

I

THE UNFAITHFUL MIRROR

'O Muse, banish wars and dance with me, your friend, celebrating the weddings of the gods, the banquets of men, and the festivals of the blessed' – for these are the themes that have always been your care.

Aristophanes

Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilised men and women.

Meredith

Comedy has usually meant one thing in theory and another in practice. In the mainstream of critical theory the prime task allotted to it has been the representation of typical characters and probable incidents from common life; according to the definition attributed to Cicero, which renaissance humanists and their successors never tired of repeating, it was 'the imitation of life, the mirror of custom, the image of truth'. This definition can be taken in two senses, as a mirror can be used either to reflect one's appearance or to correct it; but in its most direct sense the definition simply ignores or even contradicts the evidence that many of the plays it refers to are fantastic or remote from ordinary life and that most, if not all, of them contain situations that strain probability. And, for similar reasons, the argument that a comedy is essentially an instrument for moral correction remains, on the face of it, special pleading or else a pious aspiration. The interpretation of Shakespeare's comedies, in particular, has suffered from the discrepancy between critical theory and the practice of his art.

From the Greeks to Shakespeare's time and beyond, comedy has kept the signs of its origins in, and association with, seasonal festivities; the plot conventions which renaissance playwrights inherited from the New Comedy of Plautus and Terence were not imitations of common events but schematic episodes from romance or domesticated myth, or else stylised versions of practical jokes. The central figure in Old Comedy was a masked buffoon; and, with or without the assistance of a clown, the writers of comedy since Aristophanes have exalted

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high spirits and a primitive desire for life-renewal, instead of seeking merely to reflect life as it stands. They have loaded their dice in favour of youth, luck and mother-wit, as against such civilising virtues as prudence, sobriety and discretion. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many renaissance moralists, in spite of their reverence for Latin culture, attacked comedy fiercely, and that some of them, like Ascham, only countenanced the academic study of Plautus and Terence under caution. As to the Comic Muse on the early Elizabethan stage, even Sidney, defending the drama, felt bound to concede that 'naughty Play-makers and Stage-keepers have justly made [her] odious'. The typical humanist apology for comedy, which Sidney adopted, consisted of reiterating the notion of the art-form as a mirror in one sense while restricting it in another: in the first place, the 'right use' of comedy, as 'an imitation of the common errors of our life', was to serve as a signal against the traps of experience; and secondly, Sidney would admit to the stage such laughter as conveys 'delightful teaching', but not 'such scornful matters as stirreth laughter only'. Similarly Ben Jonson, among others following Sidney's lead, appeals to the Ciceronian definition of comedy only to limit it right away to 'a thing throughout pleasant and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners'. Instead of admitting that their time-honoured analogy of the mirror is either false or insufficient, theorists in this dominant neo-classical vein try to take advantage of its ambiguity; under pretence of describing what comedy is like they are recommending how it ought to be read and how it ought to be written. In the meantime, they tacitly accept the second inherited but logically unrelated principle about comedy, that – far from reproducing the miscellaneous sequence of real life – the incidents in a comic play should follow a route predetermined, at least in general terms, as a passage from distress to a happy ending. There is no necessary connection between the principle of the happy ending and the principle of the mirror (however interpreted), even though writers of comedy have habitually obliged them to coincide.

Shakespeare too acknowledges that 'the purpose of playing' – not limited to comedy, indeed – 'was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature', with the function of illuminating and correcting moral behaviour; at least, he acknowledges the force of this theory to the extent of making Hamlet expound it. But there is nothing in his text to show whether Shakespeare himself considers this statement as an apology for his own comedies already acted, or as a critique of his own

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comedies (both of which seem unlikely), or as the strongest theory available, or the one most in character for the scholarly prince. However this may be, those later critics, Meredith for example, who have sought in comedy for a picture of manners as free as possible from stage convention, have taken their standards not from Shakespeare but from Molière or Jonson or Terence. Yet at bottom there is little to choose between Shakespeare and the other dramatists with respect to their faithfulness to common reality. Terence's *Brothers*, for example, contains a study in character and manners, it is true, but the plot depends on the conventional bases of coincidence, dissimulation and a sudden change of heart. Possibly *Le Misanthrope* is the only traditional comic masterpiece in which the impression of artifice resides only in the manners of the characters portrayed, and theatrical devices such as coincidence or mistakes of identity seem to contribute nothing of importance. But one masterpiece does not make a genre. And it can hardly be maintained that here Molière has dropped his usual methods for the sake of an untrammelled essay in realism; on the contrary, the brilliance of *Le Misanthrope* lies in the way the poet has identified psychological realism with the festive conventions of the comic stage by setting his protagonist in opposition to a pleasure-loving, artificial society whose members try to live their daily lives as a ceremony of *complaisance*. As for the difference between the 'realistic' Ben Jonson and Shakespeare the 'romantic', the former's criticisms of the latter are certainly significant. But considered barely as portraits of manners and recitals of imaginary events, Jonson's comedies are no more credible than Shakespeare's. And Jonson, plainly, had no intention of severing comedy from festivity; witness *Bartholomew Fair*.

In *Love's Labour's Lost* Rosaline says of Berowne that

His eye begets occasion for his wit,
For every object that the one doth catch
The other turns to a mirth-loving jest,
Which his fair tongue, conceit's expositor,
Delivers in such apt and gracious words
That aged ears play truant at his tales
And younger hearings are quite ravished;
So sweet and voluble is his discourse.

This speech, with its nice distinction between the appeal of mirth to Youth and Age, recalls Sidney's praise of the poet as story-teller – 'with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner'; it could easily have

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furnished hints for Coleridge's remarkable chapter on the characteristics of Shakespeare's early verse, or have sprung from a moment of self-analysis by the dramatist. For Shakespeare is fond of describing 'wit' in terms of quick-ranging observation and the rapid yet harmonious interconnection of ideas. It is a kind of verbal dance, a voluntary animation of the ordinary course of thought. And Shakespeare's 'wit' is so diffused through his comedies that we are given a heightened sense of life, which is still true to, or continuous with, normal experience, in spite of the implausibility of much of the supporting fiction. Presumably this is near to what Dr Johnson had in mind when, after conventional praise to Shakespeare for upholding 'a faithful mirror of manners and of life', he stressed the breadth of the dramatist's outlook and the ease and flow of his dialogue:

In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. . . Yet his real power is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable, and the tenour of his dialogue; . . . the dialogue of this author is often so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences.

While Dr Johnson's enthusiasm – not too strong a word here – seems admirable, and justified, it may be questioned how far the dialogues in Shakespeare's comedies really resemble 'common conversation', or whether he could have distilled them from common conversation by a process of 'selection' that was nothing other than 'diligent': Johnson here is surely trimming his response to the text to fit the demands of criticism and his age. Yet conversely (but inconsistently – at least, on a literal reading of the doctrine of the stage as a mirror), he complains that Shakespeare neglects poetic justice 'and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose'; that the poet is carried away by his love of 'a quibble'; and that he is often careless in plot construction, especially towards the end of his play. Thus Johnson comments that at the end of *As You Like It* Shakespeare 'lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson' (by omitting to show the interview between Duke Frederick and the hermit); that towards the end of *The Shrew* 'the arrival of the real father, perhaps, produces more perplexity than pleasure'; and, on the ending of *Twelfth Night*, that

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the marriage of Olivia, and the succeeding perplexity, though well enough contrived to divert on the stage, wants credibility, and fails to produce the proper instruction required in the drama, as it exhibits no just picture of life.

In these cases, especially the last, it seems to be precisely the speed and gaiety of Shakespeare's invention that displease Johnson or leave him dissatisfied.

Much of Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare for distorting a 'just picture of life' in his comedies has, of course, outlived the neoclassical formulas in which it is couched. Shaw, looking down from a more-than-Augustan height on the provincial snob he takes the Elizabethan to be, distinguishes firmly between Shakespeare's hackneyed falsehoods, his incomparable word-music, and those wry insights into character which, from this viewpoint, made him a genuine forerunner of Ibsen, even though he failed to invent the technique of dénouement through discussion; for Shaw, 'Shakespeare survives by what he has in common with Ibsen'.¹ And some commentators today still find themselves trying to explain away the pleasure the comedies give, or can give, in the theatre, as if under a rule of aesthetic self-denial. For example, Derek Traversi, a critic very attentive to the figurative dimension of Shakespeare's verse, has restated the realistic objection to his comedies with more gravity than Johnson. The underlying experience of Shakespeare's comedies, Traversi writes, is 'not finally dissimilar in kind' from that in the tragedies or histories; but it is harder to reach, because the comedies contain more of 'an important element of convention, which has to be mastered before the human content of the plays... can begin to make itself felt'.² Now, it is true that conventions change and that what gave pleasure to one age – or would not have fixed itself as convention – may become obtrusive or irritating to another. But, equally, a stage convention, such as a familiar twist in a plot, is an expressive sign, a means of communication, between the playwrights who use it and the audiences who enjoy or at least accept it – until time has reduced it to a dead convention, or a bad habit. A writer who allows convention to obstruct the human content of his plays either has little human content to communicate or should not be writing for the stage. Yet this is exactly Mr Traversi's preliminary view of Shakespeare in his comedies:

¹ Shaw, *Ibsenism*, p. 198. (Note: footnote references to books and articles will be given in an abbreviated form; see the Bibliography at the end of this book).

² Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Early Comedies*, p. 7.

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Artificial situations, contrived marriages, elaborate happy endings, all set in countries of the imagination, frequently act, even while they exercise their magic upon us, as impediments to full and direct participation in the dramatist's intention: impediments which, without doubt, it is well worth overcoming, but which call for a special effort, a particular kind of attention, before the necessary fullness of response can be achieved.

To be sure, the critic has allowed that these 'artificial situations' work a kind of 'magic' on us; and he goes on to argue that as Shakespeare developed he learned to put them to 'more distinctively human use'. Yet he is urging that, in order to attain 'the necessary fullness of response' to the plays, we must deliberately resist and disregard what Shakespeare wrote. The critic claims to know 'the dramatist's intention' (or else, what it should have been) more positively than the dramatist. And it seems clear that what this intention should have been is a realistic unfolding of personal complications – something very like Dr Johnson's 'just picture of life', or perhaps like Shaw's definition of 'an interesting play', one in which there is discussion of 'problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience'.¹ The objection that Traversi raises once again cannot simply be brushed aside. But in his argument, the possibility that Shakespeare enjoyed the 'magic' transmitted through stage contrivances is not fairly discussed; still less, the possibility that he valued them also as expressive devices, as means of shaping and crystallising his reaction to life.

The apparent opposition in discussions of Shakespeare's comedies between the critics' pleasure and the critics' judgment must stem very largely from the long-established assumption that a comedy should be intended as a *reflection* of something else. Along this line of thinking, reservations about Shakespeare must always come back to blaming him, not simply for deficiencies in human insight or occasional lapses, but for submitting to the conditions of the theatre as he knew it; except that all other writers of comedy should surely find themselves in the same boat. It cannot be shown, moreover, that Shakespeare accepted the theatrical, non-realistic elements in his art reluctantly, or that his interest in these things diminished as his thought and experience matured. On the contrary, he was from the beginning an experimenter and innovator in dramatic artifice, to a greater extent than is often supposed; and his later work shows him, not abandoning, but readapting and refining upon, the artificial devices

¹ Shaw, *Ibsenism*, p. 190.

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of dramatic construction he had used in his early plays.

Nevertheless, it would be hard to imagine that Shakespeare compared the stage to a mirror without any belief in the comparison at all. And, of course, the critical problem with regard to his comedies would not have remained active if his sense of human reality was not omnipresent and so powerful. We seem to be left with the paradox that Shakespeare, in his abounding vitality, constantly reflects, or rather illuminates, the world outside the theatre, constantly imagines lifelike feelings and impulses in his characters and yet as constantly mixes reality with convention or artifice; in brief, real people in unreal situations.

A partial way out from this difficulty would seem to be to interpret the non-realistic elements in his comedies and romances figuratively or symbolically – a procedure which could find support in the fondness of the Elizabethans for allegory and emblem. But with many passages, even entire plays, a critical search for hidden meanings can only be imposed by force.¹ And any symbolic interpretation must take into account the whole of a playwright's dramatic language, his idiom of action and staging as well as his poetic imagery.

A more general solution would be to admit that a comedy can be read, as it is instinctively received by an audience, on two planes at once. It is a representation of life outside the theatre, partly by way of explicit comment, mainly by way of an imitation of speech and action, more or less literal, more or less figurative. At the same time, it is the text for a performance which is to exist, for the time being, as an end in itself. It provides for a series of gestures, physical and verbal. On this plane, a comedy may approximate to ritual or to pastime, celebration or entertainment; but it draws its meaning from its occasion, as a performance by actors before an audience, and ultimately from the general tradition of similar occasions, rather than from the particular story, the imaginary life-situation, of the characters the performers are impersonating. The two planes of meaning are perceived together, generic and particular, acting types and acted characters, comedy as performance and as representation. And in a successful comedy the two planes correspond to and reinforce one another. But they must still be felt to be independent to some extent (for otherwise it is doubtful whether we should experience the satisfaction that comes from a complex and yet unified work of art).

¹ See Leavis, 'The Criticism of Shakespeare's Last Plays', in *The Common Pursuit*.

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Never wholly independent, however. A performance without some continuous thread of representation could form a revue, but not a comedy. On the other hand, the characters and actions in a comedy never have the air of having been chosen quite freely from the author's observation of life, but always seem to emerge from, or return towards, the tradition of performance. Representation and performance are distinguishable but inseparable.

In Shakespeare's plays the sense of comedy as performance is most evident in those passages of clowning, dancing, music and the like which at first seem little more than interludes or embellishments, inessential to the plot. But the influence of the same tradition is at work, at a further remove, in the artificial-seeming conventions of his plots as well.

COMEDY AS CELEBRATION

'Is not a comonty' (or comedy), asks Christopher Sly, 'a Christmas gambold or a tumbling-trick?' No, he is told, 'it is a kind of history' (a kind recommended as a cure for 'melancholy'). But the play shows he is partly correct, since it consists largely of knockabout, practical jokes and disguises, of a kind appropriate to the Tudor Christmas holidays, the season of Misrule; the same spirit is released in the trick played on Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Similarly, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, when the lords' stratagem of a masked wooing has been turned to their ridicule, Berowne guesses that the ladies, 'Knowing aforehand of our merriment', had determined 'To dash it like a Christmas comedy'. At the end of the scenes of complication in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus, out for a morning's hunting and finding the four lovers incongruously asleep in the wood, can only account for their presence by supposing that

No doubt they rose up early to observe
The rite of May; and, hearing our intent,
Came here in grace of our solemnity.

These passages compare the comic action of the plays to holiday customs. Elsewhere in Elizabethan drama comedy is associated with special moments of triumph, or preparations for triumph, at court; for example, in *Edward II* Gaveston plans to confirm his hold on the king by means of 'Italian masks by night, | Sweet speeches, comedies,

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and pleasing shows', and at the end of 3 *Henry VI*, Edward IV will mark his victory with 'stately triumphs' and 'mirthful comic shows, | Such as befits the pleasure of the court'. As C. L. Barber has emphasised in his book on *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, there is more than a passing or surface connection in Shakespeare's time between the idea of comedy and the ideas of holiday pastime and courtly revels.

Pastime and revelry constituted a kind of borderland between everyday life and the stage; and several episodes and structural motifs in Shakespeare's comedies are situated, as it were, in this borderland. The tricks practised on Sly and Malvolio are both described as 'pastime'; so is the lords' plan to woo the ladies in disguise in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

In the afternoon
We will with some strange pastime solace them,
Such as the shortness of the time can shape;
For revels, dances, masks, and merry hours,
Forerun fair Love, strewing her way with flowers.

Each of these episodes forms an impromptu social game or entertainment, though it has seasonal precedents. Likewise, the deception played on Beatrice and Benedick to bring them together in *Much Ado* is a 'sport' devised by Don Pedro and his friends so that 'the time shall not go dully by us' in the interval before Claudio's wedding. At other times the revelling is more ceremonious, as with the masquerade held to celebrate Don Pedro's visit to Leonato's house after his successful campaign, or the masque before Bassanio's wooing voyage to Belmont, or the wedding masques mounted at short notice (by magical aid) in *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*. In *Love's Labour's Lost* and again in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the whole framework of the action is contrived to resemble a courtly fête. In the former, in spite of the King of Navarre's initial inhospitality, the Princess of France is received, after all, like a royal visitor – like Elizabeth on progress at a noble household, as in the 'Princely Pleasures' at Kenilworth in 1575: she is regaled with a shoot, a masked dance with gifts, and a pageant followed by a song. Here the main plot, such as it is, turns on the welcoming of the Princess. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – where Oberon associates his love-inducing flower with the water-pageants and fireworks prominent at courtly festivals, and where Theseus recalls royal visits on progress¹ – the plots which

¹ *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 11.i.148ff; V.i.44ff; (all line-references to Shakespeare

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frame the central action arise from the preparations of the fairies and the mechanicals to honour Theseus' wedding celebrations, on which they converge, while the central plot dealing with the lovers comes to rest at the same goal. The general shaping of these two plays seems to be Shakespeare's invention; that is, they are exceptions to his usual method of adapting the broad lines of a comic plot from some previous play or narrative – as are also the plots of 'sport' directed against Malvolio and against Beatrice and Benedick. In *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he appears to be aiming at a balance between formal ceremony and episodes of sudden impulse or sheer confusion, which yet fall, as if in spite of the actors' intentions, into patterns of custom and revelry. The masque of Russians which forms the centrepiece of the reception for the Princess in *Love's Labour's Lost* is not, in fact, a ceremony prepared in advance to seem like a surprise, as courtesy and fashion would have enjoined, but an improvisation which misfires – and thereby comes to resemble 'a Christmas comedy' after all. (Here Shakespeare was probably taking hints from actuality, for at the Gray's Inn Christmas revels of 1594, where his own *Comedy of Errors* made part of the entertainment, the Prince of Purpoole – or master of ceremonies – solemnly received an embassy of 'Russians', in other words, the 'Lord Ambassador' from the Inner Temple with his train; but the reception of these envoys was thrown into 'confusion and errors', to the 'utter discredit' of the 'Prince' of Gray's Inn. Nevertheless, the 'Prince' was invited to give a masque before Queen Elizabeth at Shrove-tide, following a pretended return visit to Russia, so that the chronicler of Gray's Inn recorded, 'Our Christmas would not leave us till such time as Lent was ready to entertain us.')

In the *Dream*, again, the lovers' flight from Athens, which threatens to clash with the royal solemnities, falls into place after all as a seeming 'rite of May'. Conversely, in each of these two comedies the prepared play-within-the-play turns into a fiasco, entertaining the spectators through the players' blunders. In each comedy, the spirit of revelry is invoked, disturbed and reaffirmed; and the characters comply with it most observantly when they are caught off their guard.

Beneath the pattern of a courtly entertainment in *Love's Labour's Lost* there is also a strong sense of the rhythm of the seasons. The guiding theme is the opposition between Carnival and Lent. By

refer to Alexander's edition of his *Works* unless otherwise specified). See John Dover Wilson, *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies*, pp. 191–207.

¹ David (ed.), *Love's Labour's Lost*, p. xxxi; Bullough, *Sources*, vol. I, pp. 431–2, 438–41.