

Shakespearean Comedy

Introduction:

It is customary to apply the two inadequate terms "classical" and "romantic" to comedy as to many other literary genres. Shakespeare's comedies, at least most of them, are broadly speaking of the romantic kind, as opposed to the traditional classical kind more or less exemplified by the comic plays of Shakespeare's worthy contemporary and rival, Ben Jonson. The salient characteristics of classical comedy are its

(i) realism:

(ii) satiric and didactic purpose; and

(iii) its adherence to the classical rules (such as those of decorum, the separation of the species, and even the "three unities") as expounded and practised by the writers and critics of antiquity.

Contrariwise romantic comedy does not bother to be realistic at least mechanically realistic-nor has it a very articulate didactic aim, nor even does it bother much about fettering the fertility of the imagination by subjecting it to rules. Romantic comedy generally has love for its theme, for what can be more romantic than love?

Now most of Shakespeare's comedies are of the romantic type. There are a few, like *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which are not as romantic or as purely romantic as the best of his comedies-*As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*-all of which are the most characteristic of his comic genius. Let us now consider the most important features of Shakespearean comedy.

The Romantic World:

Shakespeare's romantic comedies are all conceived in an imaginative setting far away from the dull and dreary world of everyday life. Their characters are also different from us as they are denizens of not our humdrum world but the imaginary, colourful world of their own. Allardyce Nicoll well observes in his *British Drama*: "Characters and scenes alike are viewed through magic casements which transform reality." Some of the settings of Shakespeare's comedy are Thebes, Arden, Illyria, Ephesus, and Venice. All these places are bathed in the light of fancy and romantic splendour which makes them recede still further from the dreary world of ours. Venice for instance is not the real, historical Venice but an ancient town of enchanting beauty in which loans could be obtained by offering the flesh of one's heart as security. What is true of settings is also true of the characters inhabiting them-they too are "romantic" and remote from the ordinary people of flesh and blood. They are somewhat unearthly. They go about making love, dancing, feasting, engaging themselves in battles of wit with one another, singing, and making merry. Life for them is very often one long spring. They seem to be eating their bread not in the sweat of their face but by some more pleasant, but unknown, method. The "fever and the fret" of life which is abundantly obvious in Shakespeare's tragedies is conspicuous by its absence in his comedies. Let us quote Thorndike here: "There are only three industries in this land [that of Shakespearean comedy], making love, making songs, and making jests. And they make them all to perfection. It is well to interrupt the love-making with a little joking and the joking with a little music and perchance some cakes and ale, and then back to love again." Another critic quips that "hardly anybody goes to business in these Shakespearean latitudes. Not Altogether Unrealistic:

However romantic and fanciful may Shakespeare's comic world and its denizens be, it will be rash to conclude that they are altogether unrealistic, having nothing to do with the world of reality and the people living therein. Shakespearean comedy is not altogether escapist in nature. It is, in its own oblique manner, what Arnold expected all good literature to be, "a criticism of life." There are some very concrete links which join this world with the actual world. These links come into being when Shakespeare has a recourse to the following methods:

(i) Shakespeare imports some features of the real world into the world of his comedy. Take, for instance, the Forest of Arden which provides the setting for *As You Like It*. The Forest, indeed, is quite romantic and fanciful. But still it has certain features which render it an understandable part of our own concrete world. It is, as Charlton points out, "no conventional Arcadia". Its inhabitants are not exempt from the penalty of Adam-winter, rough weather, the seasons' differences. The icy fang and churlish chiding of the winter's wind invade Arden as often as they invade this hemisphere of ours. Nor does manna fall to it from heaven. One may come by sufficient sustenance of flesh, if one has the weapons and the impulse to make a breach in the conventionality of idyllic Nature by killing its own creatures, the deer, to whom the forest is the assigned and native dwelling place." This is a clear instance of special pleading. A few similarities with the world of reality cannot adequately disprove the essentially unrealistic and romantic nature of the Forest of Arden. Nevertheless, we can agree justly with this critic when he says that though the ultimate world of Shakespeare's comedy is romantic, poetic, and imaginative, it is by no means "unsubstantial and fantastic."

(ii) Secondly, even when many of the characters in his comedies are romantic and remote from the world of reality. Shakespeare has the knack of adding to their world some very realistic and earthly characters who do not share their ways of life, attitudes, sports, and amor's fun. The addition of such characters exerts a concretizing influence upon the world of his comedy as a whole. Let us quote Allardyce Nicoll in this connexion: "There are contemporary figures and contemporary fashions in *Love's Labour Lost*; Bottom and his companions mingle with the fairies; Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are companions of Viola and Olivia, Dogberry and Verges of *Hero and Beatrice*. This is the cardinal characteristic of Shakespeare's romantic world-the union of realism and fantasy."

Comedies of Love:

Most of Shakespeare's romantic comedies are built around the theme of love which provides the chief motive force for starting, regulating, and sustaining the machinery of the play. In this particular respect romantic comedy strikes a note of diametrical variance with classical comedy in which love seldom plays a major part. If love does come in, it comes in the form of just physical lust giving rise to some complicated amorous intrigues. There may be sex in classical comedy, but there is not much of love. Intrigues of all sorts, including amorous ones, are alien to the nature of romantic comedy, though they are quite popular with the comedy of the classical kind, especially the one based on the plays of the Roman comedians Terence and Plautus. Love in all its manifestations and in all its kinds is, indeed, the soul of Shakespearean comedy. Referring to *As You Like It*, Stopford Brooke remarks: "In this play love lives in many forms: in Orlando and Rosalind, Celia and Oliver, Silvius and Phoebe, Touchstone and Audrey. We also see other forms of love, the love of two girls for each other, of Adam

for his master and his master for him, of Touchstone for Celia and Rosalind. Even a few touches are given to us of a daughter's affection for her father. But these kinds of love, outside the passion of youthful love, are but side issues, due to the love of Shakespeare for lovingness."

Shakespeare's comedies are then, mostly love comedies. He deals with love rather conventionally, in so far as a comedy with him generally ends in a marriage. However, to use Shakespeare's own words, "the course of true love did never run smooth." There are complications galore. The young lovers have to undergo some sort of discipline before they reach the sweet fruition of their amours. Ferdinand in *The Tempest* has to carry logs of wood for Miranda. Viola does not return Olivia's love. Benedick and Beatrice are poles apart in the beginning. But in the end love makes all obstacles evaporate in thin air, the pipes are brought and there is a marriage. The heroes and heroines in Shakespeare's comedies are invariably young, and love-making with them is a whole-time profession. The spirit of youth finds appropriate expression in amorous (but not lustful) activity. Naturally enough, there are plentiful songs and dances to irradiate the youthful atmosphere of these comedies. The heroes and heroines are youthful men and women before their marriage; on the other hand, in most of Shakespeare's tragedies we find the protagonists past their prime and already married. Love, the leitmotif of Shakespearean comedy, is doubtlessly of the romantic kind, but Shakespeare seldom exalts it to the Platonic or Petrarchan level. Nor does it smack of carnality too much; it is not the entirely culpable sexual lust which figures in classical comedy; rather it has a certain elevated and elevating power. J. W. Lever in *Elizabethan Love Sonnets* observes: "In Shakespearean comedy love is the means of all human fulfilment. This orientation comes about without a spiritualizing of love's physical basis. Shakespeare's heroines are lacking in the saintly qualities of the Petrarchan mistress. Far from raising their lovers' thought above 'base desires' Rosalind teaches Orland how to woo and Juliet reciprocates Romeo's ardour so frankly that he promptly forgets the chaste attractions of his former lady." Sometimes we can hear the sadder notes underlying the romantic sentiment.

What is love? Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth has present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure

Women in Shakespearean Comedy:

Women in Shakespearean comedy constitute its very soul. Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays are dominated by their heroes, the ups and downs of whose fortunes constitute what is mainly of interest in them. The tragic heroines simply pale into insignificance by the side of the grand heroes. But in his comedies, the reverse is true. A critic rather sweepingly, but not altogether unjustly, remarks that in Shakespeare's comedies there are no heroes at all; there are only heroines. George Gordon observes: "All, lectures on Shakespeare's comedies tend to become lectures on Shakespeares "women, for in the comedies they have the front of the stage". In Shakespeare's comedies-, to quote the same critic, we meet with "women, of all ranks and ages-from the queen to the dairy maid-and from fifty to fifteen...From Cleopatra to Miranda...he is

equally at home and has the whole range of femininity at h'is command." Shakespeare's comic heroines are much more sparkling and interesting than their male counterparts. We have the vivacious and intelligent Portia, the witty Beau in the constant Viola and the charming Rosalind. Bassanio does not come to the level of Portia, Benedick pales in wit beside Beatrice, the Duke has no comparison with Viola, and Orlando with the charming Rosalind. Though all these heroines in their character do not have the same pattern, yet they have in common one important characteristic-their quintessential womanhood. This quality makes them look surprisingly modern. The women in Restoration comedy and even the women in the novels of the Victorian age appear to be dated, but Shakespeare's comic heroines are dateless, though they were conceived much earlier.

It is understandable why Shakespeare in his comedies should give such importance to women. As we have already said, these comedies are comedies of love; and love for a man is just a part of his life and life's activity, but for a woman it is her whole life and its activity.

Humour:

A very attractive feature of Shakespeare's comedies is their humour. It is as it should be, because if comedy has a purpose it is to arouse laughter at the foibles and follies of man with a genial and corrective aim. But the kind of humour we meet with in the comedies of Shakespeare is entirely different from the kind we have in the classical comedy of Rome and its representation in Ben Jonson. The kind of humour to be found in a literary work is governed by the general attitude of the writer towards his fellow-beings as also his moral standing. Ben Jonson's humour is sarcastic, satirical, and not a little cynical. He is impatient of the follies of human beings, which he views from a superior moral level. He is always didactic and corrective. His aim is to lash and hurt, not to tolerate and be amused. He earnestly declares:

I will strip the ragged jollies of the time,

Naked, as at their birth,

And with a whip of steel,

Print -wounding lashes in their iron ribs.

Shakespeare on the other hand, does not brandish such a whip of steel. His attitude towards his fellow being is acceptive and genial, not rejective and cynical. Sometimes (as in *The Comedy of Errors*) he does fall at the manners of his times, but such a job is essentially alien to his nature. He delights and does not teach. Dowden in *The Mind and Art of Shakespeare* observes : "The genial laughter of Shakespeare at human absurdity is free from even the amiable cynicism which gives to the humour of Jane Austen a certain piquant flavour: it is like the play of summer lightning, which hurts no living creature, but surprises, illuminates and charms." Moreover, Shakespeare's comic humour is not invariably of the same kind or intensity. It is multi-faceted though it is characterised by the same quality of geniality and light-heartedness which issues not from adolescent flippancy but the maturest wisdom and insight into at least one aspect of human life.