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# SHAKESPEARE AND THE TRADITIONS OF COMEDY

LEO SALINGAR

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TO JEAN

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## PREFACE

I began work for this book a long time ago with the intention of writing a study of Shakespeare's comedies introduced by some account in outline of the earlier dramatic forms and traditions that influenced him. A study following these lines could, I thought, throw fresh light on the conventions he uses or the ideas associated with them, as well as on his position in the drama of his time and possibly on the course of his personal development. But I found that if my historical outline was to be of use or interest for my purpose I could not make it brief enough to fit the whole undertaking conveniently into one pair of covers. Consequently, I have divided my undertaking into two. A sequel to this book will discuss Shakespeare's comedies more directly and continuously; the present book is largely historical and my discussion here of details from Shakespeare's plays is selective (without, I trust, being arbitrary). My object is to indicate what seem to me his points of departure: his choice of narrative and dramatic conventions from the medieval traditions of stage romance; his far-reaching but independent application of classico-renaissance conceptions of comedy; and finally some of the innovations connected with his position as an Elizabethan actor-dramatist writing in the first period of the commercial theatre in Europe, or with his personal interest in Italian short stories.

A reader can soon see that I have depended extensively on Professor Geoffrey Bullough's invaluable examination of Shakespeare's sources. My concern, however, is less with particular sources than with general traditions or underlying conventions. In describing medieval influences I have had to use indirect evidence and inference because although the continuity of stage romance from Chaucer's time to Shakespeare's seems to me demonstrable and important, the direct evidence for it from English sources is only fragmentary. In describing the classical legacy to Shakespeare and the Italian additions to it, on the other hand, it has been necessary to select and compress. In both cases, I have ventured into ground where I cannot claim a

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specialist's familiar knowledge or insight. Such an enterprise, I am aware, carries particular risks. But a restricted approach to Shakespeare's antecedents would be false to the subject, and the risks have seemed worth accepting for the sake of a comparative survey which tries to take account, as I believe it must, of contrasts and variations in the long traditions of comedy as well as inheritances and resemblances.

I have concentrated on the history of comedy as a dramatic form, rather than 'the comic spirit'. I have not followed a chronological order. For the sequence of the argument, however, I have discussed the medieval traditions behind Shakespeare's comedies in chapter 2 before turning to the classical and then the renaissance traditions in chapters 3 to 5.

I have confined the footnotes to references and have tried to make each entry as short as clarity will allow. Fuller references to the books and articles cited will be found in the bibliography.

Parts of this book are based on material in articles of mine in *Shakespeare Quarterly* and *Renaissance Drama* and in a contribution to the collection on *Dramaturgie et Société* published by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique; I am grateful for the editors' permission to use this material again. I owe a number of ideas to the give-and-take of supervisions with my students at Cambridge; and I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to try out my opinions in lectures for the Cambridge Board of Extra-Mural Studies, for M. Jean Jacquot's research seminar on the theatre at the C.N.R.S. in Paris and for the English departments at Rouen and other universities abroad, as well as for the English Faculty at Cambridge. I owe more suggestions than can be adequately pointed out in footnotes to the work of M. Jacquot, and a general and long-standing debt to Professor M. C. Bradbrook, who supervised my first post-graduate research. Professors Bradbrook, M. I. Finley and D. H. Green and Mr H. A. Mason have kindly read parts or all of my typescript and I should like to thank them for their criticism and comment. Mr Mason has also helped me most generously in the preparation of the index. I am grateful to Dr and Mrs C. E. Baron for their kindness in helping to check the proofs. And not the least of my gratitude is due to my wife for her help in preparing the bibliography and for many practical suggestions.

Leo Salingar

*March 1974*