

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-13485-9 - Shakespeare's Comic Rites  
Edward Berry  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## I

## Introduction: Comic Rites

This book brings together eight of Shakespeare's plays, those commonly called the romantic comedies: *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. These plays are "romantic" not so much because they exploit the conventions and themes of romance, although many do, but because they share a central "romantic" action: they chart the tortuous course of pairs of lovers through courtship to marriage. It is this simple, dynamic, and infinitely variable structure that shapes most profoundly our experience of these plays, defines them as a genre, and differentiates them from other, related groups such as the problem comedies or late romances.<sup>1</sup>

To explore the nature of this genre and its distinctive appeal, I should like to begin some distance from Shakespeare, in the remote world of primitive ritual. The structure that informs Shakespearean comedy and creates its most distinctive effects is not only esthetic but social and psychological. In the form of rites of passage this structure exists in nearly all cultures, including that of Elizabethan England. To pursue its significance in Shakespeare's comedies is to venture into three very different fields – anthropology, social history, and literary criticism. The journey, admittedly, is hazardous; yet it may also be rewarding, for if at all successful it may tell us something, not only about the central experience of Shakespearean comedy, but about its relation to Elizabethan culture and to cultural patterns common to all mankind. It may illuminate, in short, some of the ways in which the comedies are at once Shakespearean, Elizabethan, and universal. Since the terrain I intend to explore is still relatively uncharted, it may be useful to begin not with the comedies but with a broad survey of our route.

In his anthropological classic, *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep analyzes the various rites by means of which societies

effect transitions in the life of an individual from one social identity to another – rites of birth, initiation, marriage and death. These celebrations of crises in the life cycle occur in societies throughout the world and at different stages of historical development. Their precise significance varies from culture to culture. As van Gennep demonstrates, however, they share a common structure, unfolding in three movements: an initial stage of separation, in which the individual is divorced from his familiar environment; a transitional stage, in which his old identity is destroyed and a new one created; and a final stage of incorporation, in which he is reintegrated into society in his new role.

In practice, rites of passage are naturally more complicated than this schema suggests: in some cases one phase may be insignificant or even missing; in others, a phase may so dominate that it monopolizes the entire rite; in still others, a phase may itself contain elements of other phases. An Elizabethan wedding, for example, may be viewed as a series of rites of passage – with separations, transitions, and incorporations. The couple move from the bride's house to the church, where they are joined as man and wife, then move from the church to the bride's house, where they are feasted, and finally move from the banquet to the bridal chamber, where the marriage is consummated. Viewed as the culmination of a courtship, however, the entire ceremony becomes a rite of incorporation.<sup>2</sup> Despite the recalcitrance of life to scholarly order, van Gennep's schema, flexibly applied, offers a meaningful approach to a wide variety of phenomena. Its impact on modern anthropology has been profound.<sup>3</sup>

Since I shall focus on initiation,<sup>4</sup> courtship, and marriage, it may be helpful to flesh out van Gennep's skeletal structure with illustrations from these rites. The phase of separation, as the name implies, marks the first stage in the loss of a sense of identity. Usually abrupt, and sometimes violent, rites of separation rupture the individual's ties to his former self, his family, his community, his familiar routine and environment. In initiation, separation is effected by such actions as whipping or intoxication, and most often by literal journeys into the bush or into seclusion; the event is sometimes characterized as a symbolic death. In marriage, separation occurs through such rites as mock-abduction, in which the bride is "captured"; by a movement across boundaries, such as crossing a threshold; or by a variety of other actions, many of

## INTRODUCTION: COMIC RITES

3

which symbolize separation in other rites as well – changing clothes, destroying or throwing away something linked to the former identity, cutting the hair or beard, insulting or beating childhood companions, washing or being washed, losing one's name. Whatever their specific form or intensity, each of these rites dramatizes a process of alienation.

Transitional rites, or liminal rites, as they are often called (from the Latin *limen*, threshold), are usually more complicated and extensive than rites of separation, especially during initiation, when they sometimes last for years. In general, the liminal phase can be characterized as one of confusion, testing, and education, although “confusion” is too trivial a word for the fundamental dislocation of self sometimes experienced. In initiation, this disorientation occurs in such activities as dying symbolically; losing one's name, language, and customary diet; disguising oneself, or mutilating or painting one's body; and engaging in sex reversal, or in other modes of behavior, such as stealing, that are ordinarily taboo. The testing in initiation rites includes physical and mental ordeals of various kinds, such as beating, fasting, sleeplessness, scarification, and circumcision. The process is educational in many senses. Formal instruction is often provided in the religion, customs, and skills of the society, but this seems usually less important than the symbolic re-enforcement of tribal values of which the individual is already aware. At times, the liminal phase culminates in a moment of insight; in some North American and Australian cultures, for example, the “gods” who torment the novices are unmasked at the end of the rite.

The liminal phase of marriage rites, or courtship, as we know it, is usually less traumatic than that of initiation. In most societies, the period of betrothal is chiefly one of testing and education. The families and future partners exchange visits and gifts, and often the betrothed couple serve their respective in-laws, demonstrating their worth and learning the behavior appropriate to married adults. The disorientation and confusion which are so dramatic in initiation rites are less pronounced in courtship, although a kind of festive misrule is not uncommon. In Zulu wedding ceremonies, for example, brides wear men's weapons, run away from their husbands, and endure for long periods the insults of their husband's kin.<sup>5</sup> In Western societies, since roughly the time of Shakespeare, when the conventional symptoms of romantic love

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-13485-9 - Shakespeare's Comic Rites  
 Edward Berry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

became a prelude to marriage, courtship has been a period of high trauma, as painful and elaborate as many rites of initiation.

The liminal phase is a period of indeterminate identity, full of ambiguity and paradox; in it, as van Gennep observes, the individual "wavers between two worlds."<sup>6</sup> Since the notion of liminality is crucial to the comedies – and, indeed, immensely suggestive for many of Shakespeare's plays – it may be worth pausing for a moment over a synoptic description provided by the anthropologist Victor Turner:

... the most characteristic midliminal symbolism is that of paradox, or being *both this and* that. Novices are portrayed and act as androgynous, or as both living *and* dead, at once ghosts and babes, both cultural and natural creatures, human *and* animal. They may be said to be in a process of being ground down into a sort of homogeneous social matter, in which possibilities of differentiation may be still glimpsed, then later positively refashioned into specific shapes compatible with their new postliminal duties and rights as incumbents of a new status and state. The grinding down process is accomplished by ordeals: circumcision, subincision, clitoridectomy, hazing, endurance of heat and cold, impossible physical tests in which failure is greeted by ridicule, unanswerable riddles which make even clever candidates look stupid, followed by physical punishment, and the like. But reducing down overlaps with reconstruction. The rebuilding process is by instruction, partly in practical skills, partly in tribal esoterica, and proceeds both by verbal and nonverbal symbolic means. Sacred objects may be shown, myths recited in conjunction with them, answers may be given to riddles earlier left unexplained.<sup>7</sup>

In several provocative studies, particularly *The Ritual Process* and *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner has explored the nature of liminality and its function in a wide variety of social contexts, ranging from political rites among the Ndembu to the social customs of modern hippies.

Rites of incorporation integrate the individual into society in his new role. In both initiation and marriage, the most common of these rites are a religious ceremony and a communal meal. They are often supplemented by the exchange of gifts and visits, and by ritual dancing. Although the community as a whole participates in these rites, they center on the initiates or the married pair, who often receive emblems of their new status, such as a ring, new clothing, or a new name. Marriage includes not only the collective rites of a communal meal and religious ceremony but many personal rites which join bride and bridegroom to each other, such as exchanging belts, bracelets, or rings; being bound to one

## INTRODUCTION: COMIC RITES

5

another, or wrapped together in a veil or piece of clothing; or eating from the same dish. The incorporation symbolized in these personal rites culminates in sexual consummation. Bonding tends to be more complicated in marriage than initiation because spouses must be joined not only to their community but to each other and their immediate kin; the network of marital relations is thus particularly elaborate and extensive.

In some societies, initiation and marriage form a single process, especially in the case of girls. Among the Vai in Liberia, for example, young girls are initiated by being taken to the *sande*, a sacred place in the forest, where they are considered dead and are instructed in domestic and sexual behavior by old women. Often, a girl's parents arrange her marriage while she is in the *sande*; in such cases she is not permitted to leave until her first menstruation. At that point, after being presented with gifts from her betrothed, she is perfumed, adorned, and taken to meet her parents at the entrance to the sacred place. After a ceremonial meal, she accompanies her mother to the hut of her intended. While the couple consummate their marriage inside the hut, their parents and guests sit outside, sharing a meal. After the consummation, the husband joins them.<sup>8</sup> In such instances, maturity and marriage coincide, the initiate being transformed in one step from unmarried child to married adult. A similar integration of initiation and marriage rites, as we shall see, occurs in Elizabethan society and Shakespeare's comedies.

In its broad outlines, the initiatory process that van Gennep describes parallels that of Shakespeare's comedies. The shipwrecks, banishments, and journeys that begin the plays may be compared with rites of separation, breaking apart lovers, families, and friends, and placing the protagonists in states of social and psychological alienation. The consistent use of symbolic geography in the plays – the movement of characters into the “holiday” or “green” worlds so important in the criticism of C. L. Barber and Northrop Frye – creates mysterious landscapes analogous to the sacred forests of initiation. In these enchanted places, Shakespeare's protagonists experience the dislocations and confusions of identity, the ordeals, and the education characteristic of the liminal phase; as Leo Salingar observes, they “are led through a passage of illusion, as in a rite of initiation.”<sup>9</sup> The conclusions of the plays not only announce the joining of lovers in marriage but

in many cases dramatize the actual rites of incorporation prominent in Elizabethan weddings – the exchanging of rings and oaths, kissing, feasting, and dancing. Since Shakespeare's successful lovers are invariably young lovers, these rites mark not only the end of a single state but the end of adolescence. The comedies, in short, might be called comic rites of passage.

If this analytic schema is to be useful, however, it is important to recognize its limitations. It is not intended as a formula. In their diversity and complexity, Shakespeare's comedies resist scholarly strait-jackets more successfully, and more delightfully, than the rites that van Gennep defines. The comic pattern varies from play to play, and the schema fits some plays better than others. If van Gennep's initiatory pattern does not provide a formula for interpretation, however, it does offer a framework, flexible enough to relate the plays to each other without, I hope, suppressing their individuality, and broad enough to tell us something important about the sources of their dramatic appeal.

The parallels between Shakespeare's comic structure and that of rites of passage are strikingly exact but difficult to explain. Why should Shakespeare reproduce in his comedies an ancient ritual pattern? One place to look for answers, although it lies beyond my scope, is in the nature of comedy itself. Although Shakespeare exploits the threefold pattern of rites of passage more consistently, more precisely, and more profoundly than any other comic dramatist, it is clear that in an abstract form it can be detected in most conventional comedy from Aristophanes to Neil Simon. Shakespeare's romantic comedy, after all, is based on a comic formula, still very much alive, that inevitably entails separation, transition, and incorporation: a young man and woman fall in love, endure and eventually overcome a variety of obstacles to their union, and finally get married. Romantic comedy of this kind is a specialized and apparently immortal version of a structure that Susanne Langer, the most persuasive modern theorist of comedy, defines as the "upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium." One of the few writers on comedy to be more concerned with comic structure than with the nature of laughter, Langer defines comedy in a way that may help explain its general resemblance to a rite of passage.

Langer locates the impulse behind comic form in biology, in what she calls "the round of conditioned and conditioning

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13485-9 - Shakespeare's Comic Rites

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: COMIC RITES

7

organic processes that produces the life rhythm." "When this rhythm is disturbed," she observes, "all activities in the total complex are modified by the break; the organism as a whole is out of balance. But, within a wide range of conditions, it struggles to retrieve its original dynamic form by overcoming and removing the obstacle, or if this proves impossible, it develops a slight variation of its typical form and activity and carries on life with a new balance of functions – in other words, it adapts itself to the situation." It is this periodic alternation of disequilibrium and equilibrium, according to Langer, that determines the form of comedy: "Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, his contest with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance. Whatever the theme . . . the immediate sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy, and dictates its rhythmically structured unity, that is to say its organic form."<sup>10</sup> Langer's description of the comic process is analogous to van Gennep's of rites of initiation and marriage: in both cases the protagonists move from an initial state of equilibrium into a state of disequilibrium, and finally into a new and more complicated state of equilibrium. In comedy or in life the triumph of the protagonists may be short-lived – there is a certain hopeful oversimplification in calling marriage a state of equilibrium – but it is a triumph nonetheless and testifies to man's capacity for renewal and re-creation.

While Langer locates the structure of comedy in fundamental biological rhythms, van Gennep uses the same rhythms to explain the function of rites of passage. Such rites are necessary, he argues, because individuals, like other organisms, experience periodically the need for renewal:

The phenomenon of a *transition* may be noted in many other human activities, and it recurs also in biological activity in general, in the applications of physical energy, and in cosmic rhythms. It is necessary that two movements in opposite directions be separated by a point of inertia, which in mechanics is reduced to a minimum by an eccentric and exists only potentially in circular motion. But, although a body can move through space in a circle at a constant speed, the same is not true of biological or social activities. Their energy becomes exhausted, and they have to be regenerated at more or less close intervals. The rites of passage ultimately correspond to



this fundamental necessity, sometimes so closely that they take the form of rites of death and rebirth.<sup>11</sup>

If both rites of passage and comic dramas have their source in man's unity with nature, it is not surprising that they share a common, evolutionary form – a form in which periodic forays into chaos lead to new kinds of integration.

Because of these structural parallels, interpretations of rites of passage are often applicable to comedy as a structure of experience, both for the characters within a play and the audience outside it. For the most part, anthropologists have approached rites of passage, as they have approached all ritual, in terms of their social function.<sup>12</sup> The dominant view, argued forcefully by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in his influential study of the Andaman Islanders, has been that rituals express and thereby perpetuate the basic values of a society: “the social function of the Andaman Islanders is to maintain and to transmit from one generation to another the emotional dispositions on which the society (as it is constituted) depends for its existence.”<sup>13</sup> Although by no means abandoned, this view has been qualified considerably by more recent anthropologists, who have stressed the role of ritual in expressing and resolving, if only partially and temporarily, underlying social tensions and conflicts. Interpreting the social disorder and sexual inversions that characterize marriage rites among the Zulu, for example, Max Gluckman observes that the rites state “in advance the conflicts that will hinge on [the bride's] position, and this statement is believed to bless the marriage.”<sup>14</sup> Although Gluckman links this process to Aristotle's conception of catharsis, he admits that we understand very little about how, or to what extent, it works.<sup>15</sup> Instead of ending social conflict, Gluckman suggests, such rituals lead to “temporary truces, and at times conceal the basic conflicts between competitors.”<sup>16</sup>

From a sociological perspective, then, rites of passage may be seen as symbolic forms for the perpetuation of social values and for the expression and partial resolution of social tensions and conflicts. Both of these functions seem pertinent to the experience of comedy. In a recent monograph, for example, Monika Vizedom has demonstrated how Gluckman's approach might be applied to a particular set of social tensions with obvious relevance to romantic comedy – those between age and youth. Many



## INTRODUCTION: COMIC RITES

9

rites of passage, Vizedom finds, especially those of initiation and marriage, involve generational conflict. Some, she notes, stress the submission of youth to age, the inviolability of the authority of the elders; others, however, such as the “coming out ceremony” of the Nyakusa, seem to “enact the triumph of youth over age.”<sup>17</sup> This conflict between youth and age figures prominently in Northrop Frye’s view of comedy: “At the core of most Renaissance comedy, including Shakespeare’s, is the formula transmitted by the New Comedy pattern of Plautus and Terence. The normal action is the effort of a young man to get possession of a young woman who is kept from him by various social barriers: her low birth, his minority or shortage of funds, parental opposition, the prior claims of a rival. These are eventually circumvented, and the comedy ends at a point when a new society is crystallized, usually by the marriage or betrothal of hero and heroine.”<sup>18</sup>

To view Shakespearean comedy from an exclusively sociological perspective, however, is to miss its most distinctive quality. As Leo Salinger observes, “Shakespeare’s great innovation was to treat comedy lyrically as an emotional and imaginative experience, an inward metamorphosis.”<sup>19</sup> The obstacles that stand between lovers in most romantic comedy from Terence and Plautus to Dekker and Greene, as Frye observes, are external – if not social, then metaphysical. While parental opposition and the vagaries of Fortune are by no means absent in Shakespearean comedy, the most important obstacles, and those that create the most delightful entanglements, are internal and self-imposed. Egeus, the archetypal *senex* of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is no more instrumental in keeping Hermia and Lysander apart than their own folly, exposed in their flight through the wood. And pairs like Rosaline and Berowne, Kate and Petruchio, Beatrice and Benedick, and Orsino and Viola are separated primarily by their own divided minds. In Shakespearean comedy the crucial obstacles are usually psychological, not social or metaphysical.

Rites of passage too have an important psychological dimension, for at their center, at least in initiation and marriage, is not society at large but the individual, in a state of crisis. Hence the sociological perspective dominant in anthropology seems not only insufficient for Shakespearean comedy but, as Gluckman is

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-13485-9 - Shakespeare's Comic Rites  
 Edward Berry  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

aware, for rites of initiation and marriage as well. Anthropologists, however, for understandable reasons, have been reluctant psychoanalysts, with the result that the effects of these rites upon the individuals involved, and the needs they fulfill, remain largely unknown and unexplored. Two studies, however, one by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the other by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, offer insights into the psychology of such rites that are suggestive for the experience of comedy in general and Shakespearean comedy in particular.

The rite that Lévi-Strauss “psychoanalyzes” is a curing rite, not a rite of passage, but as Monika Vizedom observes, the process involved seems applicable to other rituals, especially those of initiation.<sup>20</sup> The rite is used by the Cuna Indians of Panama to ease difficulties in childbirth. In the mythology of the tribe, the afflictions are caused by Muu, the “power responsible for the formation of the fetus,” who has captured the sick woman’s *purba*, or “soul.” The cure is effected through a long incantation, sung by a shaman, which tells the story of his struggle to free the woman from Muu’s power:

Thus the song expresses a quest: the quest for the lost *purba*, which will be restored after many vicissitudes, such as the overcoming of obstacles, a victory over wild beasts, and, finally, a great contest waged by the shaman and his tutelary spirits against Muu and her daughters, with the help of magical hats whose weight the latter are not able to bear. Muu, once she has been defeated, allows the *purba* of the ailing woman to be discovered and freed. The delivery takes place, and the song ends with a statement of the precautions taken so that Muu will not escape and pursue her visitors.

The woman is cured, then, through a symbolic narrative in which the obstacles that prevent her childbirth are overcome by her physician.

After a lengthy analysis of the symbolism of the narrative, Lévi-Strauss concludes that the psychological dynamics of the rite are analogous to those of traditional psychoanalysis:

In both cases the purpose is to bring to a conscious level conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious, owing either to their repression by other psychological forces or – in the case of childbirth – to their own specific nature, which is not psychic but organic or even simply mechanical. In both cases also, the conflicts and resistances are resolved, not because of the knowledge, real or alleged, which the sick woman progressively acquires of them, but because this knowledge makes possible a specific experience, in the course of which conflicts materialize in an order and on a level permitting their free development and leading to their resolution.<sup>21</sup>