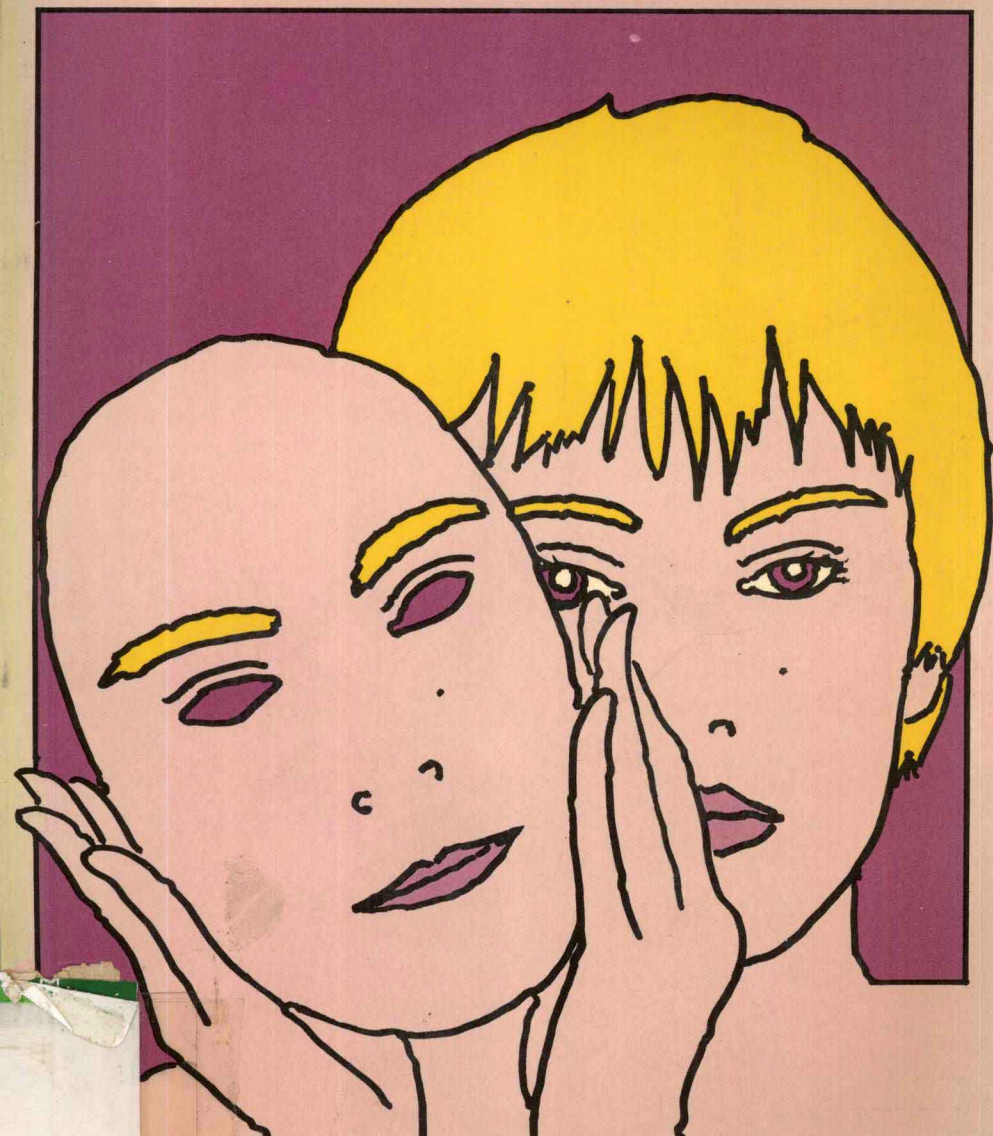


# COMIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN SHAKESPEARE

RUTH NEVO



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COMIC  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN  
SHAKESPEARE

METHUEN & CO. LTD  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# For Natan

First published in 1980 by  
Methuen & Co. Ltd  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE  
Published in the USA by  
Methuen & Co.  
in association with Methuen, Inc.  
733 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017  
© 1980 Ruth Nevo  
Phototypeset in V.I.P. Sabon by  
Western Printing Services Ltd, Bristol  
Printed in Great Britain  
at the University Press, Cambridge

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Nevo, Ruth  
*Comic transformations in Shakespeare.*  
1. Shakespeare, William – Comedies  
I. Title  
822.3'3 PR2981 80-40238

ISBN 0-416-73880-X  
ISBN 0-416-73890-7 Pbk

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of Chapters VI and XI were read while the book was in the making at conferences in Stratford in 1978, in Jerusalem in 1979 and Aberdeen in 1980; the gist of Chapter I formed part of a Shakespeare Association of America seminar held at San Francisco in 1979, and was published by the New York Literary Forum in a collection of essays on Shakespearean Comedy edited by Maurice Charney. On all these occasions alert fellow travellers set mis-emphases right and suggested new perspectives some of which were subsequently happily incorporated. To all these necessarily anonymous aiders and abettors I am most grateful, as I am, also, to those hardy annuals, my students. But most of all to my endlessly patient, meticulously critical friends and readers – Professor H. M. Daleski, without whose eagle eye I would feel completely bereft, Dr Shlomith Rimmon and Dr Elizabeth Freund, who resolutely keep me up to date, and Professor A. A. Mendilow, whose masterly comments at a very early stage of my thinking about comedy had a formative effect upon the whole carriage of the work.

Shakespearean scholarly debts are notoriously impossible to discharge in full. The most immediate and proximate are recorded in the notes, but for the rest – a great concourse – I must simply hope that my creditors find, as I do, in the pleasure and the honour of membership in such a company, a silent recompense.

The text that I have used throughout for citation is *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blackmore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

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# I

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## SHAKESPEARE'S NEW COMEDY

The chapters which follow are basically interpretative studies of Shakespeare's ten early comedies; but they lean upon a theory of the dynamic of comic form and they yield a hypothesis concerning the development of Shakespeare's art from early to mature, more detailed and specific than the ascriptions of apprenticeship or tutelage and 'masterpiece', respectively, provide. Shakespeare's early comedies are a gallimaufry of experiments, but each plays its part in the gradual conquest of the medium, the increasing mastery of its complex expressive capacities. Not that any straight line leads from *The Comedy of Errors* to *Twelfth Night*, and then through the tragi-comedies to the final romances; there are leaps and dashes forward, *reculers pour mieux sauter* and detours. The story is that of a mighty river, fretting out its channels to the sea, skirting and circumventing and deviating, dividing and rejoining, wherever topographical obstacles, so to speak, lie in its path.

Out of his Renaissance Roman and Renaissance romance materials Shakespeare wrought a form of comedy unmistakably his own. It is the function of two inconstant variables: the Donatan formula for comic plots, which serves as model for a multitude of variations; and the battle of the sexes which constitutes the underlying motivation of his variegated romantic-courtship stories. The formula was derived by the fourth century grammarian Donatus from his study of Terence and ceaselessly re-

peated and revised by the humanist scholars of the Italian Renaissance. In one of its many formulations it was expounded in the 1550 edition of the *Andria*, a text which was very possibly used in the Stratford Grammar School of Shakespeare's day. 'Comedy', the formula runs, 'ought indeed to be five-parted, the first of which unfolds the argument . . .' (in another version: 'contains either the peril, the anguish or some trouble'); the second completes the same. The third has the increment of turbations and contentions . . .' (or: 'brings on the perturbations, and the impediments and despair of the desired thing'); the fourth seeks a medicine for the turbations' (or: 'brings a remedy for the impending evil') and is a preparation for the catastrophe, which the fifth demands by right for itself.<sup>1</sup>

The 'telos' of this Terentian plot is the finding – discovery or recovery – of what was missing, that is, imperfect, at the start. I borrow the metaphysical term from Northrop Frye who, in a fine article, distinguishes between 'the teleological plots' of the Roman (originally Menandrine) New Comedy and the 'dialectical plots' of the Aristophanic Old Comedy, 'a more existential form in which the central theme is mockery and its distinguishing feature the agon or contest'.<sup>2</sup> The latter type of comedy has returned in the twentieth century, following a New Comedy hegemony of extraordinary tenacity and longevity, in the form of those extravaganzas of the absurd to which dramatists like Giraudoux, Dürrenmatt and Ionesco have accustomed us. Northrop Frye's distinction is stimulating and useful but not entirely felicitous. It overlooks the telos of dialectic itself and it overlooks the element of dialectic in the teleological New Comedy plots, where opposing temperaments, sexes, classes, generations, generate conflict. In Terence's *The Brothers*, for instance, the contest between the prim and the indulgent father of, respectively, the country cousin and the town spark, structures the entire action and the comic resolution. In Shakespeare, it will be part of my case to argue, the dialectic is particularly strong and subtle. I shall want to show later how, with the haphazardry of creative genius, its advances, its retreats, its fruitful digressions, he grows towards a form which joins the severed halves of Frye's dichotomy. But the distinction neatly emphasizes the concrete goal or aim towards

which the protagonists of New Comedy consciously direct themselves, the play coming to an end with its attainment, and it leads me into my subject.

The ends the plays of Plautus and Terence, or rather their characters, have in view are specific and concrete indeed. Brides (with substantial dowries), complaisant courtesans or purchased flute girls, a parasite's pickings, the exposing of a braggart or impostor or cheating procurer, the outwitting of a heavy father or a light son. They aim at the wealth, pleasure, freedom, or at least praise, or at least a prize, which life does not in general provide equally for all. They go about to achieve these ends with the aid of tricky manipulations, disguises, pretences, bed-tricks, simulations and dissimulations, the wily slaves themselves being the chief functionaries, if not originators, of the whole contrivance; which, however, so far from achieving what is wished brings about a thickening web of accidents and miscomprehensions, and is accompanied by considerable verbal violence (especially in the less polite Plautus) as abuse, threat and invective are lavishly and hyperbolically distributed. The ends that are finally brought about are consonant with the original desires of the protagonists, but in excess of them. They get more, and better, than they bargained for, and this on account of a series of fortunate coincidences and discoveries: lost foundlings, wrecks, rings, caskets, birthmarks, in short, all the paraphernalia of the fortunate unforeseen, the lucky chances of which, in our precarious existences, we are in direr need than of any gift of birth or intellect.

These stratagems of the New Comedy supplied Europe with its comic fictions for two millennia; longer, if we include subtle and profound inversions like those of Ibsen and Chekov, witty parodies like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Major Barbara*, and *The Confidential Clerk*, fantasias like *The Playboy of the Western World*, and the steady stream of musical comedy and soap opera, let alone the secondary proliferating life led by dramatic forms in the novel since the eighteenth century. They also provided Shakespeare with his plots from *The Comedy of Errors* to *The Tempest*.

It is worth remarking at this point that the distinction between 'plot' and 'story' (roughly equivalent to the Formalist distinction



between 'sjuzet' and 'fabula') was not unknown to the ancients. Horace recommended to dramatists that they employ an 'artificial order' whereby chronological sequence is disrupted for the sake of dramatic effects.<sup>3</sup> By the last of the final romances Shakespeare will have bettered his instruction in this respect. But if Shakespearean devices for creating a simultaneity of past and present, for irradiating present by past and for effecting multiple ironies while cunningly advancing or retarding the solutions to his characters' bewilderment finally surpass those of the ancients, it is as well to remember that the procedure is inherent in New Comedy plots as such, whether in their original form of drama or in the later development of romance narrative.

*The Tempest* is a palimpsest of Plautus' *The Rope*, which starts with a description of a tempest and has a prologue in which Arcturus explains how he has 'stirred up a wintry storm and raised high waves in the sea' in order to wreck the ship of the wicked procurer who decamped with the slave girl, long-lost daughter of the farmer-fisherman upon whose coast the wrecked travellers are washed up. And *The Winter's Tale* is a startlingly recognizable transformation of the fragment by Menander called *The Arbitration*, in which a charcoal burner and a goatherd dispute the ownership of trinkets found by the latter when he picked up an abandoned baby, later depositing it with the former whose wife had just given birth to a still-born child. The Arbitrator in the dispute, as it so happens, turns out to be the foundling's own grandfather, whose daughter, it seems, in the heat of a quarrel with her husband, inadvertently mislaid her baby. Whatever the obscure, primordial origins of such stories may be, whether they have their source in the myths of Dionysos or in the Athenian custom of infant-exposure, the lost or abandoned child whose lot is to be found again becomes, as Kerenyi tells us, basic to the entire genre of New Comedy.<sup>4</sup>

In the early *Comedy of Errors* just such a Menandrine narrative of separation and reunion encases the brisk Plautine mistakings and unmaskings of the *Menaechmi*; and this has tempted criticism to become preoccupied with the question whether the meandering romance narrative of marvellous reunions (*Apollonius of Tyre*, for instance) or the tight Roman structure of mistakes and

unravellings took precedence in Shakespeare's imagination. The fact of the matter is that both were contained in Plautus, and the historical bifurcation into medieval romances on the one hand and dramas of intrigue on the other is largely a matter of theatrical convenience. The plays foreground the tangle of errors; the romances – they have the time to do so – foreground the precedent vicissitudes. Whatever permutations and combinations come to be devised it is to the basic linkage that the term New Comedy usefully applies. However, in application to Shakespeare, a further parameter comes into play.

After the initial sally of *The Comedy of Errors* the wandering narrative of long-lost children and family reunions disappears until the final romances, save for an evocation of 'sea-sorrow' vicissitudes in *Twelfth Night* with its pair of twins fished out of the sea. The modern and fashionable in Shakespeare's day comprised not only the Roman comedies which had been enthusiastically resuscitated and interpreted by the humanist eruditi of the Renaissance and popularized by that ebullient offshoot, the *commedia dell' arte*, but also the specifically courtly branch of romance. The romance of courtship, medieval in its first impulse, had recently been trimmed and spruced up, Peele'd, Greene'd, Lylyfied and Euphuized, and had made a new and elegant début in the theatre.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore these courtly or courtship comedies, particularly the 'supposes' combination of mistakings and matings which dominate Shakespeare's playwriting till the turn of the century. And it is in these comedies that the specific and distinctive form of Shakespearean comedy is to be discovered.

The later post-tragic romances come under the powerful gravitational pull, so to speak, of the tragedies themselves and require separate discussion. They are indeed comedies – New Comedies – by Wittgensteinian family resemblance, for in them, too, losses are restored and sorrows end; in them, too, families are reunited and reconstructed. *The Winter's Tale* defeats shipwreck, emotional and actual, with its 'green world' renewal,<sup>6</sup> the healing and revitalizing powers of great creating Nature, its miraculous restoration of survivors, and a great gift for Leontes. In *The Tempest*, the green world, 'whose sweet airs give delight and hurt not', is a

whole island of survivors, but its ending reopens further vistas, and its ironies decreate. Its final note in fact is dispossession: a bare island (like the island salt and bare of Milton's displaced Eden), and every third thought the grave. Nevertheless, the telos of *The Tempest* too is recovery, if only of whatever compensations or consolations can be found for the fears and wounds, oppressions and misfortunes which have been endured.

In these post-tragic time-dominated tragi-comic comedies generations are spanned and the flux of passion and vicissitude, of grief and loss enacted or recalled. And the transformations Shakespeare's sea-change works upon his models are more marvellous perhaps even than the pearls and coral of Ariel's ditty. But in the younger plays 'placing' is far more the modality of the action than 'timing'. Their protagonists are engaged in finding their place in the world, and in placing what they find in a hierarchy of values. Rightly to be placed and rightly to place – oneself and others – engrosses a good deal of their attention and involves them in the erotic sparrings and duellings, the positionings and counter-positionings of the sexual battle in its refined and elaborated courtly form.<sup>7</sup>

The telos of Shakespeare's early comic plots then is recovery: the finding of what was missing or lacking at the start. And here the first great novelty is at once apparent – Shakespeare's protagonists do not know what they want, except in the most superficial sense. They discover as they go along, and so transform the rather arid Donatan scheme into a heuristic device of immense potency and flexibility. When his protagonists, like the Romans in their happy ends, get more than they bargained for, it is not simply the bonus (admittedly considerable) of a son's light of love turning out to be respectable, or an Athenian citizen, or even the long-lost daughter of the father's best friend, but an illumination of their entire lives. Leo Salingar expresses this extremely well, if impressionistically, when he speaks of a

) fundamental innovation which in its general effect distinguishes Shakespeare's plays from all previous comedies, that he gives his people the quality of an inner life. Their inner life, with their capacity for introspection, changes the whole bearing of

the incidents that make up a traditional comic plot. It is as if Shakespeare separates the events that composed the plot from the centres of consciousness in his leading characters, so that the plot-machinery operates on a different plane, the plane where the characters are being 'transformed' . . . carried out of their normal selves . . . observe themselves passing into a new phase of experience.<sup>8</sup>

It is not only the language of the inner life, however (important though it is), which 'changes the whole bearing of the incidents that make up a traditional comic plot.' The effect is the consequence of a radical and consistent employment of what Bertrand Evans has taught us to recognize as a particularly subtle and pervasive form of dramatic irony: the exploitation of a gap in awareness between the characters (or some of them) and the audience.<sup>9</sup> This is a major heuristic technique in all of Shakespeare's plays, but in the comedies particular profit is derived from the close co-ordination between the audience's knowledge and the character's ignorance and from an overt display of the device as such. The audience is given intelligence of matters which are concealed from the characters (or some of the characters) in such a way or by such means that progressive disclosures for the former are synchronous with progressive deceptions, confusions, mystifications, for the latter. Puck's application of the magic juice, for example, puts the audience in the know and the lovers into bafflement at one and the same stroke, as does the eavesdropping scenes in *Much Ado*. But to this central comic device I shall presently return.

The audience's possession of superior knowledge ensures that comedies of this kind never surprise. Or rather, the 'surprises' they supply are of the kind characteristic of good spectator sports: perfectly expected in principle but always admirably unforeseen in practice. They are the fruit of the finesse, versatility, verve, and skill whereby goals are achieved, situations saved, gambles pulled off in despite of the difficulties set up by the conventions of the game itself. Once again the point has been tellingly made by Northrop Frye:

All art is conventionalised but where the convention is most

obvious and obtrusive the sense of play, of accepting the rules of a game, is at its strongest. . . . The comedies as a single group . . . seem more like a number of simultaneous chess games, played by a master who wins them all by devices familiar to him, and gradually, with patient study, to us, but which remain mysteries of an unfathomable skill.<sup>10</sup>

Shakespeare's implementation of the Terentian scheme (in the first ten comedies) runs as follows.

Whatever the predicament sets forth as missing at the start, be it a twin, or an obedient wife, or matched couples to make up a foursome, or the secret of a 'living art', or requited love, or love and a fortune, or a good match for a daughter and a punishment for a jealous husband, or a match for a wayward cousin, or a place in the sun for a dispossessed young man, or mastery in love, it will be found. The plot's formal coherence depends on this, and so does the audience's perception of the play's coherence. Since, as has been noted, the protagonists are themselves seekers, and only partly, or not at all cognizant of what they seek, the formal development is a continual, unfolding process of disclosure, during which, however, the protagonist and audience are proceeding at different rates, that of the protagonist being positively retarded by tumults and confusions on the way, that of the audience proceeding apace by inferences and hypotheses.

Therefore, when the plot is finally resolved by some appropriate recognition which enables objectives to be attained, the *anagnorisis* is retrospective as well as immediate for the protagonists and holistic or integrative for the audience. The recognition invites in effect a second order or interpretative, re-evaluative reading of events for both. The solving event, of which the audience too has not had full advance notice, produces hindsight on two levels. Scales fall from the protagonists' eyes in terms of whatever mistaken identity or reunion is now disclosed, and from the audience's in terms of the entire 'journey into the interior'<sup>11</sup> the protagonists' adventures can now be seen to have been. The manifest purposes, desires, goals and motivations of the protagonists reveal their inner, previously concealed, or veiled, or latent implications. What the protagonists see will not altogether of

course coincide with what the audience sees. The audience has more material to unify, to knit into coherence, than any single character. But the approach of the protagonists' knowledge to the level of the audience's at the end of the play is what gives the recognitions of the dénouement their telling effect. And it is one of the marks of the progressive Shakespearean mastery of dramatic speech that protagonists become more self-perceptive, more aware of themselves both as having been fooled or foolish, and also as having gained in wisdom or insight.

In the Roman New Comedy the author or implementer of the comic device – the deception or pretence or bluff or imposture – which precipitates the comic process of involution and evolution, and creates the gap between audience's knowledge and protagonist's, is usually the trickster slave. In Shakespeare trickery has gone up in the world. And though he has tricky servants, like Puck, they are not markedly successful and have to have their chestnuts pulled out of the fire for them by their royal employers in the end. The freeing of the comic device from its strictly utilitarian Roman deceptions, however, has great advantages for variety and flexibility. In *The Comedy of Errors* the comic device is nature's own – the freakish identicalness of twins – but thereafter we have psychological one-upmanship, a girl as page, crossed letters, the delusive juice of a flower, three deceptive caskets, a wifely trick to catch a cuckold, a series of eavesdroppings, girls in disguise.

The comic device meshes in marvellously intricate, varied and eye-opening ways with the comic disposition of human beings to be deluded, deceived, mistaken, unreasonable, perverse, irrational and subject to every kind of folly. This produces what the neoclassical theorists of the Renaissance, following Donatus, called the *incrementum processusque turbarum*, the increase and progression of perturbations, or 'the forward progress of the turmoils',<sup>12</sup> that is to say, confusion worse confounded or the knot of errors. The reversals, shocks, absurdities, displacements and disorientations of this stage strike the protagonists as having turned their world upside down, or into dream, and result eventually in a double exhaustion. The comic device is exhausted; that is to say, it has fulfilled (or over-filled), its function. It is not usable

any more, or it is about to be exposed. But also, and at the same time, the privations or perversities which bred the entanglements ultimately to be dissolved or resolved, have undergone a process of hyperbolic excess which has reached the point of exhaustion.

This process is itself remedial, and is the internal equivalent of the providential remedy which dissolves the knot of errors and issues in the recognitions of the dénouement, and the comic resolution or recovery. The providential remedies are in the first instance the immediate local solutions to the impasses, the enigmas and the errors induced by the involutions of the plot, what Donatus called 'the infolding of the argument'. That they come about at all is the happy chance, the good luck, the fortuitous and fortunate circumstances which is comedy's presiding genius, as the fatal error and its inevitabilities are tragedy's. Thus the presence of the disguised abbe, a convenient occasion for demonstrative obedience, true love in disguise, the healing flower, the legal loophole, cover for the elopement of the young lovers, the captured villain, the fortunate encounter and a change of heart, the arrival of a lost twin – such stuff as spells out the bitter anguish of 'too late' in the tragedies – here provide solutions to the problems, dilemmas, embarrassments, mishaps, mistakings, deceptions and imbroglios, and potential disasters, of the *processus turbarum*. This is their technical function. But as they close the gap opened by the play's beginning, they provide the audience with means for a full and final retrospective intelligence of the nature, in all its inwardness, of the desirable, the pleasurable, the good, the absence of which motivated the story. They enable us to transcend, if we will, the comedy-game aspect of the play, and to move, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, 'from what it says to that of which it speaks'.<sup>13</sup> The power of Shakespeare's comic creations lies in the simultaneous formal complexity and naturalistic verisimilitude with which he deploys these canonical elements of comic form. The remedies solve and resolve, illuminate the whole human condition for the audience while they enact the particular repair, or cure the particular folly or set of follies, or species of folly, or privation or perversity presented in a particular play. The insights that these remedies generate or precipitate are thus endowed with a double validity.

We do not, it must be insisted, devise these insights from our 'identification' with a favourite character as is often carelessly or loosely supposed. We participate rather in a dynamic process, acting out imaginatively, and restructuring, impulses as often as not dialectically opposed. Identification with a protagonist would short-circuit a fully intelligent participation and it is for this essential purpose – the creation of a detachment, of aesthetic distance – that the fools are provided. But they are provided also for fun. It is to the knotty problem of the nature and function of Shakespeare's fools that I now turn.

These fools, that great company of the commonalty – menials, professional jesters, solid citizens – who carry on their quotidian, absurd and good-natured existences in the most subtle disrelation with the official plot, grow in stature as Shakespeare proceeds. They are the catalysers of the comic disposition to be deluded, deceived, mistaken, affected, conceited, pretentious, inept, maladroit or perverse, and, in short, foolish. Foolery, as Feste says, 'doth walk about the orb like the sun'. It is the fools that, to pursue the metaphor, focus its rays. Because they are not tricksters – Shakespeare's orientation is aristocratic and his plotters are dukes and princes and witty heroines – they are not tied to the exigencies of plot and are therefore free to improvise plays and parody their betters. They do this directly, if they are witty fools whose folly is a stalking horse; or indirectly if they are foolish would-be wits, simply by being in their own blithe unawareness what their betters are in their ridiculous essence.

The question of how foolish a Shakespearean fool really is, is always a good question. Who, for instance, is mocking whom when the complacent Jaques mockingly exults at having met a fool in the forest? It is a fool, at all events, whose foolish philosophy bears an uncanny resemblance to Jaques' own nihilistic obsessions. The dramatic duplicity here is like Bottom's dream, so called, it will be remembered, because it hath no bottom. Face and mask, illusion and imposture are the dubieties out of which a profoundly ironic intelligence generates its ironies, the world of the theatre and the theatre of the world reflecting each other in manifold ways. By dissonance and by consonance, by diminishing or by augmenting, by simulation or by dissimulation, by infil-



mities and by recoveries, the fools entertain us ceaselessly, and we entertain them; that is to say, we entertain a diversity of perspectives and proportions. They may not themselves always be witty – some may indeed fairly be rated under-achievers – but they are certainly the cause that wit is in others. And the constant mediation between opposing temptations: between head and heart, rational and irrational, between the defences of the ordering intellect and the defences of immersion in dissolving emotion, has much to do with the exquisite equipoise of Shakespearean remedies. Through them fantasies of the unconscious and fantasies of the ideal are both enacted and reduced to viable proportion.

One is often struck by the multi-facetedness of even the simplest of Shakespeare's clowns, by their complementarity with other characters and by their refusal to be disposed of by a dichotomous wits/butts or knaves/gulls classification, or in terms of besetting and extravagant 'humours'. The only way I can discover to account for this peculiarity of Shakespeare's fools is by recourse to an ancient Greek insight concerning three comic manners, or dispositions, or modes of conduct or characters (*ethoi*), namely, the Bomolochos, the Eiron and the Alazon: Buffoon, Ironical Man and Impostor. These are the three possible producers of the ludicrous and pleasureable according to the fourth-century *Tractatus Coislinianus*,<sup>14</sup> the fragment which tantalizes us with its glimpse into the missing Aristotelian treatise on Comedy. Tripartite divisions of the soul are common and frequently overlap conceptually, Freud's having often been shown to have more than a superficial resemblance to Plato's. The *Tractatus* for its part, lends itself to the notion of a mock or burlesque theatre of the psyche, with Plato's charioteer as Eiron/Ego, his spirited part as Alazon/Superego and his appetitive part the buffoonish Bomolochos/Id. What the appellations mean we have a fair idea from other Greek texts, in particular the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Alazon or Boaster is 'a charlatan or impostor who pretends to have distinguished qualities which he either does not possess at all or possesses less fully than he would have us believe' (book IV, chapter VII). Bomolochos is a facetious wag, exhibits an excess of wit, must be funny come what may and can't resist a joke in or out