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Intention in the Shaping of Comedy:

Jonson's *Volpone* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

James E. Kulas

It is a general feeling among theatergoers that the better the plot is the better will be the play. The feeling is, of course, a valid one, but not in the sense in which we are often inclined to interpret it. If asked to explain what constitutes a good plot in drama, we usually discuss the relation of all episodes to the central line of action, the naturalness and progress in the unfolding of the incidents, and the logical or inevitable revelation of meaning in the working-out of the various parts at the climax.

Nothing is to be denied in this description of plot when we are talking about tragedy, wherein the stakes are life and death. In this genre, the idea of a cohesive and integrated plot is quite satisfying to our strained attention's need for some measure of final order and release, however painful. If, for instance, we willingly suffer the story of Gloucester and his blinding in *King Lear*, it is because his fate is only less intensely appalling than that of the hero; there is no distracting or perplexing difference in quality of their agony: both were fools and suffer, similarly but unequally, shame and remorse. And Lear's Fool, we know, is no excrescence in the plot: his ironic fidelity to Lear, by scourging him with wit, helps drive his master to meaningful madness, even wisdom.

But for comedy to be evaluated by a rule of structure, we need a definition which includes an awareness that much of what happens in the story need have little more justification than its own good fun. This is true because, while human acts provide the basis for tragedy, human ineffectuality is the source of comedy. In even a well-integrated play of diverse lines of action like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we are more impressed by the self-contained comedy of the scenes of the lovers, the rustics, and the royalty, than by the interactions of these groups. Bottom exists in his own right, and would be but slightly less wonderful without his interplay with Titania, or even if he and his fellows performed their skit for themselves alone. Let us say that in comedy plot is all that is amusing without clashing with the theme and mood of the play. Tragedy, mirroring ordained reality in a harsh glare, reveals necessary deeds of dangerous men; comedy, a prismatic and revolving reflector, shows our harmless errors and quirks in a multi-hued and dancing light. We stare aghast in the white heat of tragedy, but laugh in the airy, kaleidoscopic lights of comedy.

The metaphors suggest a difference between the tragic and the comic writer not only in the intensity but also in the scope of their vision. This is not to imply that the comic dramatist is not selective, but rather that in his broader view he sees man in a variety of postures and

as more often fumbling than consequential, frequently uncomfortable but seldom grievously stricken. The comic dramatist turns his eye not "from heaven to earth" in an attempt to probe the mystery of human suffering, but rather turns it round our little place upon the panorama of our pettinesses and illusions, showing us as grotesque and silly in our vain wishes. In tragedy we are larger than our prosaic life, profoundly monstrous, sometimes demonic, occasionally angelic; in comedy we are little more than mischievous, bent on monkeying around to the delight of onlookers. Our awareness that life has its circus and carnival aspects as well as its horrors should help us to understand that what the comic dramatist chooses to see is often a curious *mélange*, sometimes meaningful but also often irrelevant or nonsensical.

These abstractions on the differences between the intentions and the materials of the comic and the tragic writer may become emphatic if we apply them to actual works. Two comedies, highly unlike in purpose and spirit and exhibiting sharp differences in technique, will serve.

Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's distinguished contemporary playwright, strove in most of his comedies to "strip the ragged follies of the time / Naked as at their birth...to seize on vice, and with a grip / Squeeze out the humours of sick souls, / As lick up every idle vanity."¹ A stronger statement of serious purpose by a comic satirist is hardly to be imagined. And one may wonder whether a dramatist who postulates so forceful and moral an intention for his work will not in effect prove incapable of comedy. Yet an analysis of *Volpone, or, The Fox* shows that while its author does not belie his promise of severe castigation of viciousness and folly, and while the manipulation of the plot tends at times toward the tragic, it remains laughable drama because of Jonson's deft treatment of characters and situations on the level of meaningful farce.

The story may be briefly sketched. The miser Volpone with the help of his servant, Mosca, tricks his professed friends into believing that he is near death. Consequently, the greedy Corbaccio, Corvino and Voltore each bring rich gifts to Volpone, and each is promised by Mosca that he will be made the miser's sole heir. Corbaccio disinherits his own son, Bonario, and leaves the fortune to Volpone in order to be quite sure of the old Fox's favor. And Corvino is persuaded to deliver up his young wife to the lecher when Mosca tells him that Volpone is impotent and has merely been advised to sleep beside a healthy woman as an aid in restoring his strength. But when Celia, brought by Corvino, is about to be attacked by Volpone, Bonario, who had been planted by the overreaching Mosca to hear the treachery of his father revealed, hears instead the screams of Celia and rescues her. To silence Bonario and Celia, Mosca contrives to have them accused in court of adultery by the lawyer Voltore, and even by Celia's husband and Bonario's father. Found guilty, the young man and woman are awaiting punishment when Volpone carries his luck too far by exulting over the three dupes as Mosca lies to them that Volpone has died and that he, Mosca, is the heir. Voltore then tells the truth in court and all the rogues are arrested and exposed. Mosca is sentenced to be whipped and made perpetual prisoner in the galleys; Volpone must lie in prison irons, and his wealth is given to the hospitalized; Voltore is banished; Corbaccio is to be kept in a monastery; Corvino is pilloried.

Such an account of the main action of the story notes the elements that suggest the tragic experience: betrayal of wife by husband, son by father, the near rape of the heroine; the harsh punishments of the villains. And if the bitter tone of the central action is somewhat softened by the silliness of the feverish smeller-out-of-plots, Sir Politic Would-Be, and his addlebrained but opinionated wife, yet the situation of Sir and Lady Pol is important just for the way in which it reinforces rather than relieves the main theme. Just as the dupes are absurd in readily believing all that they see and hear about Volpone, Sir Politic Would-Be is ridiculous in believing everything to be something other than what it appears. Lady Pol is no less rare as a counterpoise between these two extravagances, as she pretends to perspicacity but understands nothing. Similarly, the humor derived from the dwarf, the hermaphrodite, and the eunuch is incidental and yet something more. They add the bizarre note—one tinged with the uneasiness that we instinctively feel toward the abnormal. Whether or not they are Volpone's bastards, their incongruous shapes help concretize the aberrant nature of the hero. Furthermore, as John J. Enck has remarked, they add substance to the play:

Their verses are jangling rhymes, quite at variance with the firmness of the blank verse itself. For, as the main action of the drama demonstrates how desire can inflate itself by vanity, these three underline the level to which thought sinks by total surrender to deformity....Theirs is the negation of everything, a reduction to babbling imbecility.²

The songs that Nano and Castrone sing, like Volpone's seductive parody, "Come, my Celia, let us prove," further enhance the wry involvements of the main action. Early in the play the two zanies sing of the superior lot in life of the fool, and conclude by asking, "When wit waits upon the fool, O, who would not be he?" The play then becomes a sardonic revelation of supposed wits waiting on foolery to their bitter cost.

The pervasiveness of the bizarre and grotesque elements of the play, in its smaller as well as larger scenes and characterizations, aids us in thinking of *Volpone* as a significant farce. It is farcical in the extremeness of the childlike glee in their own cunning with which the principals must play their parts, and in the deviant but complementary antics of the Would-Be's and the irregular household pets in human shapes. It is significant in that the excesses which are ridiculed and punished are dangerous vices, and we laugh scornfully rather than good-naturedly at the central figures. In short, Jonson's harshest comedy shows us what is true of comedy that springs from a great indignation in the author: its elements are simple and cohesive rather than diverse, and whatever it uses it must, as in tragedy, which it approaches, direct to the enrichment of the dominating effect.

But if we would grasp the genius of comedy truly, we must acknowledge that this directing or channeling of parts into a single effect, what we call "funding" in drama, has often little relevance to the climax or the most intense stages in the conflict. It is true that the way in which all the strands of *Volpone* fit tightly to form a strong display of satiric ridicule is both an indication and a measure of how the materials of drama become more of a total blend as the

intention of the playwright grows more serious, and tends toward tragedy. When the purpose is moral and fierce, the artistry is spare and pertinent. Sir Politic's humiliation as he is discovered hiding in a tortoise shell, and the villains' exposure in the last scene as they are stripped of their moral disguises by one another, afford the ironic culmination to the elaborate self-deceptions that the characters have exhibited throughout.

Yet in comedy of another sort, no less convincing in artistic truth if highly different in spirit, we should not always expect to find that skill in construction depends on meticulous selection and single-minded handling of the parts.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* the pleasure that we feel is as real as that which *Volpone* gives, but of different quality and range, as it satisfies less-urgent and more-expansive needs of our nature. Since we are aware that life is, as often as not, a gay multiplicity of events, our joy in the type of comedy of which *As You Like It* is outstanding derives very properly from what can only be called a grand excess of the lighthearted spirit of the playwright. There is in this comedy little of the disciplined moulding or "funding" of components that our experience with tragedy and dark comedies have accustomed us to. This is not to say that great and joyous comedy is customarily loosely constructed—*Twelfth Night* is a paragon of economy and unity—but only that it may be so.

Plot-wise, *As You Like It* is unexceptional. As the story unfolds, the spectator is not excited to learn that Orlando, in love with Rosalind, is driven by fear of the usurper duke of the kingdom to leave the court and flee to the Forest of Arden, where the rightful duke is living in exile; for there is no suggestion that the usurper duke's forces are sent after Orlando, and Oliver, Orlando's treacherous brother, is hardly capable of capturing Orlando by himself, though ordered to do so by the duke. Thus there is little convincing threat of real danger, such as develops interest at the beginning of others of Shakespeare's comedies. Moreover, it is a strain on our credulity to believe that the Duke Frederick should suddenly decide to banish Rosalind, daughter of the exiled duke, after abiding her so long. In the central acts of the play, the main action consists of Rosalind's thinly-motivated dalliance with Orlando, whom she, disguised as the shepherd Ganymede, assures she will cure of his love for Rosalind. Also weakly motivated in the main plot is the conversion of the two ostensibly inveterate villains: though saved from a snake and a lion by Orlando, Oliver yet fails to convince us that his gratitude can ring true after his years of ill will; similarly, we are little impressed by the brief report of Duke Frederick's sudden repentance after the blackguard has discoursed with a holy hermit of the woods. Nor are we quite prepared for the gentle and spirited Celia's falling in love with the opposite-natured, saturnine Oliver.

Partly of course these implausibilities are explained by the fact that Shakespeare in *As You Like It* is thought to have been hurriedly dramatizing a popular novel of the time. But the reason why we do not bother to excuse or even extenuate the play's structural weaknesses, even if we notice them, is that while we find at best limited delight in the meandering plot of this great comedy, in its slender complications and token unraveling, we rejoice in everything else in it. The love involvements of Silvius and Phoebe, and of Touchstone and

William and Audrey may be shown to provide variations on the conventional central love story, but no such justifying of them is needed. We treasure the fresh and finished portraits of the plaintive and languorous Silviu and his imperious Phoebe; the representation of them is rich because the lovers are both unique and yet types. So too do we value Touchstone. He is here a masterful decrifier of the affections of others, who, simply to assert frank sensuality against romantic notions, marries in Audrey the acme of coarse unloveliness. William, Audrey's country suitor, in spite of his few lines remains in memory as a blithe and consummately dull rustic.

Against the mental adroitness of Touchstone, and against his amorality (for he plans to marry Audrey in a careless ceremony so he may get rid of her easily), is set the good sense of Corin and the good will of Adam, the two affecting old men of the play. And also having nothing to do with the movement of the story, but like the other minor characters emerging as something more memorable than the plot itself, is the sullen Jacques. He is the prototype of all jaded sentimentalists as he weeps for a wounded animal and castigates the "infected world." A sated libertine who has traveled widely, he is ready to preach that all is vanity. Yet we delight in Jacques' gloom even as in the sparkle of Touchstone, the venerable kindness of Corin and Adam, and the yearning adolescence of Silviu and Phoebe. Perhaps the reason we rejoice in these characters is due to the sense of surprised discovery with which we greet them: we seem to feel that while such originals can be found nowhere yet they abound everywhere. The seeds of their humours are in all of us.

The tragic dramatist's vision will isolate a segment of humanity and scrutinize its profound errors and sorrows. But the comic writer's view may include a stellar supporting cast, some called in with scant justification with respect to the structure of the play. He draws them in from far and wide, and presents them as so many irrepressible vagabonds. The eye of Shakespeare in *As You Like It* lit easily on the superficial panorama of the world and enabled the mind of the artist to flash back heightened versions of our dimly perceived and hence half-appreciated acquaintances or the perfect strangers we pass on the streets. We do not regret much that *As You Like It* has no dexterous manipulating of events that gives to characterization an increasingly dynamic quality, but rather we exult that we discover a *tableau vivant* that shows a wealth of self-sufficient personality.

Thus what a dramatist intends to do modifies his resources and his strategy. The unsparing relentlessness of the action in *Volpone*, the involvement of subsidiary episodes with the outcome, the bearing of the songs in defining the theme, are all the necessary results of Jonson's intense moral purpose. Reflection upon the success of Jonson's achievement, and upon the design which executes his intention, reveals that in dramatic satire of a harsh kind there is no room for presences and effects that disengage the beholder's attention from the central and final message: the folly and dangers of vice. But *As You Like It* illustrates that to write a great play it is not necessary to write a well-constructed or well-executed one—at least, not in the sense in which these terms are usually defined.

We know that if life as we would have it is something wondrously complete, satisfying to

soul as well as to body, yet life as we find it is a curious and fragmentary medley. Thus, in what may be called the least "finished" of Shakespeare's comedies, we are so fascinated by the froth of life, through effervescence and brilliance in the characterization, that we hardly miss the substance of a significant, concentrated and relentless narrative. We set aside the rules governing the traditional strategy of play writing and bow to genius operating somewhat, we suppose, at random and in an expansive mood, guiding us through a rare, amusing portrait gallery. To put it less fancifully, *As You Like It* has its own way of being, and the fact that it is not well plotted or organically organized should not obscure for us the fact that its success in character appeal makes its excellence and explains its triumph.

Notes

- 1) Quoted by Vincent F. Hopper and Gerald B. Lahey, eds., *Volpone, Or. The Fox* (New York, 1959), p. 16.
- 2) John J. Enck, *Jonson and the Comic Truth* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1957), p. 130.