

Humour in Shakespeare: ‘Art and Artifice in Shakespeare’

T. Anusuya

I M.A. English

Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous),
Periyakulam.

S. Kavitha

I M.A. English

Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous),
Periyakulam.

ABSTRACT

The greatest comic dramatist since Aristophanes - assuming that Shakespeare is ineligible to compete – sprang into fame with a genial satire upon the metaphysical exquisites of the blue salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet. Very different was the mood and purpose of Shakespeare in his ‘Pleasant conceited comedy’. Admittedly he set out to make fun of the sophisticated and metaphysical wits of London. By a happy coincidence Shakespeare, at an almost identical point in his career, came upon the London stage with a ‘Pleasant conceited comedy’ called *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in which the exquisites of his own time and country were brought to book. It is instructive to compare the spirit in which these two men of genius approached a very similar enterprise. Their subject was the same; they had a like intention, which was to be amusing at the expense of the verbal and sentimental affections of the period. Their audience in both cases was a select company of persons passionately addicted to the follies at which they were invited to laugh. These follies, moreover, had a superficial resemblance.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; resemblance; metaphysical.

Introduction

Ever since the early days of Romanticism, critics have found a warrant for Shakespeare, as against the claims of Classicism, legitimate or illegitimate, in the final words of the *Symposium*: ‘The chief thing which he (Aristodemus) remembered was Socrates insisting to the other two (Aristophanes and Agathon) that the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and that the writer of tragedy ought to be a writer of comedy also. But of this truth Shakespeare and the other great

Elizabethans are not the only examples, whether within the single play or separately. The Greek tragic poets wooed now and then the comic muse.

Behind comedy there is always tragedy (indeed, since the days of Romantic irony, behind tragedy there is comedy), and sometimes by the author himself its shadow is permitted to fall upon the scene.

Never let us know one another better’, murmurs Angelica, ‘for the pleasure of a masquerade is alone when we

come to show our faces', and within the limits of comedy is, of course, a still wider range of emotion and variety of tone in Shakespeare.

In 'drama' they are meant to Coalesce. But in the Renaissance, as in ancient times, comedy more comical, and there was a difference also in the rank of characters, and the elevation of the style – distinctions which were, for the most part, observed by Shakespeare, though with greater latitude and greater skill.

As with the ancients, in comedy, there was, for a complication, the same sort of misunderstanding that we have been considering; whether it arose from deception, slander, or playing a part, or from misapprehension, mistaken identity or disguise and then the effect was comic irony.

Of disguise or mistaken identity, in the open or in the darkness of a rendezvous, and of hoaxes or practical jokes, there are instances in almost every comedy that Shakespeare penned.

Shakespeare does endeavour to make these expedients plausible, it is mainly by shifting the scene, as from Athens by day to the forest by night in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*; or from England to Padua in *The Taming of the Shrew*; or to the forest of Arden in *As You Like it*. There the thing might happen, we are readier to believe.

There is no reproach of stupidity attaching to these persons or to any one else who fails to recognize the other disguised ladies in Romantic comedy, or the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, or Falstaff in *The Merry Wives*.

Shakespeare's humour of situation is seen at its best in his three great comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. The study of Shakespeare's humour cannot be considered complete till we consider Sir John Falstaff, his attitudes and how he wriggles through the many predicaments he finds himself in.

Shakespeare's humour is at its best in the humour of situation. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the quarrel between Titania and Oberon provides some exquisite humour on its own. The quarrel in over a little Indian page boy. But Titania and Oberon accuse each other of their loves and the part played by them in the adulterous activities of Theseus and the maidenly peccadilloes of Hippolyta. The quarrel between Helena and Hermia provides some fun in the rare and womanly accusations of each by the other. The fairies themselves with Puck at the helm are fanciful figures of fun. Bottom, with his bloated vanity bounces the higher when his head is changed into an ass's head. The make-believe of the Athenian artisans is an unparalleled satire on the staging of plays by country bumpkins in Shakespeare's own day.

From *The Merchant of Venice* – Shylock's responses to Tubal are like the jerking reflexes of Marionette. They give him just that appearance of a human automaton which is one of the most characteristic effects of pure comedy:

TUBAL: Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa---

SHYLOCK: What, what, what? ill luck, ill luck?

TUBAL: hath an aggravy cast away, coming from Tripolis.

SHYLOCK: I thank God, I thank God! It is true.

TUBAL: I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wrack.

From *Measure for Measure*:

They say this town is full of cozenage;

As, nimble jugglers that deceive the eye;

Dark – working sorcerers that change the mind,

Soul – killing witches that deform the body,

Disguised cheaters, Prating mountbanks,

And many such – like liberties of sin. From <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>: The performance of soliloque, I think not on my father, And these great tears grace his remembrance more Than those I shed for him, what was he like; I have forget him. My imagination Carries no favour in't but Bertram's. I am undone. From <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>:	Some lovers, like Helena, may live by such a 'truth' even though they recognize that it is exclusive and irrational: Things base and vile, holding no quantity, Love can transpose to form and dignity; Love looks not with the eyes, but with a mind; And therefore is wing'd cupid painted blind..... As in Plautus and Terence, Chapman and Johnson, this is a practical joke, a comic reprisal, or an exposure of folly; and openly the victim is made a butt or gull.
---	--

WORKS CITED

- Bradby, Anne. *Shakespeare Criticism*. Delhi: Mehra Offset P. 2000. Print.
- Brown, Russell, John. *Shakespeare and his comedies*. Great Britain: William Clowes and Sons Ltd. 1970. Print.
- Palmer, John. *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. New York: The Macmillan Press LTD. 1974. Print.
- Wells, Stanley. Orlin, Cowen, Lena. *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*. United States: Oxford University P. 2007. Print.