

Shakespeare Tercentenary: 1616-1916

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Charles Fechter as Hamlet



Edmund Kean as Richard III

SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY A GROWTH

He Worked His Way Through Experiment and Error Until He Had Learned His Art, and Never Ceased His Experimentation

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AT once the reader's mind and heart leap to a conception, a mood, that comes in large part from two plays, with potent influences from certain other plays—a mood in which perfect charm mixes with perfect sanity, and which reveals Shakespeare's genius in early and in ripening maturity. Mind and heart linger in fascination over shadowy, beautiful romance, rather than over sharply defined romantic incidents; over memory of wit rather than over recollections of witty sayings; a well interposed between us and this working-day world, and we are in an atmosphere where the things we see are instinct with beauty. Our vision, baseless fabric though it be, is lovely to us, and natural, since we are, indeed, such stuff as dreams are made on; and the magic we fancy we see is somehow akin to the deeper reality of our souls. The two plays that have been created the spell are "Twelfth Night" and "As You Like It." Trace back the gayety, tender or boisterous, that the term Shakespeare's comedy evokes, trace back the all but undefinable atmosphere of romance, and you will find yourself listening again to Viola's "I am all the daughters of my father's house," to Sir Toby's "Oh, knight, thou lackst a cup of canary," and breathing again with Rosalind and Orlando the enchanted and enchanting air of the forest of Arden.

Not that these two plays alone make up the charm. As the mood lightens the rallery of Beatrice and Benedick falls upon our almost envious ears—envy that such retorts are beyond us; as the mood deepens we share the sorrow of Imogen and of Hermione, and partake of the serene wisdom of Prospero. I mean only that were all the other comedies lost Shakespeare's comedy would not be lost to us, and that Shakespeare, the comic playwright, would appear to us still as the master in the vein that he made his own.

There is a great range in quality in the comedies, as there is in the tragedies. Shakespeare is not really human to us until we recognize that patent fact. Moreover, he does not suffer by this self-comparison. To realize that the Falstaff of the "Merry Wives" is less than the immortal figure in "Henry IV," is not to reduce the portly rascal to a heavyweight intruder; it is rather to realize the better that the companion of Prince Hal is a portrait by a sheer genius.

It is curious, indeed, that one must make these semi-apologies. One should not need to explain why regarding a writer as a writer, a man as a man. But such a hallowed tradition has been fostered by devotees that the object of the worship is sometimes in danger of losing more in simple congeniality than he gains in rapt adoration. In one point, especially, the mere matter of growth, many lovers of the poet overlook the natural difference between a beginner, a journeyman, and the skilled master of his craft. And yet nothing is more certain than that Shakespeare did not greet the world of letters as an author full grown. He worked his way through experiment, through error, through varying media of expression, until he had learned his art. Indeed, one may easily go a step further and say that this artist never ceased his experimentation. He worked at a form until he had mastered it, used it once or twice again in more than ample command of its possibilities, and then turned to still another form and made that, too, his own. Perhaps more in comedy than in history or tragedy (to continue the time-worn distinction) his artistic development is demonstrable, for it was a form he worked with from the beginning until the end of his career.

Let us deal briefly with the comedies in approximately chronological order, without raising the issues dear to the heart of Shakespearean editors, of dates of performance and publication, of variant readings, of sources, of disputed influences, or even of authorship itself, save in so far as these things may determine dramatic values. Let us consider the plays as plays, and not, so far as we may, their essential dramatic virtues, remembering, of course, that the full discussion of the least of the dramas would pass the limits of this essay.

"Love's Labour's Lost" is a verbal comedy built around a simple situation of farcical possibilities—a court of men where no women may enter; but where women do enter, to the men's confusion and happiness. It is overlong, especially the drawn-out fifth act, but it abounds in wit and word play, in pleasant contrast of personalities, and in amiable satire of fashionable foibles and of literary conceits. Its main interest is in dialogue, but it has one brilliant scene, a complete whirligig of irony, where one man after another hears his fellow confess the faults of which he himself is guilty. When one has characterized it as a somewhat more voluminous and much more elegant carrying on of Lyly's comic methods, one has attributed to it its chief virtues of lucidity, cleanness, and neatness.

"The Comedy of Errors" is sheer farce on the perennial theme of mistaken identity. For a model the young playwright has left the English Lyly and has turned to the Latin Plautus. In three one does not look for a faithful portrayal of the ordinary incidents of life; he awaits the unusual, the preposterous, it may be, but he does expect a lifelike tone and that kind of whimsical logic that is consistent with the accepted premises. Peculiarly is this play one to see rather than to read. Incident hurries upon incident, the action is quick and decisive, the situations vivid and

intelligible at a glance, and the hearty laugh follows again and again as the puzzled Dromios confuse their puzzled masters. A touch of seriousness and of pathos at the beginning and the end humanizes the fun, while the fun takes off the edge of the seriousness. Even at the outset of his career the dramatist has learned the value of mingling grave and gay.

"The Two Gentlemen of Verona" is Shakespeare's first essay in romantic comedy, and now he has apparently set himself to acquire the fresh, human note of Greene. This is a play of story, a play of people showing their deeper emotions along with their wit and their gentleness. The first of Shakespeare's memorable clowns, Launce, appears; the first of his romantic heroes, Valentine; the first of his lovely and lovable women, Julia and Sylvia. The technique is not so assured as in the preceding farce; it is somewhat slow in getting under way, and the dénouement is so literary as to be in part false to life. In order to bring about his conclusion, the author places his hero in such a dilemma that the ardent friend and devoted lover must choose between his friend or his well-won lady. He



Ellen Terry as Portia.
"I will be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state; it cannot be."
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Merry Wives of Windsor.
Anne, I pray you, Sir, walk in.
Merriman, I had rather walk in, I thank you. I bruised my
shin the other day--- and I cannot abide the smell
of hot meat since.
Painted by C.R. Leslie.

As You Like It.
Audrey, Well, I am not fair, and therefore I pray the gods make me honest.
Painted by John Pettie

chooses the prior loyalty, and proffers his betrothed to Proteus the unworthy. This is an old hypothetical situation, and when Shakespeare breathes the breath of life into it, instead of becoming real it becomes fanciful; as wrong solutions will when they are tried on wholesome people.

But it all comes right in the end, and our only wonder is that the play should not have kept the stage. The wonder is dispelled when we reflect that in this play Shakespeare has simply paid the price for doing the same thing better afterward. Had Shakespeare never let us see Viola woo the Countess for the Duke she loved herself, or Portia skimming over the list of her suitors, or Beatrice teasing Benedick, or Rosalind disguised as a boy and setting off for better fortunes; had he never developed later with the richness of his power the scenes he sketches here, this play would mean to us delightful romance. It means that, anyway, but the still better plays mean it still more. And so this charming venture is but a prelude.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" Shakespeare gives his fancy free rein. An entrancing world of fairies swims into our ken, and we see the most delicate side of the author's romantic vision. Titania, Oberon, Puck, remain household words since touched into life at the poet's impulse. There were fairies before Shakespeare; after Shakespeare we think of fairies in his terms. Here, too, the playwright is trying his hand at combining plots: four groups of personages are brought into action, the fairies, the lovers, the artisans, and the court. There is not as yet the close binding of one plot to another that we find in "The Merchant of Venice," but the relationships are kept clear and each group has something definite to do with at least two other groups. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the play is that it has fixed fast something volatile and lifted the naive supernatural into the realm of the artistic. If a man can do what the playwright attempted here, he has a technique ready for almost anything. And remember that at the same period this young man of 30 had written "Romeo and Juliet."

The technique begins to count greatly in "The Merchant of Venice." Stories of unlikely quality are woven together with a skill so obvious that it needs no praise. Characters are drawn with masterful certainty. Moods are balanced, naturally and artfully at the same time. The action moves straight forward, with that necessary acceleration and retarding of speed which makes it possible for a spectator to

gauge the significance both of incident and of situation.

Two points, neither of which would have disturbed an Elizabethan audience, may affect our appreciation of the play. The first is the quibble regarding the pound of flesh, no more, no less, and no drop of Christian blood to be shed—a turning point of the drama, vivid, but more apparent than real; since without it Shylock's first step toward Antonio, knife in hand, would have constituted a direct or indirect attempt on the life of a citizen, punishable precisely as Shylock is punished. The present-day interest lies here: if the play is run off rapidly as a romantic and somewhat remote comedy, the spectator accepts the moment without caviling; but if by elaborate and realistic presentation we have been convinced of the reality of preceding moments and of the naturalness of the characters and the issues, then at this point the subtler life obtrudes. The more the play resembles life the less this solution seems real. When Portia is perfectly acted, as Ellen Terry used to portray her, it seems almost incredible that the woman who can plead so tenderly for mercy and argue so sanely for justice should stoop to this ancient Oriental device.

The second point touches the conception of Shylock. How "human" Shakespeare meant him to be we can only conjecture, but certainly the more he is humanized and made to suffer a sort of martyrdom the more the spectator's sense of ethical values is disturbed. A man must be a bit of an anti-Semite if in the usual performance of today he feels that Shylock is fairly treated. Moreover, it is to be noted that while the modern conception of Shylock raises him from melodramatic villain to tragic hero, at the same time it irresistibly pulls down the moral character of the friends of Antonio in the trial scene. Since Elizabethan days we have gained an ill-used and desolate old man and have lost one or two gentlemen! These things are not Shakespeare's fault; the whirligig of time has merely brought certain revenges.

In "The Taming of the Shrew" we revert to farce, not the less farce for inculcating a perhaps too antique principle. Here we have character with less shading, action with sharper emphasis. Even if played but pretty well, the play "goes"; if played superlatively well (memories of Ada Rehan!) it goes with a rush. That is to say, the scenes with Katherine and Petruchio do; the Bianca scenes move much more slowly, and the scenes of Lucentio and Tranio, involving the confusion between master and man, seem to me, frank-

ly, little more than a drag on the action. We have here, I think, an obvious example of the Elizabethan five-act obsession. The presumed necessity of five acts is no hindrance to the great tragedies, but it operates unfortunately at times with the lesser plays. Above all, it prevented the Elizabethans from giving us little masterpieces in brief and perfect single acts, not to speak of two and three act plays. Here, if ever, in "The Taming" we have a natural three-act subject, whose parts, I should say, are the encounter, the struggle, the mastery. When a subject will not last out five acts it has to be padded. Sometimes superimposed material may be made to seem structural, but not always.

If you cannot count "Henry IV." among the comedies, still less can you discuss the comedies and ignore it. "Hamlet" with Hamlet left out is hardly a greater approximation to a vacuum than is Shakespeare's comedy without Falstaff. If there be one character that denotes Shakespeare's creative power, here is the man. It is not character modified to the service of a plot, it is character as it is, personality itself. Only to the masters of portrait painting, Velasquez, Rembrandt, can you go for a parallel. The man stands out before you vibrant with life. Structurally he may serve but to enhance the stern and warlike issues among which he light-heartedly moves; actually he lifts the whole play up to the level of the permanently memorable; Falstaff will live as long as Shakespeare. Even to speak thus seriously about a mirth-provoking personage is to indicate the compelling power of Shakespeare's genial vision and execution. A character may be so astonishingly endowed with irresistible humor as to draw the listener's thoughts from the manifestation to the amazing competence of endowment behind it. When Shakespeare created Falstaff he must have felt the splendor of his own dramatic power.

Whether or not "The Merry Wives of Windsor" was written at the command of Queen Elizabeth, desirous of seeing Falstaff in love, is beyond the present power of scholarship to determine. It is of little consequence; the story is good enough to be true, and there is no evidence against it. If true, the great Queen had her wish, and we have ours, and in addition we have the satisfaction of seeing Shakespeare handle, for once, contemporary English life with admirably differentiated characters. It may easily be urged that this Falstaff is not the wonderful personality of the historical play. What matter? We see him through the light of "Henry IV." There he controlled the situation; here the situa-

tion controls him. We laughed with him, now we laugh at him. Since we have the earlier play, we need not at present stop to wonder what conception we might have of the burly rogue had he appeared in this play alone.

"Much Ado About Nothing" offers the unusual spectacle of a main plot crowded into the background by two sub-plots. The radiant wit of Beatrice and Benedick, the radiant stupidity of Dogberry and Verges, make us half forget the joys and woes of Claudio and Hero. That this was not Shakespeare's original intention is fairly certain, for the play bears unmistakable evidence of remodeling. Apparently Don Pedro's intercession in behalf of Claudio, incorrectly reported to Hero's father, correctly reported to Don John, the villain, was to have been made a much more important element in the plot than it is now. Claudio's own distressed doubt of his spokesman would not have been so tamely resolved, and Leonato's vision of a Prince for a son-in-law would not have been dispelled without a single word of comment from him or of objection from his daughter. There is enough suppressed complication to furnish forth an excellent plot of cross-purposes. But, again, what matter? Here we have Shakespeare in his happiest vein. That is enough for any play.

I have already commented on the pervading charm of "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night." Shakespeare is now working with consummate mastery of his form. The fairy magic that he used in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" he now brings down to earth, and makes Arden as entrancing as the realm of Oberon. Orlando and Rosalind are characters no more perfectly drawn than is the plot their creator gives them to move in. The wholesome tone of "As You Like It" is not even the wonderful melancholy Jacques can mar, little as he would relish being counted the bitter that makes us know the sweet. Only the sudden conversions of the wicked brother, Oliver, and of the usurping Duke give us a moment's half-cynical pause, and then we forget to question things that after all accord with the irresistible happiness of the play.

To "Twelfth Night" I would give the palm of Shakespearean comedy. It has not all the essential poetry of "As You Like It," but it has poetry of the finest romantic order, it has abounding gaiety, boisterous fun, swift movement, and a more varied appeal than has its only rival. One may perhaps say that Shakespeare "let himself go" more freely here, and found in utter absence of restraint complete realization of his comic powers in all their ways of working. To get into one play Viola, Maria, Malvolio, and Sir Toby Belch is to reach the summit of comedy.

Here, save for "The Tempest" and that rare revival of youthful light-heartedness in the latter part of "Winter's Tale," Shakespeare's comedy really ends. The other plays that go under the name of comedy, while they have many moments of the true species, properly belong to that large and undefined genus of "serious drama," for which the term comedy is too light and the term tragedy impossible. "Troilus and Cressida," "All's Well That Ends Well," "Measure for Measure," "Pericles," and "Cymbeline" are variously tragic-comedy, romance, adventure, intrigue, what you will. The qualities are clear, the label vague. It is only necessary to say that where Shakespeare's hand is

present excellence of one kind or another is present, too, and that in this group of dramas, some of which are often ignored, is to be found the master's unmistakable sign manual.

"The Tempest" reveals two great virtues, a noble diction and an astonishing character creation, Caliban. Structurally, it is a little thin, though wholly adequate. The slackening of action that was necessary to bring it through the full five acts is compensated for by its surpassing poetry. If Ferdinand and Miranda do not move us as deeply as Romeo and Juliet, we have a recompense in perceiving that thus from his finally attained Olympian height Shakespeare saw youthful, first love in something like its real proportions, beautiful but slight, true but not world-compelling.

But in the last two acts of "The Winter's Tale" Shakespeare renews his early profession of faith. Florizel and Perdita (the very names are a romance) are the embodiment of ideal young romantic love, with perils close, but with the fairy godmother Fortune near at hand. And the rogue Autolycus proves to us that the master could still throw off a sketch as surely demonstrative of superb draftsmanship as the more elaborate compositions of another day.

And now, to realize more distinctly the deep import of this celebration of the Shakespeare Tercentenary, imagine yourself seated in any one of the numerous theatres within a minimum taxicab fare from Times Square, witnessing some popular comedy whose success has been proclaimed broadcast over the country, whose scenes and furnishings are scrupulously attributed to their makers and inventors; whose very hats and gowns are punctiliously credited to milliners and dressmakers of note and price; whose actors and actresses have looked at you from the pages of many an illustrated magazine, with letter press comment on the actor's favorite Summer sport, the actress's pet breed of dog, and whose author, interviewed, has candidly told the public his sympathies in the war and how to write a drama, (which usually means how he wrote his present play.) Then on top of this, suddenly imagine that in three centuries from now the whole English-speaking world will be talking of this 1916 author, studying with care his drama you are now watching, holding celebrations to commemorate the glory he has bestowed upon the race, and reading in important daily papers articles written in the man's praise. It seems incredible. That is what we are doing today for an Elizabethan of whom three centuries ago London talked; when the watermen on the Thames were the only conveyers to the theatre, when the stage appointments were scant, and there were no signed photographs to add to your collection and no impressionable youth fell in love with actresses, for there were no actresses—with or without views on pet dogs or battle-ships or cosmetics. Well, imagine that three more centuries from today our descendants may be rendering praise to one Shakespeare. It seems credible.

Between this thing incredible and this thing credible there is a great space fixed. Therein shows the superlative genius of William Shakespeare.

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