Introduction: Games and frames

(1) 'EXCELLENT DISCOURSE'

This is a study of the self-consciousness of Shakespeare's language. Or more specifically, of Shakespeare's discourse. The term 'discourse', now fashionable again in literary studies, is Shakespeare's own favourite linguistic word in the comedies. 'Language' normally refers in the plays to a given tongue, such as English or Latin, while 'speech' is usually reserved either for the faculty of speaking ('this prerogative of speech') or for an actual oral performance ('I will on with my speech'). 'Discourse' is the general Shakespearean word for language in *use.* Which includes, of course, the language used in the plays themselves. Indeed, discourse is often vividly characterized in the comedies as a tangible presence possessing imposing qualities: 'sweet discourse' *(The Two Gentlemen of Verona)*; 'admirable discourse' *(The Merry Wives of Windsor)*; 'voluble and sharp discourse', 'excellent discourse', 'enchanting ... discourse' *(The Comedy of Errors)*; 'sweet and voluble ... discourse' *(Love's Labour's Lost)*, etc. It is just this active and self-advertising presence of language in use, as it were discourse in the comedies and not merely the discourse of the comedies, that this book aims to explore.

The reasons for such an emphasis on the active roles of language within Shakespearean comedy are primarily historical. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in a brilliant commentary on the comedies, identifies what he calls the 'game of the pure self-activity of the word' as their main motive force (1932: 176). And he relates this verbal self-activity, surely correctly, to the obsessive cultivation of linguistic forms in the Renaissance. Shakespeare's was an age in which language occupied a central place in all areas of cultural endeavour and of socio-political conflict: in religious controversy (e.g. the dispute over 'sacred' verbal formulae that underlay the Reformation); in geographical exploration (the contact with unknown tongues); in philosophical debate (e.g. the competing Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of the linguistic sign); in the politics of education (the benefits or otherwise of instruction in rhetoric); in the new science (the reliability of language as a cognitive tool); in the new national consciousness (the affirmation of the vernacular); and of course in the arts, not least in the theatre itself (the

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debate on the morality of plays and their discourse). There can be no question that the intense linguistic consciousness of the Elizabethan period influenced in turn the very linguistic make-up of the Elizabethan drama, not only in its rhetorical complexity but in its very concern with language in its manifold aspects.

Discourse – this is the main thesis of this study – occupies the same kind of centrality in Shakespearean comedy as it does in Elizabethan culture at large. It is a centrality not simply as privileged semiotic means (language as the communicative medium *par excellence*, not least on the Elizabethan stage), but as direct dramatic and comic object. In other words, in an age that elects language as both primary channel and primary target for its enthusiasms, for its suspicions, and even for its wars, the dramatic and theatrical potential of verbal events in themselves becomes virtually limitless. In this sense the 'self-activity of the word' that characterizes the comedies of Shakespeare (or for that matter the comedies of Lyly or of Jonson) amounts not so much to the autonomy of verbal form as to the identity of that form with the dramatic concerns of the plays. This is nowhere more evident than in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the comedy that serves as the main point of reference for this study.

Now our own age, like Shakespeare's, is one of intense linguistic awareness. The central importance of language in contemporary thought, manifested most directly in the growth of linguistics, of semiotics, of the philosophy of language and of language-oriented sociology, raises the problem of how to approach, from our late twentieth-century standpoint, the language and the linguistic culture produced in other ages, a problem which is at once historical and methodological. In what ways do the modes and instruments of contemporary linguistic enquiry enable us to account for the language of, and the place of language in, texts of the past, and specifically such linguistically formidable texts as Shakespeare's comedies? These introductory comments will be mainly concerned with trying to answer this question, and so with sketching a methodological and historical framework for the critical analysis of the roles of discourse in the plays, setting out from a rapid review of the critical tradition with respect to the language of the comedies, and then proposing some alternative critical criteria.

(II) SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE, SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES, SHAKESPEARE'S CRITICS

Studies, especially book-length studies, of Shakespeare's language run

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two main risks. The first is the risk of tautology, or, what amounts to the same thing, of getting lost in a virtually limitless terrain. In the textual form in which we have received it, Shakespearean drama is *all* language, however great its potential for becoming, in performance, a communicative event that goes quite beyond merely *verbal* discourse. And so to elect as object of study 'Shakespeare's language' is to take on the drama *tout court*. Everything and (this is the danger, at least) nothing. The second risk is the opposite one, namely of too severe a delimitation of the critical and dramatic territory. Whatever its descriptive value, criticism that abstracts from the plays a given linguistic function or level – Shakespeare's syntax, Shakespeare's imagery, Shakespeare's lexicon, etc. – will not normally be able to integrate its findings into an overall account of linguistic structure.

It is this second danger that has been most often courted in the history of language-oriented Shakespeare criticism. We possess a considerable corpus of valuable studies dedicated to each of the respective linguistic 'strata' of the comedies and of the dramas in general: the phonetic (from Kökeritz 1953, to Cercignani 1981); the grammatical (from Abbott 1881, to Wikberg 1975); the rhetorical (from Clemen 1951, to Vickers 1970); the social or sociolinguistic (from Schlauch 1965, to Krieger 1979), etc. But each delimited level of analysis has tended to remain isolated from, or, to use an appropriate metaphor, non-communicating with the rest. Descriptive syntheses are rare and dangerously close to extinction.

Such efforts as have been made to characterize the overall roles of language in these plays have more often than not created insuperable critical problems for themselves by bringing to the task unhelpfully restrictive pseudo-Aristotelian criteria. Particular difficulties have arisen from the principle, derived from the *Poetics* but widely applied to Shakespearean comedy, that 'Diction is only one of the elements of the drama, and no matter how brilliant it may be, it is still properly *one of the lesser elements*. It must be *subordinated* to the interests of character and plot, or at least not permitted to override them' (Bonazza 1966: 74, my italics). A dramaturgic dogma that insists *a priori* on the dutiful self-effacement of 'diction', that 'lesser' ingredient of dramatic structure, can only lead to critical embarrassment before the unclassical and indecorous linguistic *in*subordination that marks the comedies in their livelier moments.

One encounters such embarrassment throughout the critical history of the comedies. It appears, for example, in the recurrent strategy of dividing the comic canon into two distinct and opposing phases – 'early' versus 'late' – so as to separate off for special treatment 'those inferior early works in which a great comedian gives away his predilections'

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(Cody 1969: 126). Thanks to this move it is not the 'great comedian' himself but that lesser figure, the 'early Shakespeare', who sins against the classical dramaturgic code in his 'failure to subordinate means to ends' (Phialas 1966: 84), that is in allowing language too prominent a role.

It was probably Coleridge who set the prevailing terms and tone of this critical tradition in his condescension towards the divinely gifted but, as yet, verbally ill-disciplined author of the first comedies: 'Sometimes you see this youthful god of poetry connecting disparate thoughts purely by means of resemblances in the words expressing them' (1960 ed., 1: 86). Both the terms and the tone survive in a good deal of influential later criticism, such as Harley Granville-Barker's: 'To many young poets of the time their language was a new-found wonder; its very handling gave them pleasure. The things it could be made to do! [Shakespeare] had to discover that they were not much to his purpose; but it is not easy to stop doing what you do so well' (1927: 8).

Now it is scarcely surprising that of all 'those inferior early works' whose supposed failure to subordinate linguistic means to structural ends is repeatedly lamented by commentators, it is *Love's Labour's Lost* – by general consent the 'linguistic' comedy *par excellence* – that has served as the preferred butt for contemptuous critical dismissal. Dryden's 'meanly written' is echoed in Johnson's 'unworthy of our poet' and amplified in Hazlitt's resounding 'If we were to part with any of the author's comedies, it should be this.' This unceremonious refusal of the play is unequivocally due to its putative structural imbalance or verbal top-heaviness. Thus Swinburne likens the structure of the comedy to 'that of a house of cards which the wind builds and unbuilds at pleasure. Here we find a very riot of rhymes, wild and wanton in their half-grown grace' (1880: 47). Twentieth-century evaluations have tended to take up H. B. Charlton's judgment of the work as 'merely a verbal display', and thereby 'deficient in plot and characterization' (1938: 276, 270). So we are told that 'plot and action [are] submerged in tides of words' (Calderwood 1969: 79), that 'the diction of melody and words is all that we . . . remember' (Hamilton 1967: 130), or, more bluntly, that the comedy is vitiated by 'too much talk' (Bonazza 1966: 64).

A number of assumptions underlying this lengthy evaluative tradition are likely to be challenged in any critical engagement with the texts that aims to do more than apply inherited judgmental yardsticks. The first of these yardsticks has to do with the conveniently binary opposition itself ('early'/'late'). A division which, apart from the all too familiar chronological uncertainties it evokes (how early *is Love's Labour's Lost*? Is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* still early enough to be

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considered 'early' or already late enough to be deemed 'late'?), entails a highly questionable assessment of the structural disposition of the plays within the two respective groups. It is by no means self-evident that 'One of the points in which *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* are superior to *Love's Labour's Lost* is that in these the role of language is made properly subordinate' (Phialas 1966: 71), even if we feel able to determine what a 'properly subordinate' role should be. There are good reasons, on the contrary, for claiming that the language of the two 'late' texts in question – as, indeed, of *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Merchant of Venice* and others – manifests a vitality and a dramaturgic conspicuousness that in no sense correspond to the dull and humble subservience approvingly attributed to it by Phialas and others.

Harder still to sustain is what might be termed the 'layer cake' conception of the drama betrayed in much of the critical reception met by the comedies. A rigid scale of dramatic 'components', in which plot, character, theme and diction are assigned to their proper places according to their relative dramaturgic value, does not merely recognize the existence of different structural levels in the dramatic text but supposes the absolute distinctness of these levels, as if 'plot' in no way depended on 'diction' nor 'character' on 'theme'. At its most reductive, this form of dissection is purely quantitative, a simple question of more and less ('too much talk'). It is not to be wondered at that such criteria have failed spectacularly to come to terms with texts in which the unfolding of discourse, action and thematic issues is of a richly dialectical rather than rigidly stratified nature.

A related obstacle to any detailed consideration of Shakespeare's comic language is the widely shared moralistic abhorrence at the showing-off of the plays' verbal 'means'. The complaint that in Shakespeare's more 'self-indulgent' plays words 'too often exist for their own sake' (Bonazza 1966: 74) is based on a misconception of the roles of discourse in comedy, and especially in Elizabethan comedy. The generic constraints on tragedy tend to set severe limits on the play of discourse, whose narrative duties are normally too pressing to leave much space for self-propagating freeplay (although the language of *Hamlet* can scarcely be said to be modestly and soberly transparent). But one of the salient characteristics of much comic drama from Aristophanes to Stoppard has been the foregrounding, or bringing to prominence, of the linguistic sign itself as phonetic, syntactic or semantic presence, a material factor to be bandied or toyed with or tortured or otherwise offered as immediate object of audience attention. This is Cassirer's 'pure self-activity of the word'. And it need scarcely be underlined that

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the Aristotelian principle of dramaturgic decorum, according to which language is judged 'one of the lesser elements' in the structural hierarchy, and which is so often and uncritically applied to comedy, was not formulated with that genre in view.

In order to find more appropriate and constructive criteria for the analysis of Shakespeare's comic discourse, we have to look beyond the critical tradition proper.

(III) LANGUAGE AS ACTION: THE SPEECH ACT

The opposition derived from the *Poetics* that underlies critical resistance to dramatic 'talk' is that between *lexis* (verbal expression) and *praxis* (action, found at the apex of the Aristotelian hierarchy, *Poetics* 38a. 15). Only if dramatic language is reduced to the status of mere 'diction', the verbal dressing-up of an action level that is in itself non- or pre-linguistic, can its absolute subordination to that level be upheld. But what if *lexis* itself, as many linguists and philosophers of language have insisted in recent years, may instead be viewed as an exemplary form of *praxis*? And what if, correspondingly, the principal mode of *praxis* in Shakespearean comedy lies in what Pirandello called 'spoken action', that is in direct *acts* of language rather than in some verbally decorated extra-linguistic substance?

This alternative perspective on language and language-use is offered by the theory of speech acts, developed over the past two decades in the wake of the pioneering work of J. L. Austin (1962). In the light of such 'a theory of language [as] part of a theory of action' (Searle 1969: 17), the speaking of language is not merely the conveying of some conceptual content (Aristotle's *dianoia*) in variable syntactic and stylistic garb, but is primarily a mode of *doing* in its own right, namely the performing of acts 'such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on; and more abstractly, acts such as referring and predicating' (Searle 1969: 17). Here priority is given to the dynamic interpersonal role of speech, thereby throwing into question any absolute polarity between linguistic representation and social practice.

A number of theorists of the drama have proposed the application of speech-act theory to dramatic discourse (Chambers 1980; Ohmann 1971, 1973; Serpieri 1978a; Elam 1980; Savona 1980; Short 1981), and indeed the immediate implications of such an application are clear and considerable. If we are able to approach the dialogue not as the 'lexical' representation or reporting of some non-linguistic action, but as a network of direct verbal deeds, that is, of *illocutions* ('the performance of an act *in* saying something' (Austin 1962: 99): thus questions,

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commands, affirmations, denials, promises, etc.) and *perlocutions* ('what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading', 109), then we may begin to come to terms with the dynamic discourse structure of the drama in its moment-by-moment unfolding. 'In a play', claims Richard Ohmann, 'the action rides on a train of illocutions' (1973: 83); and Ross Chambers is still more confident of the central importance of the illocutionary act within the dramatic narrative at large: 'in the great majority of cases, the dramatic action appears, in its unfolding, as a story composed of a series of speech acts, and the basic unit of all narrative analysis of drama can thus only be the speech act' (1980: 401, my translation). What are in play in the dialogic exchange, according to this proposal, are no longer static 'characters' represented by their 'diction', but interpersonal forces responsible for carrying forward the narrative dynamic.

With such a shift in analytic focus, unproductive critical scruples regarding the appropriate or decorous *quantities* of speech in the comedies might give way to a more fruitful concern with what comes actually to be *done* with words in a given play. To illustrate both the immediate dialogic and the overall narrative role of the speech-act continuum in Shakespearean comedy, one might take a conspicuous and consequential 'dramatic' (rather than playful) dialogic exchange, such as the first encounter between Isabella and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* (2. 2. 26ff.). Isabella's would-be perlocutionary campaign (her attempt to persuade Angelo to spare her brother Claudio's life), which unfolds through a series of individual *illocutionary* moves, meets with resistance from her interlocutor. Or in terms of speech-act jargon, her plea fails at first to achieve the desired 'perlocutionary effect':

Ang.	Y'are welcome (1): what's your will (2)?
Isa.	I am a woeful suitor to your honour (3);
	Please but your honour hear me (4).
Ang.	Well (5): what's your suit (6)?
Isa.	There is a vice that most I do abhor,
	And most desire should meet the blow of justice;
	For which I would not plead, but that I must;
	For which I must not plead, but that I am
	At war 'twixt will and will not (7).
Ang.	Well: the matter·(8)?
Isa.	I have a brother is condemn'd to die (9);
	I do beseech you, let it be his fault,
	And not my brother (10) . . .
Ang.	Condemn the fault and not the actor of it (11)?
	Why every fault's condemn'd ere it be done (12).

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The exchange can be broken down into the following constituent acts (as indicated):

(1) Greeting

(2) Question to discover Isabella's intent

(3) (= 'illocutionary sequel') Statement of Isabella's illocutionary/perlocutionary intentions as speaker ('suitor')

(4) Request for a hearing (a 'turn signal', see p. 189 below)

(5) (= 'perlocutionary sequel') Request granted

(6) Question to discover the exact nature of Isabella's would-be perlocution

(7) (= illocutionary sequel) Statement, by way of a preamble, qualifying and justifying the suit in advance (note the *meta*-illocutions – 'I would not plead' / 'I must not plead' – dramatizing the speaker's ethical agonies in making the plea)

(8) Question prompting Isabella to come to the object of her plea

(9) (= illocutionary sequel) Statement of object

(10) The plea (explicitly indicated through the 'performative' verb phrase 'I do beseech', see p. 201 below)

(11) (= Lack of perlocutionary sequel) Rhetorical question, by way of a rejection of the suit (thus an example of what John Searle (1975a) terms *indirect* speech acts)

(12) Statement elaborating and justifying the rejection

Even from so rudimentary an anatomy, the skeletal pattern of the interaction emerges clearly enough. And so does the fact that any divorce within the scene between *discursive* and *dramatic* development is purely notional. Isabella's attempted persuasion and Angelo's albeit brief gesture of opposition, like his later attempt at counter-persuasion against Isabella's vows of chastity, are exemplary speech *events* rather than instances of decorative lexical dressing. And it is this very exchange, of course, that generates the main plot (Aristotle's *mythos*) of the comedy as a whole.

At this point, however, a number of objections might be raised against the kind of utterance-by-utterance breakdown of the dialogue sketched here. One may be able legitimately to splinter the drama into a succession of well-defined little 'local' acts when, as in the cited passage, the dialogue comprises a rapid give and take of antithetical moves. But just as there will be episodes of linguistic interaction (say, the opening dialogue between Egeon and the Duke in *The Comedy of Errors*) that do not unfold in so neat a 'micro'-illocutionary fashion, so there will be larger stretches of discourse (monologues, orations, verbal performances of various kinds) whose illocutionary definition is either

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problematic (for example, what type of illocutionary act does Launce perform in his monologic reconstruction of his dog Crab's disgrace in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (4. 4. 1ff.)?: scarcely the simple act of 'narrating' or 'reporting') or otherwise tautological and banal: in illocutionary terms, Jaques's 'seven ages of man' speech (*As You Like It* 2. 7. 139ff.) is a somewhat lengthy statement, but this tells us less than nothing about its characteristics as a verbal happening.

And what are we to make, similarly, of those dramatic language-events that are definable not so much according to illocutionary content as according to dramaturgic and literary convention? In *The Taming of the Shrew*, as everyone knows, Katherina and Petruchio engage in mutual maltreatment of a more or less ritual nature:

Kath.	Let him that mov'd you hither
	Remove you hence. I knew you at the first
	You were a movable.
Pet.	Why, what's a movable?
Kath.	A joint-stool.
Pet.	Thou hast hit it. Come, sit on me.
Kath.	Asses are made to bear, and so are you.
Pet.	Women are made to bear, and so are you.
Kath.	No such jade as you, if me you mean. (2. 1. 195ff.)

Now it might be said, not altogether unjustly, that the main point of this kind of verbal brawl (compare Beatrice and Benedick or the lords and ladies in the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) is the insult-exchange itself, whereby the sequence might safely be labelled in 'illocutionary' forms as a piece of squabbling or reciprocal vilifying or the like. But this is to ignore the main defining feature of the sequence: its strict observance of the rules governing what Margaret Galway rightly describes (1935: 183) as 'the oldest of all laughter-provoking devices in native English drama', namely the *flyting* (the device first appears in the Wakefield *Processus noe cum filiis*). The decisive characteristics of the flyting – sustained vituperation, direct statement on the part of the man, sarcastic insinuation on the part of the woman, etc. – are themselves merely secondary illocutionary rules, but the overriding and implicit convention, that which makes the contest a worthy spectacle, is that the insults should be wittily and inventively varied. It is this witty inventiveness, and not the vilification as such, that is on show.

It would be quite superfluous to catalogue here all those more or less conventional and non-illocutionary units of discourse that contribute so decisively to the verbal make-up of many of the comedies: poems, songs, *lazzi*, punning exhibitions, declamations, readings, and so on.

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What is important to emphasize, as a more general rule of the poetics of Shakespearean comedy (and indeed of much English comic drama from Jonson to Shaw to Stoppard), is that language may figure as a dramatic-theatrical 'event' at levels altogether different from that of directly 'pragmatic' interaction. Take the all too conspicuous example of Holofernes's alliterative folly in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> I will something affect the letter; for it argues facility.
> The preyful princess pierc'd and prick'd a pretty pleasing pricket;
> Some say a sore; but not a sore, till now made sore with
>   shooting. (4. 2. 53ff.)

There can be no question that the pedant's little poem represents a well-defined linguistic 'happening' in its own right, ceremoniously marked off from its dialogic context. And there is likewise little doubt that the kind of speech act it purports to perform, the narration of the shooting, is of minor importance: indeed, difficult to decipher. The real event is indicated unambiguously in Holofernes's own prefatory comments: the display of letter-affecting itself as a sign of 'facility'. What is being brought to the foreground is the factor that Austin terms (1962: 96) the '*phonetic* act', i.e. the sheer material production of English phonemes. An event that in Austin's system is merely a requisite (part of the base 'locutionary' act *of* saying something) of the speech act proper (the illocution performed *in* saying something).

   What these examples seem to suggest is that an adequate account of the 'active' functions of Shakespeare's comic discourse requires a more flexible analytic framework, a framework that includes Austin's speech-act apparatus without, however, reducing all verbal events to a single action level. What is needed, in other words, is a conception of language not only *as* action but more generally *in* action at any and all of its constitutive levels.

(IV) LANGUAGE IN ACTION: THE LANGUAGE-GAME

One way of going forward in this direction might be to go back chronologically, i.e. to a proposal that actually pre-dates Austin's system but which, unlike speech-act categories, has been singularly neglected in literary and dramatic theory and criticism. The proposal in question is Wittgenstein's notion of the language-game *(Sprachspiel)*, expounded in the *Brown Book* (1933–5; published 1958) and more decisively in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1941–8; published 1953). Wittgenstein, in the latter work particularly, employs the term 'game' in a very special sense, namely to indicate any distinct form of