

Through their great diversity in subject matter and style, the plays “Henry IV Part One”, “A Midsummer Night's Dream” and “The Winter's Tale”, illustrate the variety of Shakespeare's use of the genre of comedy. With his great comic characters, his contrivance of comic situations and his adaptations of the traditional forms such as romance and pastoral festivity, Shakespeare's sure touch achieves a broad reach of comedic effect.

If we move the Greek derivation of comedy meaning “merry making”¹ to Elizabethan times with Jonson's caution that while “the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy”², it should “delight and teach”³, we have a glimpse of what comedy could be in Shakespeare's time; more than just a frothy piece of fun, but still an entertainment. Stricter definition of comedy seems a problem and there is merit in Charlton's exasperated admission that “comedy ...may be taken as a species because it is commonly recognized as such”.⁴ Such circularity of argument seems preferable to finer discrimination and also allows consideration of this material; an historical play with comedic interludes, a fairy story celebrating a wedding, and an often depressing tragicomedy, under the same genre and allowing a study of Shakespeare's deft touch in using similar techniques to vastly different effect in different circumstances.

Much of the variety evident within these comedies depends on the way Shakespeare uses his favourite devices to set up the comedic situations. Prominent amongst these devices is the endearing tactic of allowing the audience “in” on an upcoming potentially comic circumstance, of which the characters are largely unaware. In a “Midsummer Night's Dream” for example the pansy juice Oberon uses to humble Titania gives the audience the

¹ J.Cudden, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Middlesex, Penguin, 1977), p.128.

² B.Jonson., in L. Lerner, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, (Middlesex, Penguin, 1967), p.297.

³ Ibid.

⁴ H,Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, (London, Methuen, 1938), p.16.

comic suspense of not knowing who will become the object of her unexpected affection. Further, the modern reader's literary competence for such pantomime devices raises an expectation of Puck wreaking havoc with the love juice amongst the lovers in the forest. The fun of Titania looking ridiculous and the completion of the perfect disarray of affection between Demetrius, Helena, Lysander and Hermia is heightened because we know something of the sort is coming. Similarly but more explicitly in "Henry IV, Part One", the audience is included in the confidence of Hal and Poins as they plan to rob Falstaff and his would be highway men;

The virtue of this jest will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper.⁵

Poins telegraphs the jest that will follow after the execution of their plan but such is Falstaff's story that though forewarned there is no sense of anticlimax. The power of having the audience aware, as a privilege, of what is to come is shown in the opposite case in "The Winter's Tale", when the statue comes to life. There is no preparation for this at all and the effectiveness of the surprise must be tempered by a somewhat hollow feeling of being cheated, as if Shakespeare is not quite playing fair. Certainly the earlier collusion with the audience in "The Winter's Tale" in which Camillo induces Polixenes to leave for fear of Leontes's jealousy, feels more comfortable as a device with comedic possibilities. Knowing that Leontes is wrong in his fears, but also that Polixenes's disappearance will only reinforce them, the audience is aware of the joke on Leontes, who will now make himself ridiculous. That this results in tragedy contrasts with another monarch Shakespeare makes look silly; for when Titania is reduced to love of Bottom, her humiliation has no lasting consequences and is finally rather touching.

⁵ W. Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part One I.ii, 189-191.

A further aspect in which Shakespeare invites his audience to join the jest upon the characters is the use disguise and dressing up. In “A Midsummer Night's Dream” this is used repeatedly to great effect with the troupe of rustic actors playing at lovers, walls and even the moon while Bottom manages the simultaneous disguise wearing an ass’s head with the illusion of being Titania's lover. The disguise to fool Falstaff while robbing him, while presaging the later jollity at the tavern, underscores Halls disguise of his true nature to his wastrel friends and Falstaff in particular as he admits in a soliloquy:

Yet herein will I imitate the sun.
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again he himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wondered at.⁶

Disguise and illusion are at their zenith in Autolycus who is in turns a disgraced courtier, a robbed traveller, pedlar, singer, a courtier again in Florizel's clothes, and finally a humble petitioner to those he previously had tormented, Shepherd and Clown. That this list does not begin to fully describe Shakespeare's creation in Autolycus apart, the progression of forms he takes is yet another cycle in a play based on a cyclical pattern. The simple device of merely dressing up becomes for Shakespeare more than just a trick, but a way of underpinning the development of the respective plays.

Further comedic force is giving to these disguisings when the form of presentation intended for the plays is taken into account. Henderson points out the prospect of Perdita “played by a boy pretending he’s a princess disguised as a shepherdess, who is Queen of the

⁶ *Ibid.*, l.i. 201-205.

shearing feast”.⁷ A further example is the thought of the rustic's play being presented, and criticised as unrealistic by the onstage audience, who are in turn in a sparsely furnished stage being watched by an audience who could raise similar objections.

Another favourite device, the coupling of unlikely characters together, shows how much variety Shakespeare can wring out of one idea. The bizarre couple Bottom and Titania is perhaps the archetype of this device, but while enchanting, its reliance on a fairy tale world and love juice, and its rapid dissolution followed by return to normality, contrast it sharply with the odd couples that turn up in the more realistic plays. Hal and Falstaff are a mismatch between an heir conveniently hiding his nobility under the bushel of a misspent youth and a cowardly braggart. No sudden loss of enchantment destroys this pairing, rather Hal's disenchantment with his wastrel life when his responsibilities are inevitable and imminent. What is at one level just a humorous contrast between fat and thin, old and young, is also a changing relationship which is one of the major ways in which Hal's development is seen. In this case the development is linear in keeping with Hal's future as the hero-king Henry V. The relationship of Leontes and Hermione is in contrast cyclical, in keeping with the structure of “The Winter's Tale”. This contrasting couple, Hermione the pure and wronged woman and Leontes, are separated by the results of his paranoid reaction to jealousy, and find reconciliation only unexpectedly and after much time. While Leontes's behaviour is so extreme as to be nearly humorous, it is in this case an embarrassed humour, as the tragic consequences of his paranoid thought disorder unfold with the onset of the winter of the play.

⁷ D. Henderson, EN201 Study Guide No, 1 (University of Queensland, External Studies, 1988), p.19.

- The greatest variety in Shakespearian Comedy is due to the great comic characters he has created. In these plays Bottom, Falstaff and Autolycus stand out in this respect, and as characters seem more rounded and human, and have the substance to obtain sympathy in the face of activities that do not bear up to close scrutiny by a reader with modern sensibilities. Bottom is of course an exception to any reservations, with his forthright everyman stance in the face of weird goings on, he remains a lovable enthusiast, while providing a reference point of common sense amongst the love-struck couples. Although he looks the most absurd of the characters, and lacks the intelligence and position of the other stable characters, Theseus and Hippolyta, he is perhaps the sanest of them all and certainly the most fun.

Falstaff, while at times a fun character, has a popularity difficult to understand. It may only be modern sentiment but on the face of it Falstaff deals in human misery for his own comfort and schemes to use his friendship with Hal to provide for future gain. His humour has a hard edge involving lies, cowardice and insult; in keeping with a character Hal must eventually reject. Autolycus, while lacking Falstaff's nobility and being an incorrigible rogue is in the final analysis pretty harmless and his witty amoral stance is all the more attractive when contrasted with the earnest young couple, especially Florizel. His jokes are on those he dupes, and upon himself, and his colourful presence makes the shearing feast a success.

As well as variety in technique, Shakespeare includes variety in the traditional elements he incorporates into these plays. Whether court masques or rural festivals, bar-room bawdy satire or romance, he seamlessly integrates them into the play. Jack Falstaff exhibits both satirical and profane comedy which is not prominent elsewhere in these plays. He

parodies Henry IV advising his wayward son with an enthusiasm for euphemism which he also uses when abusing Hal:

'Sblood, you starveling; you eel skin, you dried neat's tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stock fish... you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bowcase, you vile standing tuck!⁸

These epithets in the main compare Hal to a penis in a sustained piece of profanity of considerable earthy exuberance. His baiting of Mistress Quickly is in a similar vein albeit with a lighter touch. This all contrasts sharply with the light, airy treatment of sexuality in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with idealised, though illogical, love and modesty in ascendance, perhaps only possible because it is a dream.

"The Winter's Tale" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" provide divergent examples of Shakespeare's handling of romance. For all the modesty and light dreamy quality of the latter, there is a sense of rightness immediate sensuality, even though it is a form of madness. In "The Winter's Tale" this madness associated with love becomes full blown paranoid psychosis and no longer a harmless dream to wake from next morning, but for Leontes a sixteen year nightmare of winter, before healing, reconciliation and a new beginning.

These two plays also contain evidence of the influence of masques and traditional festivals. Welsford finds the court masque not as a complete entity in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" but as the elements of dance, song and mime incorporated into the play, divorcing it from any specific occasion for celebration.⁹ The play itself, with its enchanted holiday atmosphere, harks back to the maying rituals of traditional courtship. Even more indebted to pre-Christian ritual is the shearing feast of "The Winter's Tale". This connection via the

⁸ Henry IV, Part One. II, iv 244-249,

⁹ E.Welsford, in Lerner pp.99-109.

Whitsun' feast day which incorporated pagan spring festivals is illustrated by a thirteenth century spring carol "Tempus adest floridum":

The time of flowers is at hand
For the flowers are springing up
In everything springlike
All things are expressing themselves
That which the cold had harmed
Is being restored by the heat
Through much travail
We see this coming to pass.¹⁰

Autolycus's song is of the same tradition:

When daffodils begin to pear,
With heigh the doxy over the dale
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.¹¹

Both songs are in the same spirit of "The Winter's Tale" with the cycles of the play and nature coming together for a new beginning. Shakespeare has taken the feel of the spring festival and made it fit his play both as an episode within the play and applied to the whole sense of the work.

The variety of Shakespeare's comedy is well represented within these three plays, both in the differing emphasis given to his favourite comedic devices, his comic characterizations, and in his adaptation of traditional forms. His comedies do indeed provide merry making,

¹⁰ E. Poston, *The Penguin Book of Christmas Carols*, (Middlesex, Penguin, 1965), p.25.

¹¹ W. Shakespeare, "The Winter's Tale IV. iii. 1-4.

and at their most complete synthesis found amongst these plays certainly delight us and continue to enlighten us.

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