

The importance of minor characters in the tempest and doctor faustus

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Shakespeare's minor characters are as often as diverse and essential to the plot as their protagonist counterparts, used within his plays to illuminate the main characters' goals and feelings. The presence of these personages also expands upon the audience's experience while giving audience members characters to which they can relate. In *The Tempest*, for example, Antonio helps to illuminate Prospero's last hardships, creating sympathy with the audience, whereas Shakespeare uses Stephano to parody Antonio, creating humour in this mockery.

The character of Antonio is introduced to the audience first in scene one, on the boat, and further explained in Prospero's story about how he was forced to Milan. Prospero's description of his brother, "Thy false uncle" and "that a brother should be so perfidious", gives the audience an indication as to the nature of the character. This would be seen as a biased statement, causing the audience to suspect Prospero's interpretations, were it not for Antonio's actions on the boat, where he proved himself to be an extremely disagreeable character in his treatment of those both lower than him in station, the Boatswain, and elder than him in wisdom, Gonzalo. For example, the quote "Hang cur! Hang you whoreson, insolent noisemaker. We are less afraid to be drowned than thou art". Antonio later makes it clear that he does not regret supplanting his brother's power, as when he is asked about his conscience he says, "Ay, Sir: where lies that?". This has the dramatic effect of alienating him from the audience as he feels no guilt after betraying his own family. Antonio is effective as a minor character as he is one of the only characters on the island who has the power to stop Prospero. Prospero needs Alonso, the king, to re-instate himself as Duke of Milan. However,

Antonio's plot to kill the King and Gonzalo, " draw together, and when I rear my hands, you do the like, to fall on Gonzalo", threatens this and creates a sense of anticipation and fear within his various appearances.

Where Shakespeare uses Antonio to darken the overall mood of the play, he counters this with another minor character, Stephano, who's plot is designed to be humorous. His story revolves around a plot to kill Prospero with Caliban, " yea, yea, my lord: I'll yield him the asleep, where thou mayst knock a nail into his head", which Shakespeare presents as a parody of the plot to kill the king. The humour of this character is evident through the lines, " I was the man in the moon when the time was", as the contemporary audience would know he had one of the lowest social positions of all the characters on the island, yet Caliban foolishly believes him a god.

Shakespeare once again uses his minor characters to eliminate his main plot lines, as Stephano's treatment of Caliban heightens the audience's sympathy of him, as well as giving them a harsher view of Prospero, due to the connotations of slavery. When analysing the play through a post colonial reading, the associations of racism and Prospero's acquisition of the island that once belonged to Caliban, present Caliban as less of an antagonist. Even the accusation of rape, " til thou didst seek to violate the honour of my child", from Miranda can be related to the white population's assumption that people from the colonised countries were savages who were seen to kill and rape.

The characters of Robin and Rafe from Marlowe's Doctor Faustus are used in a similar technique, as they illuminate the foolishness of the main character,

Faustus. Although Faustus is educated and ambitious, Robin parodies many of his wishes. For example, Faustus' wishes for the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife whereas Robin intends to 'make all the maidens in our parish dance at my pleasure stark naked'. The crudeness of Robin's ambition gives the audience a new perspective with which to view Faustus, as both men wish to influence women against their will using magic. This causes the audience to reconsider whether Faustus is as logical or educated as he believes he is.

Another minor character in *The Tempest* is the Boatswain, a character that uses the chaos of the storm to turn social standards of the time on their head. For example, while he is giving orders he berates the nobles for their cries within the cabin, "Down with the topmast! Yare! Lower, lower! Bring her to try with the main-course. A plague upon this howling! They are louder than the weather, or our office". He is the first character to take charge within the performance and although he is outranked by the captain and the Noble men, he proves far more logical and useful within the storm. This is shown through the captain's immediate dependence on the Boatswain before his exit, as well as the commanding language of the Boatswain towards the Nobles. He says, "what cares these roarers for the name of the king", which follows the consistent theme within *The Tempest* of the 'power of civilisation', namely the lack of it within the island's domain. The Boatswain and the storm are the beginnings of the idea that society and civilisation is turned on its head on the island, where nature and magic have strength, as the king has no power to save himself or his people.

The role reversal of the Boatswain is mirrored within Doctor Faustus, when Wagner speaks to the Scholars, friends of Faustus. Although they are educated men and Wagner is a servant, he is able to easily outwit them with lines like, “ yet if you were not dunces” and “ For is not he corpus natural”. Once again the minor characters of Marlowe are used to parody Faustus himself, as Wagner speaks in a mockery of educated language, using Latin as Faustus would, to insult people.

Both plays thus use minor characters in order to illuminate the main plot line and expand on both the humorous and dramatic qualities of the play.

Antonio’s plot acts as the main hindrance to the success of Prospero, however Shakespeare reassures his audience through the parody account of Antonio’s plot through the drunken and doomed plot of Stephano. Prospero himself is a more elderly and respectable character, so minor characters allow the play to explore the themes of class upheaval, nature, and deceit far more effectively, improving the experience of The Tempest.