

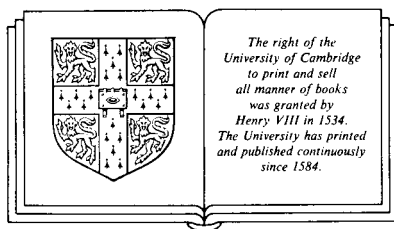
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SHAKESPEARE'S COMIC RITES

EDWARD BERRY
University of Victoria



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To My Parents

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Preface

I discuss the rationale for this study in the introduction, but it may be helpful at the outset to explain its organization. My title, *Shakespeare's Comic Rites*, is intended to suggest a remarkable affinity between the structure of Shakespeare's romantic comedies and that of rites of passage. The order of my chapters therefore follows Arnold van Gennep's description of the three phases of such rites: separation, transition, and incorporation. Chapter 1, "Comic Rites," introduces these phases and their relevance to Elizabethan society and Shakespeare's comedies. Chapter 2, "Separations," discusses the first phase. Chapters 3 and 4 explore courtship as a transitional experience – Chapter 3, "Natural Transitions," focusing on the follies of love; Chapter 4, "Artificial Transitions," on a special instance of those follies, female disguise. Chapters 5 and 6 also deal with transitional matters, although not so exclusively and from different perspectives: Chapter 5, "Natural Philosophers," discusses the role of clowns and fools; Chapter 6, "Time and Place," the temporal and spatial dimensions of the comic experience. Chapter 7, "Incorporations," considers the rites of incorporation that end the plays. A brief conclusion reviews the course of the study and highlights some of its implications. As this outline suggests, my aim is not to interpret individual plays, although interpretations are implicit, but to explore the dynamics of the genre as a whole.

Despite my restriction of discussion to the romantic comedies, I do not intend to suggest that the concept of rites of passage is inapplicable to other plays or genres. Quite the contrary. The pattern of experience that van Gennep defines, particularly as elaborated by recent anthropologists, may offer insights into a wide range of characteristic Shakespearean techniques. I focus on the romantic comedies as an unusually tight-knit genre based on specific ritual structures – those of initiation, courtship, and marriage.

Because of the peculiar nature of this study, my recorded debts

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to Shakespeare critics and scholars are relatively few. I have shied away from controversy and resisted my more idiosyncratic interpretations in the interests of the broad design. Careful readers will recognize numerous debts, some no doubt unconscious. For these I express *en masse* my appreciation. I regret that my broad scope has made it impossible to engage in dialogue (if one can use that word of notes) with many excellent critics and scholars who have fueled my interest in the comedies and deepened my understanding and appreciation.

In documenting the social history behind the plays, I have tried to stay within the boundaries of Shakespeare's lifetime. This has not always been possible; the records of Elizabethan and Jacobean social custom are sparse and fragmentary. Since my argument does not depend upon single details, I have avoided constant weighing of the evidence but have indicated dates for material that is not widely known. In citing old texts, I have normalized *u*, *v*, *i* and *j* to conform with modern practice. For Shakespeare's text, I have used *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), except that I have omitted as unnecessarily distracting the square brackets indicating emendations.

Although I did not realize it at the time, this study began many years ago in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with students whose delight in Shakespeare taught me that the clichés of his universality hold a special truth; to them I owe a continuing obligation. More recently, I am indebted to the University of Victoria and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their invaluable support; to the University of Liverpool for a generous appointment as Visiting Scholar; and to the staffs of the Huntington and Folger Libraries for their kind assistance. To Professor Philip Edwards and the Department of English Literature at the University of Liverpool, I owe thanks for the opportunity to test my ideas at an early stage before a skeptical yet sympathetic audience. To Professors Sherman Hawkins and Terry Sherwood, both of whom read the entire manuscript of this study, I owe not only my thanks but my apologies for certain weaknesses that remain. Finally, I must thank my wife, Margaret, who has taught me much about the rites of marriage, and my children, Michelle and David, who have initiated me into the mysteries of adolescence.