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Introduction: The Saturnalian Pattern

Messenger. Your honour's players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy . . .

Beggar. . . . Is not a comonty a Christmas gambold or a tumbling
trick?

Lady. No, my good lord; it is more pleasing stuff.

Beggar. What, household stuff?

Lady. It is a kind of history.

Beggar. Well, we'll see it. Come, madam wife, sit by my side and let
the world slip. We shall ne'er be younger.

—Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*

Much comedy is festive—all comedy, if the word festive is pressed far enough. But much of Shakespeare's comedy is festive in a quite special way which distinguishes it from the art of most of his contemporaries and successors. The part of his work which I shall be dealing with in this book, the merry comedy written up to the period of *Hamlet* and the problem plays, is of course enormously rich and wide in range; each new play, each new scene, does something fresh, explores new possibilities. But the whole body of this happy comic art is distinguished by the use it makes of forms for experience which can be termed saturnalian. Once Shakespeare finds his own distinctive style, he is more Aristophanic than any other great English comic dramatist, despite the fact that the accepted educated models and theories when he started to write were Terentian and Plautine. The Old Comedy cast of his work results from his participation in native saturnalian traditions of the popular theater and the

popular holidays. Not that he “wanted art”—including Terentian art. But he used the resources of a sophisticated theater to express, in his idyllic comedies and in his clowns’ ironic misrule, the experience of moving to humorous understanding through saturnalian release. “Festive” is usually an adjective for an atmosphere, and the word describes the atmosphere of Shakespeare’s comedy from *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* through *Henry IV* and *Twelfth Night*. But in exploring this work, “festive” can also be a term for structure. I shall be trying to describe structure to get at the way this comedy organizes experience. The saturnalian pattern appears in many variations, all of which involve inversion, statement and counterstatement, and a basic movement which can be summarized in the formula, through release to clarification.

So much of the action in this comedy is random when looked at as intrigue, so many of the persons are neutral when regarded as character, so much of the wit is inapplicable when assessed as satire, that critics too often have fallen back on mere exclamations about poetry and mood. The criticism of the nineteenth century and after was particularly helpless, concerned as it was chiefly with character and story and moral quality. Recent criticism, concerned in a variety of ways with structure, has had much more to say. No figure in the carpet is the carpet. There is in the pointing out of patterns something that is opposed to life and art, an ungraciousness which artists in particular feel and resent. Readers feel it too, even critics: for every new moment, every new line or touch, is a triumph of opportunism, something snatched in from life beyond expectation and made design beyond design. And yet the fact remains that it is as we see the design that we see design outdone and brought alive.

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

To get at the form and meaning of the plays, which is my first and last interest, I have been led into an exploration of the way the social

form of Elizabethan holidays contributed to the dramatic form of festive comedy. To relate this drama to holiday has proved to be the most effective way to describe its character. And this historical interplay between social and artistic form has an interest of its own: we can see here, with more clarity of outline and detail than is usually possible, how art develops underlying configurations in the social life of a culture. The saturnalian pattern came to Shakespeare from many sources, both in social and artistic tradition. It appeared in the theatrical institution of clowning: the clown or Vice, when Shakespeare started to write, was a recognized anarchist who made aberration obvious by carrying release to absurd extremes. The cult of fools and folly, half social and half literary, embodied a similar polarization of experience. One could formulate the saturnalian pattern effectively by referring first to these traditions: Shakespeare's first completely masterful comic scenes were written for the clowns.¹ But the festival occasion provides the clearest paradigm. It can illuminate not only those comedies where Shakespeare drew largely and directly on holiday motifs, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Twelfth Night*, but also plays where there is relatively little direct use of holiday, notably *As You Like It* and *Henry IV*.

We can get hold of the spirit of Elizabethan holidays because they had form. "Merry England" was merry chiefly by virtue of its community observances of periodic sports and feast days. Mirth took form in morris-dances, sword-dances, wassailings, mock ceremonies of summer kings and queens and of lords of misrule, mummings,

1. Miss Enid Welsford includes perceptive treatments of Shakespeare's fools in relation to tradition in her fine study, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York, n.d. [1935]). Professor Willard Farnham characterizes Shakespeare's grotesque or fool comedy in relation to Erasmus and More and the mediaeval feeling for man's natural imperfection in "The Mediaeval Comic Spirit in the English Renaissance," *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, ed. James G. McManaway et al. (Washington, D.C., 1948), pp. 429-439. The use of mediaeval elements for comic counterstatement is described in C. L. Barber, "The Use of Comedy in *As You Like It*," *PQ*, xxi (1942), 353-367, an early version of Ch. 9 below.

disguisings, masques—and a bewildering variety of sports, games, shows, and pageants improvised on traditional models. Such pastimes were a regular part of the celebration of a marriage, of the village wassail or wake, of Candlemas, Shrove Tuesday, Hocktide, May Day, Whitsuntide, Midsummer Eve, Harvest-home, Halloween, and the twelve days of the Christmas season ending with Twelfth Night. Custom prescribed, more or less definitely, some ways of making merry at each occasion. The seasonal feasts were not, as now, rare curiosities to be observed by folklorists in remote villages, but landmarks framing the cycle of the year, observed with varying degrees of sophistication by most elements in the society. Shakespeare's casual references to the holidays always assume that his audience is entirely familiar with them:

As fit as ten groats is for the hand of an attorney . . . as a
pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a morris for May Day, as the nail
to his hole . . .²

A great many detailed connections between the holidays and the comedies will claim our attention later, but what is most important is the correspondence between the whole festive occasion and the whole comedy. The underlying movement of attitude and awareness is not adequately expressed by any one thing in the day or the play, but is the day, is the play. Here one cannot say how far analogies between social rituals and dramatic forms show an influence, and how far they reflect the fact that the holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture, of a way that men can cope with their life.

2. *All's W.* II.ii.22. Citations of Shakespeare are to *The Complete Works*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1936). Abbreviations of titles follow the usage recommended by the *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

 THROUGH RELEASE TO CLARIFICATION

Release, in the idyllic comedies, is expressed by making the whole experience of the play like that of a revel.

Come, woo me, woo me! for now I am in a holiday humour,
and like enough to consent.

(*A.Y.L.* IV.i.68–69)

Such holiday humor is often abetted by directly staging pastimes, dances, songs, masques, plays extempore, etc. But the fundamental method is to shape the loose narrative so that “events” put its persons in the position of festive celebrants: if they do not seek holiday it happens to them. A tyrant duke forces Rosalind into disguise; but her mock wooing with Orlando amounts to a Disguising, with carnival freedom from the decorum of her identity and her sex. The misrule of Sir Toby is represented as personal idiosyncrasy, but it follows the pattern of the Twelfth Night occasion; the flying match of Benedict and Beatrice, while appropriate to their special characters, suggests the customs of Easter Smacks and Hocktide abuse between the sexes. Much of the poetry and wit, however it may be occasioned by events, works in the economy of the whole play to promote the effect of a merry occasion where Nature reigns.

F. M. Cornford, in *The Origins of Attic Comedy*,³ suggested that invocation and abuse were the basic gestures of a nature worship behind Aristophanes’ union of poetry and railing. The two gestures were still practiced in the “folly” of Elizabethan May-game, harvest-home, or winter revel: invocation, for example, in the manifold spring garlanding customs, “gathering for Robin Hood”; abuse, in the customary license to flout and flee at what on other days commanded

3. London, 1914.

respect. The same double way of achieving release appears in Shakespeare's festive plays. There the poetry about the pleasures of nature and the naturalness of pleasure serves to evoke beneficent natural impulses; and much of the wit, mocking the good housewife Fortune from her wheel, acts to free the spirit as does the ritual abuse of hostile spirits. A saturnalian attitude, assumed by a clear-cut gesture toward liberty, brings mirth, an accession of wanton vitality. In the terms of Freud's analysis of wit, the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibition is freed for celebration. The holidays in actual observance were built around the enjoyment of the vital pleasure of moments when nature and society are hospitable to life. In the summer, there was love in out-of-door idleness; in the winter, within-door warmth and food and drink. But the celebrants also got something for nothing from festive liberty—the vitality normally locked up in awe and respect. E. K. Chambers found among the visitation articles of Archbishop Grindal for the year 1576 instructions that the bishops determine

whether the ministers and churchwardens have suffered any lord of misrule or summer lords and ladies, or any disguised persons, or others, in Christmas or at May games, or any morris-dancers, or at any other times, to come unreverently into the church or churchyard, and there to dance, or play any unseemly parts, with scoffs, jests, wanton gestures, or ribald talk. . . .⁴

Shakespeare's gay comedy is like Aristophanes' because its expression of life is shaped by the form of feeling of such saturnalian occasions as these. The traditional Christian culture within which such holidays were celebrated in the Renaissance of course gave a very different emphasis and perspective to Shakespeare's art. But Dicaeopolis, worsting pompous Lamachus in *The Acharnians*: by invoking the tangible benefits of Bacchus and Aphrodite, acts the same festive part

4. *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), I, 181, n. 1.

as Sir Toby baffling Malvolio's visitation by an appeal to cakes and ale.

The *clarification* achieved by the festive comedies is concomitant to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and "nature"—the nature celebrated on holiday. The process of translating festive experience into drama involved extending the sort of awareness traditionally associated with holiday, and also becoming conscious of holiday itself in a new way. The plays present a mockery of what is unnatural which gives scope and point to the sort of scoffs and jests shouted by dancers in the churchyard or in "the quaint mazes in the wanton green." And they include another, complementary mockery of what is merely natural, a humor which puts holiday in perspective with life as a whole.

The butts in the festive plays consistently exhibit their unnaturalness by being kill-joys. On an occasion "full of warm blood, of mirth," they are too preoccupied with perverse satisfactions like pride or greed to "let the world slip" and join the dance. Satirical comedy tends to deal with relations between social classes and aberrations in movements between them. Saturnalian comedy is satiric only incidentally; its clarification comes with movement between poles of restraint and release in everybody's experience. Figures like Malvolio and Shylock embody the sort of kill-joy qualities which the "disguised persons" would find in any of Grindal's curates who would not suffer them to enter the churchyard. Craven or inadequate people appear, by virtue of the festive orientation, as would-be revellers, comically inadequate to hear the chimes at midnight. Pleasure thus becomes the touchstone for judgment of what bars it or is incapable of it. And though in Shakespeare the judgment is usually responsible—valid we feel for everyday as well as holiday—it is the whirligig of impulse that tries the characters. Behind the laughter at the butts there is always a sense of solidarity about pleasure, a communion embracing the merry-makers in the play and the audience, who have gone on holiday in going to a comedy.

While perverse hostility to pleasure is a subject for aggressive festive abuse, highflown idealism is mocked too, by a benevolent

ridicule which sees it as a not unnatural attempt to be more than natural. It is unfortunate that Shakespeare's gay plays have come to be known as "the romantic comedies," for they almost always establish a humorous perspective about the vein of hyperbole they borrow from Renaissance romances. Wishful absolutes about love's finality, cultivated without reserve in conventional Arcadia, are made fun of by suggesting that love is not a matter of life and death, but of spring-time, the only pretty ring time. The lover's conviction that he will love "for ever and a day" is seen as an illusion born of heady feeling, a symptom of the festive moment:

Say 'a day' without the 'ever' No, no, Orlando! Men are April
when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when
they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives.

(*A.Y.L.* IV.i.146–150)

This sort of clarification about love, a recognition of the seasons, of nature's part in man, need not qualify the intensity of feeling in the festive comedies: Rosalind when she says these lines is riding the full tide of her passionate gaiety. Where the conventional romances tried to express intensity by elaborating hyperbole according to a pretty, pseudo-theological system, the comedies express the power of love as a compelling rhythm in man and nature. So the term "romantic comedies" is misleading. Shakespeare, to be sure, does not always transform his romantic plot materials. In the Claudia-Hero business in *Much Ado*, for example, the borrowed plot involved negative behavior on the basis of romantic absolutes which was not changed to carry festive feeling. Normally, however, as in *Twelfth Night*, he radically alters the emphasis when he employs romantic materials. Events which in his source control the mood, and are drawn out to exhibit extremity of devotion, producing now pathos, now anxiety, now sentiment, are felt on his stage, in the rhythm of stage time, as incidents controlled by a prevailing mood of revel. What was sentimental extremity becomes impulsive extravagance. And judgment, not committed to systematic wishful distortion, can observe with Touchstone how

We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

(*A.Y.L.* II.iv.53–56)

To turn on passionate experience and identify it with the holiday moment, as Rosalind does in insisting that the sky will change, puts the moment in perspective with life as a whole. Holiday, for the Elizabethan sensibility, implied a contrast with “everyday,” when “brightness falls from the air.” Occasions like May Day and the Winter Revels, with their cult of natural vitality, were maintained within a civilization whose daily view of life focused on the mortality implicit in vitality. The tolerant disillusion of Anglican or Catholic culture allowed nature to have its day. But the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a “misrule” which implied rule, so that the acceptance of nature was qualified. Holiday affirmations in praise of folly were limited by the underlying assumption that the natural in man is only one part of him, the part that will fade.

“How that a life was but a flower” (*A.Y.L.* V.iii.29) was a two-sided theme: it was usually a gesture preceding “And therefore take the present time”; but it could also lead to the recognition that

so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot.

(*A.Y.L.* II.vii.26–27)

The second emphasis was implicit in the first; which attitude toward nature predominated depended, not on alternative “philosophies,” but on where you were within a rhythm. And because the rhythm is recognized in the comedies, sentimental falsification is not necessary in expressing the ripening moment. It is indeed the present mirth and laughter of the festive plays—the immediate experience they give of nature’s beneficence—which reconciles feeling, without recourse to sentimentality or cynicism, to the clarification conveyed about nature’s limitations.

SHAKESPEARE'S ROUTE TO FESTIVE COMEDY

In drawing parallels between holiday and Shakespeare's comedy, it has been hard to avoid talking as though Shakespeare were a primitive who began with nothing but festival custom and invented a comedy to express it. Actually, of course, he started work with theatrical and literary resources already highly developed. This tradition was complex, and included folk themes and conventions along with the practice of classically trained innovators like Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe. Shakespeare, though perfectly aware of unsophisticated forms like the morality and the jig, from the outset wrote plays which presented a narrative in three dimensions. In comedy, he began with cultivated models—Plautus for *The Comedy of Errors* and literary romance for *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; he worked out a consistently festive pattern for his comedy only after these preliminary experiments.

In his third early comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*, instead of dramatizing a borrowed plot, he built his slight story around an elegant aristocratic entertainment. In doing so he worked out the holiday sequence of release and clarification which comes into its own in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This more serious play, his first comic masterpiece, has a crucial place in his development. To make a dramatic epithalamium, he expressed with full imaginative resonance the experience of the traditional summer holidays. He thus found his way back to a native festival tradition remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy.⁵ And in expressing the native holiday, he was in a position to use all the resources of a sophisticated dramatic art. So perfect an expression and understanding of folk cult was only possible in the moment when it was still in the blood but no longer in the brain.

5. Mr. Northrop Frye has formulated a similar view of Shakespeare's development in a brilliant, compressed summary of the whole tradition of literary comedy and Shakespeare's relation to it, "The Argument of Comedy," *English Institute Essays, 1948*, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York, 1949).

Shakespeare never made another play from pastimes in the same direct fashion. But the pattern for feeling and awareness which he derived from the holiday occasion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes the dominant mode of organization in subsequent comedies until the period of the problem plays. The relation between his festive comedy and naive folk games is amusingly reflected in the passage from *The Taming of the Shrew* which I have used as an epigraph. When the bemused tinker Sly is asked with mock ceremony whether he will hear a comedy to "frame your mind to mirth and merriment," his response reflects his ignorant notion that a comedy is some sort of holiday game—"a Christmas gambold or a tumbling trick." He is corrected with: "it is more pleasing stuff . . . a kind of history." Shakespeare is neither primitive nor primitivist; he enjoys making game of the inadequacy of Sly's folk notions of entertainment. But folk attitudes and motifs are still present, as a matter of course, in the dramatist's cultivated work, so that even Sly is not entirely off the mark about comedy. Though it is a kind of history, it is the kind that frames the mind to mirth. So it functions like a Christmas gambol. It often includes gambols, and even, in the case of *As You Like It*, a tumbling trick. Though Sly has never seen a comedy, his holiday mottoes show that he knows in what spirit to take it: "let the world slip"; "we shall ne'er be younger." Prince Hal, in his festive youth, "daff'd the world aside / And bid it pass" (*1 H.IV* v.i.96). Feste sings that "Youth's a stuff will not endure" (*Twel.* II.iii.53).

The part of Shakespeare's earliest work where his mature patterns of comedy first appear clearly is, as I have suggested, the clowning. Although he did not find an entirely satisfactory comic form for the whole play until *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the clown's part is satisfactory from the outset. Here the theatrical conventions with which he started writing already provided a congenial saturnalian organization of experience, and Shakespeare at once began working out its larger implications. It was of course a practice, going back beyond *The Second Shepherd's Play*, for the clowns to present a burlesque version of actions performed seriously by their betters. Wagner's conjuring in *Dr. Faustus* is an obvious example. In the drama

just before Shakespeare began writing, there are a great many parallels of this sort between the low comedy and the main action.⁶ One suspects that they often resulted from the initiative of the clown performer; he was, as Sidney said, thrust in “by head and shoulders to play a part in majestic matters”—and the handiest part to play was a low take-off of what the high people were doing. Though Sidney objected that the performances had “neither decency nor discretion,” such burlesque, when properly controlled, had an artistic logic which Shakespeare was quick to develop.

At the simplest level, the clowns were foils, as one of the aristocrats remarks about the clown’s show in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*:

’tis some policy
To have one show worse than the King’s and his company.
(*L.L.L.* V.ii.513–514)

But burlesque could also have a positive effect, as a vehicle for expressing aberrant impulse and thought. When the aberration was made relevant to the main action, clowning could provide both release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit. Shakespeare used this movement from release to clarification with masterful control in clown episodes as early as *2 Henry VI*. The scenes of the Jack Cade rebellion in that history are an astonishingly consistent expression of anarchy by clowning: the popular rising is presented throughout as a saturnalia, ignorantly undertaken in earnest; Cade’s motto is: “then are we in order when we are most out of order” (IV.iii.199). In the early plays, the clown is usually represented as oblivious of what his burlesque implies. When he becomes

6. William Empson discusses the effects achieved by such double plots in *English Pastoral Poetry* (New York, 1938; originally printed with the better title, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, London, 1935), pp. 27–86. I am much indebted to Mr. Empson’s work: festive comedy, as I discuss it here, is a “version of pastoral.”

the court fool, however, he can use his folly as a stalking horse, and his wit can express directly the function of his role as a dramatized commentary on the rest of the action.

In creating Falstaff, Shakespeare fused the clown's part with that of a festive celebrant, a Lord of Misrule, and worked out the saturnalian implications of both traditions more drastically and more complexly than anywhere else. If in the idyllic plays the humorous perspective can be described as looking past the reigning festive moment to the work-a-day world beyond, in *1 Henry IV*, the relation of comic and serious action can be described by saying that holiday is balanced against everyday and the doomsday of battle. The comedy expresses impulses and awareness inhibited by the urgency and decorum of political life, so that the comic and serious strains are contrapuntal, each conveying the ironies limiting the other. Then in *2 Henry IV* Shakespeare confronts the anarchic potentialities of misrule when it seeks to become not a holiday extravagance but an everyday racket.

It might be logical to start where Shakespeare started, by considering first the festive elements present in the imitative comedies and the early clowns and in the literary and theatrical traditions of comedy into which he entered as an apprentice. Instead, because Shakespeare's development followed the route I have sketched, I start with three chapters dealing with the Elizabethan tradition of holiday and with two examples of holiday shows, then enter Shakespeare's work at *Love's Labour's Lost*, where he first makes use of festivity in a large way. To begin with the apprenticeship would involve saying over again a great deal that has been said before in order to separate out the festive elements with which I am properly concerned. It is important to recognize, however, here at the outset, that the order of my discussion brings out the social origins of the festive mode of comedy at the expense of literary and theatrical origins. It would be possible to start with festive affinities of the comic plots Shakespeare found at hand. One could go on to notice how Shakespeare tends to bring out this potential in the way he shapes

his early comedies. And one could say a great deal about the way he uses his early clowns to extrapolate the follies of their masters, notably about Launce's romance with his dog Crab as a burlesque of the extravagant romantic postures of the two gentlemen of Verona. Much of this "apprentice" work is wonderful. And it is wonderful what powers are in the comic machine itself, in the literary-theatrical resource for organizing experience which was there for the young Shakespeare to appropriate. But by looking first at the social resource of holiday customs, and then at the early masterpieces where he first fully uses this resource on the stage, we shall be able to bring into focus an influence from the life of his time which shaped his comic art profoundly.

The sort of interpretation I have proposed in outline here does not center on the way the comedies imitate characteristics of actual men and manners; but this neglect of the social observation in the plays does not imply that the way they handle social materials is unimportant. Comedy is not, obviously enough, the same thing as ritual; if it were, it would not perform its function. To express the underlying rhythm his comedy had in common with holiday, Shakespeare did not simply stage mummings; he found in the social life of his time the stuff for "a kind of history." We can see in the Saint George plays how cryptic and arbitrary action derived from ritual becomes when it is merely a fossil remnant. In a self-conscious culture, the heritage of cult is kept alive by art which makes it relevant as a mode of perception and expression. The artist gives the ritual pattern aesthetic actuality by discovering expressions of it in the fragmentary and incomplete gestures of daily life. He fulfills these gestures by making them moments in the complete action which is the art form. The form finds meaning in life.

This process of translation from social into artistic form has great historical as well as literary interest. Shakespeare's theater was taking over on a professional and everyday basis functions which until his time had largely been performed by amateurs on holiday. And he wrote at a moment when the educated part of society was modifying

a ceremonial, ritualistic conception of human life to create a historical, psychological conception. His drama, indeed, was an important agency in this transformation: it provided a "theater" where the failures of ceremony could be looked at in a place apart and understood as history; it provided new ways of representing relations between language and action so as to express personality. In making drama out of rituals of state, Shakespeare makes clear their meaning as social and psychological conflict, as history. So too with the rituals of pleasure, of misrule, as against rule: his comedy presents holiday magic as imagination, games as expressive gestures. At high moments it brings into focus, as part of the play, the significance of the saturnalian form itself as a paradoxical human need, problem and resource.