

The Dialectics of Structure in Shakespearean Comedy

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When we speak of Shakespeare, at least three aspects of his magical personality seem to be unveiling. In the first place, he was a man who lived like other men of his times and died 400 years ago. We hardly know this man to a satisfactory extent and whatever we know is less than significant. Secondly, there is the dramatic genius whose plays are acted and performed all over the world and bring thousands of people from the globe to flutter around theatres to see the plays like moths around a light. When we look at the variety of people who come to see and hear these plays, we realize that the first remark ever made about Shakespeare's admirers is still the best one. It is the opening sentence of the preface to the first Folio: "From the most able to him that can but spell. There you are numbered."

Yet there is a third and a still greater Shakespeare. The reader in Shakespearean world is led from the characteristics of the individual play, the vividness of characterization, the texture of imagery, and the like. But more than anything Shakespeare holds us by his power to invent the human in a man. He is there in his plays with all the follies and foibles, virtues and victories, magic and miracles, and pity and fear – in short everything that comes under the compass of what can be called attributes of a man. In the present paper I seek to argue that the recurring and everlasting appeal and popularity of Shakespearean comedy has its roots in the structural patterns of his plays, that his profound use of conventional elements like oral tradition, folk-tales, rituals, fairy-tales, miracles etc. lend them a quality of perennial interest which surpasses all ages and all times.

The Greeks produced two kinds of comedy, Old comedy, represented by the plays of Aristophanes, and New comedy, of which the best known exponent is Menander. New comedy unfolds from what may be described as a comic Oedipus Situation. Its main theme is the successful effort of a young man to outwit an opponent and possess the girl of his choice.

The opponent is usually the father and the psychological descent of the heroine from the mother is also sometimes hinted at. The father frequently wants the same girl, and is cheated out of her by the son, the mother thus becoming the son's ally. The girl is usually a slave or a courtesan, and the plot turns on a 'Cognitio' or discovery of birth which makes her marriageable. Thus it turns out that she is not under an insuperable taboo after all but is an accessible object of desire, so that the plot follows the regular wish-fulfillment pattern.

Shakespearean comedy is not Aristotelian and realistic like Menander's, nor platonic and dialectic like Aristophanes', nor Thomist and sacramental like Dante's, but a fourth kind. It is an Elizabethan kind, and is not confined either to Shakespeare or to the drama. Like Spenser's The Faerie Queen, Shakespeare too has his green world of comedy. Usually female are strengthened and there is something maternal about this world in which the new order of the comic resolution is nourished and brought to birth. In the comedies, the green world suggests an original golden age which makes us wonder if it is not the normal world. The Forest of Arden in As you like it, is the best illustration of this kind in which the green world has it all its way.

In Shakespeare, this world of fairies, dreams, disembodied souls, and pastoral lovers may not be a "real" world, but there is something equally illusory in the stumbling and blinded follies of the "normal" world, we spend our lives partly in a waking world we call normal and partly in a dream world which we create out of our own desires. Shakespeare endows both worlds with equal imaginative power, brings them opposite one another and makes each world seem unreal when seen by the light of the other. It is difficult to categorize Shakespearean form of comedy for his distinctive comic resolution is different – it creates a detachment of the spirit born of the reciprocal reflection of two illusory realities. For Shakespeare, the subject matter of poetry is not life, nor nature, or reality, or revelation, or anything else that the philosopher builds on, but poetry itself, a verbal universe. That is one reason why he is both the most elusive and the substantial of poets.

The Elizabethan age evolved two kinds of comedy, and the names of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare may be taken to typify each kind. Jonson's great comedies are comedies of

manners: they are not exactly realistic plays, but they do maintain a kind of realistic illusion. No character or incident is introduced which permanently upsets that illusion, and unities of time and place are observed, not out of pedantry, but because they are essential to the unity of action. Shakespeare, on the other hand, never wrote a pure comedy of manners, and never failed to include something in his comedy which tends to dispel the realistic atmosphere. If there are no direct fairy tales or magical forests and islands, there are plot-themes derived from myth, folklore, and romance. The strong element of folklore in the baiting of Falstaff seems to rule out even The Merry Wives. The unities of time and place largely disappear along with the unity of probability.

Shakespeare unlike Johnson was an ignorant but quick, fluent and the “inspired child of nature”. That is why his comedies lend themselves admirably to open-air performance, seem more natural than ever. The tradition of Shakespearean comedy is very different. Whitman was perhaps not wholly right when he wrote that Shakespeare’s comedies “are altogether non-acceptable to America and democracy”. Shaw was perhaps not wholly right when he suggested that many comedies of Shakespeare aptly described by such titles as As you like It and Much Ado About Nothing which could not hold the stage if Shakespeare were not a cultural vested interest.

As for the victorious society, the main figures are of course the technical hero and heroine, the nice young man and the nice young girl he finally gets. The hero’s character has the neutrality which enables him to represent a wish fulfillment. That is, we have to believe him to be a more interesting and important person than he is represented. Examples are Orlando in As you like It, Bassanio in The Merchant of Venice and, Duke Orsino in Twelfth Night. The comic ending is generally manipulated by a twist in the plot. It may sound complicated, but the plots of comedy are often complicated because there is something inherently absurd about complications. This is one reason for the convention of disguise. The manipulation of plot does not always involve metamorphosis of character, but there is no violation of comic decorum when it does. Irrational conversions, miraculous transformations and providential assistance are inseparable from comedy. The conversion of Oliver (As You Like It) or of the agents of Don John in Much Ado strain our credulity even more than our

heartstrings. Further whatever emerges is supposed to be there for good. Thus comedy aspires for the desirable and not the real.

Shakespeare's comedy, which reaches its final form in the dramatic romance, is far more primitive and popular, and is of a type found all over the world. The conventions of romantic comedy are much the same whether we find them in Cymbeline or The Winter's Tale, in Fletcher or Lope de Vega, in Menander, in Kalidasa, in Chinese comedies of the Sung dynasty, in Japanese Kabuki plays. If archaeologists ever discover a flourishing drama in Mayan or Minoan culture, it may not have plays like Lear or Oedipus but it will assuredly have plays like Pericles. The contemporary commercial movie is much closer to Shakespeare romance than to comedy of manners. It seems as though the romance is actually the primitive and popular basis of dramatic entertainment, all other forms being specialized varieties of it.

"Primitive" does not mean here chronologically early rather it is a sophisticated use of rituals that this type of comedy celebrates; on the other hand "popular" does not stand giving something pertaining to low and base standards or classless as it comes very near to being in Shakespeare. If Shakespeare at the end of his career reached the primitive and popular bedrock of drama, he did so as a result of giving the drama what it wanted, of expressing the laws of dramatic construction with increasing force and intensity. Johnson established, by conscious effort and will, the tradition of modern comedy; Shakespeare achieved a far deeper affinity with dramatic tradition by not doing anything about it.

The central approach to Shakespeare can only be, therefore, through a study of dramatic structure. His comedies feature a popular, self-contained and highly stylized technique. Shakespeare seems to impose some likeness on his plays by repeating his devices—a map road of dramatic structure. The storm at sea (both in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*), the identical twins (in *Twelfth Night*), the heroine disguised as a boy (Viola, Rosalind and Portia), and retreat into the forest are some of the prominent themes that occur so often in his comic plays.

Each play of Shakespeare is a world in itself, so complete a satisfying world that is easy, delightful and charismatic to get lost in it. Many critics like Matthew Arnold and T. S.

Eliot have told us that Shakespeare is a dangerous influence in a literary tradition because he is so clever and resourceful, and so impossible to imitate without disaster. That is why no wonder the astonishing variety of life is a hallmark of every fairyland in Shakespeare. A noted critic remarked on Shakespeare as a great writer “who has played so large a part in forming our own mental processes”. He is much more than a poet, a dramatist or a literary genius; he has shaped a universal culture, a verbal order of words. Therefore, Arnold rightly sings in praise of this immortal litterateur:

“Others abide our question. Thou art free
We ask and ask. Thou smilest, and art still.”

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