

role

also rôle (rl).

n.

- 1.A character or part played by a performer.
- 2.The characteristic and expected social behavior of an individual.
- 3.A function or position.

[French rôle, from Old French rolle, roll of parchment (on which an actor's part was written), from Latin rotula, diminutive of rota, wheel; see roll.]

Word History: Considering the various great roles in the theater, such as Hamlet or Lear, or the various roles we play, such as parent or teacher, employer or employee, it is difficult to think back to a time in the history of the word role when none of these important associations was present. Role, which is first recorded in English in 1606, came to us from French with the sense “a part one has to play.” Obviously the development of the sense familiar to us had already occurred in French, where the word rôle in its earlier history (Old French rolle) had meant “a roll, as of parchment,” particularly with reference to a manuscript roll. The word could also mean “a legal document” or “a list or register.” From such use it also came to refer to the text from which an actor learned a part. This use brought the word into the world of the theater where it has played an important role ever since.

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