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Twelfth Night and Shakespearian Comedy

MILTON CRANE

HEN Dr. Johnson stated, in his Preface to his edition of Shakespeare's plays, that these plays were not "in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind," freely and casually mingling both forms, he confirmed the opinion of many lesser critics who had either praised or blamed Shakespeare for being less scrupulous in this regard than Sophocles or Aristophanes. Dr. Johnson, however, not only applauded this refusal to patrol the frontiers of tragedy and comedy; he went on to affirm that Shakespeare's natural genius was for comedy:

He . . . indulged his natural disposition, and his disposition, as *Rhymer* has remarked, led him to comedy. In tragedy he often writes, with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comick scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comick; but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature. In his tragick scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct.¹

This judgment was tempered, however, by some severe strictures on Shakespeare's lapses:

In his comick scenes he is seldom very successful, when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contests of sarcasm; their jests are commonly gross, and their pleasantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners. Whether he represented the real conversation of his time is not easy to determine. . . . There must, however, have been always some modes of gayety preferable to others, and a writer ought to chuse the best (p. 22).

For all his reservations about Shakespeare's faulty taste in comic manner and matter, Dr. Johnson's opinion of the comedies, as set forth in his Preface and supported by his Notes to the plays, is far more favorable than that of many later critics. The tendency of nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism has been to exalt the tragedies as the supreme achievement of Shakespeare's art, and to consider the comedies as relatively minor and dated works. The problem of Hamlet is as satisfactorily timeless as that of Oedipus; but some critics, regarding comedy as irrevocably wedded to the moment, insist on waiting for Profes-

¹ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London, 1929), pp. 18-19.

sor Sisson to identify the Lady of the Strachey before they will consent to render aesthetic judgment on the play in which she so fleetingly figures. Dr. Johnson faced the question of the comedies with characteristic boldness and candor, and gave them the palm; but his successors, to the extent that they concern themselves at all with such basic questions, tend to adopt silently his premise about Shakespeare's mingling of the forms and to discard his conclusion about its success.

Some modern critics, to be sure, have preferred to skirt the problem. Professor Parrott, for example, in his comprehensive study of Shakespearian comedy deals with comic elements in the plays wherever he finds them, examining individual comic scenes or parts of scenes as largely independent of the total effect of the plays in which they appear. Such fragmentation of the plays may find justification in the fact that Shakespeare obviously concerned himself more with effectiveness of the individual situation than with larger problems of structure; nevertheless, the difference in quality between, let us say, the Porter's scene in *Macbeth* and a monologue of Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* reflects important differences of conception and plan.

The difficulty that underlies all such discussions, and that makes most modern critics hesitate either to agree or to disagree with Dr. Johnson's double-edged praise of Shakespeare's comedy, is a profound uncertainty about the propriety of treating that comedy as a single, definable thing. Here again Dr. Johnson's empirical definition of comedy in the age of Shakespeare may offer a useful point of departure: "An action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents. . . ." But so general a statement does little to enlarge our understanding of Shakespeare's purpose or method; tragedy and comedy must be divided on some more significant principle.

Our problem, then, is to expand this definition and to make it more specific with reference to Shakespeare's comedies. If it is possible to speak of that extraordinary group of plays ranging from *The Comedy of Errors* and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* to *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* in terms more meaningful than those of a happy ending or a haphazard conglomeration of laughable incidents, we must seek the solution in Shakespeare's practice as a dramatist, not in the realm of metaphysical speculation.

The extent to which Shakespeare's comedies can be identified with any tradition of comic drama has been the subject of several recent studies. Nevill Coghill, contrasting Shakespearian comedy (which he calls "romantic") with Jonsonian or "corrective" comedy, has justly remarked: "It is easy to discern the promptings of two opposed temperaments in the use of comic form by [Shakespeare and Jonson]; so much so that it hardly makes sense to speak of 'comic form' as if it were a single thing of which both had the same theoretical conception, to the discipline of which both were in voluntary and agreed subjection. And because it does not seem to make sense, it is often supposed that Shakespeare wrote under no discipline of form, that he followed no particular and definable tradition of Comedy, but was simply fancy's child. . . ."² His answer to what is in effect Dr. Johnson's position is that "Shakespeare was following a tradition that evolved during the middle ages" from fourth-century Latin gram-

² "The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy," *Essays and Studies* (London, 1950), p. 1

marians, such as Donatus, and which eventually became formulated as “romantic” comedy, expressing the idea that “life is to be grasped”, using a love-story with a profusion of incidents, and resolving all confusion and misunderstanding through a happy catastrophe. This form Professor Coghill opposes to Jonsonian comedy, which he likewise traces back to late classical and medieval sources, and which emphasizes the satirical and corrective element rather than the joyful and conciliatory.

The evidence of Shakespeare’s contemporaries suggests that they might have found Professor Coghill’s distinction more ingenious than valid. Thomas Heywood’s *An Apology for Actors*, for example, while agreeing with Professor Coghill’s grammarians that the essence of comedy is “*Turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima* . . . Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace . . .” offers a “definition of the Comedy, according to the *Latins*,”—i.e., Donatus—as “a discourse consisting of diuers institutions, comprehending ciuill and domesticke things, in which is taught, what in our liues and manners is to be followed, what to bee auoyded. . . .”³ And, in speaking of comedy as written by himself and his colleagues, he lays equal weight on the pleasurable and the didactic elements:

[A Comedy] is pleasantly contriued with merry accidents, and intermixt with apt and witty iests, to present before the Prince at certain times of solemnity, or else merrily fitted to the stage. And what is then the subiect of this harmelesse mirth? either in the shape of a Clowne, to shew others their slovenly and vnhandsome behauiour, that they may reforme that simplicity in themselues, which others make their sport, lest they happen to become the like subiect of generall scorne to an auditory, else it intreates of loue, deriding foolish inamorates, who spend their ages, their spirits, nay themselues, in the seruire and ridiculous employments of their Mistresses: and these are mingled with sportfull accidents, to recreate such as of themselues are wholly deuoted to Melancholly, which corrupts the blood: or to refresh such weary spirits as are tired with labour, or study, to moderate the cares and heauinesse of the minde, that they may returne to their trades and faculties with more zeale and earnestnesse, after some small soft and pleasant retirement (sigs. F3^v-F4^r).

It seems clear that such a definition, in which echoes of other Elizabethan critics may be discerned, embraces every kind of comedy and obviates the need for Professor Coghill’s two categories. The individual playwright may at will stress either the pleasurable or the didactic, but both elements will be present in his work, and the most successful comic artist, as I hope presently to demonstrate, will be the one who best contrives to combine both elements in his play. A work productive of mirth, frequently employing a love-story as its basic matter, agreeably resolving a disturbing or even dangerous situation or group of incidents, and exposing vice or correcting folly: such is Elizabethan comedy. *Twelfth Night* is an admirable example of this synthesis of the romantic and the didactic; but we may do well to recall that Shakespeare came to such a synthesis by way of an orderly development.

The plays generally classed together as Shakespeare’s comedies, if we omit

³ Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (1612), reprinted with introductions and bibliographical notes by Richard H. Perkinson (New York, 1941), sig. F1^v.

the chronicle histories with substantial comic subplots, fall into four major groups: (1) the early comedies and farces, including such plays as *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*; (2) the great comedies: *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*; (3) the so-called dark comedies; and (4) the romantic comedies or tragi-comedies of Shakespeare's last years. Now the earliest plays are simple, even classical, in their comic structure; and they make capital of every device known to the writer of farce. *The Comedy of Errors* is notoriously mechanical in its manipulation of the two Antipholuses and the two Dromios; after the first act, the average playgoer or reader can probably guess without much difficulty the development of most of the action. (What the reader may not guess, however, is the extraordinary effectiveness on the stage of the mistakes in identity and the knockabout farce.) *Love's Labour's Lost* plays with disguises, swearings and forswearings, sudden reversals—and even the simple Mutt-and-Jeff humor of Armado and his Moth. *The Taming of the Shrew* carries disguise from the physical to the spiritual plane, although it does not neglect the physical. The taming of Katherina is, of course, the most gratifying of all comic patterns: the biter bit. But we are at least permitted to suppose that Petruchio is truly a gentleman and that, by the end of the play, he has reverted to his normal conduct. (Perhaps Mr. Tennessee Williams will one day favor us with a tragic reinterpretation of the psychic damage inflicted by Petruchio on Katherina; Shakespeare, alas, in this play shows characteristic brutality and male chauvinism in not divining the existence of such a problem.)

About the early plays, then, we may assume that no great difficulty exists. The main action of each play is normally paralleled by a subplot of clowns: the Antipholuses have their Dromios; King Ferdinand and the Princess have their Berowne and Rosaline and even their Armado and Jacquenetta; the loves of Lysander and Hermia are answered by the marvelous triangle of Oberon, Titania, and Bottom.

As we approach the great comedies of Shakespeare's middle period, we are faced by serious questions concerning the structure of dramatic action and the nature of dramatic effect. What has the tragic—or at least melodramatic—story of Hero and Claudio to do with the comedy of Beatrice and Benedick? How does the sentimental romance of Orsino and Viola come to be played to the raucous accompaniment of Sir Toby Belch? *Twelfth Night* deserves special consideration because it has the greatest complexity of plot structure, and because the net effect of the play, in spite of Malvolio, is not comic. *Twelfth Night* is, moreover, a crucial case in the study of Shakespearian comedy, as it exhibits the chief problems that are to be raised and resolved less successfully in the problem comedies and the last plays. If it is possible to demonstrate the pattern that Shakespeare employed in *Twelfth Night*—a combination of consistent and ingenious variations on a favorite theme of classical comedy—then Shakespeare's technique of comic inversion becomes clearly recognizable; it is this technique which, when pressed too far and insufficiently controlled by comic decorum, produces such baffling and irritating works as *Measure for Measure*.

Twelfth Night is compounded of three plots. Central to the play, as Mark Van Doren has well said, is Malvolio, the gull, critical and waspish, an efficiency expert, a busybody. To pay him back for his insults, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria contrive to lead him by the nose until he has disgraced himself with

Olivia, been confined as a madman, and put out of his humor publicly in the presence of his mistress and his tormentors. He is a comic protagonist *par excellence*; his ambition and his vanity are precisely the comic vices by means of which he is plagued. The counterfeited letter is exquisitely designed so that he will put just such a construction on it as will gratify his self-love and lead him to his own destruction. And, once he has been forced to see himself as a gull, in Olivia's pitying line, "Alas poor fool, how have they baffled thee!", Malvolio has nothing to reply but "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" before he rushes off.

This is such a plot as would have delighted Ben Jonson or any writer of classical satirical comedy; Professor Campbell has justly called it "Shakespeare's comedy of humours." Its mainspring is the unmasking of a gull by his own witless conceit; it is enhanced by the parallel action in which Sir Andrew is persuaded to court Olivia, only to have his head broken by way of reward. The baiting of Malvolio is unrelieved in its comic heartlessness, and is not even superficially moral in its purpose. Others may prate about reforming the gull by putting him out of his humor; there can be no doubt, as we watch the undoing of Malvolio, that we are intended to share Sir Toby's sadistic pleasure in the process, and that no one takes the slightest interest in whether all this will make a better man of Malvolio. (Even Molière and Shaw occasionally seem to protest too much about the corrective function of the comic artist. But then every profession from time to time finds it convenient to make a show of public service.)

At the risk of laboring the obvious, I should like to recall the essential elements of Malvolio's story: the progress toward self-recognition of a man who is partly self-deceived and partly deceived by others; who assumes a form of disguise in order (as he thinks) to achieve his end, but who must ultimately divest himself of it; who loves, but—as he comes to realize—in vain. He is at length brought to utter confusion, but his downfall produces pain only in himself, a ridiculous figure (in spite of nineteenth- and twentieth-century romanticizing) and therefore worthy of suffering the typical fate of a comic protagonist.

The second of the three plots of *Twelfth Night* deals with the frustrated love of Olivia for Viola-Cesario and its happy resolution in the marriage of Olivia and Sebastian. The first interview of Olivia and the disguised Viola is a brilliantly contrived comic exchange, the end of which is tempered by Olivia's confession of love for the supposed youth. Here are all the elements of a romantic plot of frustrated love in the manner of Beaumont and Fletcher. Shakespeare, however, is content to develop the emotional possibilities of this situation for only one additional scene; then, using precisely such a casual, perfunctory, and mechanical device as he had unblushingly exploited in the farcical *Comedy of Errors*, he substitutes Sebastian for Viola and packs the lovers off to a priest. Let no one tell us of the profound psychology that Shakespeare here displays in making Viola and Sebastian identical twins in wit and intellect as well as in form and feature. Shakespeare is merely hustling his minor characters off the stage with the least possible trouble, whatever the cost in plausibility. In this respect, at least, *Twelfth Night* is no less a romance than *The Winter's Tale*.

Note, however, that the story of Viola, Olivia, and Sebastian, like that of Malvolio, turns on Olivia's awakening from a deception—actually a double deception, produced partly by a disguise and partly by lack of self-knowledge. She

first is made to realize, when she becomes infatuated with Viola, that her determination to mourn her brother seven years can be overcome in a twinkling:

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
With an invisible and subtle stealth
To creep in at mine eyes. (I. v. 314-317)

Similarly, she must presently abase herself before the young page, beg his hand in marriage, and hale him before a priest, offering no seemlier excuse for her unladylike haste than

Plight me the full assurance of your faith
That my most jealous and too doubtful soul
May live at peace. (IV. iii. 26-28)

The most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty has indeed learned to humble herself. From this point forward, she has little to do in the play but to help complete the confusion of Malvolio.

The third plot is, of course, the story of Viola and Orsino. Just as Malvolio is deceived by Maria and Sir Toby, and Olivia by Viola, so Orsino is baffled partly by his infatuation for Olivia (which steeps him in a fashionable melancholy) and by his inability to penetrate the disguise of the unfortunate Viola. This is a comedy of errors in which the only character who is fully aware of the situation is powerless to remedy it, and can only apostrophize her page's garments:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!
For such as we are made of, such we be.
How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly;
And I (poor monster) fond as much on him;
And she (mistaken) seems to dote on me. (II.i.28-36)

Now, whereas we take satisfaction in the untrussing of Malvolio, and we never really fear that the awakening of Olivia will pass beyond the boundaries of comedy (as is made altogether plain by the simple and mechanical contrivance that extricates her from her predicament), the story of Viola and Orsino is something else again. Although unmistakably comic in outline, in its development this action seizes every opportunity to develop sentimental suggestions and implications. It may be argued that comic decorum does not exclude sentiment. On this point authorities disagree; nevertheless, when Rosalind permits her mind to run on Orlando and her wished-for joys, she almost at once mocks herself for so doing. Viola cannot; not only is her situation beyond her control, but she is temperamentally one with Hero and Celia, not with Rosalind or Beatrice. In other words, she is the kind of heroine whom one does not expect to find playing a leading role in comedy, but rather serving as a Julia to a Kate Hardcastle.

Now the curious thing about *Twelfth Night* is not only that Viola plays the leading feminine part, but that the patently comic action of Malvolio, central though it be to the structure of the play, is clearly the action that least engages Shakespeare's attention. In short, here is a play that inverts what we may regard as the normal order of elements in a comedy, with respect to the importance it assigns to each. The sentimental story of Viola and Orsino is in first place; closely connected with it but clearly subordinate to it is the more overtly comic story of Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian; and in last place is the comic gulling of Malvolio. All three plots have fundamentally the same structure: a comic protagonist is gulled by another person, and is at length forced to recognize and take account of the imposition that has been practiced upon him. But it makes a very great difference whether, on the one hand, the gull is Orsino, unwillingly deceived by Viola, or whether, on the other hand, Maria and Sir Toby are joyfully hoodwinking Malvolio. Shakespeare has so harmonized the three actions that they answer one another on different levels and with different effects; but there can be no doubt as to which of these actions seemed to him of paramount interest and importance. He invented the story of Malvolio, and used it with rare skill as the foundation of his play; but he was concerned first of all with Viola and secondarily with Olivia.

Similar patterns appear in the other comedies of this period of Shakespeare's career. Rosalind's half-willing, half-unwilling deception of Orlando is echoed in her dealings with the shepherdess Phebe; but the gay mockery of the uninhibited heroine, confident of her power, lends the play a unity of comic tone that is beyond *Twelfth Night*. The deception of Beatrice and Benedick offers a comic counterpart to the grim and implausible loves of Hero and Claudio; here the comic underplot usurps the place of the more serious action and imposes its tone on the entire play.

Such a line of investigation can be usefully extended to the later comedies as well. For our purpose, however, it is sufficient if we can show that Shakespeare, beginning with a theme of classical comedy, proceeded to devise a series of variations on this fundamental action, variations that departed more and more from comedy in their effects though not in their methods. If the total effect of *Twelfth Night*, owing to the predominance of Viola's story, suggests *la comédie larmoyante* more than a Goldsmith could approve, we should not seek to explain this fact by postulating special theories of Shakespearian comedy or by atomizing Shakespeare's plays into individual scenes. Above all, we should not neglect the importance in the play's structure of the grossly anti-romantic plot of Malvolio and his tormentors.

Twelfth Night, together with Shakespeare's other great comedies, leads one to conclude that Dr. Johnson's praise of Shakespeare's comic genius was hardly exaggerated, although one hesitates to affirm with him that the comedies surpass the tragedies in excellence. One cannot agree with Dr. Johnson, however, that Shakespeare's plays were neither comedies nor tragedies. The early comedies, such as *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, are surely true comedies; and in them Shakespeare employed a comic structure and method that he, like his colleagues, had inherited from the ancients and turned to his own uses. The dark comedies depart from Shakespeare's normal practice in comedy because in them he fails

to reconcile conflicting elements of romance and satire. The great comedies such as *Twelfth Night* show, on the contrary, Shakespeare working effectively within the tradition of classical comedy and enlarging it to encompass a rich and harmonious development of fundamentally comic matter.

Washington, D. C.