UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

This volume is the property of the University of Saskatchewan, and the literary rights of the author and of the University must be respected. If the reader obtains any assistance from this volume, he must give proper credit in his own work.

This Thesis by ......PATRICIA. GERTRUDE. PLANK ..................................................
has been used by the following persons, whose signatures attest their acceptance of the above restrictions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Address</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March 22, 1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 26, 1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28 February, 1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 March 1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>28 January, 1974</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE FUNCTION OF WOMEN IN
SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

A Thesis
submitted to the Committee
on Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan

by
Patricia Gertrude Plank

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
March, 1944
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comedy in Character</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Comedy in Speech</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Comedy in Situation</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Summary and Conclusion</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

When an author speaks in a general way of the conduct
or the opinion of a man in some given situation, it is usually
understood, as a wit said long ago, that "man embraces woman."\(^1\)
The inference is sound, for human nature is human nature in
both sexes, and it is probable that men and women are more
alike than many people are willing to admit. The pretty myth
that every woman can understand any man at a glance, but that
no man ever understands any woman, is only a pretty myth.
Nevertheless, there are certain fundamental differences between
the sexes, and it is on this foundation that our thesis is

\(^1\) A. A. Thomson, \textit{Written Humour}, A. & C. Black Ltd., London,
1936, p. 23
being built; for we are going to devote our attention solely to women, and to women in a field which has not been very much explored—the field of humour. In this thesis we shall examine the contribution which women make to comedy and shall attempt to discover whether it differs in any way from the masculine contribution, and if so, what its distinguishing characteristics may be. In order to set bounds to a subject which might otherwise be endless, the study will be limited to Shakespearean drama. Here is "God's plenty" in a comparatively small space. Here, within the narrow bounds necessary to this thesis, we can watch women in nearly every conceivable comic situation.

Before opening a discussion it is always wise to define one's terms. Before considering woman's contribution to comedy, therefore, let us decide just what comedy is. Comedy, humour, laughter—we speak glibly of them, and yet if we are asked to define them, our answers are likely to be both vague and diverse. The problem has engaged serious philosophical minds from the time of Aristotle, and it has brought forth the interesting variety of opinion which one expects on any controversial subject. It is impossible to make a synthesis of philosophic opinion, for although most thinkers agree that incongruity (for instance) plays a large part in humour, each one has his own particular theory into which he makes incongruity fit. Some writers say that laughter is a cruel thing; some that it is essentially kindly. Some say that it is a reaction acquired with maturity; some that it is an
instinct apparent in the four months' infant. The student who consults Hobbes, Bergson, Greig, Sully, Agnes Repplier, Stephen Leacock, Max Eastman—to mention a few of the writers who have explored this subject—is likely to finish his studies in the same mental fog in which he began them. His wisest course is either to make an arbitrary choice of one theory, or to pick out what he likes from them all and combine his choosings into a theory of his own.

Probably the most fundamental approach to the subject is from the standpoint of society. Bergson has said that "it is the faults of others that make us laugh...by reason of their unsociability rather than of their immorality;" and later he repeats that one of the essentials of comedy is "unsociability in the performer." George Meredith, in his illuminating little Essay on Comedy, takes this point of view also and expands it into a very convincing theory. Good comedy is possible only in a state of advanced civilization, he contends, and its purpose is to preserve the status quo. Comedy is a social whip; it is "the first-born of common sense." When threats and cajolery alike have failed to correct anti-social behaviour, laughter can often bring the offender into line.

There are, in general, two ways in which a man (this time embracing woman!) can behave anti-socially, and so incur the dis-

---

3- Ibid., p. 145
4- G. Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1918, p. 119
pleasure of the Comic Muse. First of all he can attract her
attention by radical nonconformity. He can be a "humourist"
(in the Jonsonian sense), giving full rein to some vice like
avarice or hypocrisy; and it then becomes the duty of the Comic
Muse to label him a Volpone or a Tartuffe and so chastise him
for his deviation from normality. Again, he can go to the oppo-
site extreme. He can conform so meticulously to the conventions
that he attracts her attention by his very worship of society.
Then she must call him Mr. Milquetoast, and laugh at him for
forgetting that he is a human being and not a machine. The Comic
Muse is the most subtle and the most efficient ally of normality.
Recognizing what human nature is, she insists that we all act in
harmony with it. In the final analysis, the only things which are
funny are things which are abnormal, as will become apparent if
we think deeply and honestly. Why do we laugh at false moustaches
and ill-fitting clothes; at affectation and ignorance; at naivete
and indecency; at buffoonery and satire; at the incongruous and
the delightfully apt? The answer is the same in every case. We
laugh because we are brought face to face with good, common sense;
we are made to see abnormality against a background of the normal,
or normality in unexpected clarity. Sanity is being vindicated
wherever the Comic Muse places her hand. It is hoped that this
fact will be made abundantly clear in the ensuing pages.

Now that we have established a working hypothesis for our
discussion of comedy, what, in general, is woman's relation to it?
At the outset it is well to remember that what women are allowed to do in any literature or drama is limited by the social standards of the day. In ancient Rome respectable women were not represented in drama at all, and the only female character in the comedy of that time was the courtesan. The fact that she was frequently either allowed to reform or found to be the innocent victim of circumstance, reveals to what desperate lengths the Roman dramatists were driven by that taboo. In Shakespeare's day there was no similar feeling against the appearance of "good" women in plays. During the reign of Elizabeth, women secured a position of great respect and even authority in society. Naturally, therefore, they held an important share in the drama too. However, the taboo did appear in another form. While it was possible to represent a virtuous woman on the stage, it was unthinkable that any woman would so far debase herself as to become an actress! Hence, boy actors always took the parts of women in Shakespeare's plays. It is well to keep this fact in mind, because in itself it provides a glint of humour which is lost to twentieth century audiences. The mere fact that Viola is not a woman at all, but a boy dressed like a woman, adds a special and delightful flavour to a situation which is already comic for other reasons. In a pleasant sense, it is one more turn of the screw.

Although boys fill the roles, Shakespeare's women are not at all masculine either in character or in conduct. They act as we should expect women to do, and they serve the Comic Muse as
only women can. I think we shall find that as a general rule they are directing the whip rather than feeling its sting. They punish men for disregarding the social pattern or for over-emphasizing it. As far as any generalization about the sexes is true, it is probably fair to say that women are more practical than men. They are less deceived by forms and more likely to obey the dictates of common sense, because theories and abstract ideas do not interest them greatly. Hence women are usually, although not always, on the side of normality. Most often we shall find them cooperating with the Comic Muse, her hand-maidens rather than her victims.
Chapter 2

Comedy in Character

O woman, in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
And variable as the shade
By the light, quivering aspen made....
Scott, The Lady of the Lake

One of the many sources of humour is character: that is, the element of comedy is present in the dramatist's conception of character itself, irrespective of what the person possessing that character may say or do. Character may not be as rich and varied a source of humour as either action or speech, but it is basic to both of them. It is, therefore, to this matter that we shall first direct our attention. What sort of women does Shakes-
peare introduce into his comedies? Do they have their masculine counterparts, or do they possess qualities which are not duplicated by the men of comedy?

It would appear that the comic women of Shakespeare can be grouped roughly into two large classes. There are those like Rosalind, Viola, Portia—immortal women patterned on the famous ladies of Elizabeth's court, with their free and ready wit and their assumption of social equality with men; and there are the female clowns like Mrs. Quickley, whose counterparts in real life were to be found in the humble ranks of society. In this chapter an attempt will be made to study these two types in Shakespearean comedy.

Comedy plays naturally about the court lady. To begin with, she is a part of the sort of society which George Meredith finds necessary for the growth of the comic spirit. In the days of Queen Elizabeth, women enjoyed a freedom, and even an authority, that we are accustomed to consider entirely modern. Although they did not enter into the political arena openly, much of the court intrigue by which important officials were made and unmade was in the hands of the ladies of Elizabeth's court. Women were a power to be reckoned with in the political and business world because of this great indirect influence which they wielded. Socially, there

---

was nothing indirect about their influence. They were supreme in
that field. Under the Virgin Queen, the cult of the virgin reached
a stage that might be termed fanaticism. The adoration of women
which was a part of chivalry played a very real part in Elizabethan
society. Many a court lady had her train of avowed "servants" who
sued for the honour of wearing her favour, who wrote impassioned
sonnets to her beauty, who professed it a rare and almost unbearable
honour to squire her to social affairs. Wives were known to flaunt
the authority of their husbands with as much freedom as they do
today; and they adopted the masculine prerogatives of dress and of
smoking with a casualness that can hardly have been surpassed by
our women of the twentieth century. They painted their faces with
as much pains, if not with as much art, as modern women do. Truly,
Elizabeth's reign was one of the golden ages for women. Meredith
has told us that true comedy can flourish only where women share

2- Ibid., pp. 165-6: "Sir Walter Raleigh introduced tobacco into
polite society, and the ladies at first affected to be horrified,
but desirous to do everything men did, and fortified by their
doctors, who were inclined to prescribe the newly discovered
tobacco as a cure for all ills, they were soon every whit as
keen as their menfolk to come 'up every term to learn to take
tobacco.' Professors instructed novices in the new art, and
so many were their clients of both sexes that...there were in
London seven thousand shops that sold tobacco...The ladies,
once having taken to smoking, found such solace in their long-
stemmed pipes with carved silver bowls that non-smokers,
wishing to be offensive, said accusingly,
'Sister, i'faith you take too much tobacco,
It makes you black within as you are without.'"

5- Ibid. See particularly Chapters I and XV for corroboration of
these details.
an honoured place in society. In Shakespeare's time they held such an honoured place, and the dramatist faithfully reproduced conditions as he saw them.

What are the comic possibilities of a court lady with a background like this? Indeed, the possibilities are almost endless. There is ample play for her ready wit—and wit was both admired and cultivated in the days of Elizabeth. She has every opportunity for intrigue—an art brought to perfection in those days—and there is endless scope for farce in intrigue. She is courted and admired—and comedy is never far from a situation in which many gallants sue for the favours of one lady. Love, intrigue, badinage—the humour inherent in these is exploited to the full by the court lady of Shakespeare's plays.

A classification such as we have made at the opening of this chapter may be misleading in that it suggests something artificial in Shakespeare's conception of character. Nothing could be farther from the truth. His court ladies are as various as their names. They are individuals, never types. We have only to make the acquaintance of some of them to be assured that this is true.

Rosalind is a general favourite among readers of Shakespearean plays. She has enough resourcefulness, presence of mind, and courage to disguise herself as a man and to find her exiled father by her own efforts. She is strong enough to support the fainting

---

4—Meredith, op. cit.
spirits of her less aggressive cousin, Celia, when she herself is discouraged and weary. Yet with all this cool strength, Rosalind has a lively imagination and an irrespressible mischievousness which make her a never-ending source of comic delight. She is completely self-reliant. She is clever enough to think of a way to hear Orlando's protestations of love though she must still retain her masculine disguise. She is mischievous enough to tease and to mock him while he pours out his love before her. She relishes every comic situation to the full. Even her unmasking is not a tame affair, for she insists upon preparing for it by a series of ambiguous remarks which involve the happiness of the foolish shepherdess Phebe and her swain, and of Orlando and herself. Rosalind is a practical joker of the most delightful sort, for her jokes are subtle rather than cruel, and she relishes laughter so much that she is content to keep it for her private enjoyment; she does not require Celia or Touchstone as admiring audience to her pranks. Yet, with all her self-reliance, Rosalind is most spontaneous. Alarm, excitement, joy, anxiety bubble from her with unrestrained vigour. Comedy is never happier than with her, as we shall see in subsequent chapters when we examine her speech and her actions in some detail.

With all these characteristics, Rosalind is a living woman, but what is comic about her? Basically, it seems, it is the freedom of her character that produces the pleasure and the laughter. Rosalind is not anchored to the earth as we are; neither convention
nor probability restrains her. She creates an illusion of freedom. One feels that she could do anything. Banished from the court and turned adrift, she is not crushed. Calamity is only a game to her—and a game that she can win, hands down. Is her lover shut off from her by the barrier of disguise? What is any barrier to Rosalind? Quick as thought she has blown it down! Does convention forbid a maid to do the wooing? There are ways to outwit convention, and Rosalind will find them. As with facts, so with ideas. Rosalind's mind plays freely over all subjects, springing lightly and erratically from fancy to fancy, like a bee dazzled by a whole garden of nectar-filled flowers.

Le Beau: There comes an old man and his three sons...three proper young men of excellent growth and presence—

Rosalind: With bills on their necks,—'Be it known unto all men by these presents;—

(As You Like It, I,ii)

It is no wonder that we, poor slaves of environment, give our hearts to this girl who is a slave to nothing. We identify ourselves with her, and in her freedom we experience our own. This is the secret of her comic charm.

Beatrice has as much ready wit and presence of mind as Rosalind, and yet she is utterly unlike her in character. Beatrice is a professed hater of men. She delights in the rough and tumble of verbal battle, caring more at times for force than subtlety in her sorties, although her wit is both keen and delightful when she is at her best. Her saucy tongue and her excitable nature lead her into embarrassing situations from which she must retreat hastily, but
she is always able to manage the retreat with grace because her wits never desert her. Beatrice is more cruel than Rosalind, although her cruelty springs from thoughtlessness rather than from malice. When she is made to believe that Benedict loves her, she is quick to offer him the olive branch from pity for his suffering, though even in the act she must have her joke. Beatrice is a gay satirist. The fun in her character springs mostly from sharp wit.

She, like Rosalind, creates the illusion of freedom that we find so irresistible. She dances away from the rapier thrusts of Benedict's wit and escapes without a scratch. She trips airily through situations that have tragic possibilities—the rejection of Hero, the plotting of Don John—and we know all the time that no breath of tragedy will blight her. She speaks on impulse, and there are no unpleasant consequences. Hers is the freedom that we long for and never know while we are flesh-and-blood people in this limited world. No wonder that we prize the vicarious liberty that Beatrice gives us!

There is another element in her character, too, from which comedy springs. We might call it insincerity, or waywardness, or mischief. She has set herself against convention in her attitude to love and marriage. We know that in this she must be foiled. We know that her proud and free spirit must bow beneath the comic yoke. Indeed, Beatrice has placed herself in an impossible position, for she has mocked love while really loving Benedict. If she is permitted to keep to her word, she has purchased freedom at the
expense of happiness. Hence her humiliation is really comic for, paradoxically enough, the greater freedom comes from defeat. The breaking of Beatrice's will is all a joke, because it satisfies not only convention, but Beatrice herself!

Viola is a girl of still another sort. She is as gentle as Beatrice is sharp. Viola is diffident and helpless, so helpless that she must endure the caustic rebuke of Olivia's fool:

Viola: I warrant thou art a merry fellow, and carest for nothing.
Clown: Not so, sir, I do care for something; but in my conscience, sir, I do not care for you; if that be to care for nothing, sir, I would it would make you invincible.
(Twelfth Night, III,i)

Still, she carries off masculine disguise with success, although she does not scruple to confess herself a coward to avoid physical combat. Moreover, she has a wit of a very delightful sort. She is able, like Rosalind, to give expression to her love while in disguise. Unlike Rosalind, however, she does not relish the ambiguous relations which spring out of her disguise; they trouble instead of amusing her. Rosalind manipulates events to suit her purpose; Viola passes meekly through a maze of misunderstandings which constitute "a knot too great for her to untie", and she requires the ministrations of chance to free her from it. She is thus a less vivid, but an equally delightful source of humour.

Even Viola has the freedom that accounts for the comic appeal in character. Diffident though she is, she is not overwhelmed by
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
or by

the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes.

(Hamlet, III,i)

Her troubles do not dash her spirits, and we share with her the
certainty that everything will turn out for the best. She can
woo Olivia for her own lover without serious qualms, for in her
world there is no situation so confusing that it will not ulti-
mately yield up its victim to happiness. Although she waits for
things to right themselves rather than, like Rosalind, taking
the initiative, she is nonetheless a free spirit.

Portia seems more mature than any of the other three. She
is her own mistress, a wealthy lady with a host of suitors for
whom she does not care, until Bassanio presents himself in that
capacity. Portia has a caustic wit which is less acrimonious
than Beatrice's, but at the same time less playfully mischievous
than Rosalind's. Wisdom and sympathy preserve her from cruelty,
but a keen observation of human nature makes her at once sarcastic
and extremely direct. Portia's sallies are disconcertingly apt.
She is a loyal friend in time of trouble, as her ready offer of
money to Bassanio on behalf of his friend Antonio shows; but when
the trouble is safely averted she enjoys her practical joke. Never
at a loss for a wise and witty answer, always in command of each
situation, Portia is an excellent source of comedy. She possesses,
too, the glorious freedom of conduct and speech that we envy and 
aspire to. Like Rosalind, she tackles every situation and by her 
own native wit turns it to advantage. Power unlimited is hers. 
Her Midas-touch transforms, not to gold, but to something better— 
to laughter and to right. She is monarch of all she surveys. 
So are we, while we are with her.

Miranda is an unsophisticated maid who does not seem quite 
at home with these other court ladies. She is as naive as Portia 
is wise. She has none of the lively wit of the others. Indeed, 
she is not, strictly speaking, a figure of comedy at all, for she 
never excites laughter, although she does provoke smiles. Her 
appeal is through her naivety, a quality about which there is some­
thing irresistible. It does not tempt an audience to laugh aloud, 
as a rule, for it tugs at their heartstrings at the same time 
that it tickles their sense of humour. The naive person is comic 
because she differs from the civilized pattern. Civilization 
has passed over her without making its usual impression; it has 
left her essentially child-like, direct, primitive in her lack 
of restraint and her innocent disregard of convention. The naive 
woman attracts the attention of the Comic Muse because she varies 
from the norm, but her variation is so natural, so unforced, so 
charming, that no derisive laughter is launched at her. Comedy 
surveys her almost tenderly. Miranda, who is a perfect example 
of this type, has grown up in complete ignorance of the world out­
side her little island, apparently unaware that men can take forms
other than those of an aged philosopher like Prospero or an uncouth aborigine like Caliban. With a woman's years, she is a child, wide-eyed with wonder. When, from a distance, she watches the shipwreck with which the play opens, she feels sure that "the brave vessel... had no doubt some noble creature in her" (The Tempest, I,ii), but she does not know that the creature is man. Later, when she sees Ferdinand for the first time, she tells herself:

This
Is the third man that e'er I saw; the first
That e'er I sighed for.
(I,ii)

Free of the restrictions of conventional wooing, she proceeds to lay bare the state of her heart to Ferdinand at the earliest opportunity:

Hence, bashful cunning!
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence!
I am your wife if you will marry me;
If not I'll die your maid: to be your fellow
You may deny me; but I'll be your servant
Whether you will or no.
(III,i)

The pleasantest picture of her occurs toward the end of the play when the whole ship's company is assembled before her eyes, and for the first time in her life she sees a number of human beings. Here is nothing of cynicism or satire. Miranda is filled with unaffected delight, and she cries:

O wonder!
How many godly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in 't!
(V,i)
Aldous Huxley borrowed her words to give a name to his damning picture of a world governed by science, but in the mouth of Miranda they are words of ingenuous delight. The reader feels some of the wonder of his own childhood surging through him again as he reads her cry of welcome to the world of civilization.

Maria, too, differs markedly from the other court ladies, but she seems to belong in the same tradition. Like them, she is free, and like them, she is consciously amusing. Her ready wit endears her to Sir Toby Belch, in whose welfare she takes a strong interest. Malvolio's ill-tempered outburst against the old knight's noisy drinking party gives her an opportunity to employ her wit to the full. Malvolio is "sick of self-love"; it seems to him that, because he is virtuous, there should be no more cakes and ale. Maria undertakes to chastise him. She is not so light-hearted as Rosalind, and she has none of Viola's timidity. Her practical joking is efficient, and ruthless. We feel that she jests as a business—and in the denouement the business pays well, for Sir Toby gives her his hand in return for the pleasure he has got from her joke. It has been a source of regret to some critics that Sir Toby should have married her, for they feel—no doubt rightly—that by that act he ended his days of carefree jest and convivial tippling forever. Maria brings down the conceit of Malvolio, but

at the same time she takes effective steps to close the net of conventions about Sir Toby. No doubt she knows that the joke is really on the elderly knight more than on the unfortunate steward, but Sir Toby is still ignorant of that fact when the curtain descends.

Maria is perhaps the most outstanding of a class of comic court ladies who serve as waiting women to the heroines and who, for that reason, have sometimes been erroneously considered female clowns. With her we must group such women as Nerissa, Margaret and Ursula, and even Emilia whose cynical worldliness forms so striking a contrast to the innocence of Desdemona. In Elizabethan England such ladies were usually of gentle birth and therefore of equal social rating with their mistresses. This fact accounts for their free and saucy tongues in the comedies. St. Clair Byrne has devoted some space to fixing their social status:

If we can free our conception of Maria from the twist that stage practice has given to it, we realize that there is nothing in the text of the play to impugn her gentility. From the outset she treats Sir Toby and Sir Andrew as her equals, nor is there anything in her behaviour to justify us in considering her as belonging to a different class from Helena. She is sharp-tongued, witty, and high-spirited: Helena's is a sweeter, graver, deeper nature. If Maria is to be condemned as low-life comic-relief, simply because she assists in the practical joke, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew must share her fate. If we dislike the familiar tone of her conversation with the knights, what are we to say of Helena and her conversation with Parolles?... In fact, to differentiate between Maria and Helena in the matter of social standing and dress is illogical. The real difference is one of character.... This, I believe, is also true.
of Nerissa, Margaret, Ursula, and even of Emilia, who is the most difficult case of all. 7

We have not by any means exhausted the list of Shakespearean court ladies. These are perhaps the most outstanding ones, and certainly they represent all the various types. Yet of the host that remains, each one is an individual in her own right, possessing some qualities of the rest, but always having something that makes her essentially herself. There is Julia, who follows her lover in disguise as many Shakespearean heroines have done, and whose brave, unquenchable wit in the face of his disloyalty sets her apart from the others. There is Helena, who loses the reluctant husband that she has won by a king's favour, and who wins him again through a mixture of perseverance and trickery. There is Cressida, with her saucy wit designed to vex her fatuous uncle Pandarus, and the Princess and her ladies whose almost formal interchanges of witty sallies flash through the pages of Love's Labour's Lost. There are Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page who defend their honour by means of practical jokes. There are Hermione and Hero and Isabella and Perdita. They are legion, these court ladies in whose characters comedy is inherent. We shall come to know them better before this thesis is finished.

It might prove instructive in the understanding of female comic character to consider what it is that makes a comic heroine

different from a tragic one. What, for instance, distinguishes Rosalind from Lady Macbeth? Both possess in large measure the ability to turn the unexpected to their own advantage, to organize, to carry off situations successfully. Both are natural leaders whose men follow them without question. Yet one is a tragic villainess and the other a comic heroine. The difference seems to lie in their basic attitudes to life. Lady Macbeth is all ruthless ambition; getting ahead is a passion with her. To her, life is real and earnest. Rosalind, on the other hand, has a lively awareness of the incongruous which diverts her attention as often as she is tempted to take any situation seriously. The material prizes of the world mean very little to her; its fun is everything. Where Lady Macbeth, thirsting for power, would counsel murder as the ideal means of wresting Fortune's gifts from her, Rosalind would prefer to sit back "and mock the good housewife, Fortune, from her wheel, that her gifts may henceforth be bestowed more equally" (As You Like It, I,ii). The difference lies not so much in character itself—for, as we have seen, the two women possess many traits in common—but rather in the way in which their similar gifts are directed. Their behaviour differs because their goals are different. Here are two entirely irreconcilable attitudes to life—the serious and the comic. To Lady Macbeth, life is intensely grave; to Rosalind, it is a game.

The same thing will be found if we compare two women of another type—Viola and Desdemona. Here, again, are women essentially alike in traits of character. Both are timid, meek, yielding,
shrinking from decisive action though capable of it at times; yet
one makes us laugh and the other calls forth our bitterest tears.
Why? Again the answer lies in their different attitudes to life.
Desdemona is serious by nature: even when she draws Iago out
while waiting for Othello's ship to come in, she is only listening
to him to pass the time; his jests do not waken any real response
in her. One has the feeling that she is doing something that she
has seen many other women in her position do, something that is
conventional but that she does not derive any personal enjoyment
from. She is completely unaware of the delight that lies in wit;
she is unaware of the incongruous—indeed, of anything but the
most uncomplicated matters. It is entirely foreign to her nature
to analyze the motives or the characters of others. She lives in
a limited world, a world where things have only one meaning, and
that the obvious. When a situation arises which she cannot explain
by her pitiful little standards, it sweeps her away and destroys
her. Viola, with all Desdemona's meekness and gentleness, has an
analytical mind. She is aware of undercurrents, of clashes and
incongruities in the world about her. Sometimes they distress her;
sometimes they amuse her; but always they are apparent to her.

This, then, must be the fundamental difference between the
tragic and the comic character: the one is single, undivided;
it runs along in a clear, deep, cold channel, straight from the
beginning of its course to the end. The other is many and various;
it meanders throughout the whole length of its course, now rippling
impulsively into a borrowed stream-bed, now welcoming unexpected tributaries into itself, finally composed of so many diverse elements that it is incapable of one set direction. Its important dimension is width, not depth. It substitutes variety for intensity.

The question was asked at the outset of this chapter: do Shakespeare's comic women have their masculine counterparts? With respect to the court ladies, I think the answer is definitely no. Orlando plays opposite Rosalind, and he is certainly no match for her. She takes the lead in the courtship while all he can do is to carve lame-metred verses on tree trunks, and sigh over the hard fate that keeps him far from his love. He has no witty repartee with which to checkmate her in the courtship scenes. He has not even a spirited greeting for her when she finally drops the guise of Ganymede. Orlando is important only as the man whom Rosalind loves; in character he is not nearly her equal. Similarly, Viola's Duke is only the object of Viola's affection rather than an important person in his own right. His love for Olivia furnishes an obstacle which threatens Viola's happiness; his jealousy of Viola, in her disguise as the youth Cesario, adds a humorous complication at the end of the play. But these are merely incidental contributions to the plot. The Duke himself is colorless beside Viola. The same might be said for all the male leads in the courtly comedies. Portia's Bassanio who is so easily involved in the comedy of the rings, Helena's Bertram who behaves like a spoiled child when he cannot have his own way,
Miranda’s Ferdinand who mistakes her for a divinity of the fair isle, Julia’s fickle Proteus—what are they but the necessary background against which their ladies are silhouetted? Beatrice’s Benedict, indeed, comes nearer than the rest to rivaling the female lead, but he is really no match for Beatrice. He loses every verbal battle with her. He is clever enough to interest her and to sharpen her wit; that is all. We can only conclude that in Shakespearean comedy, as in Elizabethan courtly society, the woman holds the place of paramount importance. She is the divinity, and the men play the part of her worshippers.

This statement must be limited, however, by reference to other Shakespearean plays in which the heroine has a tragic rather than a comic role. For instance, we find Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*—a man whose effervescent and unquenchable good spirits, even when he leaves the stage for the last time, mortally wounded, raise him to the level of gay Rosalind herself. To both of them, life is a monstrous joke. If we take in the whole field of drama, therefore, the comic ladies are not supreme, but in their own plays, at least, they have no male rivals.

The court ladies are not the only female characters in Shakespeare’s comedy. There remains another important class, not, indeed, so copiously represented, but very different from the first, and equally reflecting the life of the times. This is the female clown. Dramatically she descends from a long line of predecessors.
reaching back as far as the Greek comedies of Aristophanes, and well represented by the courtesans in the Roman dramas of Plautus and Terence. Her English progenitors were the free-spoken, rough-and-tumble women of the old miracle and morality plays, like Noah's wife with her shrewish tongue. With the passage of the ages she has attained a more complex character, but she bears marked traces of her origin. Let us examine her as we have the court lady. What sort of character does she have? Is she the equal of the male clown?

The most important and the most fully drawn of all Shakespeare's female clowns is Mrs. Quickley who appears in four plays: Henry IV, Parts I and II, Henry V, and The Merry Wives of Windsor. She is extremely comic in conception. A woman of free morals, she is jealous of her reputation and she clings to the skirts of respectability with all the tenacity which ignorance and a supreme lack of humour can give her. Unlike the court ladies, Mrs. Quickley has no idea that she is amusing. She takes herself and her world with utter seriousness. Laughter both puzzles and enrages her. Her stupidity is endless. She misunderstands the point of every remark and every situation. She misuses the most ordinary words. When she attempts to accomplish something—such as the marriage of Anne Page—she confuses matters hopelessly. She would even upset the plans of Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page, who have entrusted her with their messages to Falstaff, if it were humanly possible for her to do so. She is a limitless source of hilarity for the audience.
Mrs. Quickley has nothing in common with the court ladies like Rosalind and Viola; it would be difficult to imagine types more dissimilar. Yet she is as fertile a source of fun as they are. The audience laughs at her where it laughs with them, never identifying itself with her as it does with Rosalind, but its laughter is genuine and unforced in either case. It is interesting to speculate why profound seriousness can be as comic as a light-hearted refusal to consider life anything but a joke. We have seen in the case of Lady Macbeth that it can be tragic, but in circumstances less grim it is a source of fun, for although solemnity in itself is not funny, humanity has always found something amusing in the man or woman who is over-solemn, who can see nothing even faintly laughable about his or her own foibles and mistakes. Too much of anything provokes the scorn of the Comic Muse. Thus she laughs at Jacques for his all-pervading cynicism; and at Roderigo for his single-minded gullibility, even though it leads him to a violent death; and at Mrs. Quickley for her seriousness, for her inability to see that she is a figure of fun. The mention of Roderigo reminds us that he was a tool of that consummate villain, Iago. It is remarkable to think that, in all the tense horror and evil of Othello, stupidity is powerful enough to provoke a smile. It is no wonder, then, that Mrs. Quickley, who is equally the dupe of Falstaff, should be riotously funny, for her setting is a light-hearted one. Even the death of Falstaff, on which she attends, is no more than very pathetic—never tragic. Thus an
audience watches her with delight as she bustles importantly about her profoundly unimportant tasks, oblivious to the significance of every situation, expressing gratitude for being duped, and flying into a mighty rage over trifles. It is her unfailing faculty for doing and saying the wrong thing that gives them most pleasure. They can always count on her to be mistaken. Whether they laugh because, as Hobbes would insist, they feel superior to her; or because, as Bergson would assert, she behaves like a mechanical doll, always responding in the same way to the same stimuli—whatever the explanation may be, the fact remains indisputable that her character is rich in comic possibilities. Her comic appeal is at the opposite pole from that of the court ladies. Where their freedom enchants us, it is the limitation of her character and intellect that provides comic delight. Where they range afar and aloft, she paces her intellectual treadmill in an atmosphere of eternal sameness. We share the court ladies' liberty, and thus capture the illusion of freedom. We look down on the

8—Thomas Hobbes, Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan, in French and English Philosophers, Harvard Classics, P. F. Collier and Son, New York, 1910, p. 355: "Sudden glory' is the passion which maketh those 'grimaces' called 'laughter'; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."

9—Bergson, op. cit., passim., especially pp. 8-22
female clown's extreme narrowness and feel that we are unfettered by comparison. The result in either case is the same, though the means by which we attain it are quite opposite.

Mrs. Quickley has a host of lesser sisters in Shakespearean drama, both comedy and tragedy. There is Juliet's nurse with her one vulgar joke and her endless banter on the subject of the relations between the sexes. To her the whole question of sex is immeasurably and inexhaustibly funny. There is Doll Tearsheet with her tender heart and her easy morals. There are Mopsa and Dorcas, the ignorant shepherdesses who help to line the purse of unscrupulous Autolycus. There is the other shepherdess, Phebe, whose fickle waywardness arouses the indignation of Rosalind. There is the ignorant Jacquenetta in Love's Labour's Lost. None of these women is as fully drawn as Mrs. Quickley is, but they are related to her, either in their loose principles or in their essential stupidity, or in both.

Touchstone's Audrey is another sort of woman. She is to the female clowns what Miranda is to the court ladies. She, too, is naive, and that is the source of her comic charm. Touchstone's clever chatter is lost on her, for she considers everything that he says with solemn simplicity. She is a virtuous but ignorant shepherdess who wins the sophisticated court fool probably because she is so unlike him. He feels it necessary to apologize for her before the society of the court, informing them in his embarrassment that she is "a poor thing, but mine own" (As You Like It, V,v). Yet Audrey needs no apology. She is delightful in her way.
Jacquenetta in *Love's Labour's Lost* is a colorless and less consistently drawn Audrey. Like her, she stands uncompromisingly by while others exchange witty remarks (although she does greet Armado early in the play with a rough sort of banter never found in Audrey). Like Audrey, too, she is promised to marry above her station when the play closes.

There remains one other woman of importance, and when we place her among the female clowns we may need to justify our doing so. She is Katharine the Shrew. In birth, perhaps, she is a lady; yet her behaviour is distinctly in the tradition of Noah's wife and the other shrewish female buffoons of old English comedy. Katharine is a woman of humour in the Jonsonian sense. It is her humour to be so caustic—so curst, as the Elizabethans said—that no man will marry her. She resorts to threats of physical violence, and she often carries them out. She has a shrewish tongue that reduces her sister to tears and her father to impotent rage. She delights in being contrary. There is much comedy in the character of Katharine the Shrew—the woman who is married against her will (or at least against her expressed desire) and who is tamed to such an excess of wifely perfection that she lectures other wives on the subject of obedience to their lords and masters. We have already discussed, when considering Beatrice, the source of comedy in the character of a woman who sets herself up as a hater of men. The same conclusions apply to Kate.

A lesser shrew is Adriana, wife of Antipholus in the *Comedy of Errors*. Her character is not nearly so fully drawn as that of
Katharine. The source of fun in her is her unthinking shrewishness which finally calls forth the rebuke of her mother-in-law when the comedy of errors is played out. From a pillar of moral rectitude she shudders down at the shortcomings of her amiable husband, finding fault with his sins of commission, his sins of omission, and even sins of which he is not guilty at all.

Such are the female clowns of Shakespeare. Comedy is inherent in their characters. As we shall see later, there is also comedy in what they say and what they do. At present we are concerned only with what sort of women they are, and what relation they bear to the men who play opposite them in the drama. The latter question may be considered now.

A cursory glance will convince us that the female clowns do not hold the assured supremacy over the male clowns that the court ladies hold over their gallants. It would almost seem that buffoonery is the province of the male. Mrs. Quickley is superb in her mirth-provoking ignorance; yet when we place Falstaff beside her, she pales into comparative insignificance. In the three Henry plays, Falstaff outwits her at every turn: he borrows her money; he cheats her and wins forgiveness over and over again; he marches off to war finally with her warm praises ringing in his ears; and when he dies she laments him in words of immortal pathos and sublime incongruity. Mrs. Quickley is really Falstaff's dupe in these plays. In The Merry Wives of Windsor, it is true, the tables are turned; but the Falstaff who appears in that play is so metamorphosed
that he is not the same character at all. Only in name does he bear any resemblance to the rascally old braggart of the *Henry* plays. Similarly, Audrey is a very pale rush-light in the sun of Touchstone's humour; and Juliet's nurse is the butt of every masculine jest. Doll Tearsheet serves to amuse an idle hour for the fat knight, and is left to bid him good-bye at the last in words of humorous pathos:

Come, I'll be friends with thee, Jack—thou art going to the wars; and whether I shall ever see thee again, or no, there is nobody cares.  

*(Hen. IV, Pt. II, II, iv)*

Mopsa and Dorcas are simple dupes of the rogue Autolycus. Adriana is severely remprimanded for her shrewishness and is left shamed in the presence of her husband. What of the shrewish Kate? Even she must meet her match, for Petruchio is impervious to her savage sarcasm, and he succeeds in changing her nature completely. We must conclude, I think, that in the field of clowning, the men carry the day. The women support them ably, but they do not lead.
Chapter 3

Comedy in Speech

When I found it could talk I felt a new interest in it, for I love to talk; I talk, all day, and in my sleep, too, and I am very interesting, but if I had another to talk to I could be twice as interesting, and would never stop, if desired.

Mark Twain, Eve’s Diary

When we turn to discuss comedy in speech, we are confronted by such copious and varied material that it is difficult to know how to organize it. It was fairly satisfactory to divide character between the female clowns and the court ladies, but speech does not fall readily into these categories, for often representatives from both groups will, in their speech, exert the same
sort of comic appeal. For instance, there is nothing fundamentally different in the child-like simplicity of Miranda's remarks and Audrey's. Again, Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page and Mrs. Quickley rival one another in uttering obscenities, with only the subtle difference that the two former jest deliberately, while Mrs. Quickley is quite ignorant of the humour of what she says. Perhaps a satisfactory method is to begin with simple speeches and work up to the more complex.

When we think of simple speeches, we think naturally of Miranda, for she is the least complicated of all the court ladies. We have already said something of her naive charm. Its appeal seems to be exerted chiefly through her character. All her speeches bear witness to it, of course, but we always feel that they are throwing light on her character, not that their value lies in the words themselves. When she cries impulsively, after hearing her father's account of Gonzalo's kindness:

Would I might

But ever see that man! (The Tempest, I,ii)

or when she exclaims, on first seeing Ferdinand,

Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,
It carries a brave form:—But 'tis a spirit; (I,ii)

or when she greets the whole future with the joyous hail:

O brave new world! (V,i)

we are constantly looking through the words to the girl who utters them. Innocent and eager, Miranda charms us with every word that she utters.
Equally child-like, yet subtly unlike Miranda, is Audrey, the country maid who captures the fancy of Touchstone in the Forest of Arden. Audrey, lacking Miranda’s wonder and enthusiasm, is a solemn, matter-of-fact girl with no imagination and no humour. This is the source of the fun in her remarks, and it insures at the same time that the laughter provoked by them will be kindly, for her genuine simplicity disarms cruel mockery. Touchstone, driven to despair by her failure to understand him—for what meeting ground is there for a rustic wench and that most sophisticated output of civilization, the court fool?—Touchstone laments to her:

> When a man’s verses cannot be understood, nor a man’s good wit seconded with the forward child, understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room: Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical.

_(As You Like It, III,iii)_

Audrey's reply is delightfully characteristic:

> I do not know what poetical is: Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?

Touchstone's jests about honesty and beauty in women pass completely over her head, but she gathers enough of the gist of his remarks to say simply:

> Well, I am not fair; and therefore I pray the gods make me honest!

Audrey's frankness and her gravity are equally irresistible. When Touchstone tells her firmly that he intends to marry her, Audrey's response is, "Well, the gods give us joy!" (III,iii). Later, when
he disposes of her rustic suitor William in his urbane manner which leaves William utterly dazed, Audrey stands quietly by, watching the scene. Her only remarks are a courteous, "God ye good even, William" when he greets her, and an equally grave, "Do, good William" when Touchstone advises him to "tremble and depart" (V,ii).

Not in the same class as Miranda and Audrey, and yet making the same sort of comic appeal is Katharine, the princess of France who is courted by the English king in Henry V. There is a pleasing scene wherein Alice, one of her ladies-in-waiting, undertakes to teach the princess how to speak English. Inasmuch as Alice's acquaintance with the language is slight, the lesson is highly amusing to an English-speaking audience. Alice assures Katharine in rapture that she pronounces the words like a native of England; Katharine sums up the lesson by declaring that English words are dreadful, not fit for the lips of an honourable lady, and that she would not utter them before the French lords for the whole world! (III,iv).

There is no doubt that naivety has in it comic elements, but the laughter that it provokes is kindly. I cannot see how Bergson, who insists that laughter is based on the desire to humiliate, that comedy demands a complete subordination of the emotions in favour of the intellect, and that "insensibility in the spectator"¹ is essential for comedy, can account for this

---

kind of laughter at all, for it seems to me that here our laughter is sympathetic above everything else. We laugh at Miranda and Audrey and Katharine of France because we love them, not because we have any desire to humiliate them. They appeal to us as children do. They are funny because they do not speak as we do, and it is our nature to laugh at whatever departs from the norm. Our laughter tends to bring them into the conventional fold, no doubt, but it draws them in with an arm of protection and love; it does not drive them in before the comic lash that it uses on its Malvolio's and its shrews.

A cousin of naivete, a disreputable cousin from the "wrong side of the tracks", is obscenity. Its appeal to audiences has always been great, and the reason is not far to seek. Society imposes on man various artificial restraints. It must do so in order to preserve itself, for there could be no sound society where all men were nonconformists who insisted on expressing their own individualities without regard to the common welfare. Hence civilized man is a sadly restricted creature. He is hemmed in by social laws which curb his natural appetites. One of the strongest of these is the moral law, and particularly that branch of it which is concerned with the taboo about sex. Different mores exist in different societies, but in any society there is always some restriction on the sexual impulse, and often a strong taboo against discussion of anything connected with it. Hence, even a glancing reference to the subject is likely to produce gales of laughter.
from an audience of healthily "average" people, for it gives them a sudden illusion of freedom. For a moment the shackling harness of society is broken, and primitive human nature is loose. I cannot see that there is any desire behind this laughter to punish the speaker of obscenities. Our laughter is that of rebellious school-boys who see the schoolmaster sit down where his chair is not. Indecency affords us a release. It is a safety valve. Perhaps we turn from it afterward, better members of society than we were before; for it has given us an opportunity to flex the moral muscles that are cramped by convention, and so it has made us comfortable again.

Shakespeare understood audiences as few playwrights have done; and he knew well the comic value of obscene jests. Indeed, in some of his plays he used them to excess. Obviously, they fall chiefly in the field of the male character, for women are supposed to be above and beyond such things. A lady, at least, does not dabble in the obscene. This was true even in Shakespeare's day, although manners were much freer then than they are now. Shakespeare would not allow his Rosalind or his Viola or his Portia to utter a questionable jest as judged by Elizabethan standards. He is not so particular about less innocent but equally respectable ladies. For instance, he permits Beatrice a certain license of speech; and the Countess in All's Well does not scruple to bandy disreputable jests with her clown, and no more does her daughter-in-law, Helena. However, it is notable that most of the jests are
actually uttered by the clown; Helena and the Countess serve as foils. They crack the conversational whip and the clown performs. Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page permit themselves a startling license of speech, and Emilia's views on sex are not refined, by any standard. The female clowns on the whole, however, are much more given to obscenity than the court ladies. In fact, they revel in it. One thinks particularly of Juliet's Nurse with her one ribald jest—or rather, with the one of her lamented husband—which she insists on repeating over and over in the face of her mistress's disapproval. Her banter on the morning of Juliet's wedding to Paris just before she discovers that Juliet is supposedly dead, is in the same vein.

All these women are intentionally obscene. What they say provokes laughter because, as we have seen, any reference to the tabooed subject of sex will do so. They afford us "that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning" that Lamb found so delightful in Restoration comedy. They make us feel free. It would be possible to argue, however, that there are degrees in the heartiness of laughter that the various speeches evoke. I should put Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page at the bottom of the list because their vulgarity is deliberate and, although partly light-hearted, is purposeful too—a sort of indirect revenge on the old knight who has insulted them. Emilia is more amusing because, though equally intelligent (I say this in spite of her

obtuseness over the handkerchief incident), she has no axe to grind. Her obscene speeches are uttered chiefly for her own pleasure. Their fun is enhanced, too, by contrast with the purity of Desdemona's language. I should place Juliet's Nurse higher in the scale because to her indecency is added that priceless comic gift of stupidity. She is laughable in herself. Thus the comedy in her own character adds to the amusement derivable from her speech, and the audience is convulsed by a laughter of mixed motives. They laugh at her as much as—perhaps more than—with her. The same is even more true of Mrs. Quickley, who is the funniest of all the obscene speakers. The Nurse knows that her joke about falling backward is funny. Mrs. Quickley has no intention of amusing anybody. Her remarks provoke uncontrollable mirth because she makes them in all seriousness, and usually with the intention of defending her reputation. They are thus humorous for various reasons. To the hilarity of obscenity is added the comedy inherent in stupidity and garrulity and over-seriousness. An example will illustrate the point:

Fal. Go to, you are a woman, go.
Host. Who, I? I defy thee; I was never called so in mine own house before.

**************

Host. What thing? what thing?
Fal. What thing? why, a thing to thank Heaven on.
Host. I am no thing to thank Heaven on, I would thou shouldst know it; I am an honest man's wife: and, setting thy knighthood aside, thou art a knave to call me so.

(Hen. IV, Pt. I, III,iii)
The basis of these misunderstandings of herself, of course, in her determined effort to pose as a model of propriety even though the facts are against her. Because she is always conscious of that which she wishes to conceal, she imagines slights where there are none. This is of particular delight to the Comic Muse who exposes hypocrisy with glee.

It is not alone for her indecency that we enjoy Mrs. Quickley. Another rich source of comedy is her amazing misuse of words. Any similarity between what she says and what she means seems, in Hollywood parlance, purely coincidental. In Henry IV, Part 2, she makes her appearance with two officers of the law whom she is urging to arrest Falstaff for the money he owes her. (She is hostess of an inn.) Falstaff, she declares, is "an infinitive thing" upon her score. Falstaff, beset by the officers and drawing to defend himself, threatens to throw his erstwhile hostess into the channel.

Throw me into the channel? [she screams] I'll throw thee there. Wilt thou? wilt thou? thou bastardly rogue!—Murder, murder! O thou honey-suckle villain! Wilt thou kill God's officers, and the king's? O thou honey-seed rogue! thou art a honey-seed; a man queller and a woman queller.

(II,i)

This amazing play on words has caught the fancy of W. J. M. Starkie in his essay "Wit and Humour in Shakespeare," where he has analyzed and classified it in some detail. There is the misuse

of words through false analogy, their sound misleading the speaker into identifying them with words of similar sound but utterly different meaning. Thus Mrs. Quickley's use of "honey-seed" for "homicide" and "bastardly" for "dastardly", and her many similar blunders. She informs Falstaff that Doll Tearsheet is "sick of a calm", and when he and Doll quarrel, she remarks that they "cannot bear with one another's confirmities" (II,iv). When Pistol arrives, very drunk and very belligerent, she addresses him thus: "I beseech you now, aggravate your choler" (II,iv).

Not only does Dame Quickley misuse and mispronounce words of her own, but she is always misunderstanding what other people have said. A particularly amusing passage follows upon Doll Tearsheet's offhand remark that Pistol is a "swaggering rascal". One can only marvel at what the word swagger may mean to her, for she launches into a long tirade in this vein:

If he swagger, let him not come here; no, by my faith; I must live amongst my neighbours; I'll no swaggerers; I am in good name and fame with the very best:—Shut the door;—there comes no swaggerers here; I have not lived all this while to have swaggering now:—shut the door, I pray you.

(II,iv)

Falstaff can always arouse her to a similar fury of misunderstanding, as we have seen in the dialogue previously quoted to illustrate her obscenity (p. 38).

Part of the fun in speeches like these comes from their unexpectedness. No one in his wildest dreams could foresee the interpretation that Mrs. Quickley will put on innocent words, or
the strange contexts in which she will place them. Her remarks nearly always involve a delightful shock to the reader which is no small part of their power to amuse. To have "honesuckle" confounded with "homicidal", for instance, is quite beyond the pale of expectation. Another trifling with words which derives some of its value from its unexpectedness is what Starkie calls the use of *paronyms*. A good example appears in the angry speech of Katharine the Shrew when she breaks a lute over her music-teacher's head:

"Fret, call you these?" quoth she: "I'll fume with them!"

*(Taming of the Shrew, II,i)*

One could quote endlessly in this misuse of words, but perhaps the examples already given have made the point sufficiently clear.

Another comic element in the speech of the female clowns is garrulity. Mrs. Quickley, for instance, is quite incapable of direct speech. When she sets out to tell a simple fact, she trips into so many conversational pitfalls by the way that she arrives at her ultimate destination only by a miracle. Hear her, for instance, telling Falstaff about his strange attraction for Mistress Ford, when he finally succeeds in getting her to discuss the lady at all:

*Marry, this is the short and the long of it; you have brought her into such a canaries, as 'tis wonderful. The best courtier of them all, when the court lay at Windsor, could never have brought her to such a canary. Yet there*
has been knights, and lords, and gentlemen, with their coaches; I warrant you, coach after coach, letter after letter, gift after gift; smelling so sweetly (all musk) and so rushing, I warrant you, in silk and gold; and in such alligant terms; and in such wine and sugar of the best, and the fairest, that would have won any woman's heart; and, I warrant you, they could never get an eye-wink of her.—I had myself twenty angels given me this morning; but I defy all angels (in any such sort, as they say), but in the way of honesty:—and I warrant you, they could never get her so much as sip on a cup with the proudest of them all; and yet there has been earls, nay, which is more, pensioners; but, I warrant you, all is one with her.

(Merry Wives of Windsor, II,ii)

Juliet's Nurse has all of Quickley's conversational quirks, though she is given less scope for them. She is equally garrulous, equally incoherent, her misuse of words is almost as ridiculous, and she is even more ignorant. Once, when she is cautioning Romeo to play fair with her mistress Juliet:

Rom. Nurse, commend me to thy lady and mistress. I protest unto thee—
Nurse Good heart! and i' faith, I will tell her as much: Lord, lord, she will be a joyful woman.
Rom. What wilt thou tell her, nurse? thou dost not mark me.
Nurse I will tell her, sir,—that you do protest; which, as I take it, is a gentlemanlike offer; (II,iv)

and again in the course of the same conversation:

Nurse Doth not rosemary and Romeo begin both with a letter?
Rom. Ay, nurse; what of that? both with an R.
Nurse Ah, mocker! that's the dog's name. R is for the dog. No; I know it begins with some other letter; and she hath the prettiest sententious of it, of you and rosemary, that it would do you good to hear it; (ibid.)
her incoherence reminds us vividly of Mrs. Quickley. Then she appears at her best. The surprise element in these speeches is delightful. Most of her comic sallies, however, are on a lower plane. Where Mrs. Quickley is ignorant but good-hearted, Juliet’s Nurse is ignorant and somewhat sadistic. Her garrulity, one suspects, is more deliberate than Quickley’s at times. She uses it purposely to torment Juliet:

Your love says, like an honest gentleman,  
And a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome,  
And, I warrant, a virtuous:—Where is your mother?  

(II,v)

When she comes in later to report the death of Tybalt, and her incoherence leads the frantic Juliet to believe that Romeo is dead, one finds her tactless rambling more exasperating than amusing:

I saw the wound, I saw it with mine eyes,  
God save the mark!—here on his manly breast:  
A piteous corse, a bloody piteous corse;  
Pale, pale as ashes, all bedaub’d in blood  
All in gore blood;—I swooned at the sight.  

(III,ii)

Mrs. Quickley, with all her ignorance, is incapable of anything so cruelly stupid as this speech. One cannot help feeling that the Nurse really enjoys death and disaster. Her exclamations over the supposed corpse of Juliet betray her relishing the situation to the full:

O woel! O woeful, woeful, woeful day!  
Most lamentable day! most woeful day!  
That ever, ever, I did yet behold!  
O day! O day! O day! O hateful day!  
Never was seen so black a day as this:  
O woeful day, O woeful day!  

(IV,v)
We laugh at the Nurse's extravagant insincerities because we know that Juliet is really alive. Were she dead, we could scarcely forgive the garrulity. In the presence of real death, however, Mrs. Quickley can be her usual comic self without offence, as we shall see.

Shakespeare himself must have loved Quickley almost as well as he loved his Falstaff, for he put her in as many plays. He kept her character consistent, moreover, and he did not degrade her comic nature in The Merry Wives of Windsor as he did Falstaff's. In addition, for her final appearance on the stage, he gave her a speech which scales the very summits of humour, if we are to judge it by the criteria of many modern philosophers. This occurs in Henry V. At the time to which we refer, Mrs. Quickley has attained a measure of the respectability which she has always coveted, for she has married Pistol. Falstaff, on the other hand, has been cruelly repudiated by the reformed king, and has sunk under the weight of royal ingratitude and treachery. During their long association, Falstaff has used Mrs. Quickley shamefully. He has got money from her by playing on her sympathies and by outwitting her. He has deceived and mocked her upon a thousand counts. Yet he has always had as secure a place in her heart as he has had in ours. When they parted on the eve of battle, she could bid him farewell in a speech which is comic because it is so amazingly untrue, and yet moving because it is so generous and so obviously sincere:
Well, fare thee well; I have known thee these twenty-nine years, come peascod time: but an honester and a truer-hearted man,—Well, fare thee well.

(Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part 2, II, iv)

When Doll Tearsheet parts with him upon the same occasion, her tribute is not so blindingly generous, yet it is in the same vein of comedy based in tears:

Come, I'll be friends with thee, Jack—

thou art going to the wars; and whether

I shall ever see thee again, or no, there is nobody cares.

(Ibid.)

At the time of which we speak, however, Falstaff has died, broken-hearted. Mrs. Quickley has just come from his death-bed, and she is reporting the melancholy tidings to his old associates of happier days:

Bard. Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven, or in hell!

Quick. May, sure he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end, and went away, an it had been any christom child; 'a parted even just between twelve and one, e'en at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields. How now, sir John? quoth I; what, man! be of good cheer. So 'a cried out—God, God, God! three or four times: now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So, 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed, and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; and then I felt to his knees, and so upward, and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.

(Henry V, II, iii)
"The humour of sublimity", says Stephen Leacock, "...views life...in as soft a light as we view the past." The very highest humour, he declares, is created by a skilful blending of the comic and the pathetic. Leacock's classic example is Mark Twain's ingenuous little ruffian, Huck Finn, who makes the reader cry and laugh at the same time. Only genius dares to juxtapose the solemn, the sacred, and the ridiculous; and only genius can do it successfully. When it has been accomplished, we contemplate it with mingled pleasure and awe. Mrs. Quickley, grief-stricken at the sight of Falstaff's condition, (genuinely moved by death as the Nurse is not), and pathetically urging him in her inadequate way not to trouble himself with thoughts of God, is a sublimely comic figure. The incongruity in a passage like this—and there are very few like it in all literature—is superb.

We found that the comic appeal in a female clown's character was its limitation, its lack of freedom. In her speech, however, although her mind and imagination are limited, the unexpectedness of what she says has the same sort of appeal as freedom has. Her chatter is restrained by neither logic nor convention. It is like a feather blown about erratically on a summer's breeze, turning now here, now there, now drifting idly, now darting quickly forward—a pleasant thing to watch because its next move can never be

predicted. The whole impression is one of careless liberty, unconscious but enviable.

The humour which we have examined thus far in the present chapter has been unconscious on the part of the speaker herself, or, when not so, of a rather low order. We turn now to the speech of the court ladies which is of a more highly developed kind and is intended to amuse us. Meredith has insisted that real comedy is possible only when there is equality between the sexes. In a society where women are considered inferior, comedy cannot live. Charlton must have had the same thing in mind when he called the heroines "the very incarnation of the spirit of Shakespeare's comedy." A large measure of Shakespeare's comic effects comes from his Rosalinds and Violas, ladies who share complete social equality with men.

The wit of these women is of various kinds. As we have already said, it is never vulgar according to Elizabethan standards, although some of the witty sallies of refined ladies would doubtless occasion consternation in a twentieth-century drawing-room. In its lowest form, this conscious wit often descends to a mere mechanical repartee in which the characters "feed" each other set lines which contain cues that prompt a witty rejoinder.

5- George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1918, p. 118
6- H. B. Charlton, Shakespearean Comedy, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1938, p. 76
This device is a popular one on radio today. Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, Edgar Bergen and Charley MacCarthey—many famous teams—use it as their stock-in-trade. The comedy here lies chiefly in punning, and in the use of homonyms—that is, in "fitting an absurd idea into a well-established phrase-form, or in taking literally an expression which was used figuratively." The rapidity of the dialogue has a good deal to do with its attraction, too. A moment's pause would be fatal, but with Shakespeare it never occurs. The wit plays like summer lightning on a hot afternoon, flashing continuously and rapidly, here, there, everywhere, faster than the eye can follow it. The audience is kept alert, fearing to miss something, watching the speed of the word-play with bated breath. When cleverly handled, this sort of dialogue is amusing, but it is apt to become wearisome after a time. As a general rule, Shakespeare is not at his best when he uses it. A good example in point can be found in Two Gentlemen of Verona. Lucetta is attempting to persuade her mistress, Julia, to read a love-letter from Proteus, who at this time languishes under Julia's disfavour. Lucetta's method is to play upon Julia's curiosity. She drops the letter, and then stoops to pick it up:

Julia What is't you took up
So gingerly?
Luc. Nothing.
Julia Why didst thou stoop then?

7- Starkie, op. cit., p. 214
Luc. To take a paper up that I let fall.
Julia And is that paper nothing?
Luc. Nothing concerning me.
Julia Then let it lie for those that it concerns.
Luc. Madam, it will not lie where it concerns,
     Unless it have a false interpreter.
Julia Some love of yours hath writ to you in rhyme.
Luc. That I might sing it, madam, to a tune;
     Give me a note: your ladyship can set.
Julia As little by such toys as may be possible.

(I,ii)

Maria uses the same sort of artificial repartee to amuse Sir Toby, although her wit has an occasional flash that is lacking in the passage just quoted:

Sir And. Fair lady, do you think you have fools in hand?
Maria Sir, I have not you by the hand.
Sir And. Are you full of them? (dry jests)
Maria Ay, sir: I have them at my fingers' ends:
Marry, now I let go your hand I am barren.

(Twelfth Night, I,iii)

In Love's Labour's Lost there occurs a good deal of punning. Probably the best example is Maria's retort to Boyet who has offered to kiss her:

My lips are no common, though several they be.

(II,i)

Comedy which depends, as it does here, solely upon word-play is mediocre because it is not based on life primarily, but on language which is a second remove from life. The humour is too superficial; it does not spring from anything fundamental in human nature and human society. Repartee rises to a much higher plane when it is based on character or on situation. Cressida's banter while she and Pandarus watch the Trojan heroes returning from the
fray is of a better quality because, while it is clever in itself, it serves the greater end of exposing the preoccupied obtuseness of Pandarus. Hear them:

Pan. Hector shall not have his [Troilus's] wit this year.
Cres. He shall not need it, if he have his own.
Pan. Nor his qualities.
Cres. No matter.
Pan. Nor his beauty.
Cres. 'Twould not become him, his own's better. (Troilus and Cressida, I,ii)

Then Pandarus announces that Helen praised Troilus's complexion above Paris's.

Cres. Why, Paris hath colour enough.
Pan. So he hath.
Cres. Then Troilus should have too much: if she praised him above, his complexion is higher than his; he having colour enough, and the other higher, is too flaming a praise for a good complexion. I had as lief Helen's golden tongue had commended Troilus for a copper nose.

Cressida is thoroughly enjoying herself here as she serves the Comic Muse. Pandarus's supreme ignorance of the fact that, far from being in command of the situation, he is the butt of it, is a rich source of humour which greatly enhances the comedy inherent in the witty dialogue itself.

Shakespearean ladies are often employed to expose masculine folly and conceit. Another example of this practice can be found in Two Gentlemen of Verona, where Julia, whose aching heart never quite dulls her keen wit, in a series of asides exposes pompous Thurio to the laughter of the audience. Proteus has been pretending to woo Silvia for Thurio. While he is
delivering mock encouragement to his dupe, Julia stands by in the
disguise of a page:

Thu. How likes she my discourse?
Pro. Ill, when you talk of war.
Thu. But well, when I discourse of love and peace?
Jul. (aside) But better, indeed, when you hold
your peace.
Thu. What says she to my valour?
Pro. O, sir, she makes no doubt of that.
Jul. (aside) She needs not, when she knows it
cowardice.
Thu. What says she to my birth?
Pro. That you are well deriv'd.
Jul. (aside) True; from a gentleman to a fool.
Thu. Considers she my possessions?
Pro. O, ay; and pities them.
Thu. Wherefore?
Jul. (aside) That such an ass should owe them.

(V,ii)

The dialogue of Rosalind and Celia is much superior to this.
It is always witty, but it is always more than mere clever word-
play. Sometimes it embodies a reflection on life as in the
following:

Ros. What shall be our sport then?
Cel. Let us sit and mock the good housewife,
Fortune, from her wheel, that her gifts
may henceforth be bestowed equally.
Ros. I would we could do so; for her benefits
are mightily misplaced: and the bountiful
blind woman doth most mistake in her gifts
to women.
Cel. 'Tis true: for those that she makes fair
she scarce makes honest; and those that
she makes honest she makes very ill-
favour'dly.

(As You Like It, I,ii)

Sometimes it throws a sidelight on character, serving to reflect
and to instil in the audience the joyful high spirits of Rosalind:
Le Beau. Fair princess, you have lost much good sport.
Celia  Sport? Of what colour?
Le Beau What colour, madam? How shall I answer you?
Ros.  As wit and fortune will.
Touch.  Or as the destinies decree.
Cel.  Well said; that was laid on with a trowel.......
Le Beau You amaze me ladies; I would have told you of good wrestling...There comes an old man and his three sons,—
Cel.  I could match this beginning with an old tale.
Le Beau Three proper young men, of excellent growth and presence;—
Ros.  With bills on their necks,—'Be it known unto all men by these presents',—

Here, moreover, as in the example chosen earlier from Troilus and Cressida (p. 51), the Comic Muse is making fun of a pompous and over-earnest man.

Even when Rosalind stoops to word-play and punning, she raises it above artificiality because she uses it as a flippant covering for an essential furtherance of the plot or an indirect revelation of the state of her mind:

Ros.  0, how full of briars is this working-day world!
Cel.  They are but burs, cousin, thrown upon thee in holiday foolery; if we walk not in the trodden paths, our very petticoats will catch them.
Ros.  I could shake them off my coat; these burs are in my heart.
Cel.  Hem them away.
Ros.  I would try; if I could cry hem, and have him.
Cel.  Come, come, wrestle with thy affections.
Ros.  0, they take the part of a better wrestler than myself.

Surely this is much more than mere word-play! It is a mild
example of the mingling of laughter and tears which we found in Mrs. Quickley's final speech.

There is so much excellent dialogue in As You Like It that one longs to quote at greater length. Rosalind's comments on Orlando's verses, her delightful obtuseness when Celia tries to tell her who wrote them, the series of questions that she wants answered "in one word"—all these cry for comment. But we must pass over them, for they illustrate points already discussed and our space is limited.

At the lower end of the scale of conscious wit we have placed mechanical word-play, the laboured, artificial dialogue through which we sense the "gag-writer" at work. At the opposite end is the native wit, the genuine flash which sparkles so naturally in conversation and is so in harmony with the character of the speaker that it impresses the audience as being extemporary. Rosalind's conversations with Orlando and, indeed, with almost everybody to whom she speaks, have this quality. Beatrice has it, too, almost constantly. The temper of Beatrice's mind is so humorous that she must jest continually, and naturally, when she talks so much, her wit is of uneven quality. Sometimes it is on the level of the unsubtle "slam" so dear to the adolescent mind:

Beat. I wonder that you will still be talking, signior Benedick; nobody marks you.
Bene. What, my dear lady Disdain! are you yet living?
Beat. Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain if you come in her presence.

Bene. Then is courtesy a turncoat:—But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and I would I could find it in my heart that I had not a hard heart: for, truly, I love none.

Beat. A dear happiness to women; they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God, and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that; I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me.

Bene. God keep your ladyship still in that mind! so some gentleman or other shall 'scape a predestinate scratched face.

Beat. Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours were.

(Much Ado, I,1)

This repartee is too bare-faced to be highly comic in itself. It is amusing, yet, for two reasons. The first is that the audience derives a certain vicarious pleasure in the deliberate insults which convention restrains them from uttering in normal life. A second, and more important reason, lies in the incongruity in the passage, for it is apparent from this first appearance of Beatrice and Benedict together that their ready bickering is an attempt on their part to conceal the attraction which each holds for the other. They are intended for one another. That they should fight against their destiny, putting themselves in opposition to the strongest of all conventional institutions—marriage—is laughable. We know that the Comic Muse is watching them, bright-eyed and purposeful.
Most of Beatrice's wit is on a higher plane than mere bickering. Her irreverence and her flippant attitude to some of the established conventions of the day are so much a part of her character that her speeches on these subjects are wit of a very high variety. For instance, she cheerfully advises Hero against too strict filial obedience when her father proposes a husband for her:

Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make courtesy, and say, 'Father, as it please you:'—but yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another courtesy, and say, 'Father, as it please me!'

(II,i)

Her railing against matrimony is constant and equally flippant.

She vows she will never marry:

Not till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be over-mastered with a piece of valiant dust? to make account of her life to a clod of wayward marl? No, uncle, I'll none: Adam's sons are my brethren; and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred.

(Ibid.)

The audience loves Beatrice for this saucy impudence. Even her old uncle and his friends cannot resist her chatter although it mocks their settled convictions more often than not. This sort of wit has something of the same appeal that is found in obscenity, for it provides a release in its mockery of convention. Reading it, we feel a surge of exhilaration, a wild thrill of freedom, such as a prisoner might experience in seizing the bars of his cage and rattling them with all his might. They are a way of
battering against the bars of society. They are a temporary triumph over our civilized shackles. All the time, we know dimly that Beatrice will be comically punished for these flippancies. She is defying the Comic Muse, and her final downfall is inevitable. But we enjoy her revolt while it lasts, for we share it vicariously. Moreover, we can feel certain that her punishment will not be too severe; for we know that she is delighting more in the feel of kicking over the traces than in the actual meaning of what she says. Indeed, we know that all along she has a secret love for Benedict, and that her punishment for mocking matrimony—which of course must be to submit to it—will really be no punishment to her at all. Beatrice cannot lose. She mocks convention with her lips, but her heart is securely within its fold.

Beatrice's agile wit saves her time and time again from suffering the consequences of her impertinence. She speaks on impulse. She carries us away with her daring and her sparkle. Her little exchange with Don Pedro is perhaps the best example of all the various elements of her wit. It is imitable:

Beat. Good lord, for alliance!—Thus goes every one to the world but I, and I am sunburned; I may sit in a corner, and cry, heigh-ho for a husband!

D. P. Lady Beatrice, I will get you one.

Beat. I would rather have one of your father's getting: Hath your grace ne'er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them.

D. P. Will you have me, lady?
Beat. No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days; your grace is too costly to wear every day; but I beseech your grace, pardon me; I was born to speak all mirth, and no matter.

D. P. Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you; for, out of question, you were born in a merry hour.

Beat. No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born.

(II, i)

There is another species of wit which is a never-failing source of delight for its unexpected cleverness. This is a neat turning of the tables on someone, and it is admirable partly for its unexpectedness, and partly because only a clever and quick-witted woman can do it. Max Eastman tells us that the secret of humour lies in adroitly leading the listener to expect a certain thing, then suddenly depriving him of that satisfaction which seemed assured. This act in itself constitutes a playful disappointment which is enough to make him laugh; but a really good joke is created when, in addition to disappointing him in what he was sure of receiving, we at the same time hand him something totally unexpected and perhaps of even greater value than what he has lost. "A joke is a little node, or gem-like moment in our experience, created by the exact coincidence of a playful shock or disappointment with a playful or genuine satisfaction." Portia employs this sort of device when, in playing

8- Max Eastman, *The Sense of Humour*, Scribners, New York, 1936, p. 28
out the ring comedy, she is pretending to be angry with Bassanio and he is trying to make his peace:

\[
\text{Bass. I swear to thee, even by thine own fair eyes,}
\]
\[
\text{Wherein I see myself, --}
\]
\[
\text{Port. Mark you but that!}
\]
\[
\text{In both my eyes he doubly sees himself:}
\]
\[
\text{In each eye one: -- swear by your double self,}
\]
\[
\text{And there's an oath of credit.}
\]  
* (Merchant of Venice, V, i)

Silvia uses it with extreme adroitness when she is encouraging her backward suitor, Valentine. She asks him to write a love letter for her to deliver to someone who holds her heart, and when he gives her the finished composition, she hands it back to him. This is too subtle a declaration for Valentine, however. His man Speed has to explain it to him:

\[
\text{For often have you writ to her; and she, in modesty,}
\]
\[
\text{Or else for want of idle time, could not again reply;}
\]
\[
\text{Or fearing else some messenger, that might her mind}
\]
\[
\text{discover,}
\]
\[
\text{Herself hath taught her love himself to write unto}
\]
\[
\text{her lover!}
\]  
* (Two Gentlemen of Verona, II, i)

She trips up the suave and fickle Proteus very neatly by the same device:

\[
\text{Sil. Servant, you are welcome to a worthless mistress.}
\]
\[
\text{Prot. I'll die on him that says so, but yourself.}
\]
\[
\text{Sil. That you are welcome?}
\]  
* (II, iv)

A final example of the use of this device, and a good one, appears in *The Comedy of Errors*. The abbess uses it with consummate skill to deliver a reproof to her son's wife for incessant nagging. Adriana has just complained to the abbess that her Antipholus's only fault was a taste for other feminine society:
Abb. You should for that have reprehended him.
Adr. Why, so I did.
Abb. Ay, but not rough enough.
Adr. As roughly as my modesty would let me.
Abb. Haply, in private.
Adr. And in assemblies, too.
Abb. Ay, but not enough.
Adr. It was the copy of our conference:
    In bed, he slept not for my urging it;
    At board, he fed not for my urging it;
    Alone, it was the subject of my theme;
    In company, I often glanced at it;
    Still did I tell him it was vile and bad.
Abb. And therefore came it that the man was mad:
The venom clamours of a jealous woman
Poison more deadly than a mad dog's tooth. (V,i)

Thus speech affords a variety of comedy. Laughter lurks
in words of child-like innocence; in obscenities, whether deliberate
or unconscious, though the latter are funnier; in mispronunciation,
misuse of words, incoherence, garrulity. It ranges from words that
are unintentionally funny and those that are deliberately and
labouredly comic, to the spontaneous wit that rises out of character
and situation. Very frequently surprise contributes a good deal to
the humour, and speed is essential, and always the free range of
imagination affords delight—whether it exists in the incoherent
garrulities of Mrs. Quickley or the dancing, agile wit of Rosalind
or Beatrice. Our discussion has served to add one more strong
link in the chain of evidence which we are forging on behalf of
our central theme: in the final analysis, the explanation of
comedy is social. Speeches amuse us either because they afford us
a temporary release from the restrictions of society, or because
they make us laugh at someone whose behaviour is anti-social. We derive a certain amount of amusement out of a pun or some other kind of word-play whose only appeal lies in its mechanical ingenuity; but in order to be truly comic, the speech must have this deeper social purpose as well.
Chapter 4

Comedy in Situation

Fool. Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

Lear. She cannot deny it.

Fool. Cry you mercy, I took you for a jointstool.

(King Lear, III,vi)

We have examined in some detail the contribution of Shakespeare's women to comedy through their characters and through their speech. Let us now turn our attention to the third and last field in which they may serve the Comic Muse—in action or situation. As has already become apparent, most dramatic sources of amusement are complex: it is impossible to segregate any of them completely and to say, "This is funny solely because of
character, or solely because of speech, or solely because of action." Nevertheless, one of these elements predominates in every bit of humour. We are now to study the situations in which the fun depends less on character or speech than on action. Some comic situations are repeated in different plays, and others bear a certain resemblance to one another. This may help us to follow some sort of rough plan in our study. We shall look first at several situations resulting from disguise, then at several which are the outcome of practical joking, and finally at a few others which do not fall readily into either of these categories.

When Shakespeare hits upon a device that proves dramatically effective, he exploits it to the limit, not scrupling to repeat it in new plays as he produces them. A modern "gag" depends for its laughs partly on its novelty, but a good humorous situation exerts more appeal with repetition. Such a situation results from disguise. Shakespeare makes it of central importance in three comedies: *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; and he uses it to good effect in two others: *The Merchant of Venice*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. A variation of the old theme appears in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* wherein, although actual disguise is not used, the complications and misunderstandings which arise are closely akin to those produced by it.

Disguise offers endless comic possibilities. A very obvious source of fun—often missed because it is so obvious—should be
noted in passing. When Viola, Rosalind, Julia and Portia dress as men, at once a doubly ironic situation results because, as we have already noticed (p. 5), their roles were taken by boy actors. The audience is amused by the rich irony of a situation wherein boys pretending to be women disguise themselves as men.

Viola, Rosalind and Julia have many similar adventures. Each, through the medium of her disguise, is brought into intimate relations with the man whom she loves. Their reactions are pleasingly varied. Under the name of Cesario, Viola is taken into the service of Duke Orsino, and in the capacity of a page she learns to love him. Shy, modest, and humble, she dares not plead her case with him openly, but she reverts to veiled hints and charming allegories. Some remark of hers about the Duke's love for Olivia (for Viola must endure the knowledge that she has a rival) leads the Duke to say to her in surprise:

My life upon't, young though thou art, thine eye
Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves;
Hath it not, boy?

(Twelfth Night, II,iv)

Viola replies with meek understatement, "A little, by your favour."

Duke. What kind of woman is't?
Viola. Of your complexion.
Duke. She is not worth thee then. What years i' faith?
Viola. About your years, my lord.

Then, emboldened by this ambiguous confession of love, she proceeds still further, but the Duke, with true masculine obtuseness in such matters, accepts her remarks at face value:

Viola. My father had a daughter lov'd a man,
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship.
Duke. And what's her history?
Vio. A blank, my lord: She never told her love
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pin'd in thought;
And, with a green and yellow melancholy,
She sat, like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was this not love indeed?
(Ibid.)

All this time we, as the audience, sit on the edge of our chairs, tense with mingled suspense and enjoyment. How far can Viola go without actually giving away her secret? Will the Duke not suspect what is so obvious to us? Our enjoyment of this scene has many elements in it. We experience a breathless sort of delight in Viola's mental dexterity as she dances all along the edge of her precipice without ever slipping into a betrayal of her identity. She lifts us out of ourselves with her superb control of a very delicate situation. We really know all along that she will not fail, but our interest in her progress does not flag on that account. Indeed, it may even be increased, like that of children hearing a familiar fairy tale for the hundredth time. We know the happy ending, but we want to follow the story step by step nevertheless. At the same time, we feel a sort of good-natured, half-contemptuous superiority over the Duke who does not penetrate the disguise as we do. Sudden glory, suspense (even though we know the outcome), delight in the mental gymnastics—these are the sources of comic delight in Viola's disguise.

Of very different stuff is Rosalind, disguised in the presence of the man she loves. She adopts the boldness proper to the youth Ganymede, and turns to her own advantage what might
have been an unfortunate position. First making Orlando admit his love for Rosalind, she produces on the spur of the moment this ingenious plan:

I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cote, and woo me.

(As You Like It, III, ii)

What barrier can a flimsy disguise put up against ready wit like that? Viola did not think of posing as Olivia so that the Duke could pour his love at her feet, but Rosalind has contrived to enjoy all the advantages of being wooed in her own person, and to add to them the additional freedom of speech which goes with male attire.

In such ways can confessions of love take on added charm through the medium of disguise. Julia is less fortunate than these two, for she must stand helplessly by while Proteus, who had sworn eternal devotion to her, serenades a new love. In the guise of a young man, and standing beside the host of a nearby tavern, Julia laments her misfortune with an inimitable mingling of wit, irony, and pathos:

Host. ....the music likes you not.
Jul. You mistake; the musician likes me not.
Host. Why, my pretty youth?
Jul. He plays false, father.
Host. How? out of tune on the strings?
Jul. Not so; but yet so false that he grieves my very heart strings.
Host. You have a quick ear.
Jul. Ay, I would I were deaf! it makes me have a slow heart.

(Two Gentlemen of Verona, IV, ii)
Sad as Julia's predicament here appears, the woman masquerading as a man must undergo still greater trials. She is frequently sent as her loved one's emissary, to woo her rival. So Viola finds herself trying to forward the Duke's suit with Olivia, putting her best eloquence into her pleas, yet inwardly praying that they will fail. Julia undergoes this trial, too, when Proteus selects her (in her disguise as a youth) to carry his messages to the disdainful Silvia. The irony is carried so far here that Julia is even instructed to deliver to Silvia the ring which she herself once gave Proteus as a love token. Silvia, however, remains as unmoved as did Olivia. Indeed, she is filled with indignation over Proteus's perfidy, of which she has long been aware; and, discovering that the young "page" is acquainted with Julia, she inquires about her. Julia replies ironically that Proteus's former love is "about my stature", and goes on to say that, when Julia was forsaken, "would I might be dead, if I in thought felt not her very sorrow!" (IV,iv).

Here is the Viola-Orsino situation duplicated. Here is Julia balancing dexterously on the tight-robe, hovering over the disastrous chasm of discovery, but never tumbling into it. Once again we revel in the heroine's dexterity, we tingle with a mixture of delicious suspense and certainty of success, and we glow with complacent self-approval because we know a secret that Olivia cannot penetrate.
In the land of romance—which is the location of all Shakespearean comedies—no one ever penetrates the camouflage. The perfection of the heroine's concealment, indeed, leads her into embarrassing predicaments. Both Viola and Rosalind must undergo the disturbing triumph of awakening love in female breasts.

Viola, pleading the Duke's cause with her rival, faces an unexpected complication when she discovers that Olivia has reacted much as the maiden Priscilla did when John Alden pleaded Miles Standish's suit. Priscilla is reported to have said, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" Olivia, unmoved by the Duke's protestations, listens eagerly while the supposed Cesario tells what he would do to overcome her indifference, and murmurs, "You might do much." (I,v).

Viola is not mischievous, and the pain of her unrecognized love is too severe to allow her to see the humour of this situation, however much it may delight the audience. She is distressed.

"Disguise," she laments, "I see thou art a wickedness wherein the pregnant enemy does much." The situation appears utterly unfortunate to her:

What will become of this? As I am man
My state is desperate for my master's love!
As I am woman, now alas the day!
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, thou must untangle this, not I;
It is too hard a knot for me to untie.

(Twelfth Night, II,ii)

Thus does she dismiss the problem and its intricate ironies.

Rosalind is of a much happier disposition. She is always so bubbling over with high spirits that she cannot restrain her
gaiety. Life can present nothing to her in the shape of tragedy. Thus, when, as Ganymede, she bursts into the pastoral wooing of Silvius and Phebe, to berate Phebe for her coquettish coldness, and unwittingly awakens a passion for herself in the shepherdess's bosom, she is amused rather than distressed. Here is a situation that will afford her endless entertainment, she thinks. When Phebe writes her a love letter and sends it by the obedient hand of Silvius, Rosalind exploits the ironic situation to the full, reading the letter aloud with all its extravagant protestations of romantic love, and interrupting her reading with such exclamations as, "Can a woman rail thus?" and "Did you ever hear such railing?" (IV,iii). Rosalind is equal to this situation as to all others. Feeling confident that she will soon be unmasking and that, when she appears as a woman again, Phebe's love will vanish as if it had never been, she sees no cause for regretting the ironic triangle. Instead, she lays down a set of seemingly impossible conditions which she engages to fulfil on an appointed day, thus preparing for added enjoyment at the time of the unmasking. To Phebe she says, "I will marry you, if ever I marry woman, and I'll be married tomorrow." (V,ii). As the audience, we enjoy with her this joke which is lost on the rest of the cast.

Shakespeare employs dramatic irony constantly when his women are in disguise. We have already heard Julia exclaiming over the perfidy of Proteus in a series of ambiguous remarks (p.66). Viola, safe in the garb of Cesario, assures the Duke of her un-
The dying affection, deriving some satisfaction from a frank statement of her emotions even if it is misinterpreted. The conversations of Ganymede with Orlando are perhaps the best of all.

One lingers over such exchanges as these:

Ros. Come, woo me, woo me; for now I am in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent:—

Orl. I take some joy to say you are, because I will be talking of her.

Ros. Well, in her person, I say—I will not have you.

Orl. Then, in mine own person, I die.

Ros. No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause. Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club: yet he did what he could to die before; and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year, though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night: for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and, being taken with the cramp, was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was—Hero of Sestos. But these are all lies; men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.

Orl. I would not have my right Rosalind of this mind; for, I protest, her frown might kill me.

Ros. By this hand, it will not kill a fly.

Orl. But will my Rosalind do so?

Ros. By my life, she will do as I do.

(As You Like It, IV,i)

We have said that no one ever suspects the female heart beating beneath the male attire in these plays. Yet it is there, and its presence affords an opportunity of another kind for the Comic Muse. The contrast between the assumed character and the
timid feminine nature is too tempting for comedy to ignore. To this fact we owe the duel which Sir Toby Belch tries to arrange between Viola (as Cesario) and Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Viola makes no attempt to act up to her role as a bold young man. At the first suggestion of physical strife, she says pitifully to Sir Toby: "I will return again into the house, and desire some conduct of the lady. I am no fighter...I am one that would rather go with sir priest than sir knight: I care not who knows so much of my mettle." (Twelfth Night, III,iv). What would appear contemptible in a man, is charming in masquerading Viola.

Rosalind is a prey to the feminine timidity that besets Viola, yet her stronger character commands her to overcome it. She feels that she owes something to the clothes which she is wearing. "I could find it in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel, and to cry like a woman," she reflects, "but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore, courage, good Aliena." (As You Like It, II,iv).

Again, disguise affords an excellent opportunity for mild satire of man's dress or character. Hear Rosalind chattering gaily to Celia as she plans her costume:

Were it not better
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand; and (in my heart
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will)
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside;
As many other mannish cowards have,
That do outface it with their semblance.

(I,iii)

When Julia is outfitting herself for her pursuit of Proteus, her mind turns to fashions rather than to character:

Jul. Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds
As may beseem some well-reputed page.
Luc. Why then your ladyship must cut your hair.
Jul. No girl; I'll knit it up in silken strings,
With twenty odd-conceited true-love knots:
To be fantastic, may become a youth
Of greater years than I shall show to be.
Luc. What fashion, madam, shall I make your breeches?
Jul. That fits as well, as—'tell me, good my lord,
What compass will you wear your farthingale?'
Why even that fashion thou best likest, Lucetta.
Luc. You must needs have them with a cod-piece madam.
Jul. Out, out, Lucetta! that will be ill-favoured.
Luc. A round hose, madam, now's not worth a pin,
Unless you have a cod-piece to stick pins on.

(Two Gentlemen of Verona, II,vii)

The adventures of Portia and Helena lead us into different atmospheres. Portia, it will be remembered, plays the part of Balthazar, a "young doctor of Rome", at the trial of Antonio. She saves Antonio's life by a clever bit of strategy when Shylock is about to collect his pound of flesh under the terms of his bond. Nerissa, her maidservant, is also present at the trial as Balthazar's servant. The part which these two women play is more dramatic than comic, except for the comedy of the rings which follows the trial and which we shall discuss presently.

Helena is the only one of all these women who does not dress as a man when she wishes to conceal herself. Her disguise is a pilgrim's clothing. Helena previously won Bertram for her husband as a reward for having saved the life of the King of France,
but Bertram, deeply resenting his enforced part in the transaction, fled the French court and enlisted in the Florentine army. Now, believing that she is driving him to his death, Helena leaves home so that he can return. Her wanderings take her to Florence where Bertram is quartered. There, unknown, she watches him march past her, and hears from the lips of strangers tales of his scandalous life:

Helena. Which is the Frenchman?  
Diana. He  
That with the plume: 'tis a most gallant fellow; 
I would he lov'd his wife: if he were honester 
He were much goodlier:—Is't not a handsome gentleman?  

Helena. I like him well. 
Diana. 'Tis pity he is not honest.  

(All's Well, III,v)

The situation is rather like that in which Julia and the host overhear Proteus's serenade, but Helena has no spirit to jest or to lament. Her disguise serves little practical purpose beyond taking her to Florence, for she very soon reveals her true identity in order to further her cause with her erring husband. The situation in Florence is comic according to the technical rules, but it hovers too near the brink of tragedy to be as pleasing as scenes in the lighter comedies. One turns back in relief to the wistful appeal of Viola and the irrepressible gaiety of Rosalind.

This whole matter of disguise rests fundamentally on a departure from the normal state of affairs. In the sensible, ordinary world, lovely ladies do not turn in scorn from handsome men in order to lavish their affections on other ladies. In the normal world, when a youth says that he experiences love "for no
woman", the words can be taken at their face value; they do not mean that he, being really a woman, does feel deep love for a man. In the normal world, a man does not think of sending the girl who loves him to plead his cause with another girl whom he loves; and in the normal world, any attempt on his part to do so would meet with a violent rebuff. In the normal world, a gallant youth does not flee in terror from the prospect of duelling with a gouty old knight—or if he did, the fact would cause us nothing but disgust. Finally, in the normal world, no youth would enjoy posing as the absent sweetheart of another youth, and listening to his complaints and blandishments. If such a situation should occur, normally only the savage pen of the satirist could teach us to find pleasure in it.

However, disguise turns our logical world all upside down. Through its magic agency, the ridiculous and the improbable become the normal and the accepted. What under ordinary circumstances would be either fantastic or revolting; is made beautifully logical. Yet the contradiction is still there, on the surface, however fundamentally sensible the whole thing is, and it is this contradiction which forges the weapon of the Comic Muse. Nearly all philosophers on the subject of humour dwell on the value of incongruity in provoking laughter; and here is incongruity in abundance. We laugh because abnormal, fantastic conduct is shown to be really normal and sensible.
Furthermore, here are women triumphantly bringing order and common sense into a mad world. Handicapped by disguise which makes them appear men in the eyes of the men whom they love, they cannot resign themselves to so unnatural a state. True to the feminine nature, they bend all their energies to restoring normality. As Cesario they pour out the confession of their love in beautiful allegories; as Ganymede they invent an elaborate love-cure in order to make their Orlando utter the tender words which they long to hear. If they put on masculine characteristics with their breeches, they would become grotesque creatures, fit victims of the Comic Muse themselves. But this they never do. They retain their femininity, and they perform the civilizing task of their great Mistress, although the obstacles which they must overcome in order to do so appear almost insurmountable. Into a world gone mad, into a world where nothing is as it seems, they bring common sense so basically sound that it can afford to appear fantastic. They can make men love supposed boys, and women love other women romantically—and make them do so because the act is the logical outcome of an illogical situation.

We have said that events in A Midsummer Night's Dream closely parallel those produced by the masquerading in the five plays just discussed. In the Wood near Athens it is supernatural machinery rather than disguise which interferes with humanity. Oberon, King of the Fairies, takes it upon himself to iron out a complicated situation, and he eventually succeeds in doing so,
but not before he has first tangled it up still further. He is troubled, just as the Comic Muse is troubled, by finding two men in love with one girl and a second girl left to pine with unrequited affection. His magic philtre would have righted matters at once if it had been correctly used, but unfortunately he entrusted the task to a deputy, and Puck treated the wrong man. The ensuing mix-up is extremely comic.

Lysander and Hermia have eloped to the wood because her father has refused his consent to their union. Helena betrays their plans to Demetrius who loves Hermia too, because she wants to please him at any cost. As a result, she and Demetrius follow the two lovers. Instead of sifting the magic powder into the sleeping eyes of Demetrius, as Oberon had directed, Puck treats Lysander. Then, discovering his mistake, he treats Demetrius too. The result is comic, if unfortunate. The powder acts like a disguise to confuse and complicate the course of true love. The two men do a right-about-face and find themselves still passionate rivals, but this time for Helena instead of Hermia. They are puppets in the hands of Comedy. They act as instinct dictates without asking themselves how they came to change their views so radically.

Not so the girls. Perhaps the absence of magic powder in their eyes makes them clearer-sighted, or perhaps, as we suggested earlier in this thesis, women are just more practical than men. At any rate, Helena does not accept this mad situation at its face value. Instead, she believes that both men are mocking her. At
first Hermia shares her views, but, when later she becomes convinced that they are in earnest, she wastes no thoughts on magic. Turning to Helena, she cries:

O me! you juggler! you canker-blossom!
You thief of love! what, have you come by night,
And stol’n my love’s heart from him?

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II,ii)

Helena’s timidity and reluctance prevent a promising feminine brawl, but supernatural means are needed to prevent the duel between Lysander and Demetrius. Finally, the whole ridiculous situation is resolved when Puck removes the spell from Lysander. In the enchanted wood one does not presume to ask if the magic powder will anchor Demetrius’s affections permanently to Helena, but at least its potency lasts until the nuptial knot is firmly tied. That is all the Comic Muse desires—a wedding—for matrimony is one of the sturdiest pillars of society.

Disguise is usually assumed for a serious purpose, even though much comedy results from it. Another series of laughable situations comes from deliberate fun—from various sorts of practical joking. Probably the most elaborate practical joke in Shakespearean comedy occurs in Twelfth Night, and it furnishes another excellent example of a woman’s serving the best interests of comedy by punishing a male transgressor against society. The woman is Maria, waiting woman to Olivia, and the man is Malvolio, Olivia’s steward. He has made himself fair game for comedy by an inordinate vanity, an ambition to be Olivia’s husband, and a puritan irritability toward the riotous merry-making of Sir Toby
Belch and his foolish friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Maria overhears his rebuke of the two drunken knights, and some spirit of mischief prompts her to play a joke upon him. Taking the knights into her confidence, she writes an anonymous note in a hand like Olivia's, and drops it in Malvolio's path. He is already daydreaming about what he will do as Count Malvolio, Olivia's husband, when he picks up the note hinting that one in lofty station loves him, and urging him to perform a number of antics all of which particularly annoy Olivia (although he, of course, does not know her sentiments on the subject). He is urged to wear yellow stockings, cross-gartered, to be surly with Sir Toby, to smile constantly, and to be familiar with his superiors. Only a thoroughly conceited man would take these injunctions seriously, but Malvolio is such a man. The letter has only confirmed what he had already secretly imagined.

The result, of course, is disastrous for him. When he appears before Olivia, cross-gartered, in yellow hose, smirking and quoting fragments of the letter, she is convinced that he is mad. Maria and Sir Toby are quick to support her decision, and the unfortunate steward is locked up. Maria is not satisfied to leave him there. Her jest is pleasing Sir Toby to such an extent that she has every opportunity of becoming his wife, and she bends her energies to improving her advantage. The clown is sent to torment him, first in the disguise of a curate and then in his own right. However, by this time the jest has worn thin, for Sir Toby
has incurred his niece's displeasure on other counts and he fears her anger when she discovers how her steward has been abused. The little farce is quickly ended.

In the sequel, Malvolio is cheated of his revenge. When he exposes the whole plot before Olivia in the final act, it is the humour of the situation which strikes her. "Alas, poor fool!" she smiles. "How have they baffled thee!" (V,i). The clown begins to mimic him, and Malvolio, snarling that he will "be revenged on the whole pack" of them, leaves the scene forever.

One's first emotion, I think, is sympathy for Malvolio who has been punished out of all proportion to his crime and then denied his revenge. Today we enjoy the discomfort of those who are "sick of self-love" and who look down their noses at harmless merriment, but we do not go so far as to lock them up as madmen and make a public mock of them. However, Malvolio is not a real person. He is a personified Humour, a caricature, and he must undergo severe comic discipline because of his serious departure from the normal pattern. It is particularly significant that a woman should have been chosen to wield the comic lash. Maria herself is no roisterer. She is the epitome of conventionality, and she was herself rebuking Sir Toby and his companions for their drunkenness when Malvolio made his unpopular entrance and took over her office. Nevertheless, she immediately recognized the greater sinner when he appeared, and she turned her attention to him at once. Like a true handmaiden of Comedy, she punished ab-
normal behaviour. Incidentally, she performed a second comic service in effecting her own marriage.

A situation somewhat analogous to this gulling of Malvolio exists between Cressida and Pandarus as they watch the Trojan heroes returning from battle. Pandarus is trying to impress his niece with the manifold charms of Troilus. He considers his method both tactful and subtle. She, however, is well aware of his purpose, and perversely determined to give him no satisfaction. Part of their dialogue has already been quoted in our discussion of speech (p. 51).

Pan. Hector shall not have his [Troilus's] wit this year.
Cres. He shall not need it, if he have his own.
Pan. Nor his qualities.
Cres. No matter.
Pan. Nor his beauty.
Cres. 'Twould not become him, his own's better.

Cres. Why, Paris hath colour enough.
Pan. So he has.
Cres. Then Troilus should have too much: if she praised him above, his complexion is higher than his; he having colour enough, and the other higher, is too flaming a praise for a good complexion. I had as lief Helen's golden tongue had commended Troilus for a copper nose.

(Troilus and Cressida, I,ii)

Pandarus is too intent on his own purpose to realize that Cressida is laughing at him. With contrary glee, she praises all the heroes who pass, while Pandarus attends with half an ear, straining his eyes for Troilus. When he finally does come by, Cressida sees him first, and says slyly, "What sneaking fellow comes yonder?" Pandarus misses this altogether in his obtuseness.
This situation is extremely comic for its many ironic undercurrents. What Pandarus does not know, and even Cressida will not admit, is that she is already interested in Troilus. Thus we have Pandarus applying all his cunning to forward, and Cressida using all her skill to defeat, a purpose that is already an accomplished thing. There is a wealth of deception to arouse the truth-loving soul of Comedy.

Another kind of practical joking is done with finger rings, the symbols of fidelity. Incidents involving them occur in The Merchant of Venice and All's Well That Ends Well. In the former play, the ring comedy begins immediately after Bassanio has made the successful choice of the caskets by which he wins Portia for his bride. In a pretty speech dedicating herself and her property to him, Portia says,

I give them with this ring;
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
(The Merchant of Venice, III, ii)

Merissa, who always follows her mistress's lead, at once gives a ring to Bassanio's man Gratiano with the same stipulation. Then the two men go their way, unsuspecting, their minds full of the calamity which is just then threatening Antonio at the hands of his determined creditor, Shylock.

The story of Portia's disguising herself as the young lawyer and ably pleading Antonio's defence is well known. Like Rosalind and Julia, she is completely unrecognized by her lover, who
accepts her in good faith as the youth Bellario whom she pretends to be. When he wishes to reward her for freeing his friend, Portia, sensing an opportunity for fun, asks for the ring. Bassanio at first protests, but when the supposed Bellario appears offended, Antonio persuades him to part with the ring, promising to explain the whole matter to Portia's satisfaction when he meets her. Gratiano, who is as much Bassanio's shadow as Nerissa is Portia's, similarly gives his ring to Bellario's page, who is, of course, none other than Nerissa.

Now the stage is set for comedy. As soon as the young husbands return home, their wives ask for the rings; and when they cannot be produced, both women at once pretend to suspect that their husbands have been unfaithful. "I'll die for it," says Portia, "but some woman had the ring!" (V,i). She goes further, telling Bassanio that "I will never come in your bed until I see the ring," and that "I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow."

These are speeches with a double meaning, as the audience well knows, but to Bassanio they have only one, and he is grievously worried for a time until Portia takes pity on him and confesses that she was the young doctor.

The situation in All's Well, though somewhat different, has the same basis. Helena has married Bertram against his will and he has sworn that he will never acknowledge her as his wife until she fulfills this seemingly impossible condition.
When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband; but in such a then I write a never.

(III,ii)

Foolish Bertram! All the time the Comic Muse is laughing at him! Helena has only to take the place of an innocent maiden whom the estimable Bertram is attempting to seduce, and to yield to him on condition that he give her his ring. She uses the ring to as much advantage as Portia does, for these mischievous wives are not averse to causing their assured young husbands a few moments' uneasiness. Indeed, Helena allows Bertram to be accused of her murder before she finally reveals herself.

The ring situations, like the rest, work to preserve normality in human relations. Bassanio has sworn that he never will part with the ring. This is to declare that life will conform to human reason, and to make no allowance for the unexpected. This is to make a mechanical thing of life; and, as Bergson has pointed out, to do that is to sow the seeds of comedy. Portia, being a woman, knows it too. She cannot resist the temptation to confront Bassanio with the unexpected. The Comic Muse laughs at him because he has tried to put life into a straight-jacket. Here, once again, is the woman serving the Comic Muse and laughing the man back into normality, back into a sane view of life where all does not happen

1- Bergson, op. cit., passim.
according to a set, mechanical pattern. The situation is essentially the same in *All’s Well*. Bertram, too, has been too sure of himself. He has dared the universe to upset his logical masculine reasoning, and the universe sends a woman to take up the dare. Here is the man who thought he could cut out his life to his own little pattern, laughs the Comic Muse. Here he is, and see what my Helena has done to him!

Another practical joke which Shakespeare uses at least twice is the substitution of one woman for another. We have already mentioned, when discussing the comedy of the rings, that Helena took the place of the innocent maiden Diana in the assignation which had been arranged with Bertram. One hardly needs to dwell on the obvious truth that Comedy is eager to discipline a young man who scorns his wife and bends his energies to seducing a virtuous maiden. By elementary strategy Helena is able to fulfill the seemingly impossible conditions which Bertram has placed in the way of their reconciliation. One does not wonder that the strategy worked, but one does wonder why Helena bothered, for young Bertram is as poor a bit of merchandise as ever appeared in the matrimonial market. However, Comedy is not concerned with matters of this kind. As long as the conventions have been satisfied, her function has been performed.

The second example of substitution is very much the same. It occurs in *Measure for Measure*. There Angelo has made Isabella’s honour the price for releasing her brother from the death cell,
and he is outwitted only when Mariana of the Moated Grange, a former fiancee whom he had basely deserted, takes Isabella's place. Mariana's action serves two purposes, for not only does it fulfil the condition which was supposed to save young Claudio's life, but it also wins her Angelo for her husband. Like Bertram, he seems to critical taste a bitter pill, but Helena and Mariana are easily satisfied in the matter of husbands.

One does not need to labour the point that in this matter of substitution the women are serving Comedy in the usual way. They are employing unusual means to bring an abnormal situation back to the normal. Through their agency, the sanctity of marriage is upheld and the flouters of the conventions—Bertram and Angelo—are made to toe the line.

The substitution device is not a pretty one, and Shakespeare does not employ it in his better plays. An even graver trick which he uses more often is the pretence of death. We might mention three instances. The first and best example occurs in Much Ado, when the impetuous Claudio has denounced Hero at the very altar and she has fallen in a swoon. At the priest's suggestion, her father announces publicly that the shock has killed her. When her innocence subsequently is established and Claudio is so overcome with remorse that he is anxious to do whatever penance the bereaved father can devise, old Leonato extends him pardon on the condition that he will marry a young woman of Leonato's choice. The bride produced is Hero, veiled. When
Claudio has declared his willingness to marry her, she confesses her identity, and so exposes the little deceit.

The second example is in *A Winter's Tale*. Here the old king Leontes, mad with unfounded jealousy, has brought his wife Hermione to public trial for adultery. When the Delphian oracle announces her innocence and the king still doubts, his only son is struck dead as a divine rebuke. The queen swoons upon hearing the news of his death; and shortly thereafter her faithful lady-in-waiting Paulina announces that she, too, has died. Protected by this false information, Paulina is then able to conceal the queen for a matter of sixteen years. At the close of the play, when old Leontes has been sufficiently humbled, and when he has been reunited with his daughter whom he had ordered to be exposed in infancy, Paulina invites him and some of the court to view a statue of Hermione which she has just unveiled. While all are exclaiming at the reality of the marble, and at the strangeness of the artist's conceit in making Hermione appear sixteen years older than when she died, the statue steps down from her pedestal and embraces the repentant Leontes. Thus Hermione returns to life amid general rejoicing.

The third instance comes from *All's Well*, and once more concerns Helena. Helena employs almost every possible device in her pursuit of the reluctant Bertram, and among her wiles is the pretence of death. Her little trick almost turns out tragically, for not only is Bertram on the verge of marrying someone else when
she decides to prove that he really is not a widower, but he is also about to be tried for her supposed murder.

Glancing back over the three examples, one notices that they are all employed under the same circumstances: through some act of injustice a man has threatened the safety of a marriage. Immediately the woman who is about to suffer undeservedly feigns death, and by this device she is able, sooner or later, to save the matrimonial bark and to launch it safely again. The Comic Muse and the woman join hands to preserve the social conventions.

A practical joke which stands by itself is the gulling of that sadly transformed John Falstaff by Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Falstaff richly deserves comic chastisement for he is attempting to seduce these two worthy wives; and the punishment which he receives at their hands is indeed adequate. Pretending to favour his suit, Mrs. Ford entices him into her home on two occasions. Then Mrs. Page gives the alarm that Mr. Ford is coming, and Falstaff is ejected from the house under humiliating circumstances. On his third attempt he is duped into exposing himself completely before the whole neighbourhood, and he must endure their laughter and ridicule. Thus convention is vindicated by these two merry wives.

A pleasanter joke in the same play occurs in the elopement of Mrs. Page's daughter Anne. This girl has been wooed by three suitors, one favoured by her father, one by her mother, and one by herself. In the final scene, where a masquerade is essential
to the exposure of Falstaff, Anne's parents plan to outwit each other in the matter of their daughter's marriage. Mrs. Page tells her husband that Anne's costume will be white, and thereupon he instructs his favoured suitor to abduct the lady in white. However, Mrs. Page has suspected his design and has prepared for it. Cunningly instructing Anne to wear green, she advises her favoured suitor to abduct the lady in green. Mrs. Page is a successful schemer where Falstaff is concerned, but her own daughter is more than a match for her. Perhaps heredity is at work here! Whatever the explanation may be, Anne, in a costume of her own devising, elopes with young Fenton, thus outwitting both parents. We find this turning of the tables delightful partly for the same reason that we enjoy the discomfiture of Bassanio and of Bertram over the matter of the rings. Mr. and Mrs. Page have sought to play Fate, and the Comic Spirit has frustrated them as a rebuke for their presumption. Life is not mechanical; allowance must be made for the unexpected: these are the lessons that Comedy teaches them.

The tricks which Comedy plays to further the cause of true love are legion. She prompts Hero, a quiet and unimaginative girl, to prepare a conversation for the ears of eaves-dropping Beatrice—a conversation which leads Beatrice to drop her scornful attitude to Benedict. This is a straightforward bit of practical joking, clearly designed to promote a marriage. Sometimes the ways of comedy are not so obvious. When Mrs. Quickley under-
takes to further the suits of all three of Anne Page's lovers, declaring:

I would my master had mistress Anne; or I would
master Slender had her; or, in sooth, I would
master Fenton had her; I will do what I can for
them all three; for so I have promised; and I'll
be as good as my word; but speciously for master
Fenton.--

(III, iv)

we are amused without doubt, but the source of our amusement is
not at once apparent. Perhaps we are laughing at this excess of
zeal on the part of a priestess to Convention. One maid and one
lover make an ideal combination. One maid and three lovers are
the stuff of comedy. The extra lovers constitute too much of a
good thing. The suggestion that, if one husband is good, three
are three times as good is ridiculously delightful.

We have now examined situations made funny through disguise
and through practical joking. Another sort of comic situation
occurs in Love's Labour's Lost and in Much Ado About Nothing.
This has to do with letters, for the dupes of comedy, like wealthy
young men enamoured of unscrupulous actresses, never learn to
keep pen from paper! We should have expected more restraint from
a hard-headed pair like Beatrice and Benedict, but what do they
do but commit to paper all the tender sentiments which they scorn
to voice to each other! At the end of the play, when they are
still wrangling, these letters are produced to give the lie to
their scornful words, and they can do nothing but step gracefully
into the Hymeneal snare. Characteristically, however, they yield
with a spirited jest still on their lips:

Bene. A miracle; here's our own hands against
our hearts!—Come, I will have thee; but,
by this light, I take thee for pity.
Beat. I would not deny you;—but, by this good
day, I yield upon great persuasion; and,
partly, to save your life, for I was told
you were in a consumption. (V,iv)

Very much the same situation occurs in Love's Labour's
Lost. Four young men have been so foolish as to swear that they
will have no dealings with women for three years. "No woman
shall come within a mile of my court," declares the young King of
Navarre, "on pain of losing her tongue." (I,i). This "dread
penalty" they consider sufficient to free them from molestation
by the fair sex. Here, of course, is an unnatural situation which
fairly cries out for the saving sanity of comedy. No sooner do
a fair princess and her three ladies appear at the castle gates
than the four misogynists lose their hearts. Unwilling to admit
their weakness to each other, they separately commit their con­
fessions of love to paper. When by an inevitable accident they
discover each other's sonnets, the whole foolish hypocrisy is
exposed. Once again the man's hand is produced to belie his
spoken word. A further twist to the comedy is given when Biron's
letter to Rosaline, and Don Adriano's letter to the country wench
Jaquenetta are exchanged in delivery.

The jokes at the expense of Benedict and Beatrice, and of
the four young noblemen, come as a disciplinary act because they
have been acting unnaturally. They have committed the most heinous of all comic crimes: they have dared to deny love. It is fitting that their own letters should be brought forth to confound them.

In *Much Ado*, Beatrice is as much the victim of the Comic Muse as Benedict is. She, too, has been guilty of abnormal behaviour. This, then, is an instance in which the woman comes under the displeasure of the Muse of Comedy. With the man, she must pass under the rod. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, however, the women are at least indirectly responsible for the downfall of the monastic scheme, for they do not believe in foolish plans for hermit life, and they are amused from the beginning at the ideals of the quartet. They are on the side of the Comic Muse who laughs the youths back to sanity.

As a final example of comedy in situation, let us consider the taming of Katharine by Petruchio. Other men had treated Kate in one of two ways: either they had let her have her unreasonable way in all things, or they had quarrelled with her, losing their tempers and thus their advantages. Petruchio's method is original. Toward all her tantrums he is incredibly obtuse. He chooses to interpret everything that she says as a courteous remark; and, rave as she may, she can make no impression on him. The courtship is wild and stormy on her side, but bland on his. After a preliminary skirmish of wits, he informs her:

'Twas told me, you were rough, and coy, and sullen,
And now I find report a very liar;
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
But slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time flowers:
Thou canst not frown, thou canst not look askance,
Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will;
Nor hast thou pleasure to be cross in talk;
But thou with mildness entertainst thy wooers,
With gentle conference, soft and affable.

This outrageous assertion is so contrary to the truth that Kate is left aghast. One suspects that she is not so reluctant as she pretends, to entertain this mad youth as a suitor. At any rate, the wedding day is set.

Petruchio's methods are not subtle, but they are effective. Katharine has been so extravagant a shrew that the Comic Muse must sentence her to severe discipline. Her chastisement is merciless. Petruchio appears at the wedding very late and very dirty, and he hurries Kate away before the wedding breakfast, effectively silencing her angry protests by this ridiculous outcry to his servant:

Grumio
Draw forth thy weapon, we are beset with thieves;
Rescue thy mistress, if thou be a man:—
Fear not, sweet wench, they shall not touch thee, Kate;
I'll buckler thee against a million.

So they leave her father's house.

At his home, Petruchio deprives his wife of food, drink and sleep, always under the pretence that he is protecting her from some unpleasantness. At last she is driven to something like humility by the excess of her hunger, and Petruchio's next battle is won. The last is over a new dress and hat that Petruchio has ordered for her from a tailor, and that he criticizes beyond all reason. Once more Kate's temper flares:
Why, sir, I trust, I may have leave to speak; And speak I will. I am no child, no babe; Your betters have endur'd me say my mind; And, if you cannot, best you stop your ears. My tongue will tell the anger of my heart; Or else my heart, concealing it, will break; And rather than it shall, I will be free Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words. (IV,iii)

This speech costs her both hat and gown, and is almost her last attempt at resistance. It teaches Kate once and for all that this mad man who has become her husband cannot be handled with her old tools; and she is intelligent enough to forge new ones. She becomes unexpectedly meek, even to the point of agreeing that the moon is the sun if Petruchio would have it so.

On the journey to her father's home, Petruchio gives the one-time shrew a final test, but she is not to be trapped. An old man meets them on the road, and Petruchio calls Kate's attention to the beauty of this "fair maid". Kate addresses the pilgrim at once:

Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet, Whither away; or where is thy abode? (IV,v)

Petruchio, basely deserting her, exclaims in shocked horror:

Why, how now, Kate? I hope thou art not mad; This is a man, old, wrinkled, faded, wither'd;

and she says at once:

Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes,...... Now I perceive thou art a reverend father.

Hortensio, who is accompanying the young couple, is overjoyed at Petruchio's victory, and he cannot refrain from murmuring,

"Petruchio, go thy ways; the field is won."
I suspect, however, that Kate herself is enjoying the humour of the situation by this time. Once she has made up her mind to cast aside her "curstness", she enters into her new role with a zest which belies any suggestion that Petruchio has broken her old spirit. He has merely directed it into new channels. If this were not so, there would be no need for her to go to the extravagant lengths which she does in acting her new part. For instance, Petruchio would not have required her to carry the flight of fancy about the identity of the old man to the extremes to which she pushes it:

Happy the parents of so fair a child;
Happier the man, whom favourable stars
Allot thee for his lovely bed-fellow!
(IV,v)

I am sure that Katharine thoroughly enjoys the final scene. There must have been a demure smile at the corners of her mouth when she helped Petruchio win his wager. By this time Bianca was wed. When Kate and Petruchio returned to Kate's old home, they found Bianca, her husband Lucentio, and another bride and groom. The three young husbands bet on the obedience of their wives. It is extremely ironic and amusing that Bianca and Katharine should have changed roles for this final scene, for Bianca turns upon Lucentio with something of her sister's old shrewishness, and Kate, humbly obeying Petruchio in everything, even to treading on her new bonnet, demurely delivers to the two indignant brides a lecture on wifely obedience (V,i).
Petruchio congratulates himself on having "tamed a curst shrew", and his friends accord him full measure of awe and admiration. I am inclined to suspect that Kate really has the last laugh, for she is an intelligent woman, and she will probably continue to have her own way in important matters, only using guile instead of temper now. However that may be, she has had to endure the mockery of the Comic Muse, and she has been made to curb her tongue.

The tables are turned in The Taming of the Shrew, for the Comic Muse has worked through a man in order to bring a woman into line. It is a woman who has flouted the conventions and a man who has upheld them.

Let us glance back over this somewhat confused welter of comic situations, and see whether we can discover some kind of pattern into which they will all fit. Although varied in detail, they seem to rest on a common foundation. Every comic situation—whether resulting from disguise, from practical joking, from misunderstanding, or from accident—rests ultimately upon deception. Some character or characters in the drama are deceived either deliberately or unintentionally. When the heroines dress as men, their lovers do not penetrate the disguise; when Maria writes her letter, Malvolio does not suspect that he is being fooled; when Petruchio pretends to misunderstand Kate, she takes him seriously; when Portia scolds Bassanio for his failure to produce her ring,
he takes the situation at its face value; when Hero and Hermione feign death, Claudio and Leontes are utterly deceived. Deception, thus, lies at the root of all these situations. What is funny about deception? Nothing, if there is no one standing by with a superior knowledge. The prerequisite to humour in all these situations is the omniscience of the audience. We are not deceived. All along we have been taken into the confidence of the deceivers. Hence our amusement. Our pleasure seems to have a double cause. Partly it lies in anticipation. There is undeniably great joy to be derived from seeing a comic trap set, and watching unsuspecting persons fall into it. The whole affair is extremely fitting. The mischievous preparation, and the inevitable fulfilment of the plan, furnish intense delight. We know what is going to happen, but we want very much to see it happen, and to see how those who did not share our knowledge will react. We like to see other people surprised. The whole matter is mechanical as Bergson would say. Everything goes like clock-work, and we laugh.

The second source of our pleasure is allied to this, and yet different. It springs from a feeling of complacency on the part of the audience. We sit, like gods, over-looking a puppet world. We feel intensely superior to these actors who never suspect the real state of affairs until they have got into all sorts of comic misunderstandings. The "sudden glory" that wells up in all of us when we see another making a fool of himself at a safe distance and in a way which has no damaging effect upon ourselves
but rather serves to highlight our superior wisdom—this is a great source of comic satisfaction.

These are the pleasures which come from foreknowledge. However, it is possible to derive much amusement from the unexpected in a situation as well. We are constantly being delighted by this, too, in the actions just discussed, for while we share the practical joker's confidence, we never know more than she does. We know that a funny situation is about to occur, but the details of its handling come as a surprise and so give us additional pleasure. For instance, a certain amount of our pleasure in Rosalind's disguise results from the unexpected benefits which she is able to wrest from it. However, surprise is relatively unimportant in these situations. Anticipation plays a much larger part in the enjoyment of them.

The happy ending is, of course, another source of satisfaction. Every audience likes to see true love triumph, and rejoices in the host of weddings which closes every Shakespearean comedy. Indeed, so strong is this popular demand, that the dramatist often goes to ridiculous lengths to satisfy it. Better any sort of marriage than none at all. Thus Helena wins her Bertram, Mariana her Angelo, and even Paulina is rewarded with a totally unexpected spouse as the curtain falls on A Winter's Tale.

We have paused as we examined each comic situation to fit it into the social pattern. It is perhaps necessary to emphasize here the difference between the purpose of comedy and the cause of
laughter. We laugh for the causes that we have seen—anticipation, superiority, surprise, satisfaction. Our laughter serves, usually, to anchor society more firmly on its basis of convention. It is always the abnormal that, in the final analysis, awakens laughter. It is always normality that is restored when that laughter has accomplished its purpose.
Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusion

That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done!
(All's Well, I,iii)

It remains, now, to gather up the threads of our thesis. At the outset we stated that our purpose was to discover the function of women in Shakespeare's comedy, to decide whether it differed from that of men, and, if so, in what way. It was also suggested, at that time, that we might find woman a civilizing
influence, a supporter of the conventions. We hoped to discover that she was in sympathy with the purpose of comedy as George Meredith saw it: that is, that she wanted to protect society from excesses. Let us see, now, whether these ideas have been borne out by our investigation of the plays.

We acquainted ourselves, first of all, with the character of the comic heroine. We found her a delightful companion, and it seemed to us that the secret of her charm is her glorious freedom, the quality which she possesses in abundance and which we most lack and admire. If she is a court lady, we identify ourselves with her, and so escape the fetters of our own environment. She carries us out of ourselves, and transports us to a world where all things are possible to us, where life is a game, where even sorrow is amusing because it is only a shadow, after all, which will be blown away suddenly before a gust of laughter. If she is a female clown, she delights us for the opposite reason: she magnifies us in our own eyes, making our wisdom great beside her unwisdom, and our folly insignificant before her vast reservoir of imbecility. The inevitability of her mechanical responses to certain stimuli creates mirth because of the fun that is inherent in any repetition carried to extreme lengths. It is her very limitation which is funny. Just as the court lady is freer than nature, so is the female clown more limited. Either extreme charms the audience by contrast with its own lot, for the one offers vicarious escape and the other a flattering of the ego. The woman in comedy contributes something from her character alone.
Does she give us something that the man in comedy does not? Has she a power not granted to the Falstaffs and the Mercutios and the Touchstones of the comic stage? Fundamentally, she has not. Mercutio possesses the same unlimited range of fancy, the same enviable imperviousness to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the same boundless relish for life, as Rosalind; and Speed has the same delightful stupidity and faculty for mechanical repetition that is the fountainhead of the babbling brook whom we know as Mrs. Quickley. Yet, at the same time, simply because a woman is not a man, she contributes something to comedy that it would lack without her. She adds the feminine complement to the masculine comic character. Is her touch lighter, softer? Perhaps. A Mrs. Quickley is not a Falstaff, but neither could Falstaff ever be Dame Quickley. Comedy needs them both to be complete.

Then we studied the speech of the women in Shakespeare's comedy, and again, in the case of the court lady, it was the free range of imagination, the audacity which need not fear tragic consequences, the whimsical juxtaposition of incongruities, the lightning interplay of wit, which charmed and dazzled us. Just as her character was freer than ours, so was her speech quicker and cleverer, and more unpredictable. Unexpectedness delighted us, too, in the speech of the female clown. Where her courtly sister excited envy and admiration in us, she awoke rather a sort of loving contempt and superiority; but we could no more predict
her next remark than we could forecast the flight of Rosalind's imagination. The unexpectedness, the freedom, in the women's speech lay at the bottom of their power to delight.

Again, in this respect, how do the men in comedy compare with the women? Fundamentally the wares that they offer are the same. Falstaff's eleven men in buckram, and Beatrice's willingness to eat all of Benedict's killing—where is the choice? Perhaps in the field of clowning, there is no one among the men who is solemn and unconscious of his comic purpose as the female clowns are. Much of the humour of their speeches springs from the serious intention behind them; but when Parolles or Touchstone or even Speed speaks, there is a merry twinkle in the eye, and a consciousness of fun which invites the audience to share the joke. Thus the female clown perhaps does more to produce the "sudden glory" of which Hobbes spoke, than does her male counterpart, for she never offers her audience that sly wink which intimates that she is laughing with them at herself. They have nothing in common with her, and when she speaks, their laughter is unmixed with sympathy, as perhaps it is not when they laugh at the quips of a male clown. Aside from this, however, she and he make the same sort of comic appeal. While one amuses deliberately, and the other unconsiously, thereby creating a difference of degree in mirth, both are the same in kind: both are obscene, garrulous, unpredictable.
Our third point of contact with the women of comedy was in action. There we found the court ladies, as in character and speech, possessed of unlimited freedom. They can move mountains. Whether it is rescuing an Antonio from the clutches of a ruthless Shylock, or winning a lover in spite of hardship and disguise, or punishing a transgressor against the conventions, there is nothing that they cannot accomplish. We have, indeed, found them sometimes worsted in action, as Katharine the Shrew was made to yield to Petruchio, but even then there was no curbing of her spirit, no crushing of her proud will. Rather there was only a change of its direction into ways more acceptable to the convention-loving Comic Muse. Beatrice, the professed hater of men, stepped into the gilded cage of matrimony with a mocking jest on her lips that did not smack of defeat or humiliation, and Katharine preached so extreme a sermon on wifely obedience that one sensed the energy of her "curstness" merely translated into a new extravagance, more acceptable to society, and not curbed at all. In the field of action there is no essential difference between the appeals made by court lady and clown. Both are free to the uttermost. Neither can come to lasting harm, and both pass through trials and dangers unscathed. Whether it is Dame Quickley, in the clutches of the law, threatening the constables:

O that sir John were come! he would make
this a bloody day to somebody.  
(Henry IV, Pt. 2, V, vii)

or Helena, deserted by her newly won husband without even the kiss
which is the token when all but "strangers and foes do sunder" (All's Well, II,5)—the same superiority to circumstance marks them. The bludgeonings of chance leave their heads, not only unbowed, but quite unscathed.

Comedy is not always so kind to her men. Mercutio, when he is called for tomorrow, is found to be, indeed, a "grave" man; and Falstaff is left to die of grief and disillusionment from the politic rejection of his erstwhile boon companion, the new king. When these things happen, however, they lift us rudely out of the comic atmosphere. Mercutio's death heralds a more severe tragedy to come, and Falstaff dies in a historical drama whose prime function is not comic. In the lighter plays the men are given their share of happiness just as the women are. When they are taking part in comic action, we find their appeal that of the women. Falstaff turns his shameful flight from the scene of robbery into a glorious tale of victory, and Mercutio makes even his death the subject of a pun.

We have tried to study the function of woman in comedy under the three headings: character, speech, and situation. What have we found out about her contribution in each field? If we look back carefully over the path by which we have come, it becomes more and more apparent that our division has been only an arbitrary one, useful for the sake of organization, but hardly justified in actual fact. Whenever we have tried to discuss woman under any one of the headings, we have found the other two
constantly creeping in. Actually, can any bit of comedy be di-
vorced entirely from character, or from speech, or from situa-
tion? So far as the women of Shakespeare are concerned, at least, it would seem not. We laugh at Beatrice’s witty remark,

In sooth, Adam’s sons are my brethren,
and I hold it a sin to match in my kindred—

(\textit{Much Ado}, II,i)

but would the speech not lose some of its power to delight if we were unaware of the saucy, irrepressible spirit of Beatrice herself, or of the embarrassing situation into which her previous chatter had got her, and out of which this quick-witted rejoinder rescued her? Again, does Mrs. Quickley’s part in young Master Page’s Latin lesson gain its sole humour from the dialogue itself, or does it not owe a great deal to what we know of Mrs. Quickley’s garrulous stupidity?

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Evans.} I pray you, have your remembrance, shild; accusative, hing, hang, hog.
  \item \textbf{Quick.} Hang hog is Latin for bacon, I warrant you.
  \item \textbf{Evans.} Leave your prabbles ‘oman. What is the vocative case, William?
  \item \textbf{Will.} O—vocative, 0.
  \item \textbf{Evans.} Remember, William, vocative is, caret.
  \item \textbf{Quick.} And that’s a good root.
  \item \textbf{Evans.} ‘Oman, forbear.
  \item \textbf{Page.} Peace.
  \item \textbf{Evans.} What is your genitive case plural, William?
  \item \textbf{Will.} Genitive case?
  \item \textbf{Evans.} Ay.
  \item \textbf{Will.} Benitive,—horum, harum, horum.
  \item \textbf{Quick.} ‘Vengeance of Jenny’s case! fie on her!—never name her, child, if she be a whore.

(\textit{Merry Wives of Windsor}, IV,i)
\end{itemize}

Humour springs, not from character or from speech or from situa-
tion separately, but from all three together. Humour springs from
character as it is expressed in speech and in action. The three elements have, in the language of the scientist, a natural affinity for one another; they fuse on contact and are henceforth inseparable parts of one body.

Through this mingling of character, speech and action, what does the woman contribute to comedy? This is our central problem, and I think that the answer has been shaping itself through our whole examination of the plays. When Rosalind, concealed in the clothing of Ganymede, gaily challenges Orlando:

Come woo me, woo me, for now I am in holiday humour and like enough to consent;
(As You Like It, IV,i)

when Portia pleads with Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
(The Merchant of Venice, IV,i)

when Viola sits at the feet of her obtuse duke and tells him her pathetic little falsehood:

My father had a daughter loved a man
As it might be, were I a woman,
I should your lordship;
(Twelfth Night, II,iv)

when Maria scribbles the note in her mistress's handwriting and drops it in the path of the man who thought, because he was virtuous, there should be no more cakes and ale—what fundamental motive lies behind all their actions? Is it not the desire to vindicate the conventions? Do they not, one and all, want to bring society back to the normal state—to make the course of true love run smoothly into matrimony, or to bring about justice among
men, or to reduce a man to a state of humility more in keeping
with his actual circumstances that was his former mood of com-
placent conceit? Undoubtedly it is so. The same motive lies
behind the garbled advice of Juliet's Nurse when Romeo is banished
and a second suitor advanced by Juliet's parents:

Romeo's a dishclout to him; an eagle, madam,
Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye
As Paris hath. Beshrew my very heart,
I think you are happy in this second match,
For it excels your first: or if it did not,
Your first is dead; or 'twere as good he were,
As living here and you no use of him;

(Romeo and Juliet, III,v)

and behind Mrs. Quickley's desire to have no "swaggering" in her
respectable home. Let us bring order to this untidy world.
Let every maid have her man, and let every tale end happily.
Let the proud be humbled, and the wronged vindicated. Let the
loose ends be worked neatly into the pattern, and let us set our
house in order. This is the ideal of most women in comedy.
"The laughter directed by the Comic Spirit is a harmless wine,
conducing to sobriety in the degree that it enlivens."¹

There are cases, of course, in which the woman satisfies
the conventions rather in spite of her own efforts than because
of them. There is Katharine the Shrew whose proud spirit must
be humbled into obedience to a husband. There is Beatrice, whose
mockery of love and marriage must also be comically punished.
These women are the victims of Comedy, not her agents, and yet

¹- George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, op. cit., p. 145
they serve her ends no less effectively than do the others—for when their stories close, they are on the side of convention, upholding it with fervour. Beatrice yields on persuasion—but yet she yields. Katharine treads on her new bonnet and lectures her sister on wifely obedience. In every case we return to the tidiness of a well-ordered society when the comedy is played out.

Here we find the men quite out of harmony with the women. Falstaff has no desire to preserve society. He drinks his sack with a fine carelessness of health and propriety, he consorts with thieves and women of ill repute, he dismisses honour as a "mere scutcheon", and behaves in battle like a man who had, indeed, done so. Mercutio is a dashing young nobleman whose interests are in joking and fighting, not in morality. Most of the male clowns behave with cheerful unscrupulousness, cheating a gullible public as Autolycus does, or deceiving a dashing young master as Launce and Speed do; or else they simply jest on all subjects without a purpose beyond that of creating merriment. This, of course, is to dismiss the men of comedy summarily. There is much more to their conduct than this—but that much more lies beyond our present scope. The point to be remarked here is that they are not concerned about the social conventions.

When we come to the end of our Shakespearean comedy, then, and close the book on all those enchanting pages of gaiety, magic, nonsense and charm, with the steady social purpose which underlies them like the rich, warm soil in which are rooted the flowers that
nod and dance in the summer breezes—when we think back over what we have learned, the wonder is not, as Helena's clown marvelled, "that men should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done", but rather that it should ever be thought that the world could keep on an even keel without the steadying feminine hand at the helm. Let the men flee from matrimony to enlist in foreign wars; let them, unable to think of anything more constructive to do when their world has flown to bits, carve love-sonnets on tree trunks; let them borrow money and set out on a hopeless quest to buy their friends out of difficulties. It is the women whose feet are on the ground all this time. It is the women who tread the paths of sanity, perhaps laughing at life all the while, but nonetheless determined that the foundation on which society rests will be held firm. We find them pursuing the errant husband; bringing the romantic lover round to a solid declaration of love; rescuing the doomed friend from the very jaws of disaster. We find, indeed, that man should be at woman's command, if society is to be kept stable!
Selected Bibliography


19. Mrs. Jameson, Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical, Saunders & Otley, Conduit Street, London, 1833


27. Thomas Love Peacock, *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1903 (particularly *Crochet Castle*)


41. John Weiss, *Wit, Humor, and Shakespeare*, Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1889


*Main books of reference*