friend Horatio smells a plot in this match but his sound advice is ignored by the prince. The fencing match begins. *Hamlet* wins first two rounds and the queen picks up the cup of poisoned wine. The queen completely withdraws herself from Claudius and aligns herself with *Hamlet*. "She" according to A.C. Bradley, "loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy like more sheep in the sun." <sup>[5]</sup>

Horatio, though a minor character is next to the hero, has a great dramatic importance. At the end of the scene Osric declares the war like approach of Fortinbras on his way back from Poland. He is accompanied by the English Ambassadors

who reveal that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been put to death. Fortinbras, a minor character speaks hardly two dozen lines in the play and yet his shadow lies across is from the first scene to the last.

Thus, we see that in *Hamlet* minor characters – Polonius, Laertes, Horatio, the Ghost, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Fortinbras play their important roles. The role of the grave-diggers is not less important. The ghost initiates the action. Polonius creates a rift between *Hamlet* and Ophelia. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play a dubious role and make *Hamlet* more apprehensive. Fortinbras inspires him to shake off his idleness. Likewise the role of the players within the play is significant. In fact, Shakespeare was a man of the world and with his unique artistic gift he wrote plays which are a true replica of our world where all characters whether major or minor play their part importantly.

### References

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