

THE COMIC IN RENAISSANCE COMEDY

By the same author

ROCHESTER: The Critical Heritage

ROCHESTER'S POETRY

**THE BENEVOLENCE OF LAUGHTER: Comic Poetry of the
Commonwealth and Restoration**

THE COMIC IN RENAISSANCE COMEDY

David Farley-Hills

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 Introduction: Comedy and the Comic	1
2 Jonson's Comical Satire: <i>The Alchemist</i>	51
3 A Satire against Mankind: Middleton's <i>A Mad World, My Masters</i>	81
4 The Comedy of Good Cheer: Dekker's <i>Shoemakers' Holiday</i> and Collaborations with Middleton	108
5 Rejoicing in Epidemicall Times: Brome's <i>A Joviall Crew</i>	147
6 Paradoxes and Problems: Shakespeare's Sceptical Comedy in <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	160
<i>Notes</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	186

Preface

This book sets out to investigate the nature of the comic in terms of its manifestation in the stage comedy of the English Renaissance period. Its basic assumption is that literary criticism can only be valid if its methods are capable of rational exposition and defence. It is based on Northrop Frye's contention that serious criticism needs to be defended not in terms of historical authenticity but in terms of the rational acceptability of its propositions.¹ Criticism too often is confused with literary history, and the literary historian who tells us what the Renaissance itself thought it was doing when it wrote comedy is often assumed to be telling us what the writer was actually doing. This is fallacious. Useful though art history is in helping us to acclimatise to an age and helping to provide us with a context of ideas that might be used for criticism, it is not itself criticism. Criticism deals not with what Shakespeare or Jonson may have thought they were doing or what their contemporaries may have thought they were doing, but with what they actually achieved in their finished plays as we find them. For criticism then, past critical views are ultimately irrelevant unless they can be defended as a rationally acceptable account of the literature they deal with.

Similarly, it is not ultimately important that the plays with which I deal were written for a vastly different theatre from ours and for people with quite different assumptions and expectations. The critic is concerned with the viability of literature as living experience. If the living experience can be recaptured only by trying to recapture the original social context in which the plays were produced then some historical acclimatisation may be necessary and justifiable; where adjustments of modern assumptions are necessary to bring a past work into modern focus the critic can usefully point this out. It may therefore be relevant to invoke historical experience, but often it is not, and such invocation is never, for criticism, an end in itself, but merely the clearing of impediments for the process of criticism to work more effectively.

It may be helpful to bear in mind the particular kind of theatre for which Shakespeare wrote, but equally it may be a distraction. The critic has the words on the page and it is his function to analyse and explain the conceptual patterns represented by these words that give the works he deals with literary value. Where it helps bring out these patterns by relating the words to stage usage or any other aspect of its historical context this can be done, but the value of Shakespearian comedy should be (and indeed is) as apparent in a modern theatre or a television studio as in an attempted reconstruction of the Globe. The Shakespeare available to us now is essentially the words he wrote down, not what he and his fellow actors did with those words on stage. Equally a modern stage performance can be useful in throwing light on the verbal structures, but a modern producer is not concerned with degrees of literary success or failure, like the critic, but with creating theatrical success out of more or less viable material. To judge Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* on the success of *Kiss me, Kate* or *The Comedy of Errors* on the recent London musical production is to judge on whim and passing fancy, and not on the value of the material out of which the new concoction is made. The 'raw material' of my criticism (if I can use such a term of such often highly refined literary works of art) are the words of the playwright's text and it is with plays as verbal structures I am principally concerned. This is not because I think stage performance is less important than reading or that the original methods of production and so on are entirely irrelevant, but because this is the aspect centrally relevant to the literary critic. The theatre critic has his own patch to hoe and we can live as good neighbours. For plays are, whatever else they are, verbal structures that generate ideas and are interesting as such, as I hope we shall see.

It follows from all this that the literary critic's task is twofold: to analyse and explain actual works of literature, but also to justify his methods and critical terms as rationally defensible in relation to literature. These two aspects of criticism tend to get out of step, critical practitioners tending to complain about the abstracting tendency of theorists and advocating a kind of inspirational pragmatism in confrontation with literary texts, while the theorists often unfortunately give the pragmatists sufficient ground for complaint by the use of abstruse jargon or abstraction divorced from literary actuality. Good criticism, however, must be fully able both to defend its assumptions in open and rational argument

and to relate these assumptions sensitively to actual texts. It is not a question of abstraction versus concretion, as F. R. Leavis tried to make it in a famous essay,² but a question of combining the two; for in reality neither can exist as criticism without the other.

This book therefore aims to combine these two essentials of good criticism: clarity and rationality in the use of terms and the ideas they stand for, with a particular (and one hopes sensitive) application of the ideas to specific works of literature. I have chosen to discuss the comic because it is an area where pragmatic criticism has fallen foul of muddled thought and inaccurate terminology; I have chosen Renaissance comedy not only because it abounds in fine comedies, but because the range of its comic attitudes is so wide that most of the fundamental types of comedy can be illustrated from it. My first chapter, therefore, is an exploration of the idea of the comic and its relevance to stage comedy. In this I hope to clarify some of the terms and ideas that are essential for making distinctions between the different comic structures that we shall actually meet at the 'pragmatic' stage of the investigation. The purpose is not to lay down rules for what the comic and comedy should be, but to clarify our use of terms so that they become useful tools in the actual analysis of particular comedies. It is the critic such a process refines, not the work of art. In practice, of course, the two processes depend intimately on one another; you can no more define the comic divorced from the experience of reading actual examples than you can judge actual examples without recourse to abstract concepts of what can be expected. The interplay between abstracting and realising concretely are so intimately bound up that nothing but mutilation can follow attempts at their complete separation: indeed this is the basic assumption of my critical method. Nevertheless, each process has its own method of establishing its peculiar validities, the rational and the intuitive, and to neglect either process is to impoverish both. Having outlined the theoretical arguments that justify the use of the term 'comic' for criticism and having established the different varieties of literary structures that can be legitimately termed comic and shown how these relate to the idea of stage comedy, we can then turn to show how those ideas can illuminate the way particular playwrights have created their comedies. In choosing examples I have tried to illustrate as wide a variety of comic structure as possible, trying to choose examples where a particular type of the comic is particularly clearly evident. Besides

throwing light on the nature of the comic and comedy as such, therefore, I hope to have been able to illustrate the intrinsic qualities of particular Renaissance comedies.

D.F.-H.