

# The Metaphor and Simile in Shakespeare's Comedies

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## The Metaphor and Simile in Shakespeare's Comedies.



There is no better means of measuring the circumference of a poet's knowledge than a study of his figures of speech especially the metaphor and simile, which reveal to us the sources from which the author has drawn, whether from books or from the living world. A study of Shakespeare's metaphors and similes show us the fact that while he is familiar to some extent with classic literature as well as with the productions of his own people, his predecessors and contemporaries, he is preeminently a poet of his own, living world and has drawn largely from his own observations and experiences. Shakespeare is called the poet of human life; but his observant mind and sympathetic nature have made him familiar not only with man; but with every phase of the living world, animal and inanimate; with the various departments of the material world; with the great and the minute phenomena of nature; and have caused him to enter into the homely scenes and everyday operations around him.

The comedies of Shakespeare afford us the

farthest measure for the study of his metaphors and similes. The nature of his subjects is such that demands more poetical efforts and finer imagery, and hence the use of more figures of speech than in his tragedies. In his comedies is more poetry and less prose than in his tragedies.

Shakespeare is exceedingly fond <sup>of the use</sup> of natural history similes. He passed his youth and early life among the fields and lawns of a wooded country, and his work bears evidence that he had all that love of animate nature which his surroundings and his kindly disposition would foster. He takes especial delight in the various birds of his native home and so many times in his work does he allude to the habits of birds, describing them in a way that only one who has had an intimate acquaintance with such could do. His work bears evidence that he had a clear conception of such sports as falconry and bat-fowling.

His preference for the commoner familiar birds is evident from the following quotations.

Act II sc II M. N. P. "Not Hermin but Helena I love,  
Who will not change a raven for a dove."

Act III sc II M. N. P. "As wild geese that the



creeping Fowler eye,  
 Or susser-palest choughs, many in sort,  
 Rising and cawing, or the gulls report  
 Seen themselves and madly sweep  
 the sky,  
 So, at his sight, away his fellows fly:

J. N. Act II sc IV. "Contemplation makes a  
 rare turkey-cock of him! how he jets  
 under his advanced plumes."

and also "Now is the woodcock near  
 the gin."

J. N. Act III sc IV Mor. "How do you do, Malvolio"  
 Mal. "At your request? Yes; nightingales  
 answer down."

J. N. Act III IV. "Why, how now, my downcock?  
 How dost thou, chuck?"

To thoroughly appreciate such illustrations  
 as the above, it is necessary that one  
 have a close knowledge of the habits  
 ways and haunts of such animals.  
 Shakespeare is an instant naturalist. Very  
 rarely does he mention sea birds or  
 sea animals of any kind. Even in the  
 Cliffs scene in King Lear, where we  
 rather expect him to mention birds  
 belonging to sea districts, he makes use  
 of the more familiar chough and crow.  
 In all of his works the cormorant,  
 the loon and the diving dapper are the  
 only three sea birds mentioned. The

guel which is as often used, always denotes a dupe or a fool.

M. N. O. Act III sc II. "That pure congealed white,  
high Jannus' snow,

Jannus with the eastern wind, turns to a crow  
When thou hold'st up thy hand"

M. N. O. Act V sc I. "As light as bird from  
Tois, Erring elf and fairy sprite."

Shakespeare doubtless understood "mew'd"  
in its original technical sense in the  
following passages.

M. N. O. Act I sc I "You can endure the livery  
of a nun, for aye to be in shady cloister  
mew'd." He refers to the custom of  
shutting up hawks during the time of  
their moulting. A mew was a house  
or enclosure for keeping the hawks  
while they were moulting.

The list of fish in Shakespeare is short.  
Only such fish as grow in fresh  
waters are mentioned. In a metaphor  
in Twelfth Night, he alludes to the trout.

T. N. Act II sc I. "For here comes the trout  
that must be caught with tickling"

It is natural that the poet should be  
familiar with domesticated animals.  
His country life could not fail to bring  
him into close contact with such  
animals as the dog, horse and cow.  
It is a striking fact that Shakespeare  
never speaks in favorable terms of

the dog. He may have had some disagree-  
able experience with the animal.

M. N. D. Act II sc I: "And even for that do I love  
you the more, I am your spaniel; and domestic  
The more you beat me, I will love you.  
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me,  
strike me,

Neglect me, love me; only give me leave,  
Unworshiped as I am, to follow you.  
What worse place can I beg in your love,  
And yet a place of high respect with me,  
Than to be used as you use your dog?"

Act II. M. N. D. "He hath met his prologue  
like a rough colt; he knows not the stop."  
Act II sc II "That same cowardly, giant-like  
ox-bow hath downed many a gentleman  
of your house."

M. N. D. Act III sc II: "Hang off, thou cat, thou furr!  
vile thing, let loose, Or I will shake  
thee from me like a serpent."

M. N. D. Act III sc II: "Out, dog! out, cur! thou  
brindst me past the bounds of manhood's  
patience."

M. N. D. Act III sc I: "As true as trust hason  
that yet would never tire."

The custom of the dogs howling after music  
is alluded to in the following:

J. N. Act II sc I: "Of it he caught to the old time,  
every land. It is as far and fulsome to  
mine ear as howling after music"  
The fennels of England here afforded

Shakespeare the means of ascertaining  
the habits of various undomesticated  
animals. Such animals as the deer, tiger,  
wolf and fox are often alluded to in  
his figures of speech.

M. N. P. Act II sc. 1. The dove pursues the  
griffin; the mailed hind makes speed  
to catch the tiger; footless speed, when  
cardinal pursued and valer flies."

M. N. P. Act II sc. 4. "No, I am as ugly as a fox."  
For wants that meet me run away with <sup>me</sup> <sup>fast</sup>."

M. N. P. Act II sc. 4. "This lion is a very fox for  
his valour."

Four; and a goose for his discretion"

J. N. Act II sc. 6 "Sweet will cry up it, for all  
this, though it be as rank as a fox."

J. N. Act III sc. 1. "Of one should be a prey,  
how much the better I would prefer  
the lion than the wolf!"

The frequenting of country lanes and by-paths  
could not but familiarize the young poet  
with the crawling creatures, worms and  
serpents.

M. N. P. Act III sc. 2. "O how true!  
Could not a worm, an adder, do so much!

An adder did it; for with scabber tongue  
than thine, thou serpent, never adder stung."

J. N. Act II sc. 6. "But let uncreeping, like a  
worm sit the food,

Fixed on her damask cheek: she pin'd  
in thought."



Shakespeare draws from Lyly for his notions and superstitions connected with such animals as the crocodile, scorpion and cockatrice or basilisks.

M. N. O. Act III sc. II. "This will so fright them back that they will kiss one another by the look like cockatrices." The poet is familiar with gardening, and farming, with the various plants, fruits and grains and with the different varieties of trees and wild flowers. He shows a wide appreciation for plant life in its various phases. Much could be said on the "garden love" of Shakespeare, and he is fond of its sweet and delicate nature. J. N. Act I. I. "O, it came not my ear like the sweet sound

That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
Stinking, and giving odour."

J. N. Act I. I. "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy: as - a squawk in spirit is a pease-cod, or a coddling wheat is almost an apple."

J. N. Act I. I. "His in grain, sir, 't will endure wind and weather." The reference is made here to a lady's face which he says will endure "wind and weather".

M. N. O. Act I. I. "But whether happy is the rose distilled"

I than that which withering on the virgin thorn  
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness."

M. N. D. Act I sc. I. - How now, my lord! why is your  
cheek so pale?

How chance the roses thus do fade so fast?

M. N. D. Act II sc. II. "Things growing are not  
ripe until their season."

So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason;

M. N. D. Act III sc. I. "Most radiant Pyramus,  
most lily white of hue,

Of colour like the red rose on triumphant brier;

M. N. D. Act III sc. II. "O, how ripe in show  
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!"

Act III sc. II. "So we grow together  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition,  
Two lovely berries moulded as one stem"

M. N. D. Act III sc. II. "Get you gone, you devil;  
You minnow, of hindering knot-grass made;  
You had, you acorn!"

M. N. D. Act I sc. I. "His eyes were green  
as leeks"

The phenomena of the elements and the  
various operations of nature have been a  
great source from which Shakespeare  
has drawn many of his figures of similitude.

M. N. D. Act I sc. I. "Believe for want of rain,  
which I could well believe them from  
the tempest of my eyes."

M. N. D. Act I sc. I. "I drift as a shadow,  
short as any man's;

Brief as the lightning in coldest night,  
that, in a spleen, unfolds with heaven's  
earth

And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"  
The jaws of darkness do devour it up."

Also in the same scene:

"Your eyes are lodestars, and your inquiries <sup>are</sup>  
More than that which to shepherd's ear."

M. N. D. Act I sc II. "He hail'd down oaths  
That he was only mine;

And when this hail seem'd to fall from  
Hermione's felt,

So he dissolved and showers forth did <sup>me</sup>!"

M. N. D. Act I sc II. "I will now obtrude,  
I will condole in some measure"

M. N. D. Act III sc II. "The sun was not  
so true unto the day  
As he to me!"

Also in the same scene:

"But by some fumes it is, — my love to Hermione  
Melted as the snow, seems to me now  
As the remembrance of an idle yawl  
Which in my childhood I did dote upon."

M. N. D. Act III sc I. "These things seem  
small and undistinguishing like

Little for of mountains turned into clouds"

M. N. D. Act I sc I. "The best in this kind  
are but shadows, and the worst are  
no worse, if imagination amend them"  
Allusion to archery and heraldry and  
to terms used in such appears often  
in his metaphors and similes.

M. N. D. Act I sc I. "And then the moon,  
like to a silver bow

New-hunt in brown, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities".

The following metaphor, although words  
not quite understood the application,  
alludes to a time in archery.

M. N. D. Act I sc. II. "Enough; hold or cut  
bow-strings". A similar passage is

found in Much Ado About Nothing.

M. N. D. Act III sc. II. "I go, I go; but (how I go,  
Swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow".

J. N. "Why, it hath bay windows, trans-  
parent as barricadoes, and the ches-  
tories toward the south-west are as  
lustrous as ebony".

Law and the terms used in law is another  
source from which Shakespeare has drawn,  
although allusions to this source are  
not frequent in his comedies.

J. N. Act I sc. V "He has been well so; and  
he says, he'll stand at your door  
like a sheriff's foot, and to the  
supporter of a bench, but he'll speak  
with you".

Materials from the mineral kingdom  
and often referred to, precious stones and  
jewels being frequently mentioned.

M. N. D. Act I. "Tomorrow night, when  
Phoebus doth behold

Her silver visage in the watery glass,  
Beckoning with liquid pearl the Haded gray"  
Also Act II sc I of the same play:

"And that same dew, which sometimes  
on the buds  
Has wont to sweet like round and  
orient pearls"

M. N. D. Act II sc I. "You draw me, you  
hood-kentish adamant;

But yet you draw not iron. For my  
heart is true as steel."

Household terms and homely occupations  
in another source from which the poet  
draws. He is not too preoccupied with  
thoughts of inspiring scenes of life and  
nature around him as to be unmindful  
of the practical matters of home life.

J. N. Act I sc III. "Excellent: it hangs like  
flax on a distaff; and I hope to see  
a housewife take this twine her legs,  
and spin it off."

M. N. D. Act III sc I. What humpers home-  
spun have we swaggering here,

To rear the cradle of the Fairy queen."

M. N. D. Act V sc I. His speech was  
like a tangled chain: nothing  
impaired, but all disorderd."

M. N. D. Act V sc I. With hands as pale  
as milk."

Shakespeare resorts very frequently to the  
remote source of mythology, especially  
the mythology of the Greeks and Romans.  
Let us note a few of these similes.

J. N. Act V sc 2. "As Hades as Vulcan in



the smoke of war:

M. N. P. Act II sc II. Yet you, the murderers,  
look as bright, as chaste,

As yonder Venus in the glimmering sphere;  
Alas in the same sense: "Let her shine  
as gloriously as the Venus of the sky!"

As regards the metaphors and similes  
of Shakespeare's comedies from the  
rhetorical standpoint, our modern  
grammarians can have little if  
anything to complain of. The figures  
are not far fetched nor do they  
dwell upon the details of a disgusting  
picture. As we have seen above,  
they are generally short and to the  
point. There are no involved  
similes nor distracting metaphors  
which are liable to confuse our  
eyes. They do not enter into detail ~~what~~  
have the appearance of being  
"hammered out". Shakespeare does not  
appear to have studied out his com-  
parisons; but they flow naturally  
from a well filled mind. The  
metaphors are not confused together  
where the action of one is inconsistent  
with the action of another. His metaphors  
are used either for explanation, for  
evidence or to throw light upon the  
thought, and not for mere belittlement  
merely. There is no artificial and

gaudy finery although there is richness  
and felicity of language. He compares  
unfamiliar things with familiar, at  
any rate with things that were formerly  
familiar in Shakespeare's own day  
and which now may have become obscure  
to us. But generally we understand  
the comparisons although we may  
not always appreciate them.

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