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# Shakespeare's Nameless Characters

*Savanna Stone*

Shakespeare's characters are possibly more well-known than he is—Romeo, Juliet, King Lear, Henry V, Hamlet, etc. These characters have been analyzed countless times by literary critics, teachers, and students. However, because critics have been writing about Shakespeare's work since its birth, today, critics are beginning to delve into deeper topics such as under-examined characters. One of those critics, Gemma Miller, says, "Shakespeare's children are the most disregarded and under-analyzed of his unsung heroes, when we take into account the OED definition of an unsung hero as 'a person whose heroism or achievements are unacknowledged or little-known'" (51). Almost all of Shakespeare's unnamed characters fit this definition of an unsung hero. Uncoincidentally, the two children Miller focuses on throughout her analysis are both unnamed (Macduff's son in *Macbeth* and the boy in *Henry V*). However, Miller doesn't go into detail about why Shakespeare would have left these two children without names. In fact (from what I have found), no critic has questioned why Shakespeare leaves characters unnamed. There are many other characters besides children in Shakespeare's works who affect the plot, and who are also left nameless (characters with descriptive names rather than creative ones). Why is it important to note that these characters are nameless? The boy in *Henry V*, the first servant in *King Lear*, and the old shepherd in *The Winter's Tale* are nameless because Shakespeare uses them as a reflection

of each king, allowing the reader to empathize with the main characters' mistakes and to forgive them for their human faults. This theme of affirming personhood to conquer settler colonialism is taken up by Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) in his essay "Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination," wherein he poses similar questions to Clements and proposes his own solution. Corntassel asks, "What recourse do we have against those destructive forces and entities that have disconnected us from our longstanding relationships to our homelands, cultures and communities?" (87-8). These questions demand answers to an often overpowering abundance of issues that threaten to snuff out Indigenous life in all its forms. To overcome the seeming impossibility of the task, he invites Indigenous people to adopt "a peoplehood model" that would renew "the complex spiritual, political and social relationships," disrupting that process of erasure and destruction (89). The heart of this model stems from the basic need to be recognized as human, not as a settler stereotype, making the struggle more of a resurgence of life than a specifically political, social, economic, or spiritual resurgence. This is done by simply enacting and living one's Indigenous traditions, reconnecting every day to "language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories" (89). While Corntassel applies his model specifically to nationhood, in this paper, I make a more individual application of his model, responding to the more personal need for life resurgence in combatting depression and suicide which are common psychological responses to seemingly insurmountable situations. I explore the food-based version of the peoplehood model solution adopted by Clements' protagonist Angeline in *The Edward Curtis Project* to illustrate her journey toward asserting her humanity, which allows her to conquer the feeling of being psychologically defeated.

The boy in *Henry V* reflects Henry and allows the reader to sympathize with the king. *Henry V* begins with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely discussing how King Henry is trustworthy now, but "the courses of his youth promised it not" (1.1.25). They also mention that he used to spend time fooling around: "his hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports, and never noted in him any study, and retirement, any sequestration from open haunts and popularity" (1.1.57-60). If a viewer were to skip over this first scene of the play, they would not have guessed that Henry used to be a boyish prince. Throughout the rest of the play, he inspires his people and fights for what is right. Because this immature opinion of King Henry

is presented at the beginning of the play, Henry must prove to the audience that he is no longer the reckless prince he once was.

The king proves he is a man many instances in the play by showing mercy and demanding justice. In the beginning of act 2, he learns from his uncle that his former “bedfellow,” or constant companion, Scroop, plans to kill him for money with the help of two others (2.2.8). Because he doesn’t want to believe this, he decides to test them to see if they deserve any mercy. The king asks them if he should punish a drunk man that “railed against [him]” (2.2.41). Scroop answers saying, “let him be punished, sovereign, lest example breed, by his sufferance, more of such a kind” (2.2.45–46). After this exchange, the king hands them papers that prove their plans to kill him. The men beg for mercy, but the king reminds them they suggested no mercy to the drunk man. Despite their pleas, the king sentences them to death saying, “Get you therefore hence, poor miserable wretches, to your death, the taste whereof God of his mercy give you patience to endure, and true repentance” (2.2.176–79). Having King Henry justly sentence his old friend to death is just one way Shakespeare shows that the king is now a man.

Just like the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely thought of King Henry as once immature, the boy in the play is also seen as juvenile (“I am boy to them all three” 3.2.27–30). He is the only other character presented this way by his peers. It is significant that he is left nameless because it allows the viewers to know him only as a “boy;” the way they only knew Henry as with his “hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports” (1.1.57–60). However, if he had a name, the reader would assume that he is not a boy because of the way he acts. The boy seems mature because he recognizes cowardly choices. When the officer, Fluellen, tries to send Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol back to fight, everyone runs away scared but the boy. After they run off he says, “as young as I am, I have observed these three swashers. I am boy to them all three, but all they three, though they would serve me, could not be man to me; for indeed three such antics do not amount to a man” (3.2.27–30). After recognizing their cowardice, he realizes that he doesn’t want to learn to pickpocket like they want him to. He decides then to leave them “and seek some better service” (3.2.50–51). Although he doesn’t seem to have anywhere else to go, the boy makes the mature decision to leave them. Miller agrees by saying, “[The boy] functions as a moral touchstone, his asides, soliloquies and interventions ironizing and undermining the self-serving actions and empty bombast of his adult counterparts. He rejects the lawlessness and cowardice

of the men he serves" (53). Just like the king made the mature decision to exact justice on a guilty friend, the boy mirrors Henry by choosing the right. Throughout the play, not only do both the boy and Henry try to convince the audience that they are men, but they also do what is best for themselves and for the people around them.

As if this evidence wasn't enough to draw a parallel between Henry and the boy, Shakespeare also compares their fluency in French. Some critics, like Miller, claim that the boy's French actually outdoes the French of the king's. Miller says, "[the boy] demonstrates a fluency in French that highlights the deficiencies of not only Pistol but of the king himself (4.4.25–66)" (52). However, I would disagree by saying that their fluency in French is quite similar. The boy is able to get the message across from Pistol to the French Soldier with few mistakes. The only time he doesn't translate what Pistol says is because he doesn't know the words "fer, and ferret, and firk" (4.4.31–32). Similarly, in the scene with Henry and Kathrine, Henry is modest while speaking French. When he stumbles ("Quand j'ai la possession de France, et quand vous avez la possession de moi—let me see, what then? Saint Denis be my speed!—donc votre est France et vous êtes mienne", he corrects himself right after. Even Kathrine comforts him when he is embarrassed by his French (5.2.182–85). She says, "saving your honor, the French that you speak is better than the English that I speak" (5.2.189–90 trans.). Kathrine connects Henry's fluency to the boy's fluency in French by complimenting him on it.

Additionally, in this scene, the boy demonstrates king-like qualities as he saves the French Soldier's life by translating for him. When the soldier learns that his life has been preserved, he says, "On my knees, I give you a thousand thanks, and I consider myself happy that I have fallen into the hands of a knight, as I think, the bravest, most valiant, and the very distinguished gentleman in England" (4.4.56–60 trans.). While the boy proceeds to translate this to Pistol, it is likely that the soldier was really speaking of the boy when he said, "the bravest, most valiant, and the very distinguished gentleman in England" (4.4.60 trans.). These words allude to that of a king.

The connections drawn between Henry and the boy, rejecting immature notions and striving to be like kings, can help the reader see Henry as a good king despite the poor decisions he made in the past. Because the reader can empathize with the boy's situation already, when they look at Henry through the boy, it is easier for them to also empathize with Henry. It is also

easier to recognize that he is trying to do his people good. The relationship between Henry and the boy helps the reader focus less on Henry's bad traits and more on his good ones. Just like the boy tries to do everything he can to be a better person, Henry is trying to do all that he can to be a better king.

The nameless first servant in *King Lear* also helps the reader see the king in a more forgiving light. King Lear is shown as a changed king throughout *King Lear*. While some attribute this change solely to his circumstances or his daughters, the first servant that saves Gloucester can help the audience see King Lear as a repentant king. The first servant and King Lear have interesting parallels that draw them together. The namelessness of the servant, again, allows the reader to gain a more focused analysis of King Lear.

There are many hidden parallels between the first servant and King Lear. Derek Cohen, the author of "The Malignant Scapegoats of King Lear," recognizes one of the more important parallels. He says, "There are ten recorded deaths in King Lear . . . Of these, the only deaths that take place onstage, in sight of the audience, are those of Lear, Oswald, and Cornwall's Servant" (Cohen). Even though the first servant has fewer lines than Oswald, and is nameless, his part seems more significant in the eyes of the audience because he tries to save Gloucester's life. Furthermore, the way the first servant dies is a reflection of the way King Lear dies. As Mahood notes, "the revolutionary fact about the first servant is that he is not . . . a shocked bystander; a performance reveals him to be one of the group of servants who have dragged in and bound Gloucester on Cornwall's orders. Some directors even make him the one who tips over the chair so that Cornwall may stamp on Gloucester's face" (168). Not only do performances show the first servant experience a change of heart, but the notes from many editors also show his change. The stage direction from the editor in the Bevington edition says, "[Servants hold the chair as Cornwall grinds out one of Gloucester's eyes with his boot]" (3.7.72 s.d.). While the stage direction doesn't single out the first servant as the one who holds down the chair, it is likely that he is one of the servants to participate in this gruesome act. Just like King Lear did a terrible thing and later repented, so did the servant.

Fortunately, this initial scene of the repentance process is not the only evidence to go on. Two scenes after the death of the first servant, a messenger relays the event to Albany when he says, "A servant that he bred, thrill'd with remorse" (4.2.73). Mahood offers insight into this phrase by saying, "The now demoted word 'thrill' retained its metaphorical vigor for the Jacobean,

so that even if ‘compassion’ rather than ‘compunction’ [guilt that follows the doing of something bad] is the more common Shakespearean meaning of ‘remorse’ the emotion is still a force that drills agonizingly into the Servant’s heart” (168). Mahood’s insight helps clarify that the messenger’s lines mean Cornwall’s servant *suddenly* felt bad. Because of this clarification in meaning, the phrase implies that the servant had a change of heart. The servant, who may have at first assisted in the blinding of Gloucester, felt bad about his actions (whether that meant assisting in Gloucester’s blinding or letting it happen), and then tried to stop Cornwall from blinding Gloucester completely. This change of heart is an important trait in the first servant. His actions in this scene represent Lear’s change of heart when he realized that banishing Cordelia was wrong (“I know you do not love me, for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong. You have some cause, they have not.” [4.7.75–77]). Thankfully, in Lear’s case, his daughter forgives him (“No cause, no cause” [4.7.78]). Unfortunately, the first servant’s actions aren’t forgiven. In both cases, they die after having tried to do the right thing. Repentance is the most direct parallel between the first servant and King Lear. Although it is more prominent when seen on stage, the themes of repentance, redemption, and change can still be found from the text and are heightened when the audience connects the actions of the servant and King Lear.

Another parallel between King Lear and the first servant is a change in loyalty. The servant has “served [Cornwall] ever since [he] was a child” (3.7.71). Literary critic Richard Strier believes the following:

The rationale the servant offers for his act is as remarkable as the act itself. After commanding Cornwall to stop what he is doing, the servant characterizes his own behavior as loyalty rather than rebellion . . . ‘But better service have I never done you than now to bid you hold’ (3.7.71–73). This is the clearest articulation and the most extreme case in the play of what we might call ‘Kent’s paradox’ of service through resistance. Direct interference is presented as an act of service . . . We can begin to appreciate how important this conception was to Shakespeare by reflecting that he could have gotten the same plot effect, but not the paradox, if he had made the interfering servant one of *Gloucester’s* rather than one of Cornwall’s retinue. The scene takes place, after all, in Gloucester’s house (as Gloucester keeps saying). Shakespeare wanted the servant to be Cornwall’s in order to make the paradox of “better service” possible. (120)

In this moment, the audience never questions whether or not the servant is doing the right thing. They only recognize that he is trying to be a better servant by trying to do what is morally right. However, earlier in the play, when King Lear banishes Cordelia and Kent, most audiences question why Lear reacts the way he does. Understanding the servant's loyalty towards his loved ones can help the audience better understand why Lear would banish his own daughter and beloved servant. It is possible that Lear does this because he thinks he is being a better father, just as the servant fought Cornwall because he thought he was being a better servant. After Cordelia tries to explain that she does love her father, but needs to leave love in her heart for a future husband, Lear is distraught (1.1.95–104). He says, "Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity, and property of blood, and as a stranger to my heart and me hold thee from this forever" (1.1.113–16). By refusing to give his "paternal care" to her, he allows her to go off and do what he thinks she wants to do. He adds, "Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her" (1.1.129). These lines seem to show that Lear believes Cordelia wanted to be freed from his care, and he allowed her to have that freedom. Although the reader still isn't able to justify Lear's actions, by looking at the parallels of loyalty between Lear and the first servant, the reader gains more empathy for Lear and realizes that Lear thought he, himself, was doing the right thing.

Another king, Leontes, in *The Winter's Tale*, is cruel at the beginning of the play but has a change of heart by the end, just like the nameless character of the shepherd. This play is unique because there are sixteen years that go by, so the audience doesn't get to see Leontes progress and change through his repentance process. Some critics have wondered how this play deals with Aristotle's unity of time. Emily Grosholz says, "With this wrenching of tragedy to comic romance, and these vast expanses of time and place, how can Shakespeare save his play from becoming episodic, from falling apart into separate, unrelated pieces? And how can he salvage the probable and necessary from the fantasy of a winter's tale that nobody would believe?" (202). Grosholz believes that the answer comes from certain named characters. However, Shakespeare wrote in another character that mirrors Leontes, who helps the audience deal with the sixteen-year gap and transition from an unforgiving Leontes to a penitent one—the old shepherd.

The shepherd fills in the sixteen-year gap for the readers by mirroring Leontes, perhaps in more obvious ways than the other nameless characters

described thus far mirror their named counterparts. At the beginning of the play, King Leontes suspects that his wife, Hermione, was unfaithful to him, which is a false assumption. In his anger and jealousy, Leontes exiles his newborn daughter, Perdita. Because Leontes sends his daughter away and thinks she is dead, the shepherd ends up raising Perdita. The most apparent similarity between Leontes and the shepherd is the fact that Perdita can call them both father. Of course, Leontes abandoned her (“Out! A mankind witch! Hence with her, out o’ door!” [2.3.68]) and the shepherd took her in (“’Tis a lucky day, boy, and we’ll do good deeds on’t.” [3.3.133–34]); nevertheless, she is a daughter to them both.

A less-obvious parallel is shown when the shepherd finds Perdita on the seacoast of Bohemia. The very first lines given by the shepherd reflect Leontes’ feelings about adultery. Upon finding the baby he says, “Though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work. They were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here” (3.3.70–74). Bevington’s footnotes specify that the word “scape” means “sexual escapade” (3.3.70 note). These footnotes also tell that “stair-work . . . behind-door-work” means “sexual liaisons under or behind the stairs or using a room or a trunk for concealment” (3.3.72 note). It is interesting that one of the first things the shepherd talks about is secret sex when he knows nothing about what really happened. This is exactly what Leontes imagined when he thought Hermione and Polixenes had an affair. Leontes said to himself, “Too hot, too hot! To mingle friendship for is mingling bloods [sexual intercourse] . . . My heart dances, but not for joy, not joy. This entertainment may a free face put on, derive a liberty from heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom, and well become the agent” (1.2.108–14). These lines come after Leontes sees Hermione and Polixenes conversing. He has very little evidence for their affair, just like the shepherd had little evidence of where the baby came from. But the shepherd decided to raise the child despite his opinion on adultery, just like Leontes later realizes his mistakes. Both characters made a snap-judgment about irresponsible affairs.

It is numinous that these aren’t the only lines between these two characters that are similar. Leo Rockas, who wrote about *The Winter’s Tale* in a journal called *Ariel*, also noticed the relationship between Leontes and the shepherd. Just before the shepherd finds baby Perdita, he says, “They have scared away two of my best sheep, which I fear the wolf will sooner

find than the master: if anywhere I have them, 'tis by the sea-side browsing of ivy" (3.3.65–68). Rockas believes the two lost sheep are symbolic of the prince and the princess (Perdita and Florizel) in the play. Rockas comments on this passage saying, "The shepherd's statement parallels what Leontes says to Florizel and Perdita: 'I lost a couple, that 'twixt heaven and earth / Might thus have stood, begetting wonder as / You, gracious couple, do' (V.i.131–33). As soon as the shepherd has lamented his lost sheep he discovers the baby Perdita" (14). The two lost sheep of the shepherd are comparable to the lost prince and princess in Leontes's lines at the end of the play. These lines help parallel the two father figures because it shows that both felt bad for what they had lost. In addition to what Rockas believes, the shepherd used the words "scared away," which is how Leontes lost his daughter. He scared the people into abandoning her ("What will you adventure to save this brat's life?" [2.3.162–63]). Because of these immediate similarities between Leontes and the shepherd, from the point of meeting the shepherd onward, the audience can see Leontes' change of heart through the shepherd's character, making for an easier transition from the unforgiving Leontes to the penitent one.

All three kings, Henry V, King Lear, and Leontes, make poor decisions and try to fix them. Shakespeare gives subtle similarities to the audience between his nameless characters and the named kings in order to help the audience sympathize with those characters. Because of their exceptionally acceptable qualities, the boy being a boy, the servant trying to save Gloucester's good eye, and the shepherd fathering an abandoned child, these nameless characters help the audience empathize with the kings. Their namelessness lets the audience reflect on the kings in a different way—with understanding for their choices, like an unbiased, clean slate or mirror that reflects who the king truly is. When looked at through the lens of their nameless characters, all three kings can be seen as people full of love for their country and their family. Unfortunately, all three kings are usually only recognized by their human faults.

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