

Ejner J. Jensen



Shakespeare

AND
THE
ENDS
OF

Comedy



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Introduction

This study of Shakespearean comedy grows out of the perception suggested by the deliberate ambiguity of its title: that modern criticism has confounded the endings of the comedies with the purposes of comedy. Another way of asserting the same point is to speak, as I do in the first chapter, of "The Aggrandizement of Closure." The study begins with an analysis of the modern criticism of Shakespearean comedy, dating from the publication of John Russell Brown's survey of the extant criticism in the mid-fifties. The development of criticism of the comedies since that time has been rapid and extensive, but it has been shaped by two dominant figures, Northrop Frye and C. L. Barber. While everyone recognizes the strength of their influence, no one has shown how their theories of comedy have concentrated critical attention on closure. The results of that concentration have been twofold. First, the aggrandizement of closure has transformed comedy, which is in its essence a matter of local effects and moment-to-moment theatrical pleasures, into a genre whose design and meaning are understood teleologically. Second, this stress on the interpretive primacy of closure has led to a critical situation in which contrary readings of the same play depend for their support on evidence drawn from the same material. Thus two critics who view *The Merchant of Venice* in opposed ways (one seeing it as moving toward final harmony, the other seeing it as discordant and problematic) derive their views from the identical materials. Those materials are essentially the closing moments of the play, and the critics have been influenced to seek meaning there by the dominant tradition of comic criticism, a tradition shaped by the work of Barber and Frye. Indeed, in my view, Barber and Frye can be seen together as a single influence, even though particular emphases in their criticism differ widely.

To this point in my argument, the position I take might be termed oppositional. I judge the emphasis on closure to be both inimical to the logic of criticism and contrary to the spirit and design of comedy. To some readers, my procedure may seem essentially negative. It is

necessary, however, to clear away the critical ground in order to establish a different way of looking at the individual plays. It is precisely this work that the first chapter of the study accomplishes. Subsequent chapters focus on individual plays while keeping my main argument constantly in view. But that argument is seen in each case in the particular context of that comedy's critical history, and it leads directly into a discussion of the play that is intended to explore its particular strengths as comedy. I see this new focus as providing something like what Richard Levin calls for but does not himself provide in his discussion of the fundamental weaknesses of thematic criticism, a sense of the play in its moment-by-moment unfolding on the stage.

If the example of Levin provides one significant influence on my approach, the work of stage-centered critics like John Styan and John Russell Brown and (from a slightly different angle) Alexander Leggatt provides another. The five plays I discuss in detail are *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Measure for Measure*. In every instance, I bring to my discussion of the play a sense of its critical history (including its stage history), and I work to demonstrate that as a comedy it creates its effects as it unfolds and not as it moves toward a significant and thematically crucial ending.

One effect of my reading is to restore to the comedies something of their joyousness, and in this too I find myself in opposition to one of the major trends of criticism of the last thirty years. That trend is, of course, the critical habit of finding in these works a darkness and a problematic quality that grows out of the need to make Shakespeare our contemporary. I don't wish to return to an age that one critic has referred to as the "lost innocence of criticism," a time "when we were advised to do little more than 'bask in the sunshine' of Shakespeare's comedies." But I do want to insist that the plays I discuss here are called comedies for a reason.

Thus I see the study as a whole performing a number of critical tasks. It offers a view of modern criticism of the comedies and describes how that criticism, dominated by the work of two men, has essentially led us away from the spirit of these plays toward a search for meaning and an assertion of their teleological design. It brings five representative comedies into a new perspective and illustrates

how they unfold as works written for the stage. And, finally, in doing that critical work it restores to the comedies their true comic life.

Throughout this study, citations of Shakespeare's plays refer to the texts in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

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one

Crowning the End

*The Aggrandizement of Closure
in the Reading of Shakespeare's Comedies*



Over thirty years ago, John Russell Brown reviewed the course of "The Interpretation of Shakespeare's Comedies: 1900-1953." In doing so, he located the central critical tendency of the works he surveyed in the "constantly repeated dictum . . . that the heart of Shakespeare's comedy lies in its characters."¹ This emphasis on character, he found, led to summary judgments about the plays' merits, including the view that "the endings of *The Two Gentlemen*, *Much Ado*, and *Twelfth Night* are . . . precipitous and unsatisfying." Faced with such evidence, his conclusion was a sort of wistful challenge: "There does seem to be something wrong with a theory of Shakespeare's comedy which implies that all his successes are so considerably blemished" (7).

Since that time, critical discussion of the comedies has been both abundant and varied. In 1979, Wayne A. Rebhorn reported that thirty-five books on the subject had appeared in the years after 1957, and the flood of interest has shown no sign of abating since that time.² But given all this activity, it remains curiously true that in the critical perspective afforded by most writers on Shakespearean comedy the plays are regarded as somehow falling short of the full glory that the form itself promises. In the most familiar readings, the com-

edies appear tainted by a sort of aesthetic original sin, a fault from which there is no redemption, since their shortcomings are measured against an ideal form that has declined to incarnate itself in the actual world of texts and theatrical representation.

If there is one root cause of this difficulty, it lies in the fact that the dominant approaches to comedy over the last three decades have attached extraordinary importance to the ways comedies end. Closure—and in this term I include the final disposition of characters, staging, tone, the completion of patterns of language and imagery, the characters' (or actors') relation to the audience, and any other matter that may be said to affect our final perception of a play's events—has become the focal issue in the criticism of Shakespeare's comedies. For some of the comic dramas this emphasis is of course not new at all. Dr. Johnson, one remembers, could not reconcile his heart to *Bertram*. But then he saw Shakespeare as generally content with unsatisfactory endings: "When he found himself near the end of his work, and in view of his reward, he shortened the labour, to snatch the profit. He therefore remits his efforts where he should most vigorously exert them, and his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented."³ The problem plays as a group, however large that group may be, have usually been faulted for not bringing their comic dilemmas to a satisfactorily comic issue; and Brown was simply acknowledging established practice when he treated them in a separate category in his review of critical interpretations.

But preoccupation with the endings of the romantic comedies has also been an insistent focus of criticism over the last three decades, with the result that nearly all the plays have been labeled as "problematic." Few readers today would willingly associate themselves with the emphatic cheeriness of J. Dover Wilson in his assertion that "the quality the first ten comedies have in common is happiness, a serene happiness, liable to develop into merriment in the conclusion."⁴ It seems necessary, however, to divide the issues surrounding this emphasis on closure, to see that declaring the importance of the comedies' conclusions need not entail the view that the endings are dark or problematic or otherwise disturbing. To begin such a task, one need only look closely at the development of the critical situation in the years since Brown's survey. The focus on Shakespeare's

characters has been replaced by other approaches, nearly all of them concerned in some way with dramatic structure; and at the source of these approaches stands the work of two key figures, C. L. Barber and Northrop Frye.⁵ Although the particular emphasis of their analyses differs considerably—Frye focusing chiefly on literary antecedents, Barber taking a more “anthropological” way to his view of the comedies—both writers throw the weight of their observations on comic outcomes, the social reconciliation Frye discovers at the moment when “a new social unit is formed on the stage” (“Argument” 60) and the “clarification” Barber sees as the product of the characters’ experience of “saturnalian release” (6–10).

For both Frye and Barber, then, closure stands for the comedies as “at once the source, and end, and test of Art.”⁶ Over the course of some years, Frye has refined and developed his interpretation of the comedies. In *A Natural Perspective* he offers not merely a fuller account of his understanding of the plays but an explanation of the critical logic that enables us to function as interpreters. In this view, our critical activity is in suspension during our experience of a literary work: we are in a “precritical” state, participating in a direct experience of the work’s movement. Only when its structure becomes accessible to us can we engage in criticism proper. Thus Frye argues that “the point at which direct experience and criticism begin to come into alignment, in a work of fiction at least, is the point known as recognition or discovery, when some turn in the plot arrests the linear movement and enables us for the first time to see the story as a total shape, or what is usually called a theme” (9). One could hardly find a more definitive statement of the importance of closure. Barber’s view, while similar, is in some ways more attentive to the complexity of a theatrical experience of the comedies; he pays more attention than does Frye to the mingling in Shakespeare of complementary views that are yet in some measure opposed, a quality of the plays defined recently with great skill by Norman Rabkin.⁷ At nearly every stage of his discussion, Barber is careful to avoid overstatement. Thus he detects the problem one faces in concentrating on structure, he knows the sort of falsification it requires, yet he persists: “every new moment, every new line or touch, is a triumph of opportunism, something snatched in from life beyond expectation and made design beyond design. And yet the fact remains that it is

as we see the design that we see design outdone and brought alive" (4). For both Barber and Frye, then, "the end crowns the work" is not merely an adage well suited to justify a critical procedure; it becomes instead the guiding principle of their criticism and enables them to find in the structure of Shakespearean comedies a teleological design.⁸

The influence of Barber and Frye on subsequent criticism is so widespread and profound as to make illustration nearly supererogatory. And even those critics whose aims are quite different from the aims of these two dominant figures tend to follow them in basing their assessments of the plays on the issue of closure. Thus Ralph Berry, who opposes himself directly to the "festive" readings of Barber and Frye, nevertheless makes closure the key element in his reading of the comedies: "I should prefer to see the conclusions of the middle comedies less as 'clarifications' than as provisional re-groupings of situations that will continue their complex development."⁹ Similarly, Elliot Krieger, whose Marxist reading of the comedies emphasizes tensions and antagonisms undreamed of in the social worlds described by Barber and Frye, nevertheless finds the strongest confirmation of his thesis in Shakespeare's management of the plays' conclusions. Thus he says that the conclusion of *Twelfth Night* "confirms the aristocratic fantasy (Maria is, discreetly, kept off-stage) that clarification is achieved when people are released from indulgence and restored to the degree of greatness with which they were born."¹⁰ Anthony B. Dawson may stand for all those critics who view comedy as a process whose end lies in some sort of discovery. For Dawson, "it is as if the characters must arrive, within the movement of the plot, at an understanding of, and response to, the nature of drama itself."¹¹ This emphasis on process, whether it leads to unmasking,¹² self-discovery, or some perception about the limitations of the theatre (as Philip Edwards would have it),¹³ is clearly grounded in a teleological view of comedy: it is purposive, and its purpose is revealed in its close.

The comic dramatist described by W. Thomas MacCary is a very different figure from the Shakespeare of the critics I have just been discussing. MacCary's Shakespeare focuses not on marriage as a goal but on a passage through the stages of object-choice appropriate to a developing male; not on social integration but on narcissism.

And yet this playwright, too, focuses his comedies on a clear end: "the primary goal of the comedies, their teleology, is a definition of love, and this involves a consideration not only of stages in the development of object-relations but also some attention to pathology."¹⁴ William C. Carroll, whose attention to metamorphoses in the comedies uncovers new insights on nearly every page, is likewise led to acknowledge that the changing shapes of love are finally brought to a static condition: "love is always harnessed, as Proteus was by Menelaus, into a single shape—into marriage, the final cause of comedy."¹⁵

The critics I have been discussing differ from Frye and Barber in a variety of ways. Some, such as Ralph Berry, deny the celebratory element in Shakespearean comedy in order to replace it with an emphasis on the problematic nature of the plays; yet such an approach still appeals to a reader's or spectator's perception of the individual comedy's end in an effort to establish its validity. Others, such as MacCary, wish to focus on something other than the social experience of the comedy, its communal meaning, and direct attention instead to the individual comic journey, the development of the central figure—in MacCary's case, the young male hero. But though MacCary takes note of stages in this progress, his chief concern is with the results at journey's end, the wholeness and personal integration of the hero.

It is even more clearly the case with those who accept the Barber-Frye position (if I may so label their views, conflated here for my immediate purpose) that the emphasis on closure so crucial to that position has been equally important to their refinements, extensions, and modifications of the outlines of "green world" and "festive" comedy. Among these writers I might include, following Rebhorn, critics of widely differing originality and importance: Blaze Bonazza, Charles R. Lyons, Patrick Swindon, and Leo Salinger.¹⁶ Perhaps the most helpful illustration, though, appears in a recent book by Edward Berry in which he argues for "the romantic comedies as an unusually tight-knit genre based on specific ritual structures—those of initiation, courtship, and marriage."¹⁷ Without wholly rejecting the insights of Barber and Frye, Berry insists on the primacy of personal rites over seasonal rites as the basis for our response to the comedies. His design, based on the studies of the anthropologist

Arnold Van Gennep, nevertheless shares the general outline made familiar by his predecessors, for he sees rites of passage and comic drama illustrating "a common evolutionary form—a form in which periodic forays into chaos lead to new kinds of integration" (8). Moreover, Berry emphasizes early in his book that he shares with Suzanne Langer a belief in the high significance of structure for an understanding of comedy, and he quotes approvingly her dictum: "Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy" (7).

Because Berry presents his views with such elegance and subtlety, he affords the best starting point for illustration of what has often seemed a corollary to critical emphasis on closure in the comedies: the idea that Shakespearean comedy leaves us dissatisfied, unfulfilled, doubtful about the future of the comic protagonists and the world they inhabit, or simply aware—in a resigned, melancholy way—that the achievement of art is necessarily incomplete and insufficient for our needs in the world waiting outside the theatre. For Berry, though the "rite of incorporation" which is marriage provides an appropriate comic conclusion, "it is important to remember that the significance of a wedding lies in the full event, not merely in the abstract ideal it embodies. Since ideals are never actualized, weddings, like all ritual events, are inescapably ironic" (171). Later, he emphasizes the tonal complexity such endings provide: "We experience not only the delight that arises from comic communion but the detachment that accompanies our awareness of its incompleteness and fragility" (197). In support of this view he quotes an equally subtle critic, Philip Edwards, who claims that "the 'festive comedies' do not really end in clarification and in a resolution of the opposing forces of holiday and everyday. A strong magic is created: and it is questioned" (197, Edwards 70).

But if Berry and Edwards approach the issue of comic closure gingerly and analyze the presence of tonal richness with elegant tact, others are less subtle. The darkening of Shakespeare's comic endings has become a phenomenon not merely of critical discourse but, perhaps inevitably, of theatrical practice as well.¹⁸ Perhaps no one has contributed to these linked tendencies with more energy and single-mindedness than Jan Kott. In the "Bitter Arcadia" he attributes to Shakespeare, Kott finds in every disguise a "diabolic invention" and "a call to orgy";¹⁹ and nothing is more revealing of

his emphasis on comedy's darkness than this summary of the mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The lovers are divided by a wall, cannot touch each other and only see each other through a crack. They will never be joined together. A hungry lion comes to the rendezvous place, and Thisbe flees in panic. Pyramus finds her blood-stained mantle and stabs himself. Thisbe returns, finds Pyramus's body and stabs herself with the same dagger. The world is cruel for true lovers" (190).

For Clifford Leech, this darkness is a progressive matter, shadowed only fleetingly in the early comedies but growing to such a point in *Twelfth Night* that "the most interesting thing" about the play "is its drawing back from a secure sense of harmony."²⁰ This reluctance to claim perfection—a reluctance that seems to be shared by the playwright and his comic dramas, functioning almost as autonomous creatures—manifests itself "alone among the early comedies" in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which "has a disturbing quality which we shall meet later: a recognition of unappeasable suffering, of death and recurrent destruction, of an imperfection that is not easily faced. As this strain grows in his comic writing, it makes Shakespeare's hold on the idea of comedy a precarious one" (25). Thomas F. Van Laan sees a similar evolution in Shakespeare's growth as a comic writer; thus "as Shakespeare's comedy reaches its full complexity, it also begins to take on some of the sombre colouring normally associated with the so-called dark comedies."²¹ Less concerned with questions of the playwright's development, Richard A. Levin is forthright about his intention to develop only the antiromantic alternative of each of the plays (as though criticism were simply a matter of selecting alternatives). He does so by such dubious means as asserting that in *Much Ado about Nothing* "Shakespeare uses Margaret to develop the dark background against which Messina moves toward marriage."²²

One final example may close this rather brief look at those critics who take an "antifestive" position on closure. Ralph Berry does so explicitly and with more than a touch of shrillness. He attacks with rhetorical questions: "What sort of double marriage is it that is thrown together at the end of *Twelfth Night*?" And lest some inattentive reader miss the point, he reiterates it with the aid of heavy sarcasm: "One can scarcely acclaim as the apotheosis of festivity a

final dance from which the local lord of misrule is unavoidably absent, expiating in hospital his addiction to the pleasure principle" (13, 14). What Berry and others who share his view insist on is a Shakespeare far too knowing and worldly to support by his art the easy patterns of escape and fulfillment advocated by Frye and Barber and their followers. This Shakespeare is a doubter, a playwright who asks questions, a realist like Feste who knows all about change, about wind and rain, about mortality.

My object, though, is not to mediate these two commonly opposed ways of reading Shakespeare but to emphasize their common origin, to argue that it is precisely in its emphasis on closure that modern criticism of Shakespearean comedy has gone seriously off course, and to suggest by example a means of adjusting critical perceptions in order to correct this mistaken focus. Enough has been said, here and elsewhere, to show how completely the Barber-Frye position has become the orthodoxy of those who have written about Shakespearean comedy since that position was given its first statement. It is equally clear that those who have taken the opposite position have been forced to do so, for the most part, in a fashion that acknowledges their view as a heretical departure from an established system of belief. The cornerstone of that system, as I have tried to show, is the importance of structure, and especially of a design that issues in life-enhancing ceremony and clarification about the meaning of life itself. Thus both the followers of Frye and Barber and those who set themselves in opposition to their critical line have attributed to closure a signal importance.²³

In the current critical situation, the description I provide cannot possibly cover every effort to come to terms with the comedies. What I am describing are the ways in which the dominant influences of Frye and Barber emerge in an emphasis on closure, and my focus therefore does not take into account critics who ignore altogether issues of design and structure. Nevertheless, the tendencies described here are both wide and deep. Even in cases where the critical method is little concerned with structural matters and therefore unlikely to stress closure, one still finds the influence of Frye and Barber. That influence is fully acknowledged by Peter Erickson, even though his larger concern with patriarchal structures would seem to ally him with forms of criticism that are less attentive to