

Exercise 4

Choose a minor character in *Richard II* and write a 700 word essay on his or her place in the play.

This exercise follows on our consideration of minor characters in *Romeo and Juliet*. Bring to your inquiry into *Richard II* some of the ideas discussed in lecture; you can make your character an occasion to experiment with those ideas, their explanatory powers and perhaps their limits. They include:

- A minor character does not change (while a major character does; or at least, his or her capacity for change will be tested by the plot).
- Minor characters are more narrowly allegorical than major characters. That is: they can be more easily reduced to a single, stable meaning within the text's field of meaning, as when one says that Friar Lawrence stands for sententious wisdom.
- Minor characters occupy a position in a larger character space surrounding the main characters. The minor characters serve to define a) possibilities for the main characters (that is, Juliet could choose to adopt the Nurse's attitude toward pleasure), b) contrasts with the main characters, c) alternatives by which to measure or understand the main characters.
- Minor characters are projected aspects of the main characters: the space is filled with characters whom we should read back into the main characters, taking the Nurse, for example, to represent an aspect of Juliet (her own readiness to desire).

You may find one or more of these assumptions useful in thinking about the minor character you choose. You may also find, of course, that your character is not quite containable by any of these schemes—what we found, of course, with the Nurse. Shakespeare is famous for his ability to bring bit players to unexpected life. That said, he is also a pattern maker, who thinks on the level of the whole play, and this exercise is first and foremost an exercise in thinking about how the representation of an individual contributes to a larger design. So give serious thought to the question of where your character fits among other minor characters (in that character space), and in relation to Richard and Bolingbroke.

Previous exercises may be useful, especially the last, for among Shakespeare's characteristic strategies is to let a significant word wander among different characters—how each of them uses it will go a long way to defining the differences among them, and their meaning. Feel free to choose any character but Richard and Bolingbroke.