

*Sympathetic Engagement And
Detached Ridicule In The **Comedy Of
Errors** And **A Midsummer Night's
Dream***

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the development of shakespeare's dramatic technique in his two comedies: **The Comedy of Errors**, and **A Midsummer Night's Dream**.

In the **Comedy of Errors** the audience hardly ever has a chance to get involved in the action of the play; and very few characters engage our sympathy - if they do, then it is only for a brief space of time. The spectators remain as detached observers deriving much fun from the intrigues and the farcial situations.

By the time Shakespeare wrote **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, approximately three years later, farce has been much reduced, to be replaced by a lyricism which fills the audience with wonder. Moreover, characters such as Oberon, Puck, and Bottom and their dreamy speeches engage our sympathies and linger in our mind long after the play has been read or seen.

I. Introduction

It is an established fact in Shakespeare criticism that the early comedies were more or less exercises in current dramatic fashions - nobody, therefore, is likely to claim that such early plays are among Shakespeare's greatest works. But they are certainly good entertainment, and are of particular interest because in them we can detect early versions of techniques, language, and characters that reappear more fully developed in later works.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was written approximately three years after and several plays later than **The Comedy of Errors**, so it is only natural that Shakespeare's dramatic technique should have developed from one play to the other. A great deal of Shakespeare's work involves building on his previous plays, reworking his themes into new combinations, gradually maturing and gaining depth as he goes along. Even in his early plays, we can trace this, and though the difference in time is relatively small between **The Comedy of Errors** and **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, we can already see the direction in which Shakespeare is moving in his comedies. Generally, this movement can be characterised by an inclination away from the realm of farce towards the realm of poetry, an inclination which was later to manifest itself in the separation of these elements into two different levels - the 'poetic' and 'noble' main plot, and the 'far-cical' and 'low' sub-plot. But that is a later development. As yet, the two are still intermingled, still part and parcel of the play itself, and they come in many guises.

II. Sympathetic Element in The Comedy of Errors

Shakespeare's main source for **The Comedy of Errors** was plautus' **Menaechmus**! However, where Shakespeare uses the characters from his classical source he manages to transform these cardboard figures that masquerade for our amusement - puppets in the dramatist's hands - into men of flesh and blood. This transformation is shown in the character of Adriane. Though based on the stock character of the Shrew, she nevertheless touches us through her suffering as we realise that her anxiety is real. We cannot laugh as we listen to her speak to Antipholus - for a moment her words reach us; we hear her with engagement. It is only as the speech ends and we turn to the bewildered Antipholus - the wrong Antipholus - that we distance ourselves and laugh at her intimate disclosure to a complete stranger:

How dearly would it touch you to the quick,
Shouldst thou hear I were licentious,
And that this body, consecrate to thee,
By ruffian lust should be contaminate? (II.ii:130-34)²

Taken in their general context, these words are very funny - but behind them we can sense the appeal of a woman who knows her marriage is not working, and does not know what to do about it. Later, her sincerity is affirmed when we notice her fear as Dromio rushes in to ask for the money to release his master from imprisonment. With immediate concern she cries: "Where is thy master, Dromio: Is he well?" (IV.ii:32). "I'm press'd down with conceit" (IV.ii:65), she adds, as she watches the messenger depart.

But we see her at her most appealing in her confrontation with the Abbess. Believing that her husband is mad she promises "I will attend my husband, be his nurse,/ Diet his sickness, for it is my office." (V.i.:98). Deprived of her husband she turns to the Duke, pleading "prostrate at his feet" (V.i.:114) for the release of Antipholus to be "borne hence for help" (V.i.:160). And thus, when her husband **is** returned to her, we do feel that after all she has suffered a great deal.

The second character who stands out among the slapstick and tomfoolery is Luciana, who acts "as a foil to his presentation of a jealous wife" (Traversi, 1962:75). Deeply concerned about her sister she advocates the traditional view of marriage based on male superiority. She accepts that men are "more divine" (II.i.:20) and, therefore, "masters to their females and their lords". (II.i.:24). Her advice to Antipholus of Syracuse, whom she mistakes for her brother-in-law, also shows her deep concern for her sister's happiness: "... if you like elsewhere, do it by stealth;/ Muffle your false love with some show of blindness;" (III.ii:7-8). H.B. Charlton in a telling analysis makes the contrast between the two sisters clear. He says:

Adriane is the shrew realistically sketched in the routine of housewifery, complaining, bullying servants, seeing to dinner, and querulously shouting her troubles to the street. Luciana is a singing mermaid, spreading o'er the silver waves the echoes of her song and wisps of golden hair as a bed whereon her love may lie. Not even Shakespeare can make sisters of two such beings. They are of different family, and indeed of different race, if not of different species. (Charlton, 1967:70-71).

It is not Luciana, however, who introduces the emotional undercurrent but rather Antipholus of Syracuse. Here the love theme, so dominant in **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, is touched upon briefly, and we can enjoy for a moment the beauty of Antipholus' speech:

Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote,
Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
And as a bed I'll take them, and there lie...

(III.i:47-9)

The one sympathetic note in the **Comedy of Errors**, however, is provided by Egeon who, according to Charlton is not so much a 'Figure in the play as a prologue and an epilogue to it.' (Charlton, 1967:72). Oddly enough, **The Comedy of Errors**, despite its title, begins on a highly serious level. Few opening words could be more solemn than the opening words delivered by Egeon: "Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall,/ And by the doom of death and woes and all." (I.i:1-2). Throughout the first scene we wonder if Shakespeare did not trick us after all, or if the title was perhaps intended ironically. Why call a play a comedy when it starts with a tale of woe and suffering? Long speeches, lofty words, and a definite attempt to gain our sympathy, a scene ending

"Hopeless and helpless" (I.i:157): all these do not point to laughter. Indeed, Egeon's description of the storm and the subsequent loss of his wife and son is full of tragic overtones. The most touching moment in the play, however, and a foreshadowing of the truly tragic agony of **King Lear** is the cry of anguish uttered by Egeon as, at the point of death, his 'son' fails to recognise him:

Not know my voice! O time's extremety,
Hast thou so cracked and splitted my poor tongue
In seven short years, that here my only son
Knows not my feeble key of untun'd cares? (V.i:308-11)

and

... but perhaps, my son,
Thou sham'st to acknowledge me in misery. (V.i:321-2)

Although we know everything will turn out for the best, the agony of this man is apparent to us, and our heart goes out to him. Full of sympathy, we watch the family reunite - the Abbess, after thirty-three years "gone to travail" (V.i:401) once again finds happiness. It is a beautiful moment, full of harmony and peace, and we feel part of it. In the end, it is this scene of participation, or sympathy with the characters, that has the last word:

We came into the world like brother and brother;
And now lets go hand in hand, not one before the other.
(V.i:425-6)

III. Elements of Ridicule in the Comedy of Errors

The frame, however, can never make the painting, and within the play is something rather different. There, the audience is invited to forget the painful world of emotion and simply sit back, and, unreservedly, laugh. As Ifor Evans points out, "incident and coincident dominate, not sentiment and imagination" (Evans, 1966:18). The whole situation from beginning to end, is preposterous. Two sets of identical twins in the same place? what is more, the play "depends on the unlikely double premise that the two Antipholuses and the two Dromios will not meet each other." (Swindon, 1970:25). And so we have entries and exits, quarrels, madmen rushing in with swords drawn and masters locked out of their own homes. Not an ounce of sympathy do we feel for Antipholus of Ephesus as he shouts "I pray you let me in". "By my troth," says S. Dromio, "Your town is troubled with unruly boys!" (III.i:62). The angrier Antipholus becomes, the harder we laugh, as we laugh over the confusion caused by the chain, when Antipholus of Syracuse appears wearing openly "that self-same chain about his neck/ Which he foreswore most monstrously to have" (V.i:10-11). Two characters are flabbergasted here - neither Antonio nor Angelo can make any sense of the other's words, and the irony increases two-fold for us, who god-like see everything that is happening. Of course, the most farcical part of the play is that when Dromio, "due to a woman", tries with desperation to escape that "beastly creature" (III.ii:88), Lucè. To

Dromio, it is a serious matter - he would, in fact, be willing to remain in Ephesus "but for a mountain of flesh that claims marriage" of him (IV.iv:156-7). It is therefore, with great relief, that he tells his brother at the end of the play:

There is a fat friend at your master's house,
That kitchen'd me for you today at dinner:
She now shall be my sister, not my wife. (V.i:417-20)

IV. Lyricism and Fancy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Turning to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we find a "strange admixture of farce with fancy" (Swinburn, 1908:11) as we do in *Comedy of Errors*. But comic as the play is, we notice that the farce has been much reduced, to be replaced by a lyricism which fills us less with laughter than with a sense of wonder. The world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "is fairy-ridden, and its inhabitants are apt to the witchery of love. It's natural instruments are magic philtres and mischievous Pucks. It is avanescent as a dream, a midsummer fantasia." (Charlton, 1967:112).

The number of sympathetic characters has increased. There are the two pairs - Titania and Oberon, and Theseus and Hippolyta - who command at least our attention. The relationship between Oberon and Titania could easily have developed into a farcical fight over the boy in the hands of a less subtle writer. However, Shakespeare seems to wish us to see them as responsible persons, whose quarrels can upset the whole balance of nature and can bring dismay unto the people of the woods. In addition, the language used by Oberon prevents us from seeing him as an object of ridicule. There is no possibility of the audience taking a patronising attitude towards this omnipotent figure who seems to be, in many ways, directing the action of the play. When under the influence of Oberon's magic, Titania is made to look not so much comical as pathetic, so that Oberon remarks: "Her dotage now I do begin to pity". (IV.i:47)

The other pair, Theseus and Hippolyta, do not appear much, but their function seems to be to define a mood of lyricism; Hippolyta in her first speech seems almost to be weaving a spell:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four days will quickly dream away the time... (I.i: 6-7)

Theseus emerges as a strong man of action, and though at first we partly condemn him for meting out such a harsh sentence on Hermia we fully take his side when he brushes aside Egeus' protests regarding Lysander and Hermia's marriage. Generally he serves as a rational reminder that not all is "midsummer madness" as Olivia puts it in **Twelfth Night**.

That is not to say that the star-crossed lovers do not have their share of serious treatment. No member of the audience can fail to respond to the language of Lysander and Hermia's opening scene together:

Lys. How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale,
 How chance the roses there do fade so fast?
 Her. Belike for want of rain; which I could well
 Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.

(I.i: 128-31)

This speech and the ensuing lines, according to Wolfgang Clemen, "Not only express the play's central theme, the transitoriness and inconstancy of love, they also convey to us the peculiar rhythm of quick movement and dreamlike wonder" (Clemen, 1972: 15):

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
 Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
 That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth... (i.i:144-48)

But basically, as soon as the confusion starts, our sympathy fades away and we are left viewing things, as it were, from a distance. After her betrayal of her friend, Helena loses the little sympathy that we were willing to grant her.

A large number of comical effects related to the two pairs of lovers come from the contrast inherent in the outwardly magical situation and the high-flown, hyperbolic language. When Lysander wakes up and makes his highly rhetorical speech to Helena we laugh because neither Helena nor Lysander himself could have conceived such a situation as possible in ordinary circumstances. Then Demetrius expresses his change of heart, and the two girls prepare to tear each other's eyes out.

Clearly, however, it is the presence of Oberon and Puck that gives us the right perspective of things, as P. Phialas points out³. As in **The Comedy of Errors** there is a great "reliance upon an arrangement of discrepant awareness" (Phialas, 1966:6). We know that it is all a trick and that things will be sorted out - meanwhile, we can watch with the Fairy King and say with Puck: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III.ii:115). The violent emotions of the characters become "fond pageantry". Oberon and Puck are a mockery of the traditional Fate-Providence: they manipulate everything for their own satisfaction. They are the gods who watch mortals as wanton boys watch flies. And seeing things from their angle, we are not inclined to worry about the feelings of lovers. We set aside everything but our desire to enjoy the situation as long as it lasts.

V. Farce and Ridicule in A Midsummer Night's Dream

But the real comedy of the play - and a comedy which is rooted in ridicule with nothing to detract from it for one instant - is the character of Bottom. This child-like "ass" certainly evoked laughter even from the groundlings who were from a similar social background. Nothing can beat his all-including confidence as he announces that he will play all the roles in the play: "I'll speak in a monstrous little voice, 'Thisne! Thisne!' 'Ah' pyramus, my lover dear! Thy Thisby dear, and lady dear!" (I.ii:51). Then there is the scene when, abandoned by everyone, he is left alone in the woods to face the spirit of mischief, his head converted into that of an ass, and he begins to sing to pluck up courage. Then comes the soft voice of Titania: "What abogel wakes me from my flowery

bed?" (III.i:136). As Deborah B. Wyrick points out, "the overall juxtaposition of the dainty sprite and the 'palpable gross' monster creates a comically incongruous spectacle embellished with equally incongruous flourishes - the homely song, the orders to the fairy attendants, the flowery garland decking the ass's nose." (Shakespeare Quarterly, 1982:445). Equally hilarious is the fact that "Titania exhibits the amorous aggressiveness one would anticipate from a lusty beast; Bottom reacts with the reserve one would anticipate from a virtuous lady." (Shakespeare Quarterly:445).

But by far the most cleverly contrived piece of artistry is the play within the play. Here Shakespeare plays upon our sense of the ridiculous with a double level of irony; the first - that neither Bottom nor any of his 'fellow actors' are aware of the real impact the play is having. As far as they are concerned, the play is a success. As Theseus puts it: "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men." (V.i: 215). The second ironical situation is that the play is in many ways an enactment of the scene of confusion that had only recently been played by the lovers who so scornfully watch the Pyramus and Thisby play. Demetrius plays the clever wit now, unaware that a moment ago we were laughing at him. And, naturally, we laugh at the whole set-up - the sheer badness of the performance given by the mechanicals.

IV. Conclusion

Finally, I think that it would be fair to say that **A Midsummer Night's Dream** is a more sophisticated advancement on **The Comedy of Errors**. The two plays share much in common in terms of the audience's response to the different comical situations, but we can also say that **A Midsummer Night's Dream** represents a step forward "from the comedy of intrigue to the comedy of character" (Herford, 1899:125). We emerge from the **Comedy of Errors** with a feeling of satisfaction, but with few lasting impressions of any memorable characters, unless we consider Luce and Dromio memorable characters! On the other hand, once we have met Oberon, Puck and Bottom, we are hardly likely to forget them. They stand out above and apart from the technical manipulation of the play, somehow attaining a life of their own. And our last impression must be, of the dreamy speeches that have weaved their web about us, and the general pleasurable sensation that 'all's well that ends well'.

Notes:

1. See Nevil Coghill, "The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy" in **Shakespeare Criticism** 1935-60, ed. Anne Ridler, London: O.U.P., 1963, P. 206.
2. All quotations from **Comedy of Errors** and **Midsummer Night's Dream** are from **The Riverside Shakespeare**, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
3. See Peter G. Phialas, **Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies**, North Carolina: 1966.

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