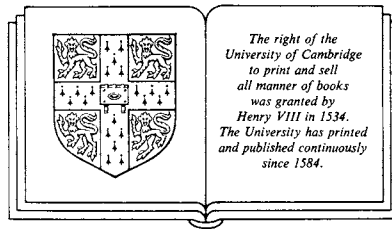


SHAKESPEARE SURVEY
AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY AND PRODUCTION

37

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STANLEY WELLS



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ERRATUM

We regret that in *Shakespeare Survey* 36, page 46, column 2, line 9 was inadvertently repeated, replacing line 11 which should have read 'them in the only possible way, by the act of suicide.'

CRITICISM OF THE COMEDIES UP TO 'THE MERCHANT OF VENICE':

1953–82

R. S. WHITE

Since John Russell Brown in 1955 surveyed criticism of Shakespearian comedy,¹ there has been such a wealth of information and interpretation that the job of bringing his work up to date has had to be divided amongst contributors. M. M. Mahood in 1979 looked at 'A Generation of Criticism' on *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*,² whilst the present essay will cover the comedies leading up to this great trio. Obviously one cannot talk about the later plays without having an eye to the earlier, and Professor Mahood has made it unnecessary to attend to certain general aspects which the plays have in common. In the group examined here we have a couple of assured masterpieces and some plays which either have been or may become battlegrounds where 'experimental' approaches will fight for recognition. At first sight, however, the plays do not fall readily into a coherent grouping.

The Comedy of Errors, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,³ and *The Merchant of Venice*: a thoroughly professional, classical farce, a comic romance, a courtly entertainment, a robustly unsentimental marriage-play, a piece of faery mingled with courtly interlude, a genial glimpse of provincial life, and a dark, 'problem' comedy which brings us close to death on the stage. Nothing much in common there, except the utter difference of each from its neighbour. Indeed, no other group of plays in the canon so firmly defies categorization, and all that the collection displays, if anything, is the dramatist's virtuoso control over a diversity of modes and materials loosely called 'comic'.

I. SCHOLARLY MATTERS

The plays share also a notorious difficulty for scholars who wish to ascertain dates of composition. No other selection of plays is so consistently disputed on this score. Now, just as we had begun to rest upon a general orthodoxy, E. A. J. Honigmann in *Shakespeare's Impact on his Contemporaries* (1982) shakes our complacency by arguing strongly for Shakespeare's 'early start', pushing some of the plays back to the mid 1580s. His thesis demands the greatest respect, and therefore throws into doubt the dating of all our plays except perhaps the *Dream* which seems fairly indisputably placed in 1595 or 1596. The debate will have to be carried on, and its outcome affects questions of sources, chronology, Shakespeare's development as an artist, and his literary relationships with contemporaries. Luckily, it is not I who must adjudicate, but somebody in thirty or so years' time. In the meantime, just to be on the safe side and to prevent the play disappearing into a *Shakespeare Survey* black hole between *The Merchant* and 'the middle comedies', I am taking *The Merry Wives of Windsor* under my wing. It would be a shame to let such a

¹ John Russell Brown, 'The Interpretation of Shakespeare's Comedies: 1900–1953', *Shakespeare Survey* 8 (Cambridge, 1955), 1–13.

² M. M. Mahood, 'Shakespeare's Middle Comedies: A Generation of Criticism', *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (Cambridge, 1979), 1–13.

³ See below for my admittedly tenuous reasons for including this play. The various scholarly editions describe the difficult problems concerned with its date, and see William Green, *Shakespeare's 'Merry Wives of Windsor'* (Princeton, 1962).

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friendly child become a homeless waif, and although nobody has seen the need to argue that the play is earlier than *The Merchant*, they may well have both been composed in 1597.

It is to be hoped (and expected) that any redating will not invalidate the monumental labours of Geoffrey Bullough in collecting the known sources for the plays. His *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (8 vols., 1957–75) may turn out to be amongst the most significant works done since Chambers on a whole range of scholarly issues. As well as collecting together a wealth of sources and analogues, he provides in the respective introductions masterly analyses of other problems for scholarly inquiry. Bullough has done for source study what the indefatigable S. Schoenbaum has more recently done for the study of Shakespeare's biography and the tribe of Greg and McKerrow for textual and bibliographical study of the whole canon. Kenneth Muir's *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (1978), more modest in its scope, gives a compact survey of the field. L. G. Salinger in *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge, 1974) provides much specialist information on what might be called 'structural analogies' in Italian comedy, and at the end of the book he applies these to the study of Shakespeare's comedies, including *The Merchant of Venice*. We shall have to wait for his proposed sequel, which will deal more directly with Shakespeare, to judge fairly whether his emphasis on things classical and Italian (at the expense of romance traditions) helps to illuminate the comedies radically enough to enforce reinterpretation.

The early comedies, like many of Shakespeare's plays, have been well served in the last thirty years by vigorous and clear-headed editors. The new Arden has produced texts of each play with the scrupulous editorial attention and judicious reviews of criticism that we have come to expect from the series. Some have already dated, but one can happily single out the most long-awaited and most welcome, Harold Brooks's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1979), as likely to stand unchallenged for many years. Now that a fresh series from Oxford is on the road there may be some competition, but judging from H. J. Oliver's *The Taming of the Shrew*

(Oxford, 1982), appearing more or less at the same time as Brian Morris's Arden (1981), these will complement rather than compete. The 'newer' New Variorum is beginning slowly to come to life. Nobody could complain that too little is being done on textual, bibliographical, and historical matters. A welcome addition to the repertory is the appearance of all of our plays in the uncluttered series of New Penguin editions, with their sensible, lucid introductions and annotations.

2. GENERAL CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

Much of the work done over the last thirty years on the comedies as a group has consolidated one position that Brown himself helped to establish. No longer do we need to confess in furtive whispers that we find them 'serious' and worthy of close analysis. No longer can they be brushed aside as 'happy', lightweight works which might be destroyed by systematic analysis. In fact, even the most ardent initiates must have wondered at the boldness of the vanguard which attempted to move the plays right into the heavyweight division. With a breathtaking speed that took everybody by surprise, even *The Comedy of Errors* swiftly became a meeting place for Old and New classical comedy, a Jungian archetype from the collective unconscious and a play troubled with the *angst* of identity-crisis. Supporters trembled in anticipation as C. L. Barber brought the tablets down from the cloudy mountain inhabited by Northrop Frye. Their plays had come out!

Frye's 'The Argument of Comedy' (*English Institute Essays 1948* (1949), 58–73) had already appeared when Brown wrote his retrospective, but it was only a taste of things to come, especially in *A Natural Perspective* (1965) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957). Although one might now feel impatient with the sweeping range of his generalizations, Frye remains seminal because he established two basic positions: comedy, romance, and tragedy all have intimate formal and visionary links with each other, and comedy can be every bit as serious as tragedy. Without somebody saying these things, the study of Shakespearian comedy could have remained these thirty years the domain of charming,

weightless *belles-lettres*. Judged purely as a critic, rather than as a contributor to the history of ideas, C. L. Barber seems to have weathered better, though for a reason which the ‘anthropological’ critics may not have expected. He never allows the portentousness of ideas to overshadow the sense of a play as an individual work of the imagination. The theoretical section of *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959), where he examines the pattern of saturnalian release implicit in the comic pattern, seems now as distant from the plays as Frye’s unveiling of the mythos of spring. On the other hand, Barber’s interpretations of the plays still yield surprises and increased respect for his acute sensitivity to tone. His work has not been swept aside by an avalanche of precocious innovators taking advantage of his pioneering work. Indeed, a recent, radical book, *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*⁴ is dedicated to the memory of his inspiration. Meanwhile, Frye’s influence is still alive in more hardheaded fashion, as evidenced by Ruth Nevo’s *Comic Transformations in Shakespeare* (1980), a book which takes the pattern of Roman New Comedy as its point of departure.

After these critics who wished to interpret the comedies in more ambitious ways than their predecessors had laid foundations in the 1950s, we found in the 1960s a new breed of upstart crow amongst the ranks. Responding perhaps to something in the ‘spirit of the age’ (or to something publishers had decided was timely), these critics liberally sprinkled their titles with words like ‘social’, ‘role-playing’, and ‘metadrama’. The plays often became case-studies for the social scientist or behavioural psychologist. These critics had their feet on the ground, not in the clouds of archetypes and mantras, and their touchstone was ‘relevance’. A book which, although appearing much later, elegantly brings to maturity one aspect of these approaches is Thomas van Laan’s *Role-Playing in Shakespeare* (Toronto, 1978). It is most adequate in its treatment of the early comedies, where the approach seems to fit the subject like a glove, showing Shakespeare’s characters conversing and acting in response to a complex awareness of social roles. In such works, there is little talk of mythic

significance or even ‘release’. Everything becomes accessible to sober analysis in terms of social pressures, restrictions, and self-images imposed upon the characters. In extreme cases, we are reminded of the panel of social workers investigating why the ‘delinquent’ has ‘deviated’ (two more words popular at the time). Even when dealing with the play as illusion, ‘the idea of the play’ in Anne Righter’s phrase from the title of her book,⁵ ‘discrepant awareness’ (Bertrand Evans in 1960⁶) or ‘metadrama’ (J. L. Calderwood’s field of inquiry), these critics refused to be ‘taken in’, insisting that playwright and audience alike are perfectly aware that they are engaged in the enactment of an artefact whose capacities for enchantment and willing suspension of disbelief must not be taken for granted but closely analysed. If Frye and Barber had made the comedies ‘social’ in the sense of recreating traditional, folk experience shared by all the community, the later critics took away the inverted commas, seeing social behaviour in the comedies in terms of rationally explicable patterns of behaviour and self-reflective illusions. Perhaps critics with these kinds of interests recognized their own pioneer when the essays of James Smith, some written in the 1940s, were reprinted as *Shakespearean and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1974). Reading this book reminds us that even before the flood there were critics of remarkably searching capacity who could find quite enough to be serious about in the comedies. His delicate awareness of how revealing even a short snatch of dialogue can be helps us to understand better the phenomenon of tonality in works written for the stage, and to respect Shakespeare’s skill in giving us people who actually converse responsively with each other instead of (as in the plays of many Elizabethan dramatists) speaking in rhetorical set-pieces, ellipses or indirections.

Since the analytical days of the 1960s, innovative streams of criticism have developed the stance of

⁴ Carolyn Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Neely (eds.), *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana, 1980).

⁵ Anne Righter (Anne Barton), *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962).

⁶ Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Oxford, 1960).

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wary scepticism, sometimes in a way that may strike the conservative as threatening the citadel itself, the 'universality' which institutionalized Shakespeare has always been credited with. The new demystifiers have warned us that Shakespeare was himself the product of his historical context, and that he could not avoid ingrained cultural and political assumptions which are not necessarily universally shared and should be closely inspected for degree of bias. Marxist critics, so far represented in this field by Elliot Krieger in *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (1979), remind us that the view of the world in the comedies holds a class structure which discriminates the privileged and aristocratic from the bourgeois and those who can be said to 'work', such as clowns, servants, constables, artisans and bawds. A growing body of feminist critics, their own model being Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), submit to critical scrutiny the (invariably male) lecturer's commonplaces that 'Shakespeare understood women' and believed in their liberation. Do not the comedies confirm in their structure that Shakespeare's women are made for marriage, that their liberation is brief and confined to courtship, and is conceived anyway in male concepts of freedom? Are not Katherine and Portia characters drawn to reinforce certain male stereotypes of perverse or 'strong' womanhood, rather than distinctively female? The significance of these 'alternative' approaches lies in the fact that fundamental questions are being asked, and the history of Shakespearian criticism has surely shown that Shakespeare can survive such a test. Some Marxists and some feminists respectively will say that Shakespeare, because of his class-bias and his appropriation of women to male expectations, is a dangerously reactionary influence when enshrined in school syllabuses and revered for his 'universality'. However, other critics of the same persuasions will argue that if we read the plays with a new astuteness to such concerns we will find just as much inbuilt criticism of the prevailing world-view as tacit support for it, and that Shakespeare may indeed be giving us patterns of liberation from conventional expectations in ways that will emerge as debate goes on. Each argument is likely to be carried out most

fiercely over *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew* respectively, and we shall return to these plays. Certainly, the new approaches cannot be ignored, and writing with a mind to the reader in thirty years' time, I must recognize that it has often happened that heterodoxies of today's Shakespearian criticism are assimilated into the orthodoxies of tomorrow's. As Jaques reminds us, 'Out of these convertites / There is much matter to be heard and learn'd.' If it is possible to generalize about such matters, I should guess that the general current of thought amongst the younger critics is turning away from matters of form and imaginative vision towards an inspection of the deeper ethical assumptions underlying each play, and underlying the notion of criticism itself.

Of course, the little map which I have drawn of those trends in criticism most appropriate to the early comedies has been partial and personal. It is important to remember that probably a majority of writers would claim allegiance to no 'school', and are modestly attempting to explain their pleasures in the comedies by presenting patient and respectful explorations of particular problems in interpretation, and dealing with the plays as individual works of art with their unique idioms and effects. Not everyone wishes to be Apollo to Hyperion, or Hyperion to a satyr in the grand march of intellect. Alexander Leggatt's *Shakespeare's Comedies of Love* (1974), beginning with the apparently limited subject of Shakespeare's discrimination between different speech-modes in the comedies, manages to develop quietly sensitive accounts of each play as a unit. The eminently sensible Kenneth Muir, in *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence* (Liverpool, 1979), stays safely up the beach, judiciously sifting the sand of old critical problems, rather than risking himself on the ocean of current controversy. Many, such as D. P. Young in *The Heart's Forest* (New Haven, 1972) and Rosalie Colie in *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton, 1974), have expanded our understanding by choosing to begin with Elizabethan conventions of the pastoral genre and its linguistic patterns. In conducting a revaluation of one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, G. K. Hunter in *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (1962) provides much insight into Shakespeare's

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own early comedies. We should remind ourselves also that the last thirty years have seen the appearance of works that nobody would claim as innovations of theory but many have found refreshing: John Russell Brown's own *Shakespeare and his Comedies* (1957), J. Dover Wilson's *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies* (1962), F. P. Wilson's 'Shakespeare's Comedies',⁷ and the brief but interesting *Writers and Their Works* pamphlets by D. A. Traversi⁸ and G. K. Hunter.⁹ E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's Early Comedies* (1966), a sturdy standby for students, has some sound things to say on individual plays, and is particularly adequate on *The Comedy of Errors*. Generally speaking, it is to these kinds of critics that we turn in surveying the work done on each play in the multiplicity of articles from journals and the occasional book-length study. Of course, it is necessary to be highly selective, and the fact that I do not refer to any single, seminal essay from such a journal as *Shakespeare Studies*, for example, does not mean that it has not provided over the years many helpful insights. Furthermore, although a thorough exploration is impossible in this piece, we cannot ignore the often profound effect on critical approaches caused by revolutionary performances of each play. Peter Brook's production of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 1946 inspired a critical rediscovery of the play and a new attention to the significance of its ending, whilst his more recent *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) has also had an incalculable influence upon all critics who have written since on the play. There is now a more intimate and symbiotic relationship between what happens on the stage and what is written than ever before, and this is possibly most true for the comedies. Until one sees how effective and thought-provoking a play can be on stage, one is tempted to retreat to the older tendency of regarding serious analysis of the comedies as being an exercise in breaking a butterfly upon a wheel.

3. THE PLAYS

'Nobody will want a demonstration that *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* are better plays than *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Comedy of Errors*.' So writes

Frank Kermode in his essay on 'The Mature Comedies' in *Early Shakespeare*.¹⁰ One's sympathies are immediately aroused for the underdogs, which are apparently so insignificant that their names can be truncated without disrespect, and whose general inferiority is considered to be so patently obvious. They have occasionally had large claims made for them, but almost invariably by critics who have their sights set on later, and therefore higher, things, on the assumption that the child is father to the man. Nevill Coghill in 'The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy' (*Essays and Studies*, 3 (1950), pp. 1-28) and Stanley Wells in 'Shakespeare and Romance' (*Later Shakespeare*, ed. J. R. Brown and B. Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 8, 1966), both present *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as blueprints for later comedy, and excellent as these essays are, their authors would not claim to be giving the plays a qualitatively higher place in the canon than Kermode. Frye uses both plays as items of furniture in the vast room which for him is Shakespearian romance, and his goal is really the last plays. C. L. Barber does not grace either with a chapter in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, and his essay on 'Shakespearian Comedy in *The Comedy of Errors*' in *College English*, 25 (1964), although enlightening, is accurate to the proportions of its title. Stanley Wells, in one of the best essays on the other play, registers some sense of defeat in his title, 'The Failure of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*' (*Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 99 (1963), 161-73).

Even the critics who believe the early plays have their music too, and advocate that we think not of the later, have expected little more than modest success in their evangelism. The respective Arden editors, R. A. Foakes (1962) and Clifford Leech (1969), praise the formal qualities of the plays, and emphasize some of the 'serious' elements, but they carefully refrain from making any special claims. Stanley Wells, who has contributed as much as

⁷ F. P. Wilson, 'Shakespeare's Comedies' in *Shakespearian and Other Studies*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1969).

⁸ D. A. Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Early Comedies* (1960).

⁹ G. K. Hunter, *Shakespeare: The Later Comedies* (1962).

¹⁰ *Early Shakespeare*, ed. J. R. Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 3 (1961), 211-27; p. 211.

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anybody to the critical understanding of both comedies, does so, at least when editing *The Comedy of Errors*, by insisting that we should be looking for virtues other than 'the range, the variety, the subtlety, the richness of plays that [Shakespeare] was soon to compose', and he proposes different criteria for *Errors*:

But it would also be wrong to write of it as if it were not both the most brilliant comedy that had so far been written in English, and also – lest this imply merely relative success – a completely assured work for which no excuses need be made.

(New Penguin edition, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 8)

Another critic who has fondly made these plays his domain, Harold Brooks, has emphasized the sheer craftsmanship and good fun of both plays, in 'Themes and Structure in *The Comedy of Errors*' (*Early Shakespeare*, pp. 55–71) and then in an essay whose genially meandering title suits its subject: 'Two Clowns in a Comedy (to say nothing of the dog): Speed, Launce (and Crab) in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*' in *Essays and Studies*, 16 (1963), pp. 91–100. The play must attract long titles, for we have also Inga-Stina Ewbank's careful essay, "'Were man but constant, he were perfect": Constancy and Consistency in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*' (*Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 14, 1972).

Cinderellas or ugly sisters? Will their day ever come? At least among critics in general, it has not come yet. They have attracted the attentions of the fine critics mentioned above, but otherwise they are regarded as caviar to the general. Since 1953 several essays can be reported which have increased our admiration for the skill exhibited in the plotting of these plays, and we have witnessed some rather frustrated attempts to read at least *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as a sustained parody of its romance materials, but nothing more solid which might shake the generally demeaning attitude to the play. It seems fairly clear that as long as we look for what Leavis called a 'deep centre' to plays, so long will these two early comedies (as well as *Cymbeline*, in discussing which Leavis coined his phrase), have to wait for reevaluation. In the meantime, no doubt

audiences will continue to be delighted by fondly presented productions, although in making this judgement we can probably have more confidence in *Errors*, judging from the uninspiring stage history of *The Two Gentlemen*.

The Taming of the Shrew nowadays is acquiring a kind of perverse celebrity, not because it is seen to contribute to any particular model for Shakespearean comedy, nor because its poetic quality is undergoing any radical reassessment, but because it is a good play to start arguments. One argument used to rage (amongst those whose passions are aroused by such problems) about whether it preceded or post-dated *The Taming of a Shrew*, although now the consensus is that *The Shrew* came first. The critical, or ideological, argument centres upon how we are to read Kate's last speech. Is it a piece of conventional, Elizabethan advice on the duties of wives, a 'more or less automatic statement... of a generally held doctrine' as Robert Heilman puts it in his essay 'The *Taming* Untamed, or, The Return of the Shrew' (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 27 (1966), p. 147), or is it a sophisticated, ironic triumph over the more conventional people around Katherine and Petruchio? Does it show a patriarchal society vindicated or undermined? Is individual personality destroyed or created in the process of 'taming'? At least the days when one could describe the play as a 'farce' and gratefully turn to other matters, even though this policy is still adopted occasionally, seem to be numbered. Now we have 'the emergence of a humanized heroine against the background of depersonalizing farce unassimilated from the play's fabliau sources' (John C. Bean in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, p. 66), and Ralph Berry's version which finds in the play a 'synthesis of farce and comedy':

The kernel of the play is, if one likes, a fairly brutal sex farce; the formula of man taming woman is one to agitate primitively the minds of all audiences. But the play contains also a subtle account of two intelligent people arriving at a *modus vivendi*.

(*Shakespeare's Comedies*, 1972, p. 54)

The argument is fought also over Petruchio's speech in which he likens his practice towards Kate to the

taming of a hawk. Does this passage reveal a brutal area of Shakespeare's own thinking which should make us wary of finding 'universal truth' everywhere in his words, or can we in some way maintain an ironic distance from the sentiments? The problems are compounded (or, if some bright critic could make something of it, clarified) by the Induction involving Christopher Sly, and raising characteristically Shakespearian doubts about the authenticity of illusion. To what extent is the play a projection of Sly's own attitudes towards women, expecting them to be demure but cunning (Bianca), shrewish or, preferably, obedient wives? If such an approach could in fact be sustained, it might lead us to claim that Shakespeare is challenging all conventions about women, rather than implicitly supporting any one of them. Whatever the answers to these questions may turn out to be (if settlement is ever reached), the fact that they are being vigorously raised has given new life to a play which had been regarded as too simple, or too poetically impoverished, to merit the serious discussion which has marked the criticism of Shakespearian comedy in recent years.

Love's Labour's Lost and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are the most friendly (rather than happy) plays in the canon. Both present pictures of community, the one where Costard as 'a member of the commonwealth' trades jokes with a princess, the other showing a tightly knit township, integrating those willing to accept its godfearing and commercial values, and closing ranks against outsiders who threaten its stability. There is much to engage the attention of the 'serious' critics. The unconventional separation of lovers and the introduction of death at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* are by no means dramatically unprepared for, as Bobbyann Roesen (Anne Barton) argues ('*Love's Labour's Lost*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4 (1953), 411-26). The shadows lengthen as afternoon turns to evening, and there is, as other critics have emphasized, an element of nastiness in the way the courtiers disrupt the play put on for their entertainment, there is considerable immaturity in their treatment of the women, and there is a justified, retaliatory testing of the men performed by the women through mockery, ridicule and a form

of passive non-co-operation. The play's preoccupation with language itself, too, has serious implications, as J. L. Calderwood has pointed out in '*Love's Labour's Lost: A Wantoning with Words*' (*Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 5 (1965), 317-32), Ralph Berry in 'The Words of Mercury' (*Shakespeare Survey* 22, 1969, 69-77), and W. C. Carroll in a book-length treatment, *The Great Feast of Language in 'Love's Labour's Lost'* (Princeton, 1976). None of these enriching elements has, however, distracted audiences from wholeheartedly appreciating the cohesiveness of the sparkling comedy of manners. The play has triumphantly come into its own on the stage in recent years, after lying in relative obscurity for some two centuries. In the last fifteen or so years I have seen some ten productions, all highly successful, and although belief in 'the School of Night' has been eroded, there is still something in the play which draws its admirers together in a spirit of benign cabbalism.

The Merry Wives of Windsor has also been shown recently by the Royal Shakespeare Company to be eminently stageworthy, but critics have found difficulty in dealing seriously with it. F. P. Wilson called it 'the least worthy comedy',¹¹ and few will risk celebrating the play publicly. This is partly because its mode is perceived to be different from the norm of 'love comedy' and Leggatt, for example, leaves it aside for separate brief treatment in his *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto, 1973). Barber and Berry, among others who have written books on the comedies, do not deal with it at all. Another reason for the lukewarm response is that no genuine 'difficulty' has been found in the play. I have a suspicion, however, that its unproblematical nature is an assumption that deserves to be challenged. It almost certainly stems from a lazy reading that places Falstaff at the centre, regards him as a sadly diminished figure, and dismisses the rest as secondary. If, however, we pursue other lines of interest, the play is found not only to be extraordinary in the complexity of its construction, as Chambers pointed out back in 1925, but also full of problems that can attract the

¹¹ 'Shakespeare's Comedies', p. 88.

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attention of critics interested in the treatment of underlying ideologies in Shakespeare's drama. There is a thoroughly 'serious' thematic preoccupation with exploitation and jealousy in marriage (despite the comic tone), while the feminist could find material for exploring the double functions of women in Shakespeare's comic world, at once treated as commodities and as holding some kind of moral authority in their own right. The Marxist could recognize a community where class and economic motivations are not side-issues but central to the action and the vision. Before these lines of approach are developed, however, we must see through Shakespeare's joke, and take Falstaff away from the centre of our gaze. His very clumsiness in the economically 'middling' society of Windsor which deprives him of his wit, when seen in this light, might make us more appreciative of his mastery of comic tone in his own domain of Cheapside in the *Henry IV* plays. When somebody systematically places centrally the township of Windsor with its presentation as an entity in itself, made up of individuals but larger than each in its prevailing attitudes, then we shall be in a position to make pronouncements on the play's artistic value. Of course, there have been commentators who have appreciated aspects of *The Merry Wives*. Bertrand Evans found much to praise in the structure, whilst Brian Vickers in *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (1968) finds the unique range of linguistic modes of interest. M. C. Bradbrook writes well on the unity of the play in *Shakespeare the Craftsman* (Cambridge, 1969). If the partial leads made by these critics are followed, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may yet have its day of critical acclaim as in many ways equal to, although very different from, the 'middle comedies'.

It is dangerous for a critic to be clever about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play is quite clever enough itself. If we try earnestly to find logical reasons for the contradictions in its time-span, we find ourselves implicitly on Theseus' side, questioning things which are 'true' in an imaginative and theatrical sense, and we are uneasily aware that his point of view is undercut by the action we witness. On the other hand, if we simply accept the tricks

and the fairies as delightful products of the imagination and laugh into silence all the awkward questions, then we are just as likely to underestimate the intellectual toughness displayed by the dramatist in bringing off his conjuring tricks which unite three such different societies. Puck's final challenge remains as baffling as ever, rivalling the last words of *Tristram Shandy* and the last lines of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in its impenetrable lightness of attitude:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb'rd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream.

After all, it is only a poet's 'dream' dealing with the common 'dreams' of young love, such impossibilities as transformation of a man into an ass, and explaining the notorious changeability of the English weather by absurdly positing a realm of fairies whose emotional states are reflected in the natural world. Simple, to the point of simple-mindedness. Or is it? The play teases us out of thought as does eternity, only to tease us back into thought as does a mystery.

One theory that promises an analytical entrance to the glittering experience of the *Dream* is Norman Rabkin's notion of 'complementarity':

For the first time Shakespeare has turned his complementary vision in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a full examination of art itself, and with his characteristic ambivalence toward the irrational he sees it simultaneously as 'base and vile' yet of the highest 'form and dignity'.

(*Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, New York, 1967, p. 205)

'Ambivalence', the concept used so effectively by A. P. Rossiter in his essays on the history plays, does seem appropriate to the *Dream*, with its obvious polarities between the rational and the irrational, the imaginative and the commonsense, the world of night and the world of morning, but only if we agree that the central subject or theme is 'art' itself. Others have been proposed.