

STOCK CHARACTERS

Shakespeare, as an heir to the Commedia Del-Arte tradition, in which the play's message is communicated largely through easily recognizable or even stereotypical characters, employs many of "stock" characters throughout his works. Once you look at their basic characteristics, it is easy to identify them across the Shakespearean canon. This identification of characters can make understanding an unfamiliar text a little easier – because the characters in a particular category behave in similar ways, and may even speak using similar rhetorical, image or verse structure.

LOVERS

- **Ingenue (female):** Innocent, sweet, youthful, honorable
- **Sobrette (female):** Not-so-innocent, not-so-young, usually honorable, witty, likes banter and argument
- **Rustic/ Rude (Male and Female):** country born and bred, simple, agrarian, earthy.
- **Noble (Male):** born of nobility, high-born, generally honest

COMPANIONS

- **Councilors (Male or Female):** faithful, honest, convey messages, have information, confidantes.
- **Bawds (Female):** worldly, saucy, dispense advice, maternal with an edge.
- **Mentors (Male):** fatherly, give advice, supply the hero with the means to pursue their desire.

AUTHORITY FIGURES AND SOLDIERS

- **In Control (male):** authoritative, most times fair, peripheral to plot, initiate or resolve conflict.
- **In Distress (male or female):** strong, noble, comprised by circumstance or bad decisions/advice, decisive, often with a flaw of temperament.

RELUCTANT HEROES

- **Rakes & Cads (male):** Walk the line between good and bad but usually turn out good, witty, bawdy, seductive, hot-tempered, loyal but independent.

COMIC CHARACTERS

- **The Wit:** Language based humor, somewhat noble, melancholy.
- **The Clown:** Physical comic, jester, paid to be amusing, singer.
- **The Fool:** situational comic, dim-witted, unaware of being a fool.
- **Bawds (Female):** worldly, saucy, dispense advice, maternal with an edge

OPPOSITIONAL CHARACTERS

- **Villains (Male or Female):** Charismatic but ruthless and malicious characters. They are often murderous characters driven by blood-lust, revenge, murderous ambition or simply hatred of the protagonist. Their actions are mostly premeditated.
- **Antagonists (Male or Female):** As well as having some or many of the villains, the antagonists are also characterized by petty ambition, jealousy, greed, and gullibility. They are often misinformed or mistaken in their opposition. They may also lack the ability or determination of a villain. These characters are often simply at odds with the protagonist because they are culturally or ideologically opposed.

PARENTS

- **Dominant Father or Mother:** These characters are often used in the role of one of the other stock characters but it is important to include them in their own category as well. These are strong, domineering characters who are sometimes cruel or in opposition to the desires of their children in favor of their own ambitions or sense of order and degree.
- **Doting Father or Absent Mother:** It is difficult to find many doting fathers in Shakespeare's plays and if they are found, they very often turn dominant somewhere during the action of the play. Absent mothers however, are evident, as they are in most fairy tales, in many of his plays. At times, Shakespeare will use a matronly character to stand in for an absent mother. These characters are often older, simple people who are natural or foster parents or marginalized characters. They offer counsel, love and support and may find themselves in peril for their love and care.

NON-HUMAN CHARACTERS

- **Fantasticals / Sprits (Male, Female, or Neither)** Creatures of imagination, fairies, sprites, goblins, and ghosts and even the occasional god. Often used to provide insight into future events or to council and protect mortal characters or to wreak havoc and mischief.

"EVERYMAN" CHARACTERS

- **Rustics and Mechanicals:** Pastoral or country rather than urban or city based characters. They are often simple, comical, less sophisticated, but always wise in common matters. Usually honest but highly gullible.

EXPOSITIONAL AND SUPERNUMERARIES

- **Lords, ladies, soldiers, officers, musicians, messengers, servants (Male or Female)** Important but often nameless and shallow characters in that we know very little about them and do not see them consistently throughout the play. They serve to deliver expositional material, bring news, or act as a sort of chorus commenting on the action of the play. There are numerous examples of these characters; just about any that don't fit into one of the other categories.