

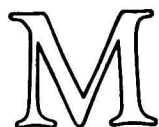
57-156-2
J. Dennis Huston

SHAKESPEARE'S
COMEDIES
OF PLAY



SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES OF PLAY

J. Dennis Huston



© J. Dennis Huston 1981

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission

First published 1981 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 30923 5

Printed in Hong Kong

For Priscilla Jane, Kate, and Penn
who would rather have had my time

Acknowledgments

First books, particularly first books which do not appear at the onset of one's academic career, have deep and long-standing debts to clear. It is my pleasure, at last, to set about this business, though I am also fully aware that the nature of my subject carries with it immeasurable obligations to past scholars: our greatest debts, after all, are the ones we no longer recognize as debts. As best I could, however, I have identified ideas borrowed from others in my footnotes. Here I want to record more general – and less easily footnoted – kinds of indebtedness.

As a student I was encouraged at crucial times by three teachers, Edward T. Hall, John Maguire and Alvin Kernan, who thus changed the direction of my life and helped me to think of myself as one who might some day similarly affect some of my students. Because Al Kernan in addition directed my dissertation and then years later read the manuscript of this study, offering encouragement and suggestions for revision, my debt to him is most obvious and extensive.

As a teacher I have been regularly taught and encouraged by my students, who first pointed me in the direction of this study and then showed continuing interest both in the project itself and in the ideas included in it. There were times, in fact, when their excitement about these ideas was the clearest proof I had that the ideas made sense.

My colleagues and friends at Rice University have also offered generous portions of their time, interest, advice, and emotional support. Many of the ideas in this work grew indirectly out of the experience of acting in Shakespeare productions with Wes Morris, Terry Doody and John Bouchard – as we all tried, in rehearsal and discussion, to figure out just what Shakespeare was doing in these often perplexing plays. At different times Jane Nitzsche and Alan Grob read this manuscript and offered the same helpful suggestion for improving it, and I could have saved myself a good deal of work and some considerable disappoint-

ment if I had not stubbornly resisted their suggestion for almost two years. Of all my colleagues, though, I am most deeply indebted to David Minter, who not only read the manuscript – some portions in several drafts – and offered useful advice but also, as my playing partner in a countless number and variety of games, has helped me to understand that we do not have to give up play just because we have to give up youth.

At various stages in its growth this study was read by scholars who offered me help of one sort or another. Sylvan Barnet, James Calderwood, Sherman Hawkins and David Young, in the midst of busy schedules, found time and kind words for the work of a writer they had never even met. And Robert Egan read this manuscript with the care and consideration that all writers hope will be afforded their work. His enormously detailed and thoughtful suggestions eventually enabled me to shape this study into its final, publishable form.

While working on this book, I had the help of three different typists, Audrey Handley, Sue Davis and Erma Turner, who patiently made their way through an almost unending series of foul papers. And during this time Rice University provided generous financial support, not only by assisting with typing and later with publication expenses, but also by providing me with a semester of sabbatical leave in which to write without interruption.

Parts of the chapters on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew* appeared originally in *SEL* and in *Shakespeare Studies*, and I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to reprint this material here.

Finally, I want to acknowledge support so freely and lovingly given that I continually took it for granted: from my wife, Priscilla Jane, who listened tirelessly as I first tried to thrash out my ideas, who read even the roughest drafts of this study and gently pulled me back toward sense when I had ridden my hobby-horse beyond the pale of reason, and who continued to have faith in this project even when mine wavered.

Snowmass, Colo.
August 1980

J. D. H.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: The Comedies of Play</i>	1
1 Playing with Discontinuity: Mistakings and Mistimings in <i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	14
2 'Form Confounded' and the Play of <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	35
3 Enter the Hero: the Power of Play in <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	58
4 Parody and Play in <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	94
5 The Evidence of Things not Seen: Making Believe and the Self-defensive Play of <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	122
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	151
<i>Notes and References</i>	154
<i>Index</i>	165

Introduction: The Comedies of Play

Old myths, particularly old critical myths, die hard. And Shakespeare, as was his wont, promulgated more than his share of myths, both in his plays and in his person. One of them we are all familiar with, partly because it was given the ring of authority by the greatest of English myth-making poets: Shakespeare was a natural genius, essentially untutored and unlearned, who achieved literary greatness simply by warbling his native wood-notes wild. That idea took centuries to die, in spite of massive evidence to the contrary about Shakespeare's learning and about his professional involvement in the theater, as actor, writer, and part-owner. Another myth, almost as old and even more enduring, is that there was a recognizable and tidy pattern to Shakespeare's development as an artist. He began, so this argument goes, by serving a sort of dramatic apprenticeship, during which time he wrote basically unsophisticated (though often commercially successful) plays in which he developed his dramatic and poetic skills. These eventually reached fruition in a great outpouring of dramatic energy that produced his mature, 'great' plays. And then, after this period of productivity, there was a tailing off of dramatic energies that resulted in the strange, sometimes de-energized, and often disjointed plays of the later period.

To both of these myths there is undoubtedly some measure of truth. Shakespeare was not a scholar-writer, like John Milton or Ben Jonson. And he produced most of his greatest plays in the middle of his career. But such ideas also severely limit our understanding of Shakespeare. The first prevents us from seeing the learning and professional skill that provide the underpinnings of Shakespeare's art; the second blinds us to the particular strengths of the early and late works by measuring them against the achievement of the middle plays. Only recently, for instance,

have critics, guided by Northrop Frye's re-evaluation of the romances,¹ begun to argue that Shakespeare's later plays are only different from, not necessarily inferior to, the mature works.² I think the same thing can be said for some of the early plays, particularly some of the comedies, which have too often been judged deficient because they have been measured against works like *As You Like It*, works richer in characterization, more sophisticated in language, and more complex in world view. For such virtues, though they are highly valued by modern critics, are not the only ones we might value in a play. If, for example, we decided that coherent dramatic action – not an insignificant artistic virtue – were of crucial importance in drama, then almost any early comedy would seem superior to *As You Like It*, which interrupts its main storyline to dally for two acts in the Forest of Arden. Of course, critics do not demand coherent action from *As You Like It*, because it has other, very considerable strengths. So neither, I think, should these critics necessarily demand the virtues of *As You Like It* from earlier works.

The argument of this study, then, is a simple one: we have too long undervalued Shakespeare's early comedies because we have not paid sufficient attention to their particular strengths – to their creative energy, their exuberant experimentation with dramatic convention and, ultimately, their joy in the theatrical medium and in the act of play-making itself. Instead we have been too much concerned with finding in them an outline for the future, marking in their structures, themes and characterizations early strains of a more complex species of comedy to follow, rather than noting the essential characteristics of the species before us. One such characteristic, which I take to be the defining quality of these early comedies, is their playfulness. In them Shakespeare dramatically announces his sense of the way play, in its almost infinite variety, can affect and transform the world; that is, he celebrates his delight in his own creative powers, in the possibilities of drama itself, and in the vital worlds created by the union of such powers with such possibilities. In their celebration of the playwright's near-magical control of his form and medium – and so implicitly of the world itself – these comedies of play give evidence, no less metaphysically serious for being exuberant, that Shakespeare began his career as we now realize he ended it: by dramatizing the artist's urge to play with his world, to order 'reality' as he orders the world of his art.³ Let us see how.

On the day that he himself has appointed for his marriage to Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio does not arrive as expected for the wedding, and as the family and friends of Baptista Minola wait uneasily for an arrival they fear may never come, they offer various explanations for the groom's delay: Petruchio means to shame them; he is mad and therefore not to be trusted; he is a man of his word and has been somehow unavoidably delayed by fortune. Each of the speakers, it is clear, is acquainted with a Petruchio different from the one known to the others. To Baptista, he is a proud young lord from Verona whose irresistible self-assurance may now signal villainy; to Kate, he is a madman who may now be making a joke of her feelings, as he earlier made a joke of reality itself; while to Tranio, he is one who, because he has earlier made good his word against impossible odds, must now be trusted, even though his present absence is inexplicable. What such discrepant opinions of Petruchio here suggest, besides the uncertainty of Kate's wedding, is the very uncertainty of human personality itself. Like Petruchio, man is a player of roles who appears in different guises before different people. In a sense, he is an actor on the stage of life fleshing out a variety of roles to which he gives his own very personal sort of interpretations. And if unlike the actor, man does not find his parts already composed or his world tidily coherent, he at least tries to bring to his roles the ordering effects of composition and coherence: he would play his parts with the convincing style of a well-practised actor and he would find or impose coherence on the unpredictable welter of his life.

All this is no doubt a commonplace observation; it was not new when Petronius gave voice to it two thousand years ago: *totus mundus agit histrionem* – all the world plays the actor. And it still commands attention today, as the recent studies of sociological theorists like Erving Goffman and Elizabeth Burns⁴ have made clear. What is not commonplace about this observation, though, is the use to which it was put by Shakespeare, who returned obsessively in his plays to what Anne Righter in her brilliant book of that title⁵ calls the 'idea of the play', to that moment when, as Sidney Homan argues,⁶ 'the theater turns to itself' – when the dramatist turns away from the images regularly employed in other art forms and focuses instead on the uniqueness of his own medium, on the theater itself. In such a moment man appears as an actor playing out his life before other

actors and an audience of distant spectators he never sees. And in such a moment too Shakespeare not only turns the theater to itself, but turns his audience that way as well. Those spectators who are suddenly made conscious that they watch people who are only actors may necessarily wonder if they also are people who, from another perspective, appear merely as actors. Moreover, this use of the theatrical metaphor may turn the members of the audience to themselves in another way: they may become conscious that Shakespeare is playing with their emotions and thoughts, manipulating them, in some of the same ways that he is manipulating his characters. For a time at least the audience may, like the characters, be under the control of the playwright. Granted that control is not as extensive as the playwright wields over his characters – an audience can at any moment turn away from a play as a character cannot – but it is control nevertheless, and so strengthens the metaphorical association between audience and character, between man and actor. Temporarily the boundary between the stage and life dissolves as the play reaches out to touch the audience partly by reminding it of its *role* as audience.

It is perfectly possible, for example, that members of an audience watching a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and waiting for Petruchio to arrive for his wedding, might become conscious during the interlude I have just described that they are themselves watching an audience waiting for Petruchio to arrive for his wedding. For like the people who have come to Kate's wedding, Shakespeare's audience has gathered in a ceremonious way upon a special occasion to observe a kind of ritualized spectacle, complete with costumes and a foreordained script. In different ways each group has entered into the realm of play, as Johan Huizinga defines the term:

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'⁷

A wedding is not, of course, to be exactly equated with a stage comedy, but both are similar in being festive occasions set apart in time and space from the world of ordinary events and

activities. In this instance, too, the similarities between a play and a wedding are reinforced by complementary correspondences, since the stage comedy is about to present its audience with a wedding that is in fact a kind of stage comedy. In addition both the wedding party and the play's audience, though for different reasons, impatiently await Petruchio's arrival so that the festivities can begin. At the beginning of this scene, then, Shakespeare plays with two audiences as he prepares them for Petruchio's re-entry. In the process he intensifies dramatic tension and at the same time turns the audience watching his play in upon itself; he both plays with its responses and calls attention to the fact that he is playing with its responses. Why he does so the subsequent entrance of Biondello makes clear.

As we and the wedding party await Petruchio's arrival, Biondello brings news of him and of his imminent entry. That news is presented in such a way, though, as to bring a temporary halt to the action of the play. For a moment the forward momentum of plot is forgotten, as Shakespeare focuses the attention of both his audiences on Biondello's performance. Bearing the news everyone wants to hear, Biondello first tantalizes his audience by quibbling about the difference between the phrases 'is coming' and 'is come,' next delivers a bravura description of Petruchio's dress, groom and horse, and finally dances off in self-satisfied delight. For this brief moment a minor character hardly noticeable in the rest of the play (where he never has a speech longer than six lines and usually speaks only one or two lines at a time) commands stage center.

Such a dramatic interlude can be accounted for in any number of ways. It gives evidence of Shakespeare's capacity to provide actors with God's plenty by bringing even minor parts to sudden moments of life; it prepares both Shakespeare's audience and Petruchio's for the outlandishness of his behavior during the wedding scene; it provides this play, rich throughout in opportunities for performance, with yet another spectacular dramatic set-piece; and it suggests the way in which Petruchio's energetic capacity for playing roles magically inspires and touches off performances in those he makes contact with – not only by Biondello here but also by Gremio immediately after the wedding, by Grumio after the wedding journey and, most importantly, by Kate first on the road back to Padua and then at her sister's wedding celebration. Of these explanations the last is

of most particular interest to me here, because it points the way of this study – to Shakespeare's abiding concern in his early comedies not only with 'the idea of the play' but also with the idea of play itself.

Like the statement that all men play the actor, to which it is closely linked, this observation is a kind of commonplace. Players of one type or another are everywhere in Shakespeare, not only among his clowns and fools (Feste, Touchstone, and Bottom) and comic heroes and heroines (Petruchio, Berowne, and Rosalind) but also among his villains (Richard III, Iago, and Edmund) and tragic heroes (Richard II and Hamlet). Moreover, criticism in recent years, turning away from the New Critics' concern with plays as essentially dramatic poems,⁸ has directed an ever-increasing amount of attention to qualities and characteristics of play and play-making in Shakespearean drama.⁹ It is hardly surprising, then, that the works examined in this study show Shakespeare playing with the contingencies of plot, staging an almost endless series of plays-within-plays, manipulating conventions and expectations in order to play with his audiences' responses, engaging his characters in games of elaborate wordplay, offering events and characters out of the play worlds of fairy-tale and make-believe, delighting almost like a child in the play of his own newly discovered powers, playing with the difficulties and challenges of playwriting by drawing attention to them, and presenting characters who play out consciously elaborate dramatic performances before their own audiences as well as Shakespeare's. In play, such evidence suggests, Shakespeare found – at least while he was writing the early comedies – nothing less than an existential address to the world. For him, as for Schiller, man may have seemed 'only fully a human being when he plays.'¹⁰ Let us see why.

Play, and most particularly child's play, is an attempt to mediate between the self and the outside world by an exercise of control. For a time the child in his little world, or microsphere,¹¹ and the adult in the carefully delimited realms of his games manages the inchoate welter of reality by subjecting it to forms and schemes he has constructed. Temporarily he manipulates reality by bringing it under the control of his very particular purposes, though this control must necessarily be both temporary and in part illusory. 'To hallucinate ego mastery,' Erik Erikson writes, 'and yet also to practice it in an intermediate

reality between phantasy and actuality is the purpose of play . . . '12 Such a definition of play, though, relates it to activities which we normally think of as different from play, namely working and learning. For in order to work at or learn something we must first be able to subject it to managing forms and schemes already known; we must bring it in some way under the control of the ego. Work, learning, and play then may not be as different as we usually suppose. After all, work and learning, almost as much as play, may be, in Huizinga's words quoted earlier, 'a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding . . .' For this reason Jean Piaget, perhaps the foremost modern theorist of the meaning and nature of child's play, argues¹³ that play is merely one of the aspects, or poles, of almost any activity.

The real difficulty in our attempt to find a satisfactory definition of play, Piaget claims, 'lies perhaps in the fact that there has been a tendency to consider play as an isolated function . . . and therefore to seek particular solutions to the problem, whereas play is in reality one of the aspects of any activity'.¹⁴ What defines play for Piaget then is the ever-present but ever-changing nature of the relationship between the self and reality. When in this relationship reality predominates, the result, according to Piaget, is accommodation, the adjustment of the organism to imposing demands from without; when the self predominates, the result is assimilation, the absorption of reality to the demands of the organism. The first sort of predominance, Piaget argues, produces imitation; the second, play. And when something like a balance is struck between accommodation and assimilation the result is 'serious' thought: 'If every act of intelligence is an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation, while imitation is a continuation of accommodation for its own sake, it may be said conversely that play is essentially assimilation, or the primacy of assimilation over accommodation.'¹⁵

The attractiveness of Piaget's explanation of play is apparent to anyone who has ever found in his own work the joy and fun ordinarily associated with child's play: play is to be defined not by what one does but by how one does it. It is not some isolated function or activity to be juxtaposed to work but rather a state of mind, an address to the world. To the extent that the self can

master, control, assimilate the world around it, it attains to play: and although there can be in Piaget's system almost no such thing as perfectly pure play, since any act of assimilation must also involve some measure of accommodation, there is conversely no activity which cannot become play. Before Piaget, theorists of play have opposed it to work, even when that work seemed obviously related to play – as in professional sports, where paid participants earn money while they 'play'. But if we think of play as essentially an address to the world by which the self proclaims its mastery of reality, we can account for the fact that professional sports, like any other activity, *can* be play. For instance, in his first years with the Giants, Willie Mays played baseball in the Polo Grounds with the same spontaneous joy and energy that compelled him when the game was over to join in children's games of stickball on the streets outside the stadium. For him professional baseball was play, and as if to signal this fact, Mays developed a distinctive way of catching fly balls, in 'basket catches' that dramatically enacted, perhaps by intuition, what Piaget calls assimilation. Instead of receiving flies in the traditional self-protective way of accommodation, in front of his face, Mays allowed them to drop into his lap, or belly, almost as if he were swallowing – assimilating – them. Baseball, Mays so announced, was child's play for him.

And what Willie Mays made out of baseball Shakespeare may have made out of playwriting, at least near the beginning of his career. I do not mean to imply by this statement that Shakespeare, warbling his native woodnotes wild without a real thought for what he was doing, found himself suddenly a star in the major leagues of the London theater world. I mean rather that in his occupation with the theater, both as an actor and writer of plays, Shakespeare may have discovered and celebrated the power of play as a supremely human achievement. Within the compass of the theater, manipulating the reality of actors, stage, and audience around him so that they became temporarily a world as he himself defined it, Shakespeare may have found himself playing not only with the theater but with life itself. In the continuing confrontation between self and world, he may, like a child at play, have temporarily felt himself assimilating and becoming that world he confronted. For in a way a stage offers a playwright a grown-up version of a child's play-world – a literalized microsphere, circumscribed in time and space, where

the imagination assimilates, manipulates, and reshapes – masters – reality. And such mastery was emphasized in the Elizabethan theater not only by the presence of an audience to applaud the playwright's powers and share his vision, but also by the conscious correlation of theater, with its heavens above and pit below, to world. To this insulated world, implicitly an image of reality mastered by the playwright, Shakespeare in his early comedies brought an exuberant delight in the exercise of his powers, both as a dramatist and as an assimilator of reality.

The first four plays in this study, for example, are all dramatically different from one another, as if Shakespeare were trying out different principles of organization in each work – focusing on plot in *The Comedy of Errors*, on language in *Love's Labour's Lost*, on the player-hero in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and reflexively on the act of writing a successful play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In these four plays, too, the playwright who so successfully and self-consciously manipulates the theatrical medium to his purposes, assumes a prominent role in the action – sometimes making his presence known through surrogate figures like Berowne, Petruchio, and Oberon, sometimes calling attention to himself as the manipulator of plot and action by the very way he manipulates plot and action. This he does most obviously in *The Comedy of Errors*, where he plays almost exclusively with the dramatic possibilities of plot, moving two sets of identical twins through a series of mistakings and mistimings that depend for their success upon elaborate authorial manipulation. The extent of this manipulation he emphasizes – and makes fun of – not only by matching each set of identical twins with identical names but also by emphasizing the discrepancies between what the audience and the characters know of the circumstances. From a position of detached amusement, the audience observes the characters, as they construct one logical but faulty explanation after another, trying, but failing, to assimilate the monster of reality which confronts them. Meanwhile, secure in its knowledge of the dramatic situation, the audience sees as play what the characters experience as madness.

In *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare turns away from his earlier concern with plot and instead concentrates on language and the uses to which man puts it as he constructs schemes and pageants to suit reality to his desires. And although no one in this work altogether succeeds in finding a language to control either self or

world, Shakespeare plays with the characters' failures and converts them to his success. He assimilates their interrupted schemes and pageants into his own interrupted, but coherent, pageant. *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, at the thematic center of this study, present play, as process and product, attaining almost to transcendence. In their celebration of, and play with, the possibilities of the theatrical medium itself, these works have perhaps never been surpassed: to the creator of the Padua which Petruchio conquers and the Athens which Theseus governs almost anything seems possible, and proves so.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* an Induction of enormous dramatic energy that plays through a series of Pirandello-like variations upon the theme of illusion and reality demonstrates the ambivalence of its ties to both reality and illusion by proving simultaneously illusory – it is soon abandoned without apparently having to do with Shakespeare's play of shrew-taming – and real – it is retained as an Induction to that play and does dramatically prepare an audience to understand Petruchio's methods and purposes in his dealings with Kate. Then, too, Petruchio himself proves to be Shakespeare's most obviously successful player. Unlike Richard III, who collapses after he acts his way to success, and Rosalind, who must at last depend heavily upon the miracle-working powers of the playwright *ex machina*, Petruchio succeeds on his own in making reality over in the image of his desires. As actor, director, gamesman, and wordplayer who magically metamorphoses and masters the world that is all before him, Petruchio offers us the image of the player and playwright as all-conquering hero. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we feel the powers of the playwright not so much in his hero as in the achievement of the play itself – in the way Shakespeare interrelates separate and apparently disparate plots, juggles the mistakings of Puck and the lovers in the woods, plays tricks with both historical and dramatic time, converts metaphor to dramatic action and dramatic action to metaphor, and finally, makes of the mechanicals' failed play his own supremely comic success. In the process he suggests, and at once dramatically demonstrates, how the playwright may achieve and express a 'most rare vision' at once transcending the limitations of his form and parodying his own success as a dramatist.

This vision, however, undergoes modification in the later