DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 637 TE 001 352

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William Shakespeare: Comedian. English Association of Ohio Monographs in Language and Literature, No. 1.
Pub Date 65
Note-12p., A lecture delivered to the English Association of Ohio, October 10, 1964.
Available from-National Council of Teachers of English, 508 So. 6th St., Champaign, Ill. 61820 (Stock No. 39602, $0.50)
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.70
Descriptors-*Characterization (Literature), *Comedy, *Drama, English Instruction, *English Literature, Irony, *Literary Conventions, Literary Genres, Literature, Moral Criticism, Motifs, Renaissance Literature, Tragedy
Identifiers-*Shakespeare William

In his plays, Shakespeare reveals a double view of life by repeatedly juxtaposing a representation of the comic spirit with the tragic protagonist. In the idiom of Shakespeare's world, heroic characters often embarrass or destroy themselves by confusing appearance with reality. Then, the comic characters or "mad men," functioning as "professional undeceivers," shatter the illusions of the self-deceived. Having no illusions of their own and no need to pose as wise, these "fools" can speak the unvarnished truth and can also skillfully effect illusions to serve their purposes. Falstaff, stage manager and actor supreme, completely incorporates this comic technique as he employs such devices as the practical joke to educe reality for his opponents as well as the audience. (JB)

William Shakespeare: Comedian

By

Norman Sanders

A Lecture

Delivered to the English Association of Ohio

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Published by the English Association of Ohio, 1965

Copies of this monograph may be obtained from the Editor of the series, Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio. Price: 50 cents.

I think most people would agree that Shakespeare's two most profound and tragic figures are Hamlet, the young prince of Denmark, and Lear, the old king of Britain. And, in view of this, I have always been struck by what may be called perhaps the two most common representations of these characters in the pictures and statues of which they have been the subjects.

Hamlet is almost invariably seen at his moment of quiet truth when he accepts the reality of death, newly returned from the pirates' custody, dressed, in his sea-clothes and staring pensively at the skull which he holds in his hand. King Lear, on the other hand, is usually depicted at the height of his chaotic passion, out on the bare heath with his rain-soaked garments, and his hair and beard whipped by the elements, as a slim, boyish figure crouches at his feet. What I find interesting here is that at two such moments these tragic protagonists are both accompanied by representatives of the comic spirit. For it is a court Fool that cowers at Lear's side, trying to out-jest the storm; and it is the skull of poor Yorick, the royal jester, that Hamlet contemplates with a mixture of loathing and affection.

Now, such a coupling of the serious and the comic is not rare in Shakespeare. Rather, it is one of the fundamentals of his art and the vision of life which that art embodies. For even as it is impossible to sit through a Shakespearean tragedy without being aware, if only for a moment, of the comic (bitter and ironic though it may be); so it is impossible to see one of his comedies without sensing the shadows of evil, violence and death that lurk just below their glittering surfaces, and occasionally erupt unexpectedly into life, almost upsetting the comic balance. These forces may take the form of the sudden death of the heroine's father as in *Love's Labour's Lost,* or the agony of an oppressed race as in *The Merchant of Venice,* or the cynical misanthropy of a prowling Jaques as in *As You Like It.* But whatever the form the manifestation may take, their presence is unmistakable.

I think this essentially double view of life is basic in Shakespeare because his kingdom was of this world. He was no seer or religious mystic who speculated obsessively about the life to come: he was as uncertain of the existence beyond death as someone like William Blake was sure. His vision, whether it included tragedy or regeneration or salvation, was firmly anchored to this earth and man's life and possibilities on it. All the materials he employed, diverse as they were, Christian beliefs, pagan fertility rituals, the divine right of kings, the nobility of Roman suicide, ghosts, witches or fairies,—all are of equal value to him at the time of their employment and are seen in terms of man and the problems that beset him while he lives.

The end of Shakespeare's drama was "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature"; and he knew that the woven fabric of our lives is one of good and ill together, of comedy as well as tragedy. As Dr. Johnson, the wisest of his critics, has noted, Shakespeare's compositions are

> of a distinct kind: exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another.

Unfettered as he and his theatre were by those Aristotle-derived dramatic rules which decreed otherwise, Shakespeare was free to give full rein simultaneously to his skill which led him to tragedy and to his instinct that led him to comedy. And the instinct was every bit as true as the skill; for the comedian

deals as profoundly in his way with life as the tragedian — they are dealing with but different aspects of the same thing. In this Shakespeare is the living proof of that maxim to which Socrates at his Athenian banquet forced Agathon and Aristophanes to agree: that "the man who knew how to write a comedy could also write a tragedy, and that a skillful tragic writer was capable of being also a comic writer."

I

One aim that all human beings have in common is that we are all seeking the truth—that elusive goal which we are perhaps nearest to only while we are actively engaged in its pursuit. And the most difficult truth of all to seek is that concerning ourselves. "Que sais-je?" asked the French essayist, and provided the only possible answer to such a question: "Je sais moi."

This task of seeking or knowing ourselves, however, is always bedeviled by the fact that life presents to our view so many paradoxes, so many contradictory surfaces and false appearances which may or may not conceal the very truth we seek. Hamlet, you may remember, at the beginning of his play, is quite sure he knows the difference between what is and what merely seems to be. When his mother suggests that his grief for his father's death *seems* so particular in him, he asserts

> Seems, madam! nay, it is; I know not 'seems'.
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
> For they are actions that a man might play:
> But I have that within which passeth show;
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

However, during the course of the play, he has to learn that grief which is played can produce real tears in the actor and appear to be more real than his own, even as a simple tapestry hanging can conceal a meddling old fool instead of the damned villain at whom he thinks he lunges with his rapier. Shakespeare knew that such deceptions as this can lead to tragedy: that a noble Moorish general can mistake villainy for honesty and strangle his faithful wife; that an old king can mistake flattery for truth in two daughters and truculence for lack of affection in a third; and that a Scottish general's wife can appear to deny the very powers of nature while awake, yet be forced to acknowledge them while she sleeps.

This is indeed one way to display illusions; but another is to show us those deceptions that we practice daily—not maliciously with all our concentration, like an Iago or a Richard III, on other people — but on ourselves. It is that day-to-day fostering of the illusions we often live by, and which, unless we become aware of them, may push us dangerously close to living a lie. The form of art which is the best vehicle for such a display is comedy — in which gulls and fools, the disguised and the blatantly transparent, the deceived and the undeceived rub shoulders in Illyria, or the Forest of Arden, or Verona or London.

Sometimes the dramatic form such a display takes is based on a humorous practical joke like that in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The hero and heroine of this play, Benedick and Beatrice, are surely two of the most sophisticated and worldly, knowing characters in the Shakespearean gallery. Benedick, indeed,

is so conscious of the pitfalls of life that he vows eternal bachelorhood. When Don Pedro tells him that he will look pale with love, his reply is just as positive as Hamlet's:

> With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love: prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel-house for the sign of blind Cupid.

And Beatrice, too, believes herself to be just as clear-sighted on the same subject:

> For, hear me . . . wooing, wedding and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque pace: the first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding mannerly-modest as a measure, full of state and ancientry; and then comes repentance and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinque pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

Yet, two simple playlets, plotted by their friends and acted out within their hearing, are sufficient to make them "horribly in love." And it is through their love that they find themselves. They come to realize also that, while words, over which they both have such a mastery, can express the truth, they can also be as deceptive as eyesight, and confuse us about reality just as certainly. Such characters as these, however, can laugh at themselves every bit as successfully as they can at others. As Benedick says in excuse of his marriage to Beatrice: "the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married." Such a man as this may be forgiven his earlier delusions at the play's end.

At other times, Shakespeare sets at the center of his demonstration a character who needs to be no audience at a contrived play, who requires no aid to self-deception, because he is at once both the perfect actor and most responsive audience in the small, narrow theatre of his own mind. Such a one is Malvolio, the steward in *Twelfth Night*. As he walks alone in his mistress's garden, he daydreams — and like all daydreams, his are as egocentric as the next man's:

> Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state . . . Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown; having come from a daybed, where I have left Olivia sleeping . . . and then to have the humour of state; and after a demure travel of regard, telling them I know my place as I would they should do theirs, to ask for my kinsman Toby . . . Seven of my people, with an obedient start, make out for him: I frown the while; and perchance wind up my watch, or play with my —

and his hand reaches automatically for his steward's chain, the sign of his rank, but here an unwelcome remembrancer of reality breaking concretely into his world of fancy; and he quickly corrects the gesture and words to ". . . play with my — some rich jewel."

Unfortunately for Malvolio, his little play has another audience in Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian who are hiding behind the garden hedge. The forged letter attesting Olivia's love for him which Malvolio finds in his path teaches him nothing new: it merely reinforces an already fully-fledged self-delusion, and is the means of bringing its operation out of the realm of fantasy, and into the cruel light of reality. It enables Malvolio to play out in life the role he has always secretly believed he was destined for. He does so — in cross garters and yellow stockings — and as a result is locked up as a madman. How often have critics of *Twelfth Night* complained that Malvolio's treatment is too severe for his fault? Indeed, how often have we all felt the same emotion in the theatre? And, I think, with good reason. For we in the audience have our daydreams also; only most of us are fortunate enough

never to have Malvolio's opportunity to test them against life. As Lichtenberg has observed pertinently here, "A man's character may be inferred from nothing so surely as from the jest he takes in bad part." Malvolio cannot take the jest in good part; unlike Benedick, he cannot learn from comedy, and in the logic of this art form, his last cry as he leaves the stage is that of a man whose illusion was so total and so necessary to his being, that, once shattered, he has nothing left but the last refuge of the despairing soul: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!"

As we progress through Shakespeare's comic world, the self-deceptions and cherished illusions accrue, as character after character, as certain as Hamlet was of the difference between his mourning clothes and true grief, find that their most treasured certainties are false. Shylock is brutally made aware of his wrong values, Orsino is violently shaken out of his mawkish affectation, Olivia is laughed into sense by a suit of clothes, and Rosalind betrayed by a bloody handkerchief. In this tangle of daydreams, some are punished, others merely have their self-esteem pricked, and some few perceive the truth just before the curtain falls. It is because such are the themes of all the comedies that disguise and the idea of clothing play so prominent a part in both their action and their language. For while there may be some truth in the claim that Shakespeare got his Violas and Julias and Rosalinds into page's costume as soon as possible because such roles were played by boys on the Elizabethan stage, it is true also that disguise is the perfect visual equivalent of a deeper spiritual mistaking.

II

There is, however, one class of characters who are never deceived, because they cannot afford to be, because they are the professional undeceivers of this life. These are the fools, whether they be of the courtly or natural variety. In *Twelfth Night,* Viola puts her finger on the heart of the matter after a conversation with Feste the jester, in lines which must surely have been subscribed to by her creator:

> This fellow is wise enough to play the fool;
> And to do that well craves a kind of wit:
> He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
> The quality of persons, and the time,
> And, like the haggard, check at every feather
> That comes before his eye. This is a practice
> As full of labour as a wise man's art:
> For folly that he wisely shows is fit;
> But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit.

Such men as Feste are "allowed" fools; they have no need to strive or pretend to be other than they are. And Shakespeare endows them with a quality which is derived from their traditional role and which enables them to do that which others cannot: that is to use their folly as a stalking-horse beneath which they may shoot their bird-bolts at those wise beings who are too wise to see how foolish they are. This traditional role also liberates them from the necessity of responsible action, so that there is never any tension between them and their immediate circumstances. Like Charlie Chaplin, whether he finds himself in a war trench or in Alaska, they are perfectly adjusted to their environment. And they are so, simply because they never make any attempt at adjustment; it is simply the thing they are that makes them live. They alone bring to the game of life that single-minded concentration that the child brings to its play, and which Nietzsche saw as the key to true maturity.

Thus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* four earnest adolescent lovers take life and themselves with the terrible seriousness that only youth is capable of; and during the course of the play we see them dramatically subjected to the

implications of their mistakings through the agency of Puck and the fairy world with its magic potions. However, Bully Bottom, the London weaver transported to Athens by some curious freak, takes the wood, the deceptive moonlight, and even the love of the fairy queen all in his stride. He knows that "love and reason keep little company together nowadays"; Titania may offer him flowery beds and everything he wishes, but he wants only to have his head scratched; and to the music of fairyland he prefers the sound of the tongs and the bones. He takes only one occupation seriously — that of acting, of pretending — and in that he is the very image of the play — and of life itself — as Theseus perceives.

Nor does the exiled Touchstone in the Forest of Arden find himself out of place. He can sharpen his wit at the expense of the simple shepherd, Corin, rhyme impromptu in a parody of Orlando's bad love poetry, mock Rosalind and her lover, or court a slattern because, as he puts it, "as the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his curb and the falcon her bells, so man hath his desires; and as pigeons bill, so wedlock would be nibbling." The true nature of his role—of the fool's role—however, is not brought out in any of these encounters as it is in his relationship with Jaques, the sour and melancholy man. For Jaques is a man who is disgusted with the world, whose cynical view of humanity, based upon his own former depravity, drives him to solitude, and who in Touchstone imagines he has found the perfect mode of life for himself:

> O that I were a fool!
> I am ambitious for a motley coat . . .
> I must have liberty
> Withal, as large a charter as the wind,
> To blow on whom I please; for so fools have, . . .
> The wise man's folly is anatomised
> Even by the squandering glances of the fool.
> Invest me in my motley; give me leave
> To speak my mind, and I will through and through
> Cleanse the foul body of the infected world,
> If they will patiently receive my medicine.

Like Shakespeare's learned contemporary, Ben Jonson, Jaques perceives the satirical possibilities of the comic spirit. But his very nature and his relentless seeking after perfection prevent him from ever being truly a fool; because such a role entails acceptance. Never could he voice Touchstone's observation, as he solemnly draws his dial from his poke and looks at it with lack-lustre eye,

> Call me not fool till heaven hath sent me fortune . . .
> It is ten o'clock:
> Thus may we see . . . how the world wags:
> 'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
> And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;
> And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
> And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot,
> And thereby hangs a tale.

Jaques, in his famous description of the life process in the seven ages of man speech, judges this process; he seeks to impose an order upon life, whereas the wise fools know that any order there is must rather be sought out.

This is one of the reasons why we find a fool in the most moving of the tragedies, *King Lear*. This play stands, of course, beside the Sistine Chapel, the Choral Symphony, and the *Divine Comedy* as one of the testimonies to the value of the human spirit; and as such, it cannot be categorized by any narrow definition. But, as well as many other things, it is surely a tragedy of disproportion — a disproportion which shows itself in passions, in suffering and in punishment. Without the Fool, one might be inclined to agree with

Charles Lamb, who claimed that it was "essentially impossible to be represented on the stage." But because the Fool is present, like Lear's shadow, we perceive amid the superhuman chaos the possibility of human proportion. He states the simple palpable truths to Lear, as no one else can, because of his traditionally accepted role; but for precisely the same reason, his truths are ignored by Lear. In one sense Lear, Othello, Macbeth are all Malvolios with a capacity to suffer and learn. But there are no Maria and Sir Toby Belch who can manage life for them, in such a way that they may perceive their errors and wrong values. Instead, the forces of life itself push them to the very limits of endurance before they achieve a kind of acceptance. When in the third act of *King Lear* the Fool passes out of the play to "go to bed at noon," it is simply because he is no longer needed; Lear has passed beyond the point where anything can be done for him on a purely human level, and no return is possible.

Hamlet, of course, is not equipped with a living fool. He does not need one, for he can play out in his own person both the roles of hero and fool. Because, in the fifth scene of the play, after he has talked with his father's ghost, this is in effect the decision he takes: he assumes the fool's role and with all the free-speaking privileges that it involves:

> How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,

he observes to Horatio

> As, I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on.

And when we witness his performance when he assumes this antic disposition, it recalls to us the very idiom of the comic world. Is this exchange, for example, between Hamlet and Claudius after Polonius's death distinctively Hamlet's, or could it equally well be that of Feste?

> *King.* Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?
> *Ham.* At supper.
> *King.* At supper? Where?
> *Ham.* Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service — two dishes, but to one table. That's the end . . . A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.
> *King.* What dost thou mean by this?
> *Ham.* Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

Nor is such a kinship of utterance between two such diverse characters as Feste and Hamlet at all surprising, because they are brothers in a Shakespearean society where different modes of experience and divergent moods are fully interrelated. As Mary Lascelles has observed in her British Academy Shakespeare lecture,

> Shakespearean characters do not consist of two sorts, those on whom the comic spirit shines his lantern, and those who are shielded from its beam . . . Shakespeare's comic vision may be called unsparing. It is not mitigated by the seriousness of the occasion.

No character can be spared his confrontation with the comic. And none are spared: not Coriolanus in exile, nor Henry V at Agincourt, nor the Christ-like Duke in *Measure for Measure,* nor even Cleopatra at the hour of her death.

III

There is one special characteristic that all Shakespeare's Fools share with characters as different as Hamlet, Portia, Richard III, Prospero and Oberon;

namely, they are all experts as actors or skillful stage managers. It is striking how many situations in the plays, tragic and comic, are rooted in an awareness of the theatre and its effects; how often Shakespeare places one of his characters so that he has a stage audience, known or unknown to himself, in addition to the real audience in the theatre. As we have noted, Hero, Don Pedro and Claudio act out their playlets in the full knowledge that they have a most receptive audience in Beatrice and Benedick behind the hedge. The four young lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* on the other hand, play out their comic quarrels and reconciliations, unaware that Oberon, their producer, and Puck, their director, are invisibly nearby. In the tragedies, too, Hamlet provides his guilty uncle with an entertainment to wring his withers and catch his conscience; Lear and his Fool direct a play based on the mock trial of Goneril and Regan; and Othello directs the final act of his own tragedy by reciting for his spell-bound audience one of those round, unvarnished tales which had captured the heart of Desdemona. To these characters, it is true, such dramatic projection is but one part of their whole being; whereas to the Fool it is the very condition of his existence.

However, the figure who incorporates most completely this aspect of Shakespeare's comedy, as indeed most others also, is neither traditional Fool nor tragic hero. He is man, Fool, Vice, buffoon, wit, coward and Miles Gloriosus all rolled into one — the fat knight, Sir John Falstaff. First, it is noticeable that Shakespeare carefully places his greatest comic creation not in a comedy at all, but in the center of those doings which worldly men — benighted as they are — imagine to be of prime importance: the sphere of politics. Like the professional Fool, he possesses the quality of easy adjustment; for him any situation is acceptable and he can be put out of countenance by none. If fate sets him down in the Boar's Head tavern in Eastcheap, it is all well and good, for there is a tolerant hostess and a vast deal of liquor; if, on the other hand, it takes him to the battlefield at Shrewsbury, why then a pistol holster is as good a place as any other to carry a pottle of sack. If chance takes him into Lincolnshire, then two doting and reminiscing old justices might as well be played along for a good meal and the inflation of one's self-esteem.

The reason why Falstaff is able to do this is that, similar to the clown, while he is a part of society, he is also outside its standards, its desires and its aims. He is not opposed to these things, he simply does not even recognize their existence as having value; as indeed, for him they do not. However, Falstaff is like this not by virtue of any traditional role which is accepted by society, but because such is his very nature. We can go even further than this, Falstaff never changes, he is not a character who develops; he is an absolute. As Prince Hal observes, he is outside the limits of even Time itself:

> What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack and minutes capons and clocks the tongues of bawds and dials the signs of leaping-houses and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.

He lives in the everlasting present of self-absorption. And in this, as in so many other ways, he is the opposite of the two time-obsessed young men, Hal and Hotspur; for Hal plans to and does redeem time when men least think he will, and Hotspur dies the fool of that time which must have a stop.

Like Bottom, Falstaff creates the environment he finds most congenial: he loves Hal when he is present, but stops not to slander him when only Doll Tearsheet is by. Concepts like Justice, Loyalty or Morality are beside the point where he is concerned. If the serious business of life and the wise men who run it require the monumental idiocy which is war, then is it not more sensible, he reasons, that the graves are filled with the dregs of humanity rather than with the flower of the nation's youth. And what of this concept of honor that men like Hotspur would pursue as high as the moon and as deep as the ocean bed? It cannot set a leg, or mend an arm; why, then Falstaff will have none of it.

He resembles the Fools also in that he has no illusions about himself. Unlike Orsino, Viola and Olivia, he can never be brought face to face with his own image as it appears in other men's eyes. He knows himself perfectly and so cannot be taken unawares. This is why I find it so difficult to go along with those critics who would have us believe that Prince Hal's rejection of him is a mortal blow. Surely it is the sentimentality of the simple Mistress Quickly and Pistol that ascribes his death to a broken heart — such people in plays as in life are ever-ready to hazard such causes. Falstaff died of old age, disease and excess — and in spite of them " 'a babbled of green fields." The comic spirit lives in him because he sees life as he sees himself, with an uncomfortable honesty, which is why *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is so unbelievable. If, as legend has it, this play was written at the request of Queen Elizabeth because she wished to see Falstaff in love, then that normally astute lady had totally misunderstood the character. But, then, of course, this is not really very surprising because she was a first rate ruler and politician—like Henry V.

Finally, Falstaff is the actor supreme. As W. H. Auden has pointed out in his recent book, *The Dyer's Hand*, all he requires from people is an audience. It does not matter what kind of an audience it is. If the Prince and Poins want a description of a fight, then he is ready to regale them vigorously, if not very consistently, with a struggle of epic proportions between himself and four — or was it seven? — men in Lincoln green. His devotion to the art of improvised drama is as total as the child's: to Hal's father he will play the son, or to Hal's son he will play the father. It matters not which — except that Hal will not play out the play, even though it proclaims a basic truth. Again and again, we think that the fat rogue will have his defenses pierced and will be shown up for what he really is, as each of his lies is revealed. At such moments we imagine that now we can remember he is nothing but a globe of sinful continents, that we can disapprove what our minds told us all along we should, but at which we were amused despite our better judgments. But it is we, not Shakespeare, who are mistaken. Falstaff, the unmanageable in man's nature, that force which revolts against the simplified order imposed upon humanity by itself in the name of social well-being, is only waiting for his chance to assert its presence when it is unbidden and least expected. Like Sir Toby Belch, Falstaff will confine himself no finer than he is — and neither will the aspect of human nature he represents. Like the clown, he is able to live with the truth that all situations and actions have a potentiality for moving toward both ends of the moral spectrum. In this there can be "no abuse . . . i' the world . . . none" — for, such is a part of the comedian's art.

IV

The obsession with the art of illusion, with the role played in life, is no accidental feature in the Henry IV plays or in any other play by Shakespeare. As it is fundamental to the comedian, so it is fundamental to the writer of plays, to Shakespeare himself, who can never be unaware of its existence. For all the reality and credibility of his observation and characterization, Shakespeare time and again reminds us of the basic unreality of his art. He knew as early in his career as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

> The lunatic, the lover and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact . . .
> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.

In so many plays he reminds us strikingly of the mutual deception which is drama and to which we, the audience, are willingly subscribing.

This jolting of us into an awareness of the limits of the dramatic illusion itself takes many different forms, and, of course, paradoxically serves to reinforce the illusion as well. In its simplest form it becomes Brutus's words as he and the other conspirators stand round the corpse of Julius Caesar:

> How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
> That now on Pompey's basis lies along
> No worthier than the dust.

Or in those words of Cleopatra, which draw perilously near to the danger line, as she speculates on being led to Rome as Octavius's captive after Antony's death:

> the quick comedians,
> Extemporally will stage us, and present
> Our Alexandrian revels . . . and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I' the posture of a whore.

But more frequently Shakespeare will bring us back to reality from the imaginary world of his play in a far more drastic fashion. You may recall how so many of the comedies end on the note redolent of a theatre dressing-room, when a character or characters doff their disguises and identities and say in effect, "Look, I am not what you thought I was!"

Even after such scenes, a Rosalind will detach herself from the frame of the play, and remind us that we have been assisting at a voluntary suspension of disbelief, by pointing out that she is really a boy actor. Or perhaps a Puck will remind us that the play we have been watching is only a dream world after all, and assure us that there will be another play at the same theatre tomorrow:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended,
> That you have but slumbered here
> While these visions did appear.
> And this weak and idle theme,
> No more yielding but a dream.
> Gentles, do not reprehend:
> If you pardon, we will mend.

The more ironic Feste, in his plaintive song at the play's end, puts both us and his play in the whole context of time: from a great while ago when the world began, to illustrate the fact that the play's rosy ending is not really as our lives are, for, in them, the rain it raineth every day. Even the master illusionist himself, Prospero, asserts his reliance on the audience and begs them to set him free now that his charms are all o'erthrown.

Like Duke Theseus, Shakespeare knew that even the best plays in this kind are but shadows which must be amended by the audience's imagination; and he mocks our trust in the shadows he creates. He did so ultimately because he knew that the end of all art, the direction that all art must take, is life. The audience is his true touchstone of reality. The playwright can surround his fictions on three sides only; the way to the auditorium is always open. The gesture of the true comedian must be towards this, towards health and life; for, its opposite is the gesture of the tragic and the doomed — of Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth — towards death.

But can an art which is founded on illusion and mutual, willing deception truly "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature"? Yes, indeed, and for this very reason. For Nature, life and drama are not at all as distinct as they first ap-

pear. The line of division between actor and audience in the Shakespearean theatre is blurred and the one passes easily into the other:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits and
> Are melted into air, into thin air:
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

In art as in life, if the humor of Bottom, the wit of Touchstone and the delight of Portia are but part of this insubstantial pageant; then so too are the bitterness of Timon and the anguish of Othello, the sacrifice of Cordelia and the malice of Iago. Unlike so many of his critics, Shakespeare recognized that life is too mysterious and too complex a thing to be explicable by dwelling on one of these aspects, or by offering one view or one theory. He portrayed the human lot as it might be seen by what Lear calls one of God's spies, seeing all the roles that a man might play. Such a vision entails, certainly, the exercise of moral perceptions — but it does not entail any deliberate proposals for translating them into reformative action.

The very path that Shakespeare's dramatic career took illustrates his refusal to see tragedy as the final condition of life; for, the Romances are beyond tragedy in a very special way. Yet while it is, of course, impossible for even the most universally minded of men to grasp life in all its complexity; Shakespeare's illumination seems to be seductively complete. And it does so, I think, because of the comedian in him. For, his comedy does not depend, as does most, on the deliberate exclusion of certain basic features of our existence — like death and suffering and sacrifice. Neither does it demand a constant awareness of their presence. Rather, it embraces these things and gives them proportion. For if tragedy mirrors by its intensity the anguish that we know exists, what I mean by comedy can suggest the whole of which that anguish is a part. Shakespeare the comedian created a world in which the Fools speak true and madmen often talk the real sense; in which the shadows on the stage cause the flesh and blood people in the audience to see themselves with greater clarity; and where the tears behind the clown's mask are often truer than those more immediately apparent ones that Niobe — and Gertrude — shed.

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Christopher Fry tells a story somewhere of how a friend of his related to him a dream in which he was reading the Book of Life, the pages of which were alternately tragic and comic. Fry quite naturally asked him the question that we would all ask — namely, what was on the last page. The friend replied that he did not know, because, as he was about to turn the last leaf, he awakened. However, he did recall that he was laughing when he woke up.

I do not know that I am old enough and I do know that I am not wise enough to go this far about life. But I think I would be prepared to hazard that when, three hundred and forty-nine years ago, Shakespeare lay in his house at Stratford-upon-Avon, about to cross the bourn from which no traveler returns, it was at least the suspicion of a smile that was on his face.

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