Ethnic, Class, and Occupational Identities in Shakespeare's Names

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Abstract

The clarity of ethnic, class, and occupational identities in Shakespeare's names contributes significantly to the verisimilitude of his art. In contrast to Ben Jonson, and other theatrical rivals, Shakespeare used relatively few names that are obviously descriptive – such as Frugal, Tradewell, or Stargaze in Jonson's *The City Madam*. Shakespeare's naming shows that his imagination was focused on stage action rather than on references that might appear in print. He designated a large percentage of characters actually appearing on stage in terms of social groups, e.g., "Certaine Commoners" (*Julius Caesar*), and identified minor individuals to clarify functional roles ("Messenger") or for wordplay, e.g., "Cobbler" (*Julius Caesar*). Shakespeare drew very clear distinctions in social class in his uses of socially distinctive names and formal titles. He also made ethnic differences clear in the names where ethnicity seems unimportant to the action (e.g., the spelling of Alonso in *The Tempest*), but he seems deliberately to have avoided common ethnic associations when the names are mentioned frequently by other characters and ethnicity is a major theme – e.g., Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*) and Othello (*Othello*). By avoiding names that are specifically associative with ethnic minorities, Shakespeare lends these major ethnic characters greater individuality and dignity.

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This paper is a partial report on my audacious efforts to catalogue all names, references, and meanings in Shakespeare's plays. My plan is to analyze the names play-by-play because I feel that the meanings of the names are reflected in how Shakespeare used names to enhance his artistic goals in each particular play. If I ever complete and publish this study, all names will also be listed alphabetically to show repeated uses and similar meanings between different plays. So far I have completed rough draft analyses of five plays – *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. The extended examples used here will be drawn primarily from these plays, and shorter examples will be used from others.

As indicated in my abstract, this presentation will focus on ethnic, class, and occupational identities in Shakespeare's names. Ethnic identifiers are actually much less important than indicators of social class and occupation. Nonetheless, I believe that these are similar types of identifications, and that they show the basic nature of the creative process in Shakespeare's use of language. We often explain theories of language and of onomastics in terms of the Platonic distinction between the views of Cratylus, who asserted a natural relationship between words and their referents, and Hermogenes, who saw the relationship as essentially arbitrary. For this paper I would like to take a slightly different approach. I would like instead to emphasize the difference between references to social classes and references to character traits. Shakespeare, I believe, conceptualized his plays primarily in terms of social order, and that the names and identities of his characters most often emerge in the course of their development, from their interaction within an assumed social order, and often from the action of a specific scene.

We may begin by observing that Shakespeare's naming was inevitably bound by the exigencies of his art form. He often did not use proper names as we understand them, but in

writing for theater productions, he had to designate each person appearing on stage in his stage directions, in speech prefixes (except for mutes), and usually in the textual references by other characters. Many of his characters do not have personal names referred to by other characters in the text, but Shakespeare still needed to designate these characters in some way so that the prompter could get the actors on stage in proper order. On a few occasions, he simply used an actor's name, but in almost all cases he took care to indicate the specific social as well as dramatic function of the character. At the most general level he labeled groups of characters with simple descriptions of social roles and status, e.g., *Commoners*, *Plebeians*, *Knights*, *Lords*, *Ladies*, *Boy*, and it is easy to observe that an indication of social role and status is a dominant feature of Shakespeare's designations. As the dramatic function becomes more specific, so does the labeling, e.g., *Ambassadors*, *Murderers*, *Officers*, *Servants*, *Soldiers*, *Watchmen*, etc.

In scenes where characters are labeled in terms of such categories, he sometimes used numbering to designate specific individuals. What is most interesting to observe is that Shakespeare often seems to go out of his way to delineate individual personalities within such groups that are part of a collective action and on stage at any one time. As G. W. Williams has noted of the funeral scene in *Julius Caesar,* 3.2, "Plebeians 1, 2, 3, and 4 are distinct: 1 is a practical man and an originator, 2 is a sympathetic reflector, 3 is good-natured and responsive, 4 is impatient, talkative, and suspicious" (Walton Williams 1997: xix). The point we may often observe in Shakespeare's plays is that Shakespeare individuates his characters to a high degree, even when they are identified with the most general labels of social class or occupation.

When the action is not collective but by an individual, Shakespeare generally gives the character a simple occupational label in singular form, e.g., *Cobbler*, *Fool*, *Herald*, *Messenger*, *Provost*, *Soothsayer*, *Schoolmaster*, etc. In using the designation of occupations for names, Shakespeare is, of course, following a well-established pattern of name formation. (Personal names most commonly originate as descriptions of what a person does or where the person is from.) However, the occupational labels designate a non-aristocratic social class and afford Shakespeare an opportunity to pursue poetic and thematic goals that relate directly to the action on stage. In the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, for example, he singles out the Carpenter and Cobbler among the "certain Commoners over the stage" (Opening Stage Directions). These specific labels function to identify the general "Commoners" as tradesmen, a social class that many in Shakespeare's audience would view as responsible citizens. As it so happens, these characters are celebrating the recent triumph of Caesar. By implication, the scene pursues a theme supporting monarchy, and by analogy the English monarchy, from, of course, the point of view of the tradesmen class. That is to say, Shakespeare uses the specific occupational label of *Cobbler* to ridicule the point of view of the tribunes, Murellus and Flavius, two lower level aristocrats who fear and plan to resist the possible monarchy of Julius Caesar. The tribunes use and obviously interpret the word *cobbler* with the singular meaning of "bumbler," illustrating thereby their condescending view of the tradesmen. However, the meaning of *cobbler* as a trade has moral significance; it is, as the Cobbler says, "A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience" (1.1.13–14). The tribunes, by contrast, "are in great danger" (24), as the Cobbler says, morally and spiritually. In such ways, Shakespeare exploits very simple occupational labels that function like names and reflect an important political theme relative to social order.

Although Shakespeare applies mechanistic social and occupational labels most often to minor characters, he often applies them to major characters as well. The mechanics of stage performances required only the simplest designation of any character. Thus, he uses the term *Duke Senior* in *As You Like It* to designate an important character in terms of his social status and age relative to his younger brother, Duke Frederick, emphasizing thereby the violation of primogeniture and the great evil of usurpation. Similarly, the dominant character in *The Life and Death of King John*, is usually referred to in speech prefixes as *Bastard*, a social label reminding readers and maybe the writer (if

not so much the audience) of the theme of legitimacy being paralleled on the personal as well as political levels. On the other end of the social scale, the *Daughter of the Jailer* in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* designates a character of very low social status who has a very crucial role in the love story of aristocrats. She helps the aristocratic Palamon escape from jail; of course, she is in love with Palamon, and the anguish of her hopeless love complicates and counterpoints the central plot.

Shakespeare's history plays ostensibly attempt nothing more than the dramatization of history, and in such cases the names of all characters are presumably fixed. Yet, Shakespeare varies the designation of some characters (e.g., Prince Hal) in terms of titles, surnames, bynames, given names, and functional roles in ways not found in sources. He also introduces characters who have no historical parallels, and when he does so his artistic intent is clear – such as his creation of *Faulconbridge* as the *Bastard* in *King John,* as I have just observed, or his use of *Fluellen*, *Macmorris*, and *Jamy* in *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* to illustrate the imagined unity of British ethnic groups. Ethnic identifications, although they are few, are clearly a part of Shakespeare's unified vision, as well as examples of his individuations of characters. Because of their uniqueness and specificity, such names help to create a sense of verisimilitude in the history plays that in turn lends credence to the poet's interpretive license.

Shakespeare often made ethnic differences clear in the names when ethnicity is appropriate for the setting but not a crucial element of the plot. For example, Alonso is the fictive King of Naples in *The Tempest,* and Shakespeare uses a spelling for the name common to the Neapolitan dialect of the time. However, Shakespeare seems to have deliberately avoided common ethnic associations when the names are mentioned frequently by other characters and ethnicity is a major theme – e.g., Aaron *Titus Andronicus* and Othello *Othello*. Such names are very appropriate in their figurative meanings, but by avoiding names that are broadly associated with ethnic minorities, Shakespeare lends these major ethnic characters greater individuality and dignity.

Shakespeare clearly thought of his characters mostly in terms of their individual social relationships and how their specific action affected their relationships. This is illustrated by the fact that in the very process of writing, Shakespeare often changed the designations he used for characters. One striking example is the variation in prefixes for Lady Capulet in the Q2 of *Romeo and Juliet*. In this quarto, five different dramatic functions are suggested by five clearly different designations, each of which has variant abbreviations. Some form of *Mother* appears 16 times, *Lady* 13, *Wife* 10, *Old Lady* 6, and *Capulet's Wife* 2. When used as speech prefixes, these designations are regularized in modern editions, but as R. B. McKerrow suggested many years ago, a prefix change seems to reflect a different social role of the character "which is at the moment prominent" (460) in the ongoing action and, presumably, in Shakespeare's imagination. For example, in 3.5 of *Rom.*, Shakespeare changes his prefixes repeatedly and more or less as the social role of the character changes. Lady Capulet is *La.* when speaking about their social responsibility to avenge Tybalt's death; then she is some form of *Mother* when speaking to Juliet; and she is *La.* or *Wi.* when speaking to her husband. Similar variations can be found in other plays, e.g., *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Titus Andronicus*, and McKerrow hypothesizes that plays that do not have this type of "irregularity" in their speech prefixes were not printed from the author's original draft, i.e., "foul papers." Of course, variations in speech prefixes might have sometimes been introduced in various ways by compositor error or scribal or editorial intervention, and Shakespeare could have regularized some prefixes himself in revision. Nonetheless, the variations that occur in several plays illustrate how Shakespeare thought of character labels and used them for designating social roles and focusing on their specific dramatic action. He seldom focuses on moral traits – such as Ben Jonson would do with names such as *Frugal*, *Tradewell*, or *Stargaze*. Shakespeare viewed names as social constructs reflecting the

social role of a character and especially how that character is viewed by other characters – carrying more sense and less reference, as Frege might say (Frege 1970: 56–78), than we usually see in the meaning of names. Even in the names that are most stable, e.g., the nobility in the history plays, we can see the care Shakespeare gave to making the social role and status of each character very clear in each name, usually by using formal titles as names in much the same way as he used occupational labels.

If we narrow our focus to proper names, Shakespeare may be described as an opportunistic coiner of names. His names often emerge as a function of wit within a single scene. That is to say, Shakespeare's initial conception of a character is generally in terms of his or her social role and status, but he often associates a character with the action of a particular scene in a way that epitomizes the identity and thematic function of the character within the plot. In *Much Ado about Nothing.*, for example, the central problem of the main plot is solved when Borachio pulls Conrade aside, saying, "I will, like a true drunkard, utter all to thee" (3.3.104–105). Borachio's story is overheard by the Watch, and being overheard it leads to Hero's exoneration. The name *Borachio* almost certainly derives from the Spanish word *borracho,* meaning 'drunk' or 'drunkard' and is, therefore, a lexical equivalent of how the character has just described himself. It states the character's motivation for this particular scene, telling us why Borachio blabs to Conrade at this time and under these conditions about his deception of the Prince and Claudio. Such a scene is what I call a *signature scene* because the meaning of the name is clearly pointed out by the words and/or actions of the character in a way that is especially relevant to this scene.

Shakespeare appears to have coined many names that fit the action of one particular scene and that he or a copyist has then inserted in scenes previously written. Borachio, for example, appears in several earlier scenes with no clear indication of drunkenness. Furthermore, in the quarto and First Folio editions of this play, the character who seems to have a romantic relationship with Margaret at the masked ball (2.1.100–111) is named *Balthasar*. Modern editors change the name *Balthasar* to *Borachio* in this scene for the sake of character consistency. Margaret playfully suggests that her romantic favor is Balthasar's for the taking, and yet in the next scene, Borachio notes that "for a year since" he has had "the favor of Margaret" (2.2.12–13). If Balthasar and Borachio are intended **are** different characters, Shakespeare would be emphasizing Margaret's promiscuity, and Margaret would appear too unprincipled to be a friend and attendant on Lady Hero. We would also have to overlook the innocence of her wit, Borachio's later insistence that she "always hath been just and virtuous" (5.1.296), and the comic effects of her faults. It seems more likely that Shakespeare attached the idea of drunkenness to the Borachio character in 3.3, changed the name in earlier scenes, but overlooked the change needed in 2.1.

Shakespeare's use of a foreign word to describe this character also illustrates a common distinction in his uses of names – and that is, characters with aristocratic standing are most often given names from classical literature or foreign languages, while commoners are given English names. Shakespeare's story, borrowed from Bandello, is about the Spanish speaking court of Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon as well as of Sicily and Naples. Thus, in coining the name *Borachio*, Shakespeare not only described the action of a crucial scene, he also suggested the character's social status (courtier) and ethnicity (Spanish).

I believe that Shakespeare's coinages of names are often reflected in *signature scenes*, scenes in which the meaning of a name is pointed out by the words of the characters or clearly implied by their actions. Three other names will have to suffice here for illustrating Shakespeare's onomastic opportunism and the idea of *signature scenes*.

Shakespeare coins two names for a single character in *Measure for Measure* in pursuit of a sight gag, *Pompey* and *Bum*. In the First Folio, all stage directions and speech prefixes refer to Pompey as *Clown*, a generic term for the player of such roles in the acting company, but this

generic reference is never heard by the audience. In 1.2, Mistress Overdone refers to him as "Thomas Tapster," and again in 2.1, Escalus initially addresses him as "Master Tapster," a traditional occupational name with an alliterative first name. However, Escalus then asks for a byname, i.e., a name by which he is known among friends, "What's your name, Master Tapster?" (213), and he answers "Pompey." The pronunciation of *Pompey* would have been a near homophone of *pompion*, an old word for 'pumpkin,' and Shakespeare's pun is explicit when Costard refers to himself as "Pompion the Great" in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2.502). Thus, Shakespeare seems to have inserted the name in this play to poke fun again at the physical appearance of the actor and, of course, at any comparison that might be made to the Roman hero (defeated by Julius Caesar in 48 BCE). The actor-clown would have been costumed with lots of padding (or conceivably was, in fact, an obese person). At the same time, it may be that the *pompion* joke depended a bit too much on a rustic word because Escalus immediately asks for a second name, and Pompey offers the name *Bum*, a word used in common parlance to refer to a person's buttock, especially suggesting protuberance or rotundity. The visual reference is clear, and Escalus then laughs, "in the beastliest sense you are Pompey the Great" (2.1.218–219), confirming the descriptive function of the name and the ironical association of the clown and the Roman general. After the clown identifies himself as *Pompey* at 2.1.214, he is thereafter always referred to as such by the other characters. His social status and dramatic function (i.e., clown) are clearly established, and the names *Tapster* and *Thomas* are not used again.

Much as *Much Ado about Nothing.* is set in a Spanish court and the name *Borachio* is derived from a Spanish word, in *All's Well that Ends Well* Lafew's name is a French word describing his fiery indignation in one particular scene. Lafew and Parolles get into a heated argument over the propriety of Bertram's marriage to Helen (2.3.184–264), and it is for this signature scene that Shakespeare seems to have coined the name. Shakespeare added this character to his source plot as an elderly voice of reason (e.g., that the King should admit Helen), good counsel (that Bertram should accept Helen and abandon his friendship with Parolles), and eventual reconciliation (inviting Parolles into his household). It appears that Shakespeare initially referred to this character as "Old Lord" because that designation appears as a speech prefix in 2.3 of the First Folio. However, like a good angel in the old morality plays, Lafew functions primarily as a counter to the influence of Parolles, who takes the blame for misleading the essentially good Bertram. Thus, the name focuses our attention on the *signature scene* and Lafew's vehement objection to Parolles, to his pompous "scarfs and the bannerets" (2.3.203–204), and to his martial boasting and craven avoidance of any fight whatsoever – even with so old a man as Lafew himself (e.g., 237–245). Lafew tells Parolles, "I have now found thee [out]" (205–206), and he is the first to do so. When his fellow soldiers are plotting to expose Parolles, the first Lord ("Captaine G" in the First Folio) refers directly to the signature scene with a metaphor playing on Lafew's name: "He [Parolles] was first smok'd [out] by the old Lord Lafew" (3.6.103). When Parolles is first captured, he too uses the smoking metaphor, "They begin to smoke me, and disgraces have of late knock'd too often at my door" (4.1.27–28), and when he finally begs for Lafew's help, he too refers directly to the signature scene, "O my good lord, you were the first that found me [out]!" (5.2.42). Thus, Lafew's name illustrates Shakespeare's poetic opportunism in name coinage and the way in which his word play often overtakes his initial designation of characters.

One last example will illustrate how Shakespeare's coinages sometimes arise simply from the sounds arising in a dramatic dialogue. There is no obvious etymology for the name *Othello*. However, Shakespeare would almost certainly have pronounced the name *O-TELL-O*, and when first spoken on stage it would have sounded like a request for Othello's explanation, which, in fact, is the intention of the words by the character named "[*1.*] *Sen.*" in response to Brabantio's accusations:

> But, Othello, speak.
> Did you by indirect and forced courses
> Subdue and poison this young maid's affections?
> Or came it by request, and such fair question
> As soul to soul affordeth? (1.3.110–114).

This is only the first use of the name, but in almost all subsequent uses of the name by other characters, the sound of the name again repeats a request for Othello to say something. Thus, the name functions as a pun, reminding the audience that Desdemona fell in love with him because of his storytelling, which is, in fact, Othello's explanation to the senators and an important theme of the play.

Shakespeare's names are seldom descriptive of moral traits or the classical humors. They seem more realistic because they are grounded in occupational and class distinctions from which names are often naturally formed, and they come alive when Shakespeare associates the characters with poignant action on stage – much as nicknames are coined and catch our attention in the every day use of language. Shakespeare's names are thus less theoretical than those of Ben Jonson and other contemporaries. They are related more concretely to the action on stage, more closely tied to individual plays, and therefore more open to various interpretations of their significance.

References

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