



## SHAKESPEARIAN COMEDY



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*by*

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TO MY WIFE

TOTUM MUNERIS HOC TUI EST

## *Preface*

CHAPTERS 2 to 9 in this volume were first published in numbers of the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library between July 1930 and October 1937. Chapter 2 was reprinted in the World's Classic's volume, *Shakespeare Criticism* 1919-1935. I wish to thank my fellow-governors of the John Rylands Library for permission to reprint these chapters. In particular, I want to make avowal of obligation to my friend Dr. Henry Guppy, Librarian of the John Rylands Library. As one of the John Rylands lecturers, it is not for me to praise him for his choice of lecturers. I can however say that his programme of lectures during the last thirty years has made scholars in Europe and America gratefully realize the wealth of the library of which he is the devoted guardian. And I am surely quite free to express my personal gratitude for the forethought with which he eases the lecturer's task and for the charm with which from the chair he adds dignity and grace to the occasion of the lecture.

H.B.C.

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# I

## *Preliminary*

THE lectures which make up this book were given one by one in eight successive years. They were given extempore at the John Rylands Library, and were then, within a month or two of their delivery, written out for publication in the John Rylands Bulletin. They are now brought together without further re-writing. This may very likely be the wrong way to build a book. For one thing, the style is naturally nearer to the range of the spoken idiom than to the patterns of the written word. Moreover, over a spread of eight years, it is certain that the mood of that evening which happens to be the one appointed for the lecture, and the adventitious way in which the lecturer responds to that evening's audience will unconsciously modify the particular manner of his lecture. It has, however, seemed best not to tamper with what served its temporary purpose and answered its separate occasion; for though the individual lectures were shaped in the weeks immediately leading to their delivery, the whole scheme of them was devised before the first was given. They were meant to be consecutive steps in a continuous argument. To rewrite them now would perhaps throw the structure of their central idea into clearer relief. It would certainly permit of the excision of repetition here and there. But those paragraphs which occur in the separate sections as summaries of as much of the general argument as has gone before may possibly help to keep the main structure in mind.

As the series now appears in print, it is labelled "Shakespearian Comedy." That title has been chosen because it appears to be

the simplest and most objective description of the material handled and the briefest indication of the object of that handling, namely, the attempt to trace in Shakespeare's comedies the growth of his "comic idea." But the title has been adopted with misgiving; for it suggests a comparison of this book with the vastly profounder volume which Bradley devoted to Shakespearian tragedy. Deliberately to invite such a comparison is to call upon oneself the proper penalty for sheer arrogance: Bradley was one of the really great Shakespearian critics of the last half-century. There is no claim that this book means to do for comedy what he did for tragedy. But there is a hope that it may lead to wiser and more competent efforts for making up the enormous lee-way into which the consideration of comedy has fallen in comparison with the progress which has been made in exploring the grounds of criticism in tragedy. The philosophy of tragedy has drawn hosts of thinkers; for tragedy deals with issues which seem greatly to transcend those of comedy. Perhaps even more important, European thought about tragedy has started on solid foundations, for Aristotle's treatise on tragedy is extant, and his discourse on comedy is lost. Moreover, from what remains in his *Poetics* and in such attenuated survivals of its tradition as exist in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, it would hardly seem that the body of comic material available to him would have allowed him to exploit on it the magnificent method by which he digs so deeply into the idea of tragedy. The progress of comedy from its Greek origins has been infinitely fuller, more varied and richer than has the growth of tragedy since the Greeks gave to it their characteristic stamp. But it may not be impossible to apply Aristotle's critical method to the huge and varied body of later comedy. That, at all events, is the belief on which this book rests. Even so, a long succession of far abler critics must devote themselves to the adaptation of such a method before the criticism of comedy can reach the same stage of development as the theory of tragedy had already reached in Aristotle's treatise.

It is no doubt tactless in these days to declare one's faith in Aristotle so roundly, for some of the most illuminating critics of our time have very little use for him. Indeed, the present trend of fashionable criticism appears to have little use even for drama. To our most modern coteries, drama is poetry or it is nothing; and by poetry they mean some sort of allegorical arabesque in which the images of Shakespeare's plays are far more important than their men and women. To these critics, characterisation is rather an accidental than an essential element in drama, and all that really counts is the mystically symbolic patterning of tonal and visual form. The appreciation of Donne is distorting the valuation of Shakespeare. Yet drama is a representation of action; and to our simple sense the actors in it do look more or less like human beings; wherefore, to consider them as images of men and women seems the safest way of trying to understand them.

There is much virtue in this safety for a merely academic person whose occupation is in a department of literature in a university institution. But it is a safety which must not be bought at the cost of substituting scholarship for criticism. Departments for the study of English literature are now established in universities as an accepted means for effecting that particular spiritual and intellectual discipline which is a primary object of academic study. But there is still uncertainty as to how best they may contribute to this object. The real problem is to determine the right relationship between scholarship and criticism. Our own impression, after twenty five years spent as a university teacher of literature, is that in the main we are lacking in courage. Confronted with this vast body of material which we call English literature, we find a multitude of ways of handling it which can easily be justified as proper activities in the pursuit of knowledge. Such, for instance, are all the opportunities it offers for what in the most obvious sense can be called historical research. The lives of the poets are to be traced from documents and registers in the Record Office; the social, economic, political and religious background of

their time is to be similarly constructed. Then there is the history of the poet's works in their physical form—his manuscripts, his copyists, his proofs, his printer, his bookbinder, and, if he be a dramatist, his company, his censor, his prompter, and, may be, also his pirate. Without enquiries of this sort, it is clear that we can never really know just what it was which the poet wrote; and our generation in particular owes an enormous debt to the historico-bibliographers who are establishing for us a definitive text of Elizabethan drama. A further much practised method of literary study is the specifically comparative method, from mere *Quellenforschungen*, arid pursuit of sources, to the tracing of a tale or a tradition as it takes on different shapes in different ages and amongst different peoples.

Yet when all this is done, a fear remains that the main issue has been overlooked. There is no harm in a mere professor of English literature locking himself up in the Record Office or devoting his life to the tenth-rate company of authors whose writings the wiser world has willingly let die. But only two or three of our young folks in a generation need be submitted to the technical training for this sort of a career. The primary reason for admitting the study of literature into an academic organisation is the belief that literature has a contribution to make to the spiritual and intellectual growth of man and of the world. In its final resolution, the study of literature is the study of "poetry", the study of what artists have created, whether their creation is epic, lyric, drama or novel. From the infancy of the world, it has been felt that what the artist and the poet could give was a mode of experience which none but artists and poets could provide. Their worth as artists and as poets was the value to mankind of the peculiar and distinctive experience which they as poets had experienced and which they as poets had the art to communicate to men. Their merit, then, is their meaning, so long as "meaning" is taken to be their significance and not merely their lesson. They are finally therefore to be assessed philosophically rather than historically. A teacher of literature must not be satisfied to present a body of unques-

tionable facts: he must brace himself to measure values. He must be prepared not only to say what a poet was, but to judge what his worth is. Scholarship must lead to criticism.

But by his very scholarship an academic man knows how precarious are the judgments of the critics. Above all, he knows the properly repressive weight of knowledge. He realises that a mind naturally dedicating itself to the pursuit of truth will inevitably be chary in pronouncing judgment. He will feel that there is an inherent though not an inevitable antipathy between temperaments which most readily take to scholarship and those whose proclivity is to utter values. It is the old and lasting problem in which the scholar's subject, Shakespeare, taking sides, came down riotously and scornfully against academic and bookish students. Nothing is more vain than painfully to pore upon a book to seek the light of truth:

"Small have continual plodders ever won  
Save base authority from others' books. . . .  
Such universal plodding prisons up  
The nimble spirits in the arteries."

There is no author in the world teaches such beauty as a woman's face. The reading of books is a slow art which entirely keeps the brain, a barren practice which scarcely shows the harvest of such heavy toil. The real ground, the book, the academes from whence doth spring the true Promethean fires are, of course, not libraries, but women's eyes.

Though a mere scholar may enter his caveats against this comprehensive rejection of academic learning, he will nevertheless recognise that the very instincts which have led him to devote himself to scholarship are probably a sign that in his own mental make-up, the gift of rapid insight and the aptitude for instantaneous and undoubting decisions are not markedly predominant amongst his endowments.

Hence his dilemma. How is he to make his scholarship serviceable to his own practice in the art of criticism? How is he to use his scholarship to atone for his relative deficiency in a

natural acumen for coming to artistic judgments? It was precisely for this that Aristotle seemed extraordinarily helpful to one novice when a quarter of a century ago he began his career as a teacher of literature.

It was, however, not so much what Aristotle had to say in detail about this, that, or the other aspect of Greek tragedy. Rather, it was the method of Aristotle's enquiry, and the summary exposition of that method which has come down to us imperfectly in the first four brief chapters of the *Poetics*.

A philosopher with a bent for biological modes of thought, Aristotle found that the origin of poetry was a clue to its specific nature. It was what it was because it came into being to fulfil a particular function. Mankind was discovering the possibility of certain refinements of simple instinctive pleasures. Poetry is the outcome of the impulse to gratify a group of those conscious and relatively refined pleasures. That being the primary cause of poetry, then poetry is the specific thing which displays the characteristic activity of poetry. The nature of the mouse is to achieve the specific capacity of mouseness, and the law of its growth is its development in evolutionary progression to a more and more complete fulfilment of the inherent possibilities of mouseness. The nature of a developed horse is its capacity to realise the progressive functions of horse-ness, say, for instance, its ability to run with a rider. All its separate properties, the shape of its bones, and their articulation, the disposition and the proportion of its legs, the size and the relative positioning of its nostrils, all these are excellent only in so far as they contribute to the efficiency of the animal in its specific function of horse-ness. Like an animal organism, poetry is never static; it grows organically under a vital compulsion to realise its capacity and its function. It is this sense of a controlling objective as the law of poetic form which was the essential motive of Aristotle's theory of *Katharsis*, though it was his opposition to Plato which determined the particular formulation of it. The impulse for the invention, and the general acceptance when invented, of all distinct art-forms like

flute-music, arousing and appealing to "enthusiasm", and like comedy, arousing and appealing to the emotions which express themselves most simply in laughter, and like tragedy, arousing and appealing to pity and fear—this itself implies that each and all of these emotions are in the majority of men most readily and most mightily excited by the casual, multitudinous and inevitable accidents of life. They are thus the emotions perpetually liable to strive for outlet; and their striving involves a continual disturbance of settled composure and of controlled personality. But by flute-music, by comedy, and by tragedy, the particular emotions which have prompted the creation of the particular artistic kinds or species secure periodic opportunity for an ordered way of exercise, discharge or purgation. This process of the exercise and the discharge of perturbing feelings is in itself a feeling of pleasure and it results in a pleasurable feeling of relief and of consequent well-being. It is *Katharsis*, then, in Aristotle's terminology, which is the function controlling the form of tragedy. His primary conception of poetry as an organic creation is patent in his insistence of function as the law of its being.

Hence, his method of criticism. Poetry meant to him a vast range of poems, the creation of the golden age in the past of his own country. Surveying his material and endeavouring to see it historically, he discovered in it an evolutionary emergence. Poetry as such had demonstrably tended to more or less clearly defined species—epic, and dramatic in particular. The emergence of these species suggested a classification on a zoological or organic basis. Their generic characteristics were the means, material object, and manner of them as modes of imitation. But the specific characteristics were the different types of means, of material objects, and of manner in which as distinctive species they exercised their imitative activity. Then, within the reorganised species, the critic found differentiating modifications of the specific means, material object and manner, so that either a recognisable sub-species emerged, or within the sub-species there was a recognisable trend to the



realisation of a purer form of the species. It is a process which is a progressive movement towards the ideal type; and we need not follow Aristotle in his belief that in some species that process had already reached its goal.

Comedy may be looked at, as Aristotle looked at tragedy, without assuming that either comedy or tragedy has yet reached perfection. Comedy, like tragedy, may be taken as a species because it is commonly recognized as such. History will reveal the consolidation of its specific traits in the progress of its growth. Its means, material objects, and manner will be seen as organically distinct from those of epic and of tragedy. Moreover, more or less distinct variations of it have already been duly recognised and labelled. These can be examined as separate members of the genus comedy or as examples of a comic species, and thus it may be seen how modifications within the generic essentials coalesce to produce a new species. In that way the line of growth of each species will become clearer. Carry the process further and further—follow sub-species and sub-species, and the nature of comedy in general and of all comedies in particular will be illuminated.

The method is technically historical and comparative. Whatever may be the metaphysical justification of it as a method, in practice it does appear to help in the problem of grappling intelligently with literature. It was certainly Aristotle's method which prompted the most original and the most fruitful speculations of those critics in Italy in the sixteenth century who were laying the foundations of modern European literary criticism. The best of them were often strongly opposed to particular principles of the Aristotelian theory: but they learnt from him how to embark on the problems of critical enquiry. Castelvetro is Aristotelian in mind, and often anti-Aristotelian in detail. Cinthio, to whom as yet no one has paid proper critical tribute, was even more markedly an exponent of the Aristotelian method, and no less free from bondage to the Aristotelian edict. They were, of course, mainly concerned with tragedy. They are of enormous assistance to the modern