SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE'S COMIC INSIGHT

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WHEN you did me the honour of inviting me to deliver this year's Shakespeare Lecture, I turned an anxious gaze on the names of my august predecessors and wondered, with deepening dismay, at my temerity in daring to accept the invitation; but in the titles of their lectures I found this morsel of reassurance: there was little mention of comedy; and to clarify and present some few ideas on Shakespearian comedy has long been a cherished project. That this subject has suffered general neglect I will not maintain. Nevertheless I am troubled by two signs in the weather of Shakespearian criticism as it relates to comedy: first, the assumption that Shakespeare's plays, with the exception of the great tragedies, are compounded of ingredients—like any nostrum, or pudding—amongst which one may be separated from the rest and designated comedy; secondly (does it follow from the first?), an ambition to explain this component, by reference to something other than itself—and the upshot of that is all too often success in explaining it away. How otherwise should it come about that, while Alfred Doolittle's defence of the undeserving poor[1] is hailed as comedy, Davy's plea to Shallow—'God forbid, sir, but a knave should have some countenance at his friend's request. An honest man, sir, is able to speak for himself, when a knave is not'[2]—that this is subjected to dispiriting sociological comment? (A reversal which might have annoyed Shaw, and perhaps have amused Shakespeare.)

A little before his death, James Thurber recounted a visit to a friend: '"I have come to talk with you about the future of humour and comedy", I told him, at which he started slightly, and then made us each a stiff drink, with a trembling hand.' The conclusion of the little tale hints at the courage of despair: '"I . . . remember when we used to write about . . . the human comedy. If there is no human comedy it will be necessary to create one."'[3]

With Thurber, we have come to ascribe this alteration in the climate of comedy to our present discontents; but, reading the

signs attentively, we should perhaps wonder when it really began. Those of Shakespeare's plays which we used to call romantic comedies have been (with honourable exceptions) least well served in recent criticism, and (again with due exceptions) very capriciously on the stage. I believe this to be significant and disquieting. If I attempt to account for it in terms of fable, it will not be in any flippant spirit, but because fable takes the shortest road.

As the Victorian age was drawing to its close, Satan (reviving a slander which had formerly failed of its purpose in heaven) went about the earth, whispering in one ear after another: 'Doth Job fear God for naught?' And the generation that was then coming to intellectual maturity looked back over a century and more of English novel-writing in which the imagination of their parents and grandparents had found satisfaction, and saw happiness treated as the proper reward of virtue. (And if, here or there, the tragic bent of one novelist's heart gave to the words in which the transaction was concluded a wry ambiguity, that only served to confirm them in their mistrust of all the rest.) Retreat is not easily halted. To the generations that followed, and supposed themselves wiser because they knew themselves sadder, it was not enough to ask: 'Has this happiness been rightly allotted?' They challenged an author's competence to bestow it, whether as reward or bounty—not considering that, in the world of the imagination, it is a gift at the disposal of anyone who can obtain credence for it. Now, the tradition of the English romantic novel, deriving as it does from Shakespearian comedy, could not thus falter without casting doubt on its progenitor. And so it has come about that Shakespeare's happy endings are either warily examined for hidden meanings, or else summarily dismissed as concessions to popular demand. But should we not sometimes be prepared to consider the possibility that they are intrinsic to the purpose and congenial to the mood of the comedies they crown? We may have been intended to take the whole context of many a comic predicament into account—including the felicitous outcome. Beatrice's question—'Would it not grieve a woman to be over-master'd with a piece of valiant dust, to make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?'[4]—how would this sound in a different context—if it were spoken, for example, by Lesbia Grantham (in Shaw's *Getting Married*)—or even by Lady Percy, whose piece of valiant dust will, at the close of the play, be that and nothing more? Whereas *hers* is Benedick; a man for whom twenty eyewitnesses in a tale together weigh light against her

affirmation of her cousin's innocence; the man with whom she will eventually leave the stage in a dance which we recognize as the Shakespearian token of traditional happy ending. That question—'Would it not grieve a woman . . .?'—is at the heart of Beatrice's comic predicament. The answer—Yes; it would; and you will find fulfilment in accepting it—lies at the heart of the play. The integrity of particular comedies has been notably demonstrated—of *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, by Dr. Harold Brooks, of the first part of *Henry IV* by Professor A. R. Humphreys. But I think that a sense of the integrity of Shakespeare's comic vision is still to seek.

When Rosaline enjoins Berowne

> With all the fierce endeavour of your wit
> To enforce the pained impotent to smile—[5]

we may take her penance as signifying little more than one of those forfeits that compose the final pattern of the play. But when he expostulates, and she concedes

> A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
> Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
> Of him that makes it—[6]

we recognize a truth valid beyond the limits of this pattern. And when a great comic artist takes up this very challenge (to 'jest a twelvemonth in an hospital'), but with the whole world for his hospital—why, then, it appears that happiness and comedy are to part company. But, should the precariousness of happiness cease altogether to be one of the common themes of tragedy and comedy, what would remain? Only the comic fact of the precariousness of laughter, solitary and sterile.

You will surely not expect from me, however, any philosophical reflections on laughter. Indeed, I desisted (after a while) even from reading such exercises; not only because I found (like Rasselas) that I understood less as I listened longer, but also for fear lest I might never laugh again. Fortunately, the return to Shakespeare still lay open, with Johnson for company on the way.

Johnson arrived at his position by way of an exploratory defence of Shakespearian tragi-comedy (in *Rambler* 156), and fortified it in his Preface.[7] There he maintains that the mingling of grave and merry themes is consonant with life; that Shakespeare has admitted their interplay almost everywhere; that experience denies the force of the theoretical objection (attention will be dissipated); that no critical authority known to

Shakespeare forbade this alternation of moods; and that in comedy he was following the natural bent of his genius. Thus, the central bastion of assertion—Shakespeare's comic vein is pervasive—is flanked by two pleas—no one can now object that it is ineffectual, no one could then tell Shakespeare that it ran counter to dramatic convention—and rests firmly on two justifications—it is level with life, it was congenial to Shakespeare. Questions of critical authority now seem remote; we do not wait to be persuaded that what *works* will do well enough. Into the mystery of Shakespeare's natural bias I will not follow Johnson. I therefore propose to examine the two remaining parts of his argument: the terms of his assertion that comedy is (very nearly) omnipresent in Shakespeare's plays; the validity of his appeal to our experience of life as a justification of Shakespearian practice.

> Shakespeare [Johnson asserts] has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and, in the successive evolutions of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.

This statement takes for granted a pattern of alternating and contrasting episodes, tragic and comic in succession. Such analysis may be called traditional, an expression of the customary response to Shakespearian diversity. William Seward records of Lord Chatham that he excelled as a reader of tragedy, delighting in both parts of *Henry IV* and in *Henry V*. Seward's informant, however, 'observed that when he came to the comic or buffoon parts of those plays, he always gave the book to one of his relations, and when they were gone through, he took the book again'.[8] (Unfortunately he does not tell us which of them read Mrs. Quickly's tale of the death of Falstaff.) At either level, whether of criticism or taste, this assumption of tragi-comic alternation plausibly corresponds with Shakespearian dramatic structure; but it is liable to hinder critical insight and harden into an unverified theory of comic relief. Alternation can afford relief from many different sorts of pressure. Is it tragic tension alone that Hamlet relieves when he assumes the antic disposition of the fool in his dealings with Polonius? Change of tone is sovereign against inertia: it can dispel unreceptive moods, avert impatience. It can give resilience to the narrative structure of comedy itself—Lyly and Greene had shown that. Raillery does not serve for amusement only—which is just as well, since some of it is not very amusing. The fool, or any character who borrows

his untimely garrulity, is free to utter what we might have said if he had not forestalled us. Lucio's interruptions in the trial scene at the end of *Measure for Measure* are (in their tiresome way) useful: the Duke has to make his audience within the play understand what has happened, as well as what it signifies; for us, who are in possession of the facts, unbroken demonstration threatens tedium. There are, moreover, juxtapositions which elude any formula of contrast, or relief. In two successive scenes of *Henry V*, the King pronounces sentence of death on Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey, concluding:

> The taste whereof God of his mercy give
> You patience to endure—[9]

and Mrs. Quickly tells how she watched by Falstaff's death-bed:

> Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.[10]

This resembles not so much the effect of two colours placed side by side as an alteration in the light falling on a single colour.

Nevertheless, alternation, juxtaposition—however variously and subtly they may operate—these are not the whole matter: Johnson's statement does not reach far enough. But, since he is a poet, he will often tell us more in a single figure of speech than in a whole passage of argument. When he levels Shakespeare's practice with the condition of human life, he uses this figure:

> Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous or critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.[11]

This surely aims at the heart of the problem, for it compels us to ask: what have the mourner and reveller to say to one another when they meet? A. P. Rossiter spoke of 'that frightening inclusiveness of the Elizabethan mind which attains its full scope only in Shakespeare'.[12] But inclusiveness may threaten artistic integrity, provoking so vehement a reaction as Ben Jonson's passion for relevance. Have the mourner and the reveller anything of moment to say when they encounter? Not unless

each, looking in the other's face, should recognize the lineaments of his own.

Shakespearian characters do not consist of two sorts, those on whom the comic spirit shines his lantern, and those who are shielded from its beam. Compared with later, sentimental, comedy, and seen in relation to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century adaptations of his plays for the stage, Shakespeare's comic vision may be called unsparing. It is not mitigated by the seriousness of the occasion. With the kingdom falling in ruins about them, Hubert tells King John how the rumours of Arthur's death and a French invasion are received, and mimics the amazed blacksmith

> With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news;
> Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,
> Standing on slippers, which his nimble haste
> Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet—[13]

tells his tale of disaster. (And, if this is ascribed to Shakespeare's alleged contempt for the common people, I reply that the Grecian princes who listen to Nestor in *Lucrece* are shown in equally grotesque postures.) But it is not only nameless persons in that notoriously undignified aggregate, a human crowd, that this comic vision exposes. According to the code of sentimentality, a character whom we are meant to regard as sympathetic must be spared the full rigour of acquaintance with comedy. (If the case *appears* otherwise, then we may guess that this character is being subjected to an ordeal or test, carefully, even clinically, controlled.) Shakespeare allows no exemptions on this score. Indeed, his favourite device of disguise or mistaken identity is most often employed to bring one of these 'sympathetic' characters face to face with his own image as it appears in the mirror of other men's minds—a proverbially disconcerting experience. The Duke, in *Measure for Measure*, must hear the common interpretation of his conduct; Hamlet, the popular account of his insanity; King Henry, before Agincourt, learns that Pistol alone regards him as a combatant—and to be Pistol's chosen champion would not raise a man in his own esteem. The discovery of Vienna's Duke, or England's King, helpless in such a comic predicament has driven some critics to the desperate explanation that Shakespeare must have intended such characters to alienate, repel, even disgust the intelligent observer—who would thus share a sour joke with him at the expense of simpletons ready to take this fellow for a hero. Under such a dispensation, who is to

be saved? Not Posthumus in the gaoler's keeping; not Coriolanus among serving-men in the house of Aufidius; not Pericles suppliant to the fishermen—no, not Marina herself at odds with Boult. Of tragic and comic characters alike it may be said that, if dignity survives what they are called on to endure, it has not been preserved by aloofness.

Furthermore, they can all speak that middle language which was, for Johnson, the signal achievement of Shakespearian comedy;[14] all use imagery which carries what Wordsworth called 'the ballast of familiar life'.[15] When lesser Elizabethans use a homely idiom for tragic themes, we may fear they are 'for Alisander . . . a little o'erparted'.[16] No such anxiety attends Cordelia's declaration:

> Mine enemy's dog,
> Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
> Against my fire.[17]

Shakespeare's mourner and reveller meet (not merely intercept) one another, because they are akin; kinship is possible because diverse and even contrary moods interpenetrate (they do not merely alternate) throughout nearly all his plays. In the very heart of his pastoral romance, Jaques calls up a vision of human life which includes its first and last indignity—utter helplessness at the gates of birth and death. It is a far more daunting picture than Pope's:

> Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,
> Pleas'd with a rattle, tickled with a straw . . .
> Scarfs, garters, gold, amuse his riper stage;
> And beads and pray'r-books are the toys of age:
> Pleas'd with this bauble still, as that before;
> 'Till tir'd he sleeps, and Life's poor play is o'er![18]

Strange, at first sight, that the satirist's should be the softer impression! But Pope is speaking in his own person, whereas Jaques is merely the voice of satire in the orchestration of *As You Like It*, and falls silent at the close.

Contrariwise, in a play whose plot retains some of the hard brilliance of its original (though Dr. Brooks has shown us in how romantic a light the Elizabethans could regard Plautus),[19] we are haunted by the 'piteous plainings of the pretty babes' which have rung in Aegeon's ears until they brought him

> to the melancholy vale,
> The place of death and sorry execution.[20]

The very theme of a play may submit to diversity of treatment. While the mimic warfare between men and women in *Love's Labour's Lost* treads the razor's edge that divides angry and merry laughter, Berowne turns the image of love this way and that until it reflects all the colours of a tempestuous April. He tells himself

> Go to; it is a plague
> That Cupid will impose for my neglect
> Of his almighty dreadful little might.

To his fellow subjects, he delivers a splendidly formal oration on their sovereign:

> And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
> Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.

To Rosaline, he extenuates their behaviour with the plea that

> love is full of unbefitting strains,
> All wanton as a child, skipping and vain.

And, at the last, the Princess's reply to Navarre's importunity resolves these rainbow colours to a white radiance:

> *King.* Now, at the latest minute of the hour,
> Grant us your loves.
> *Princess.* A time, methinks, too short
> To make a world-without-end bargain in.[21]

In Shakespearian comedy we may again and again discern that 'inclusiveness' which Ben Jonson (as playwright though not as poet) discarded in the interests of comic relevance. It belongs to a region of thought and feeling which Professor Willard Farnham has characterized as 'the mediaeval comic spirit in the renaissance'.[22] Within the narrow compass of a lecture I cannot hope to do more than indicate where this region lies, and comparison with Ben Jonson may serve as finger-post. It is impossible to imagine Jonson treating any of his characters as Barnardine is treated—a reprobate who must be brought to realize that he is compounded of an immortal soul and a body desperately mortal, before authority will trouble to find out what he has been doing, and stop him doing it. What Ben Jonson's artistic conscience exacted must have become always easier with changing assumptions as to man's nature and situation. Pope admits both to be paradoxical, but proceeds as though the problem were merely to reconcile 'self-love and social'. Our failure to reach this supposedly attainable good provokes the angry disappointment of the satirist. The age which brought the novel to maturity

gave its whole attention to these often intractable partners, seeing the well principled social being yoked in every individual with the intransigent egoist: in those who are amiable, regard for others is able to subjugate self-love; in the unamiable, the knowledge that this is expected of them merely serves to regulate the appearance of selfishness. Response to the human comedy comes to depend for its diversity on variation of experience and temperament: those to whom both suggest despair, and those to whom they bring a sober hopefulness, will alike call their inference rational. But the yoke-fellows within man, as the Elizabethans conceived him, were not to be reconciled on reasonable terms. The mortal part would still cry out 'It is *I* who am undeniably sensible of life.' This claim (none the less insistent for being inadmissible) rings with a shivering hilarity through Doll Tearsheet's question to Falstaff: 'When wilt thou leave fighting a days and foining a nights, and begin to patch up thine old body for heaven?'[23]

In a region of thought and feeling comprehending such extremes, even kinship and common language will hardly avail to compose all differences. Moreover, when we have looked across the generations to Shakespeare's world, and seen it standing nearer to Chaucer's than to our own, we have still not measured the full magnitude of that capacity for reconciliation demanded of his comedy. We ask of it (surely it was he who taught us to ask) that it shall reconcile apparently incompatible states: ideal happiness, with all that this implies of grace and harmony; and those abject indignities to which error or misadventure may subject body and spirit—with all that they threaten of discord and disgrace.

Professor Coghill has taught us to look for two distinct strains in Renaissance comedy, and acknowledge that the one chosen by Shakespeare has its own traditions of theory and practice.[24] But I would plead for recognition of a third, which, together with that narrative and romantic strain which he distinguishes, goes to the making of Shakespearian comic art. Coleridge has defined one property of comedy. It is, he says, 'poetry in unlimited jest'. It is 'the apparent abandonment of all definite aim or end . . . the removal of all bounds in the exercise of the mind'. Again, it is 'intellectual wealth squandered in the wantonness of sport without an object'.[25] These, however, are intellectual terms. Can they capture and hold up to view something that is not always and altogether intellectual? The term I would use for this property of comedy as it works at all levels, down to the

humblest, is simply play. (It is a pity that we have not a distinct word for what I mean: gambol, game, sport for its own sake.) Although Christopher Sly is corrected for supposing that comedy has something to do with Christmas gambols, he may not be altogether at fault. Comedy is indeed, as his pretended lady tells him, 'a kind of history';[26] but it is also a kind of revelry—he is himself playing a part in one of this sort without knowing it. That, surely, was what Berowne meant by 'a Christmas comedy'.[27]

Play is a faculty we share with the other creatures—as anyone knows who has watched hares at sunrise, or badgers after sunset, or young lambs engrossed in the game which children call 'king of the castle'. Now, those who play together contend with one another—or make believe to contend. Elizabethan taste fostered the contention in words, one player fending the other off by answering at cross purposes, as the servants answer their masters in Shakespeare's earlier comedies. (Who would have guessed that the dialogue of *Henry IV* could ever have developed out of this?) Or they play tricks—cheat one another's eyesight by disguise, dumb-show, or carefully planted misinformation. They are not always the first instigators of these illusions, but may be initially beholden to mischance: it is the trick played by fortune on Viola that compels her to cheat Illyrian eyes; and, since this subterfuge can be only partially successful (someone in the play must see through the disguised girl, or she will seem to us a virago), there are those who divine that Cesario lacks a man's heart, and on this half-truth build their comic conspiracy.

Comic contention, in so far as it is really play, has certain characteristics which set it apart from heroic or tragic conflict and even from that of satire or corrective comedy. Finality is alien to it; if the players desist, they are waiting for the impulse to renew itself. The odds are a matter of indifference, and may well fluctuate from episode to episode, now one player up, now the other. What they are contending for is not so much the advantage as the initiative—which, in the nature of things, cannot be perpetuated, though it may be renewed. (In romance, on the other hand, the hero must be outmatched, must vanquish, and remain for ever the victor. But then he is, to borrow Saintsbury's happy misquotation of Tennyson, 'Grand, epic, homicidal, six-feet-high'.)

To illustrate Shakespearian comedy as play, I choose two episodes, one from either part of *Henry IV*. They happen to be numbered Act II, Scene iv, in both, and each is a scene of

unusual length resourcefully diversified. In the first, the theme of the *play extempore* begins to declare itself when the Prince, having played his practical joke on Francis—as though he were indeed of little more account than Hotspur's 'sword and buckler Prince of Wales'—is asked by Poins what it signifies. (Poins is never inside the game—any more than a dog is, prancing at the heels of a boy intent on some ploy of his own; but he has this advantage, for us, over the dog: when he does not understand, he asks questions, and we benefit by the answers.) The Prince's answer, here as often elsewhere, is directed rather to us than to his inquisitive companion:

> I am now of all humours that have showed themselves humours since the old days of goodman Adam to the pupil-age of this present twelve o'clock at midnight.[28]

The sentence, as Johnson interprets it (and I concur), leads direct to that passage in which the Prince sketches, lightly but acutely, the humours of two men, each confined to his own orbit: poor Francis, driven out of his few wits by being asked to think of two things at once, and that inflexible engine of war, Hotspur: 'I am not yet of Percy's mind', he says, and launches into a piece of mimicry of the man who begins his day by killing 'some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast', and observing to his wife: 'Fie upon this quiet life! I want work.' There, he seems to say, goes such another one-idea'd man as simple Francis; and, delighted with his own insight and the freedom it confers, he resolves on calling in Falstaff to exploit its possibilities by playing Lady Percy to his own Hotspur.

Falstaff comes; but there is that not inconsiderable matter of what happened at Gadshill to be settled first between them; and when Falstaff has clambered to a pinnacle of effrontery he does not wait to be pulled down but proposes 'a play extempore'—on which the Prince of course suggests that the subject shall be Gadshill. The King's emissary, however, affords a diversion and respite, for Falstaff offers to treat with him on the Prince's behalf, and, when he returns from speaking with Sir John Bracy, he makes use of the information he has obtained to regain the initiative. The Prince, he reports, is summoned to give an account of himself at Westminster, for the Percies are joined in rebellion with Douglas and Glendower. 'Art thou not horribly afraid? Doth not thy blood thrill at it?' The Prince's rejoinder—'Not a whit, i' faith; I lack some of thy instinct'[29]—warns him that his brief absence has allowed his enemies to combine against

him, and the way lies open, wider than ever, towards Gadshill. With a keen relish of his own predicament, leaving defence to lesser men, he attacks from another quarter: let the Prince join with him in rehearsing the answer he will be called on to make to his father. And so the play within a play, long promised, is after all presented, and on a subject of Falstaff's choosing; but it is prevented from reaching the culmination he has designed by yet another diversion, the Sheriff's entry. So robust is Shakespeare's comic invention that we may all too easily overlook its economy: he forbears to surfeit us; where suggestion is sufficient for his purpose, he rests content with the half-spoken.

In Act II, Scene iv, of the second part, the Prince and Poins, disguised as drawers, have been present while Falstaff has assured Doll (whom I would not play as an accomplice of authority) that they are both shallow young fellows—with even less complimentary additions. They discover themselves, and Poins, that too assiduous terrier, warns the Prince that Falstaff will get away—'drive you out of your revenge and turn all to a merriment'—unless he is prompt with his accusation. In seeming compliance, the Prince challenges Falstaff—'And you knew me, as you did when you ran away by Gadshill. You knew I was at your back, and spoke it on purpose to try my patience.'[30] The question is a trap: Falstaff is invited to use his former plea of instinct. The only answer to this invitation is a wary movement: Brer Rabbit seems to stir within the briar patch. 'No, no, no; not so; I did not think thou wast within hearing.' The Prince, with a mimic gesture of triumph, posts himself at the obvious bolt-hole: 'I shall drive you to confess the wilful abuse, and then I know how to handle you.' Still only a shuffling movement, as of a player who has lost the initiative: 'No abuse, Hal, o' mine honour; no abuse.' The Prince relentlessly reminds him of his very words of dispraise. Still Falstaff feigns helplessness, and Poins takes up his feeble 'No abuse' with a sharp yelp of triumph, thus giving Falstaff the opportunity he has been waiting for—the occasion to negotiate and break the enemy's ranks: 'No abuse, Ned, i' th' world; honest Ned, none. I disprais'd him before the wicked—that the wicked'—he swings round to face his other adversary—'might not fall in love with thee; in which doing, I have done the part of a careful friend and a true subject; and thy father is to give me thanks for it.'

To admit the weather of actuality, to take into account the dependence of Falstaff and his companions on the Prince's whim of forbearance—this is to deny to this mimic warfare the spirit

of play, of comedy as revel. Even the fire-eating Hotspur lays claim to a sort of prudence: 'Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.'[31] Falstaff reaches out for the nettle, but, if he were to find the flower in his hand, would he not toss it away, for the sake of one more round in the game? And, despite his disclosure of a disquieting preoccupation with the future, I believe the Prince to be of the same mind while he is playing, to take the same delight as Falstaff in the successive turns and reverses which bring now one, now the other, uppermost—that is, to a commanding position from which his very momentum must topple him down. Would he drive Falstaff into a thicket of prevarication if it were not for the sake of hearing that deceptively mild voice from within—'Born and bred in a briar-patch, Brer Fox'?

Translate game into earnest; turn Falstaff into the ingratiating parasite that a favourite dependent may be in actual life—and what are we to make of his tactics with his own shabby retinue ('devoted Falstaffians', Professor Humphreys happily calls them[32]), whose favour he is certainly not seeking? Like Bottom, he can create an element in which he is buoyant; but, while Bottom floats serenely in the smooth waters of his ascendancy over his fellows, Falstaff prefers the surge and swell of opposition. Unchallenged in Eastcheap, as Bottom was in Athens, he cannot desist from provoking his subjects to rebellion, in order that he may have the pleasure of sallying out to quell it. He enjoys giving a finished performance, if only for his own approbation: in default of better sport, he will rout Pistol.

I have still to meet the most forcible objection to any simply comic reading of Falstaff: that it fails to reckon with those two sombre episodes, rejection and death. That he must fall from favour is beyond question; the wild Prince cannot change into the trustworthy King on any easier terms; and where a character has to make a harsh choice, it is not Shakespeare's way to soften it: in his plays, whoever says 'no', man or woman, says it with the rude vehemence of a force of Nature. That he must die is less evident. It would be pleasant to accept Johnson's surmise, that Shakespeare 'made haste to dispatch him, perhaps for the same reason for which Addison killed Sir Roger, that no other hand might attempt to exhibit him'.[33] But the sense of old age and death has hung heavy in the air throughout the second part of *Henry IV*. So powerful is this impression that I could more easily believe his fellow players to have been forcing Shakespeare's hand when that incoherent epilogue was written than that he intended to carry Falstaff to the French wars and

changed his mind. When the hour strikes—and it cannot be very far off—he must depart, like the Lord of Misrule, or the Christmas Prince. For them and their like, it is no grave matter; they will come again another year. (Miss Welsford has remarked the close relation of these figures, in England, with seasonal, recurrent revelry.[34]) Common sense forbid that I should ask you to regard Falstaff in terms of myth, as symbol of the winter solstice—as anything but himself. But there are certain characteristics that he shares with the figures of traditional revel, and fable. The Lord of Misrule cannot change, in respect of what he signifies—any more than the characters of beast fable can change, the fox turn vegetarian, or the sheep grow quarrelsome and vainglorious; but like them he can recur. If all these withdraw, it is to wait the proper occasion for return—and that is the recurrence of a mood in which we spontaneously demand another episode in a tale which properly has no end. In them, both changelessness and renewal result from simplicity of structure: only complex characters can change without loss of identity; only simple stories can be prolonged by successive episodes. Falstaff is not structurally simple; yet he cannot change, as Henry of Monmouth changes. And it is evident that he prompted the demand for recall—to Windsor, if not to France. If we object that we would rather take leave of him in Arthur's bosom than at Mistress Page's fire-side, we may fairly be accused of fastidiousness, and can but plead that this is what happens when genius works upon the stuff of popular imagination.

Supposing I am right—what becomes of the integrity of Shakespeare's comic vision; what, of Falstaff's kinship with other Shakespearian characters—those, for example, who are simple and traditional in a different sense: braggarts, whose pretensions to valour are exposed, but for whom the exposure is not an invitation to begin the game afresh? I believe that the answer is to be sought in the tenor and function of the soliloquies allowed them on these very occasions. We know, of course, that the clown was furnished with opportunity for direct intercourse with the audience—if he had not been given it, he would have taken it. We are, moreover, aware that the world of the comic character is never private. Whereas in all drama the fourth wall is down, comedy has this peculiarity: from whatever quarter we cross the ruins of that wall, we may be sure the other three will cut off the quarry's line of escape. Life itself cannot (fortunately for us) equal the completeness of comic exposure. In Shakespearian comedy, however, this is seldom the conclusion; for the victim,

if he does not turn to bay like Falstaff, may take refuge with us from his tormentors; and, in that case, soliloquy is his passport. As a fugitive from his own comic predicament, he throws himself upon our mercy. It is to us that Parolles turns, with his declaration:

> Simply the thing I am
> Shall make me live.[35]

It is to us that Pistol confides his plans for a campaign after the campaign[36]—like any black-marketeer, on the stage, at the end of the last war. Upon which Johnson (surely no lax moralist) is impelled to comment: 'The comick scenes of the history of *Henry* the fourth and fifth are now at an end, and all the comick personages are now dismissed.'[37] He enumerates them, with an observant eye for their several histories, and concludes: 'I believe every reader regrets their departure.' Who could say as much for Jonson's Bobadil? But *he* must continue to excuse his behaviour, under the merciless gaze of those who can testify against him[38]—the poor wretch is never alone with us.

Surely it is significant that Shakespeare should allow the fourth wall to be crossed, as it were, in both directions—and by such diverse fugitives, all of whom this device of soliloquy compels us to admit, even while we laugh, to sanctuary. This traffic indeed creates a sort of fellowship between those who are found out, and those who are witty enough to find themselves out: Berowne and Benedick outdo themselves in their soliloquies of self-discovery. Could we, and would we, claim exemption from this fellowship? Shall we not submit, because it is inclusive, and consent, because the vision that framed it is merciful?

I fear that I have done little but ask questions, and, when I could not arrive at an answer, send others chasing after them. It will therefore be appropriate to end by quoting (though I cannot interpret) a passage which by haunting my imagination has prompted many of them. In the close of the *Banquet* of Plato (as Shelley translates it), Aristodemus tells how he fell asleep, and woke to find that some of the company still slept, some had gone home, and Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates were still disputing:

> The beginning of their discussion Aristodemus said that he did not recollect, because he was asleep; but it was terminated by Socrates forcing them to confess, that the same person is able to compose both tragedy and comedy, and that the foundations of the comic and tragic arts were essentially the same.

NOTES

1. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Act II.
2. *2 Henry IV*, v. i. 41.
3. *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1961.
4. *Much Ado about Nothing*, II. i. 50.
5. *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 841–2.
6. Ibid. v. ii. 849.
7. (1765), pp. xiii–xv.
8. *Anecdotes* (1795[a]), II. 340.
9. II. ii. 178–9.
10. II. iii. 18.
11. Op. cit., p. xiii.
12. *Woodstock: a Moral History*, ed. A. P. Rossiter (1946), Introduction, p. 37.
13. *King John*, IV. ii. 195–8.
14. Op. cit., p. xviii.
15. *Prelude* (1805), VII. 603.
16. *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 578.
17. *King Lear*, IV. vii. 36–38.
18. *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 275. . . .
19. Harold Brooks, *Themes and Structure in* '*The Comedy of Errors*', in *Stratford-upon-Avon Studies*, 3 (1961).
20. *Comedy of Errors*, I. i. 73 and v. i. 120–1.
21. III. i. 191–3; IV. iii. 340–1; v. ii. 748–9; v. ii. 775–7.
22. *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies* (Washington, 1948), pp. 429–37.
23. *2 Henry IV*, II. iv. 222–3.
24. Nevill Coghill, *The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy*, in *Essays and Studies Collected from the English Association* (1950).
25. T. M. Raysor, *Coleridge's Shakespearian Criticism*, I. 169.
26. *Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, ii. 138.
27. *Love's Labour's Lost*, v. ii. 462.
28. *1 Henry IV*, II. iv. 89.
29. Ibid. II. iv. 361.
30. *2 Henry IV*, II. iv. 295.
31. *1 Henry IV*, II. iii. 9–10.
32. New Arden Shakespeare, *1 Henry IV*, II. iv. 475, note on S.D.
33. Shakespeare (1765), IV. 397; note on *Henry V*, II. iii.
34. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (1935).
35. *All's Well that Ends Well*, IV. iii. 310–11.
36. *Henry V*, v. i. 81–83.
37. Shakespeare (1765), IV. 474 (note on Pistol's *exit*).
38. *Every Man in his Humour* (ed. Herford and Simpson), IV. ix.