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James Smith

Excerpt

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## I

AS YOU LIKE IT<sup>1</sup>

It is a commonplace that Jaques and Hamlet are akin. But it is also a commonplace that Jaques is an intruder into *As You Like It*, so that in spite of the kinship the plays are not usually held to have much connection. I have begun to doubt whether not only *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*, but almost all the comedies and the tragedies as a whole are not closely connected, and in a way which may be quite important.

Recent criticism of Shakespeare has directed itself with profit upon the tragedies, the 'problem plays' and certain of the histories. The early comedies, on the other hand, have either been disparaged or entirely overlooked. Yet the same criticism owes part of its success to a notion of what it calls Shakespeare's 'integrity'; his manifold interests, it has maintained, being co-ordinated so as rarely to thwart, regularly to strengthen, one another. Hence he was alert and active as few have been, while his writing commanded not part but the whole of his resources.

Such a notion seems sound and proves useful. Belief in an author's integrity, however, ought to forbid the dismissal of any part of his work, at least its hasty dismissal. The comedies, to which he gave a number of years of his life, are no insignificant part of Shakespeare's. If it is true that they shed no light on the tragedies nor the tragedies on them, it would seem he deserves credit for a unique dissipation rather than concentration of his powers.

It is of course comprehensible that the comedies should be shunned. To some readers they are less inviting than the tragedies, to all they are more wearisome when their study is begun. Not only are the texts in a state of comparative impurity, the form itself is impure. Being less serious than tragedy – this I am aware is disputed, but would suggest that the word has a number of meanings – being less serious than tragedy, comedy admits of interludes and sideshows; further, the material for the sideshows is not infrequently such that it might be

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material for the comedy itself. Decision is important but not always easy whether or not it should be disregarded.

The desultory nature of the following notes may, I hope, be forgiven, partly because of complications such as these, partly because of contemporary distractions which leave no time for elaboration. I start with Jaques's melancholy, in respect of which alone he has been likened to Hamlet.

It is, I think, most accessible to study in his encounter with Rosalind at the beginning of Act IV. Having abundant leisure he needs a companion to while it away. 'I prethee, pretty youth', he says, 'let me be better acquainted with thee.' But Rosalind, who has heard unfavourable reports, is by no means eager to comply: 'They say you are a melancholy fellow.' As for that, replies Jaques, his melancholy is at least sincere, for it is as pleasing to him as jollity to other men: 'I doe love it better then laughing.' But sincerity is irrelevant unless to deepen his offence. As there is an excess of laughter so there is of sadness which should not be pleasing to anybody:

Those that are in extremity of either, are abominable fellowes, and betray themselves to every moderne censure, worse then drunkards.

The rebuke is no more than a rebuke of common sense. Your melancholy, objects Rosalind, is not justifiable merely because it is your melancholy, for it may be one of the things which, though they exist, ought not to do so. But the rebuke is none the less pertinent, common sense implying a minimum of alertness and Jaques being afflicted with languor. Either as cause or as consequence of his state he is blind and fails to see, or is stupid and fails to ponder obvious truths.

The force of the rebuke is to be noticed. From Shakespeare, mediaeval rather than modern in this as other matters, drunkards receive no more than temporary tolerance: Falstaff is in the end cast off, Sir Toby beat about the coxcomb. And the respect which they receive is not even temporary. Wine and wassail make

Memorie, the Warder of the Braine  
 . . . a Fume, and the Receipt of Reason  
 A Lymbeck only;

the sleep they produce is 'swinish', by them nature is 'drenched'. A drunkard as such forfeits not only his manhood but his humanity. Nor does Rosalind's 'modern' mean what the word

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does now, 'modish' or what has been invented of late. Rather it is that which has always been the mode, and which stands plain to reason so that there never was need to invent it. In this play for example the justice is described as

Full of wise sawes and moderne instances

– of instances which belong to proverbial wisdom, apt and sound so that they have become trite. What Rosalind is saying is that Jaques by his melancholy is turned into a beast, and that an old woman would be less ignorant, less pitiable than he.

Taken aback, for the moment he can think of nothing but to reaffirm his liking: 'Why, 'tis good to be sad and say nothing.' Crudely however, so that he lays himself open to the crude retort: 'Why then, 'tis good to be a poste.' And it would seem to be this which finally rouses him to a defence.

His melancholy, he begins, is not like others Rosalind has heard of:

I have neither the Schollers melancholy, which is emulation: nor the Musicians, which is fantasticall; nor the Courtiers, which is proud; nor the Souldiers, which is ambitious. . . .

and so on. Jaques's melancholy has its source not in private hopes, anxieties and disappointments but in what is of wider importance as it is in the world outside. 'It is a melancholy', he continues, 'of mine owne' – one that is which he is the first to discover – 'compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects.' Or in other words it is 'the sundrie contemplation of my travells, in which (m)y often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadnesse'.

Jaques's meaning may not be quite clear, and I do not think it is or can be, but his intention would seem to be so. By boasting of originality, breadth and freshness of information he hopes to impress, perhaps to intimidate, the youthful Rosalind. But she mistakes, and I suspect purposely, his drift: as she is intelligent enough to distrust originality, she is subtle enough to challenge it in this way. Seizing on the word 'travels' she exclaims:

A traveller: by my faith you have great reason to be sad; I feare you have sold your owne lands, to see other mens; then to have seene much, and to have nothing, is to have rich eyes and poore hands.

She ventures after all, that is, to assimilate his melancholy to other people's, suggesting that it may be due to poverty, which

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is a private anxiety. But Jaques rejects with scorn the notion that his travels have on a balance brought him anything but profit: 'I have gain'd', he insists, 'my experience.' Once more he is implying that something, because it exists, has a title to do so; that his experience, as it has been gained, was necessarily worth the gaining. Once more therefore, and if possible more vigorously this time, she appeals to common sense for his condemnation. Whatever profit he imagines he has brought back from his travels, there is something which the merest stay-at-home could tell him is a loss:

*Jaques.* I have gain'd my experience.

*Rosalind.* And your experience makes you sad: I had rather have a foole to make me merrie, then experience to make me sad, and to travaile for it too.

Whether or not Rosalind is aware of it, this second rebuke is of peculiar force as addressed to Jaques. Of all the characters it is he alone who, in previous scenes, has expressed complete satisfaction in the company of Touchstone, the fool. He has gone even further, and claimed that nowhere but in folly ought satisfaction to be found:

Oh noble foole,  
 A worthy foole: Motley's the onely weare . . .  
 . . . O that I were a foole,  
 I am ambitious for a motley coat.

Yet now he has to be reminded that there is an office which fools can perform. About his conduct it seems there is a grave inconsistency, for at one time he countenances factitious gaiety, at another equally factitious gloom.

If it stood alone, such an inconsistency might be puzzling; but it has a companion, which also serves to explain it. In claiming in his interchange with Rosalind that all experience is worth while, Jaques is claiming in effect that no experience is worth anything at all. In asserting that, in the present, there are no reasons why he should do one thing rather than another – why, for example, he should be merry rather than mope – he is shutting his eyes to reasons why, in the future, one thing rather than another should be done. In other words he is posing as a sceptic, and scepticism is an inconsistent doctrine. Though a belief itself, it denies the possibility of belief; it denies to man the possibility of action, though by his nature he cannot refrain

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from acting. And it is because Jaques, in his more alert moments, is aware of this second inconsistency that he commits the first. He seeks shelter in the motley to persuade himself that though he acts and cannot help doing so, he nevertheless does nothing. For if his actions are mere folly they are of no account, and as good as nothing at all.

It is however only at rare moments, as for example when stirred by a first meeting with Touchstone, that Jaques is alert. For the greater part of his time he is characterized by the languor already referred to: which keeps him from making sustained efforts, even that which (as he is not wholly unintelligent) being a fool requires. Instead of concerning himself to justify his scepticism, he quietly submits to it; and his submission is his melancholy, his 'sadness.' A man in whose eyes the world contains nothing of value, cannot be spurred to action either by the sight of objects he wishes to obtain, or by the thought of ideals he hopes to realize. The only action open to him – and as he is human, he cannot remain wholly inert – no more than half deserves the name, for in it he is as much passive as active. He needs, so to speak, to be betrayed into action – to be propelled into it from behind, by agencies of which he is not completely aware. Such agencies are the mechanism of habit, or a conspiracy of circumstance. In comedy where characters are not relentlessly harassed by circumstance, they are able continually to yield to habit.

The travels to which Jaques refers the origin of his scepticism are equally likely to have been its consequence, for travel and exploration degenerate into habit. When the senses are dazzled by a ceaseless and rapid change of objects, the intellect has no time to discriminate between them, the will no occasion for choice, so that in the end a man becomes capable of neither. The habit is then a necessity to life, which at the same time and to the same extent has slackened, become languid. It concerns itself only with the surface of objects while their substance is neglected. Jaques's decision in Act V proceeds from a habit of this kind:

The Duke hath put on a Religious life. . .  
To him will I.

His pretext is that

out of these convertites  
There is much matter to be heard, and learn'd.

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But his reason, rather than to learn, is to avoid learning. He quits the court for the monastery much as amateur students, threatened with the labour of mastering a subject, abandon it for the preliminaries of another – usually as different as possible. If during the course of the play Jaques does not engage on travel, it should be remembered that he frequently changes, not his surroundings, but his interlocutor. He indulges the habit of gossip, which is that of a traveller immobilized. That he has abundant leisure for gossip is only natural: time hangs heavy on a sceptic's hands, for whom the world contains nothing that can take it off.

It hangs heavy on Hamlet's, and this is the most obvious point of resemblance between him and Jaques. 'I have of late', Hamlet complains, 'lost all my mirth, forgone all custome of exercise'; and he goes on to give general reasons. They imply scepticism of a kind: the earth and sky, he says, seem but a 'foule and pestilent congregation of vapours', such as do not encourage enterprise: man himself has come to appear but the 'Quintessence of dust', with whom he would not willingly have commerce. In the same way, to refer to another tragedy, time hangs heavy on Macbeth's hands, at least as he draws near his end. Neither sight nor sound can rouse his interest, nor could it be roused by any conceivable sight or sound. He finds himself incapable of believing in the reality even of his wife's death: the report of it, he suggests, should be kept from him until tomorrow. But at the same time he knows that tomorrow will find him as insensible, as incredulous as today.

Scepticism of a kind: but it is immediately obvious that Hamlet speaks with a disgust or an impatience, Macbeth with a weariness, which to Jaques are unknown. Even in this matter in which alone they are similar, their dissimilarity is yet greater. Anticipating a little, it might be said that Macbeth and Hamlet lead a fuller, a more complete life than Jaques; they are, that is, more conscious of themselves, and rather than languid are continuously, perhaps, feverishly alert.

One consequence is that they cannot easily be betrayed into action. Whereas Jaques looks back without regret, even with complacency on his travels, it is only with reluctance that Macbeth lapses into the habit of fighting for fighting's sake:

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Why should I play the Roman Foole, and dye  
 On mine owne sword? whiles I see lives, the gashes  
 Do better upon them.

Sentiment and rhythm are flat to extinction, Macbeth is speaking sullenly. What he is about to do may be better than nothing, it is all he can do; nevertheless it is no more than might be done by a common bully, by an animal. For them it might be a full life; for himself, Macbeth admits, it can be no more than the slackened half-life of habit. Similarly the 'custome of exercise' and all customs have lost their hold on Hamlet; for him to act he needs to be surprised by extraordinary circumstance.

Nevertheless, as has been said, neither he nor Macbeth is idle. The energy which their state of mind forbids they should employ on the world, they employ on the state of mind itself; so that not only the inconsistency, the evil (what Rosalind meant by the 'beastliness') of scepticism is continually before them. They see it is not the solution to a problem, but rather a problem which presses to be solved; not the tempering of feeling and the invigoration of thought, but the denial of both. They not only reject Jaques's flight into folly, which was to preserve scepticism; they agonize over the sort of reflections with which, in both languid and alert moments, Jaques is lulled. 'And all our yesterdayes', exclaims Macbeth in despair at what forces itself upon him as the nothingness of man,

And all our yesterdayes have lighted Fooles  
 The way to dusty death;

'tis but an hour agoe', observes Jaques with satisfaction,

'Tis but an hour agoe, since it was nine,  
 And after one houre more, 'twill be eleven,  
 And so from houre to houre, we ripe, and ripe,  
 And then from houre to houre, we rot, and rot. . .

or rather Touchstone observes this, from whom Jaques is quoting. Touchstone is by profession and conviction a fool, the seriousness of whose statements will come up for consideration later; Jaques is as little serious as, in a quotation, it is possible to be. He is echoing more sound than sense; the latter he has not plumbed (the movement, the rhythm show it), and the statement he has made no more than half his own – fitting accompaniment and expression of a half-life of habit. Elsewhere he compares

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human life to a theatrical performance as though, in harmony with his scepticism, to stress its unreality; but very soon, in harmony with his languor, the theatre begins to appear a substantial, for all he cares a permanent, structure. Performances in it last a long time, so that it is possible to make a full display of talent:

one man in his time plays many parts,  
 His Acts being seven ages.

And then Jaques recites the ages, diverting himself with objects separated on this occasion not in space but in time. When the same comparison occurs to Macbeth he is so overwhelmed with the notion of unreality that he does not allow even the actor to act: the latter ‘struts and frets . . . upon the Stage’, struts and frets not for a full performance but only for ‘his heure . . . and then is heard no more.’ In Macbeth’s verse the comparison flares up and extinguishes itself in indignation at what it implies of man’s lot:

It is a Tale  
 Told by an Ideot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing.

That of Jaques continues to demean itself elegantly even when describing in detail man’s end

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Once again the rhythm and the movement show that Jaques is meaning little of what he says; that a true traveller once more, he is occupied with the surface only, not the substance of objects before him.

If I may look aside or ahead for a moment, I would venture to suggest that the essential difference between comedy and tragedy may perhaps be this sort of difference: not one of kind, I mean, but of degree. As far as I can see it is possible and even probable that tragedy and comedy – Shakespearian comedy at any rate – treat of the same problems, comedy doing so (to repeat the word) less seriously. And by ‘less seriously’, I may now explain, I mean that the problems are not forced to an issue: a lucky happening, a lucky trait of character (or what for the purposes of the play appears lucky) allowing them to be evaded. As, for example, conditions in Arden and conditions of his own temper preserve Jaques from fully realizing the nature and consequences of his scepticism: to Rosalind, to the reader, it is obvious that



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his interests are restricted, his vigour lessened, but he is never put to the test. Hamlet, on the other hand, in a similar spiritual state, is called upon to avenge a father, foil an uncle and govern a kingdom. And when at last chance forces him into action it is not only that he may slaughter but also that he may be slaughtered: in other words, not that in spite of his disability he may achieve his end, but that because of it he may fail. In *Othello* hardly an accident happens which does not lend plausibility to Iago's deceit, so that the problem posed by human malice on the one hand, human ignorance on the other, cannot but be faced; in *Much Ado* there is a final accident – and a very obvious one, for its name is Dogberry – which unmasks Don John. In *Lear* accident of the wildest form unites with malice and with the elements to convince a human being of his imbecility; in *The Winter's Tale* accident equally wild serves to hide that imbecility, if not from Leontes (who is however encouraged to forget it) at least from Florizel. In comedy the materials for tragedy are procured, in some cases heaped up; but they are not, so to speak, attended to, certainly not closely examined. And so what might have caused grief causes only a smile, or at worst a grimace.

I apologize for speculations of this kind, which can only remain gratuitous until it is known more exactly what comedy, more especially what *As You Like It*, is about. At least one other resemblance, possibly an important one, between it and the tragedies, calls, I think, for attention. As Hamlet's melancholy is caused by the sin of others and Macbeth's by sin of his own, so Jaques – if the Duke is to be trusted – has not only travelled but been

a Libertine,

As sensuall as the brutish sting itself.

And the cure for all three, according to each of the three plays, is very much the same. Fortinbras reproaches Hamlet, and Hamlet reproaches himself, with lacking a 'hue of resolution' which, as it is 'native', it is a defect he should not possess; Macbeth contrasts the division of counsels within him, suspending activity, with the strong monarchy or 'single state' enjoyed in the healthy man by the reason. Similarly Rosalind confronts Jaques with the desirability of what she calls merriment or mirth: from her remark already quoted it is obvious she does not mean laughter, not at any rate laughter without

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measure, and therefore not laughter in the first place. For the confusion of Jaques it is necessary she should speak emphatically; in a conversation which irks her she is to be excused if she is brief. Were the occasion other, or were she given to reflection, she might perhaps describe this 'mirth' more closely – as something similar to her own 'alertness' which has already drawn attention: the prerequisite of common sense, and what in more recent times, according to the sympathies and perspicacity of the speaker, has been known either as 'vitality' or 'faith'. The meaning of 'mirth' in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century devotional books should be borne in mind, and its meaning on the lips of, say, St Thomas More. Hamlet, it will be remembered, noted as first among his distressing symptoms that he had 'lost all his mirth'.

This scene at the beginning of Act IV sheds light, I do not think it would be too much to claim, on all that Jaques says or does. If so it is important to a not inconsiderable part of the play, and in that at least Jaques cannot be an intruder. For his quips and monologues, however loose in their immediate context, have a dependence on this dialogue to which he is indispensable. He is so not only by what he says, but also by what he causes to be said to him. I am going to suggest that, in spite of the familiar verdict, he is no more of an intruder anywhere. For the rest of the play consists largely of situations which, if he is taken as primary melancholic, might be described as modelled on that in which he finds himself with Rosalind. Either she or a temporary ally or deputy of hers – frequently Corin the Old Shepherd – faces and condemns a succession of characters who, like Jaques, are incapable of or indisposed to action. Silvius, Touchstone, Orlando, the Duke, each has a melancholy of his own; and so too has Rosalind, in so far as she is in love with Orlando. But not even that escapes her judgment, since she can judge it disguised as someone other than herself. Add that the minor characters occasionally condemn or at least reprove one another, and it is possible to gain some notion of the pattern which Shakespeare seems to have intended for *As You Like It*. A single *motif* is repeated, giving unity to the whole; but at the same time it varies continually, so that the whole is complex.

Such I think was Shakespeare's intended pattern: unfortunately