

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

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SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

8

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ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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- I. Part of last page (enlarged) of MS. of *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (Huntington Library, MS. HM 500), showing:
 - A. Mundy's signature, and the date added subsequently by another hand
 - B. Detail
- II. A. Second page of Mundy's holograph dedication of *The Heauen of the Mynde* (British Museum MS. Add. 33,384, fo. 2^v)
 - B. Mundy's signature to his will, 19 March 1628-9
(Somerset House, London)
- III. Account of expenses incurred by Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn as Masters of the Beargarden, 1615-21
(Sackville-Knole MSS. I, 5200)
- IV. Petition of Edward Alleyn as Master of His Majesty's Beargarden, 1622
(Sackville-Knole MSS. I, 6994)

PLS. V-VIII ARE BETWEEN PP. 134 AND 135.

- V. A. *Othello*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1954. Produced by Antony Quayle; designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. Under the Awning
(Angus McBean)
 - B. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1954. Produced by George Devine; designed by Motley. The Rude Mechanicals
(Angus McBean)
- VI. A. *All's Well That Ends Well*. Old Vic Theatre. Produced by Michael Benthall; designed by Roger Furse. Lafeu and Parolles—"Simply the thing I am"
(Angus McBean)
 - B. *All's Well That Ends Well*. The King marries Bertram to Helena
(Angus McBean)
- VII. A. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon and Puck
(Angus McBean)
 - B. *The Tempest*. Old Vic Theatre. Produced by Robert Helpmann; designed by Leslie Hurry. Prospero and Ariel
(Angus McBean)
- VIII. A. *Romeo and Juliet*. Performed by the drama students of the State Conservatoire of Ankara at the ancient theatre of Aspendus, April 1953. The Dance (i, v)
 - B. "Can any of you tell me where I may find the young Romeo?" (xi, iv)

THE INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES: 1900-1953

BY

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

The boldest critic is apt to become modest when he writes of Shakespeare's comedies; he is afraid of taking a joke or a fancy too seriously. While the tragedies and histories seem to invite his serious attention, the comedies evade it; on the point of expounding the 'meaning' of a comedy, he hears a whisper, "But that's all one, our play is done." He may be sure that he has seen a "most rare vision", but he will prudently judge that it is "past the wit of man to say what dream it was". This modesty has often restricted criticism to praise and the expression of enjoyment.

Comparison with other comedies has encouraged this attitude. Dowden in his essay on 'Shakespeare as a Comic Dramatist' in Gayley's *Representative English Comedies*, I (1903), A. H. Thorndike in his *English Comedy* (1929), George Gordon in *Shakespearian Comedy* (1944), and many others, have dissociated Shakespeare's comedies from theories derived from Aristotle, Meredith, and Bergson; his plays are not 'corrective', and our laughter comes from a "gaiety . . . absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation". Seeing that Shakespeare's comedy has no satiric meaning, many critics have presumed that it has no 'meaning' at all. In 1905, for example, Stopford Brooke wrote of *As You Like It*:

The solemn professor, the most solid moralist, will not be able to assert that Shakespeare wrote this play with a moral purpose, or from a special desire to teach mankind. He wrote it as he liked it, for his own delight.

Apparently Shakespeare's fancy flowered without any effort. T. M. Parrott in his *Shakespearian Comedy* (1949) thought that *As You Like It* was a comedy of escape, adapted from Lodge's *Rosalynde* with "little intellectual effort". John Palmer in his *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (1946) found many "accidental" felicities, but, following Hazlitt, he believed that it is "too much to suppose all this intentional, but it very luckily falls out so". Yet critics have usually conceded that the comedies have a salutary effect. Thorndike advised his readers to "bask in the sunshine" of Shakespeare's romance and "simply watch the clouds roll by", but added that this "painless operation will fill your soul with poetry and a consciousness of duty well done". This curious moral value, like the 'gaiety' of Shakespeare's comedies, has seldom felt the touch of cold analysis. Its enduring quality is usually explained in most general terms, such as "Truth to Nature": "if we smile at the quaint forms of the hieroglyph of life", wrote Dowden, "we know that it has a deep and sacred meaning". And there the matter is apt to rest.

Some critics have gone farther, and the major successes in the study of the comedies since 1900 have been due to the belief that Shakespeare had an artistic purpose that we can try to analyse. We no longer think that the 'last plays' are the idle recreations of an old man, or that the 'dark' or 'problem' comedies are the mistakes of an irresponsible malcontent. These revaluations are so generally accepted that these two groups of comedies are usually discussed as distinct kinds of drama.

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This retrospective article deals first with the interpretation of the comedies from the beginning of Shakespeare's career until *Twelfth Night*, and then considers the revaluation of the 'dark' or 'problem' comedies, leaving the 'last plays' for separate treatment in a future issue of *Shakespeare Survey*. At the outset, reference must be made to advances in our knowledge of the texts and their authority, and of the chronology of the plays, but no detailed discussion of these branches of scholarship is given here. Studies like Dover Wilson's argument for a re-writing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have important implications for the interpretation of the plays, but a just treatment would entail a detailed account of bibliographical and textual studies, and that is beyond the scope of this article. The omission is warrantable since F. P. Wilson has already written an account of 'Shakespeare and the "New Bibliography"' (*Studies in Retrospect*, 1945) which has been received with general assent and gratitude; Sir Walter Greg's *Editorial Problem in Shakespeare* (1942; 2nd edition 1951) has an unprecedented authority, and J. G. McManaway has reviewed 'Recent Studies in Shakespeare's Chronology' in *Shakespeare Survey*, 3 (1950).

I. THE COMEDIES TO *TWELFTH NIGHT*

A retrospective view of the study of Shakespeare's history plays or imagery reveals sustained critical and scholarly argument with progress marked by a few outstanding books. But, in the period under review, there is no clear line of development in the study of the early comedies: outstanding books have either been concerned with single plays or with specialized aspects of comedy, or else they have been followed by only a few scholars. A somewhat discursive method is needed to record what has been accomplished; there is much detailed work to report but little concerted effort.

Literary Influences

H. B. Charlton's *Shakespearian Comedy* (1938) is the most significant book on the early comedies. By tracing the evolution of Shakespeare's comedy from the forms of English, Italian and classical comedy, Charlton discovered a purpose and theme which the examination of individual plays might not have disclosed. Here Shakespeare is presented as a 'serious' comic dramatist, who sought to "elucidate the moral art of securing happiness". Charlton developed his thesis with learning and humane wisdom, and it is most unfortunate that part of his argument involves the generally unacceptable notion that *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* were written before *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Literary influences have often been studied by other scholars. F. E. Schelling's *Elizabethan Drama* (1911), Thorndike's *English Comedy* (1929), and Parrott's *Shakespearean Comedy* (1949) sketch the main outlines.¹ Shakespeare's modification of the pastoral tradition was considered by Greg in his early *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama* (1906) and by E. Greenlaw in *Studies in Philology*, XIII (1916). Cornelia Coulter traced 'The Plautine Tradition in Shakespeare' in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XIX (1920), while, in his *William Shakespere's Five-Act Structure* (1947), T. W. Baldwin related one aspect of the earliest comedies to Terence and Lyly. In *Shakespeare Quarterly*, IV (1953), Northrop Frye showed how closely Shakespeare's comic characters conform to the basic types of classical and Renaissance drama. M. T. Herrick's *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (1950) will be of great use to later students in this field. At the

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beginning of this century, Italian influences were studied by J. W. Cunliffe and Winifred Smith in *Modern Philology*, iv (1907) and v (1908), and their lead was followed by M. J. Wolff in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XLVI (1910) and O. J. Campbell in *Studies in Shakespeare, Milton and Donne* (1925), both of whom dealt specifically with the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Campbell showed that several details in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* might have been taken directly from the Italian, rather than through Lyly as it had been thought. In 1940 D. C. Boughner elaborated this, showing that no single literary source could account for Don Armado (*Studies in Philology*, xxxvii). Kathleen Lea's *Italian Popular Comedy* (1934) provides an admirably full basis for judging such questions. Frye's 'The Argument of Comedy' in *English Institute Essays* (1948) shows how the plots of both classical and Renaissance comedy involved not only the release of an individual but also a social reconciliation; Frye believed that this is a clue to the elusive argument or 'meaning' of Shakespeare's comedy.

In the same paper Frye stressed Shakespeare's debt to folk plays and ritual, to what he called the "drama of the green world". Traces of such a debt had already been noticed in Janet Spens's *Essay on Shakespeare's Relation to Tradition* (1916), and Thorndike had linked *As You Like It* with the Robin Hood plays (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, iv, 1902), but Frye made the further suggestion that the folk theme of death and revival is implicit in the forest scenes of early comedies, in the debate of winter and spring in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and in the 'renewal' of Hero. By stressing this theme in the early comedies, Frye linked them with the 'last plays', in which it is more generally recognized. Middleton Murry made a somewhat similar point in his *Shakespeare* (1936), suggesting that *The Merchant of Venice* made its appeal "to that primitive substance of the human consciousness whence folk-tales took their origin". Murry did not believe that Shakespeare consciously adopted such themes, but that he merely 'humanized' a given story.

The influence of English comedy has received comparatively little notice; Shakespeare's debt to Lyly was briefly discussed by R. W. Bond in his edition of Lyly (1902), and his debt to Greene by J. L. Tynan in *PMLA*, xxvii (1912). English romance has received its fullest treatment in E. C. Pettet's *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (1949). On the analogy of characters in Sidney's *Arcadia*, Pettet argued that many of Shakespeare's young lovers are "simply pasteboard . . . The tale is the thing, and Shakespeare never intended us to worry ourselves with their personalities and motives." But as early as Julia there are exceptions, and they become increasingly important; so Pettet concluded that Shakespeare had to 'reject' romance. This is a difficult position, for it implies that Shakespeare was at odds with his sources for *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, and gives little reason why he should *choose* a romance theme when he really wished to 'reject' it. It seems wiser to agree with Charlton that Shakespeare was successfully developing his own kind of romance. The study of influences can only show what an artist started with; Shakespeare must be allowed to create the standards by which his own works are to be judged.

In recent years greater importance has been given to medieval influences. In a lecture delivered in 1916 Sir Israel Gollancz reminded his hearers that medieval drama was "a drama of allegory" and suggested that *The Merchant of Venice* might bear an allegorical interpretation. He developed this idea in further papers, and in 1931 A. W. Pollard gathered a group of them together in a posthumous volume called *Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare*. Already in the *Philological*

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Quarterly, VIII (1929), J. D. Rea had suggested that the trial in *The Merchant* was indebted to the traditional Processus Belial, and later, in 'The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy' (*Essays and Studies*, III, 1950), Nevill Coghill claimed that the medieval conception of comedy as "a poem changing a sad beginning into a happy ending" was more formative for Shakespeare's comedies than the Renaissance conception concerned only with ridicule. He illustrated the medieval view from Vincent de Beauvais, Dante, and Webbe's *Discourse of English Poetry*, and proceeded to interpret *The Merchant* as an allegory or narrative 'image'. In 1951 M. C. Bradbrook's *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* claimed that "in some respects Shakespeare retained more of the medieval tradition . . . than the courtly poets had done".

Sources

Progress in the hunt for sources has been recorded in Sir Edmund Chambers's *William Shakespeare* (1930), in editions of individual plays, and in Selma Guttman's annotated bibliography, *The Foreign Sources of Shakespeare's Works* (1947), which covers the years 1904-40. In addition, Parrott's *Shakespearean Comedy* has brief, yet sane and fresh, accounts of the sources for each of the comedies. Fuller information is widely scattered. There have been some comprehensive studies, such as F. Sidgwick's *Sources and Analogues of A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1908), H. Conrad's study of *Twelfth Night* (*Englische Studien*, XLVI, 1912), and two studies of *The Merchant of Venice* by J. L. Cardozo and B. V. Wenger (*The Contemporary Jew* (1925) and *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, LXV, 1929), but for the most part, each new suggestion has been the subject of a separate article. Of particular importance are: F. Brie's discussion of the relevance of Mundy's *Zelauto* to *The Merchant* (*Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XLIX, 1913); C. T. Prouty's discussion of Beverly's *History of Ariodanto and Ieneura* and Whetstone's tale of Rinaldo and Giletta, and D. J. Gordon's of *Gli Duoi Fratelli Rivali*, as sources for *Much Ado* (*Studies in Philology*, XXXVIII-XXXIX, 1941-2); Dorothy H. Bruce's argument that *The Merry Wives* might be indebted to a tale from Riche's *Farewell to Military Profession* (*Studies in Philology*, XXXIX, 1942); and Dorothy F. Atkinson's suggestion that Wotton's *Cupid's Cautels* (1578) contained the basic plot for *The Two Gentlemen* (*Studies in Philology*, XLI, 1944). For some plays discussion of extant analogues has been curtailed by debate about conjectural lost source plays—notably *The Jew*, mentioned by Gosson, for *The Merchant* (S. A. Small offered a theoretical reconstruction in *Modern Language Review*, XXVI, 1931, but Parrott, later, rejected the whole idea), and an Italianate comedy for *The Merry Wives* (W. Vollardt discussed an Italian analogue in *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*, VII, 1907, and O. J. Campbell distinguished Italianate episodes in Shakespeare's play in the University of Michigan's *Essays and Studies*, 1932).

In the early years of this century Raleigh's assumption that Shakespeare "spent no great care . . . on the original choice of a theme, but took it as he found it, if it looked promising" (*Shakespeare*, 1907) would have found general acceptance, but now, as more secondary sources are discovered, this view is being superseded. C. T. Prouty's *The Sources of Much Ado* (1950) is evidence of this.² Despite Masfield's dissent, it has often been said that Shakespeare was interested only in Benedick and Beatrice and lighted on the Hero-Claudio story almost by accident, but, by inquiring exactly how Shakespeare's play differs from eighteen sources or analogues, Prouty has shown that his modifications of this story relate it significantly to that of

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Benedick-Beatrice. So he re-interpreted the play: "Instead of romantic lovers we have two couples completely opposed to the romantic tradition . . . : for the one, love is a real emotion, for the other, a business arrangement." All critics would not agree with this analysis; one might complain that Prouty was insensitive to the charm of Claudio's verse, another that he saw the financial aspects of Claudio's match with too modern an eye, and others, with K. Neill (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, III, 1952), that he did not give due weight to the way in which Shakespeare strengthened the grounds on which Claudio believes the slander. But however these points are judged, Prouty's presentation of *Much Ado* as a carefully wrought unity may still stand: a study of sources has given a new basis for criticism.

Elizabethan Stage, Life and Thought

During the present century, critical writing on Shakespeare has been greatly enriched by an awareness of Elizabethan stage conditions, but studies devoted to particular problems of the comedies have been disappointing. G. P. Baker's *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist* (1907) and Brander Mathews's *Shakespeare as a Playwright* (1913) treat the early comedies as exercises in plotting, but illustrate Shakespeare's ingenuity rather than his imaginative conceptions. J. R. Moore's paper in the University of Wisconsin's *Shakespeare Studies* (1916) and Richmond Noble's *Shakespeare's Use of Song* (1923) are more constructive, showing that the songs are not mere *divertissements* but of structural and thematic importance. These studies emphasize the subtleties of Shakespeare's art, but W. Robertson Davies's *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (1939) suggests that Beatrice and Rosalind are such simple creations that they are seldom anything but 'witty'. If Davies had considered some non-Shakespearian roles he would not have presumed, following Granville-Barker, that the use of boy actors *forced* Shakespeare to avoid voluptuous scenes. The need for more precise knowledge about Elizabethan stage conditions is illustrated by the revaluation of Touchstone in Leslie Hotson's *Shakespeare's Motley* (1952); this book must out-date all vague references to the stock-in-trade of fools, for Hotson has reminded us to ask 'What kind of fool?', or even 'Which fool?'. The Elizabethan theatre had complex traditions, and it is becoming increasingly clear that all inferences based on *general* statements about stage conditions must be suspect.

In 1930 two books relating to the comedies added to the growing prestige of historical criticism, or the attempt to see Shakespeare's plays as Elizabethans saw them. G. W. Keeton's *Shakespeare and His Legal Problems* sought to allay modern doubts about Portia's conduct in the trial of Antonio, by arguing that she adopts the "attitude of the Court of Chancery at the period", and M. W. Latham's *Elizabethan Fairies* showed, with full documentation, that Shakespeare created his own fairies—they are not members of an "active and powerful commonwealth with their traditional ruler" but the "innocuous and almost negligible attendants upon two literary or mythological sovereigns". Such inquiries are typical of many; for example, H. P. Pettigrew and Hardin Craig have argued that, for an Elizabethan, the mercenary marriages of Bassanio and Claudio could also be love-matches (*Philological Quarterly*, XVI, 1937, and *An Interpretation of Shakespeare*, 1948), while Z. S. Fink, O. J. Campbell and E. E. Stoll have related Jacques's melancholy to the affectations and disorders of his contemporaries (*Philological Quarterly*, XIV, 1935, *Huntington Library Bulletin*, VIII, 1935, and *Modern Language Notes*, LIV, 1939). Shylock became a

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cause célèbre: in an article of 1911 Stoll put the case for a comic Shylock, arguing from the text of *The Merchant* and from contemporary opinion of Jews and usurers (expanded in *Shakespeare Studies*, 1927); in his *Contemporary Jew in Elizabethan Drama* (1925), J. L. Cardozo tried to prove that Shakespeare had never seen a Jew and would present Shylock as a fabulous bogey, but subsequently C. J. Sisson established beyond doubt that Jews did live in Shakespeare's London and maintained elements of their ancient worship and way of life (*Essays and Studies*, xxiii, 1938); in the meantime, in *The Review of English Studies*, v (1929), A. Tretiak had related Shylock to the 1595 anti-alien riots and suggested that *The Merchant*, like the 'Ill Mayday' scene in *Sir Thomas More*, was a plea for toleration, and in *Modern Philology*, xxxiii (1935), J. W. Draper had taken up Stoll's point about usury, arguing that Shylock should be hated as a villainous usurer; S. A. Tannenbaum countered Draper's arguments on the grounds that Shakespeare left money for Judith at interest and that usury is not a dominant theme in the play (*Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, x, 1935). Such divided counsel argues for the complexity of Shakespeare's plays and the diversity of Elizabethan opinion, and, together with Latham's proof that Shakespeare could reject time-honoured traditions, it suggests that historical criticism should be used as a guide, not as a commander.

For the early comedies, historical criticism has been chiefly concerned with elucidating difficult characters or themes, but J. W. Draper has led an attempt to provide a commentary from Elizabethan writings on many characters who have not hitherto perplexed the reader or audience. This produced a series of articles on subjects like Orlando as a younger brother suffering from the effects of primogeniture, or Orlando as a sanguine lover under Jupiter's influence (*Philological Quarterly*, xiii, 1934, and *Modern Language Quarterly*, ii, 1941), and two books, both by Draper—*The Humors and Shakespeare's Characters* (1945) and *The Twelfth Night of Shakespeare's Audience* (1950), which describes Olivia's household as an Elizabethan one "in transition from easygoing feudal paternalism . . . to the modern era of a more stringent economy". Draper pieces out the imperfections of Shakespeare's sociology with details from real and fictional case-histories, and finds that the play centres on Sir Toby and Malvolio, and that its theme is "social security, generally attained through marriage".

The study of Shakespeare's life and times has brought to light a number of allusions to real persons and events. The scent has proved strongest in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which seems to allude to a quarrel between Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe, and to a group of poets under Raleigh's patronage, which may have been known as the 'School of Night'. In her study of the play (1936), Frances Yates added to the possible allusions and attempted a synthesis of the earlier work of scholars such as Warburton, Fleay, A. Acheson, H. C. Hart, R. Taylor and Sir Edmund Chambers. In detail, the discoveries are debatable, but the general direction of the satire seems reasonably clear. For a succinct and judicious account of the work on this subject, it is best to refer to Richard David's new Arden edition of 1951. In *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931) Hotson has argued that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written for the Garter Feast of 23 April 1597, and that Shallow and Slender are satiric portraits of William Gardiner and his stepson, William Wayte, with whom Shakespeare had been involved in a lawsuit. Hotson presented Shakespeare as a "personal satirist", and in this he belongs to a considerable group of scholars. In *As You Like It*, Jacques has been seen as a satire of Jonson or of Sir John Harington (A. Gray, *How Shakespeare 'Purged' Jonson*, 1928, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3, 10 and 17 January 1929), and

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the de Boys family as the family of that name from Weston-in-Arden, the Rainsfords, or the Howards (*Notes and Queries*, 26 May, 30 June and 1 September 1928, and *Review of English Studies*, XII, 1936). T. W. Baldwin suggested that *The Comedy of Errors* has allusions to the execution of William Hartley at Holywell on 5 October 1588 (*William Shakespeare Adapts a Hanging*, 1931) and E. I. Fripp that further allusions to a Star Chamber case were added for performance at Gray's Inn in 1594 (*Shakespeare: Man and Artist*, 1938). Prototypes for Malvolio have been seen in Sir Ambrose Willoughby, Sir William Knollys,³ and Sir William Ffarington (*Book of Homage*, 1916; E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare, a Survey*, 1925; and *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, VII, 1932). There has even been an attempt to see Shylock as Philip Henslowe. In general such identifications have been received with caution.

Characters, Themes and Language

By far the most common way of studying Shakespeare's comedies is to study the characters in them. This has been encouraged by the constantly repeated dictum—Dowden, Baker, Charlton, Palmer, and Parrott have given their authority to it—that the heart of Shakespeare's comedy lies in his characters. So Cumberland Clark's studies of *The Merchant* and *As You Like It* (1927 and 1931) are mainly character studies, and John Palmer's *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (1946) deals broadly with Shakespeare's conception of comedy. From this character study, some generalizations have emerged. Particularly since Raleigh's *Shakespeare* (1907), critics have stressed Shakespeare's tolerance and sympathy, his ability, as Palmer put it, to identify himself "imaginatively with all sorts and conditions of men and women". More fruitful perhaps, has been the realization that the characters are significantly related to each other—Palmer stressed this with regard to *As You Like It*. S. C. Sen Gupta's *Shakespearian Comedy* (1950) is probably the most straightforward attempt to create a theory of the comedy of character: Gupta believed that Shakespeare's "principal purpose" was to "portray character in all its complexity and depth" and that instead of inviting the audience to enter into the characters' emotions, as in the tragedies, Shakespeare "places his characters in certain situations in which they learn the deeper secrets of their own hearts"—it is a drama of 'contrasts', not of 'conflicts' within individuals.

This stress on characters has had some important consequences: *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Shrew* and *The Merry Wives* are neglected as mere farces; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is considered to be *sui generis*, a 'symbolical' or masque-like play; Shylock, who appears in only five scenes, is made the centre of *The Merchant*; Hero and Claudio are thought to be of little interest to Shakespeare or the audience; the masque of Hymen is passed over as an unauthoritative accretion; Malvolio is sometimes allowed to play for tragedy; and the endings of *The Two Gentlemen*, *Much Ado* and *Twelfth Night* are called precipitous and unsatisfying. Few critics would doubt Shakespeare's increasing mastery of characterization or the universality of his sympathy, but there does seem to be something wrong with a theory of Shakespeare's comedy which implies that all his successes are so considerably blemished.

Critics who have dealt primarily with plot and construction have been less apt to find fault with the early comedies. The studies of *The Merchant* and *Twelfth Night* in W. H. Fleming's *Shakespeare's Plots* (1902) are early examples of this; Fleming was at pains to show Shakespeare's ingenuity, but he also showed the unity of the plays, how Viola, for instance, is the structural

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and thematic centre of *Twelfth Night*. Later M. P. Tilley elaborated this particular point in *PMLA*, xxix (1914). In keeping with such studies, F. E. Schelling found the "interest of the comedies" to lie in their "kaleidoscopic groupings" and called them "comedies of incident rather than comedies of character". W. P. Ker's 'Note on the Form of Shakespeare's Comedies' (*Edda*, vi, 1916) also stressed the importance of contrasts between characters, and suggested that by this means Shakespeare developed his own form for comedy and history plays alike. A. Y. Fisher's *Introduction to a Study of Shakespearean Comedy, Part One* (1931) and W. Jacobi's *Form und Struktur der Shakespeareschen Komödien* (1937) are somewhat mechanical analyses, but Jacobi has useful comparisons with non-Shakespeare plays, and Fisher shows how the complications are of situation and plot rather than of character or character development.

The imagery, verse and style of the early comedies has been little studied except in general works such as those of Rylands, Caroline Spurgeon, Wilson Knight, and Clemen. Wilson Knight's *Shakespearean Tempest* (1932) has the most to say about the comedies. He has read them listening above all else for "poetic colour and suggestion", and although his views tend to be uncorrected by reference to plot, character, or situation, and sometimes give undue importance to trivial details—see, for example, his passage on the symbolic importance of the ducking of Falstaff—he has taught others to look for implicit value-judgements in passages which have often been dismissed as merely poetic or descriptive, and has shown a way to a new view of the coherence and thematic unity of the comedies. Granville-Barker's treatment of III, ii, of *The Merchant*, in his *Preface* to that play (1939), is an example of what might be achieved by a close study of verse and style; a fine sense of theatre and a sensitive appreciation of Shakespeare's dialogue has reinstated a scene which has sometimes been dismissed as frigid and over-fanciful. Hardin Craig's paper on 'Shakespeare's Bad Poetry' in *Shakespeare Survey*, I (1948) is a tactful and constructive attempt to find dramatic reasons for some archaic and comparatively unfinished verse in the comedies.

It remains to consider those critics who have tried to discover a theme which can be more closely defined than the presentation of life or nature. Some such attempts have been discussed already, as Charlton's study of comic form, the medieval approaches of Gollancz, Coghill and Frye, the investigation of sources by Prouty, and various kinds of structural analysis, but other critics have worked more directly, asking 'What are these plays about?' From the first it has been asked with regard to *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the plot is slight and the contrast of characters is obviously significant; in 1902, for example, Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke stressed the importance of Mercade's entrance for the simple moral theme which they saw in the play (*Poet Lore*, xiv). John Masefield, in his *William Shakespeare* (1911), was more adventurous, and with a poet's insight tried to discover what interested Shakespeare in his plots; so he saw *As You Like It* as a play about the "gifts of Nature and the ways of Fortune", and *Twelfth Night* as a presentation of images of self-deception. Masefield was sympathetic towards the earliest comedies; for noting that vow-breaking is a "pole-star of dramatic action" at all stages of Shakespeare's career, he saw *The Two Gentlemen* as an exploration of the "moral blindness" that leads to vow-breaking. Such intuitive discernment is always open to question: for instance, H. T. Price differed widely from Masefield, believing that *The Two Gentlemen* is critical in tone and that Shakespeare "set out to prove Valentine a fool" (*Philological Quarterly*, xx, 1941). The critic's personal disposition has influenced such criticism: J. Smith took *Touchstone* seriously,