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Some Plebeian Characters in Shakespeare: Their Sources and Use

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Some Plebeian Characters
in Shakespeare

Their Sources and Use

by

Clarissa Flenniken

Some Plebeian Characters
in Shakespeare

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A Paper
Presented to

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of the Requirements for the Degree
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by

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I

The Popular Appeal
of Shakespeare's Plebeian Characters

Shakespeare has no rival in the art of character creation. Disregarding his poetic genius - the beauty and expressiveness in the arrangement of words, the accents, rhythm, and overtones of the language as it came from his pen -, we still would find in him the master of writers by virtue of his intimate knowledge of nature and human life, knowledge convincingly revealed in the vivid and compelling characters which live in his plays. There are few people indeed who cannot from their own experience delightedly identify among their acquaintances a Slender or a Mrs. Quickly or some other of the rich profusion of vital, living, men and women who people Shakespeare's plays. Fascinated recognition of the familiar must be one of the most powerful magnets which have for over three hundred years drawn readers and audiences alike to devoted admiration of, and attachment to, the plays. And while we may cheer a Hotspur, marvel at a Hamlet, or shudder at a Lady Macbeth, the fact remains that very few of us number among our friends anyone near the dramatic intensity or royal pretensions of Shakespeare's heroes and heroines; therefore, one strong element or sense of familiarity in the plays comes to us through his delineation of the ordinary, the plebeian, the common people in the various guises he has given them. As a rule, discussions and criticisms of the plays more or less ignore these characters in their preoccupation with motives and stresses in the framework of action of more consequential members of the dramatis personae. In 1863, Charles Cowden Clarke wrote that

"the subordinate characters (in Shakespeare) have to a considerable extent been neglected,"¹ and today, almost a hundred years later, the statement still holds true.

And yet, the very vitality of these people testifies to Shakespeare's intense interest in them and his high valuation of them. "He fairly leaps into the skin of some most unlikely persons."² A secret of his power is the facility with which he identifies himself imaginatively with all sorts and conditions of men and women. A policeman is presented as convincingly as a prince. True, the most important parts usually go to nobles and royalty; people then, as now, were interested in the affairs of the wealthy, the prominent, and the great. The folk of London liked to see a king or a duke,³ and they liked to see him made gracious and generous. Common people were seldom the subject for leading parts, although royalty was interested in seeing the intimate life of the middle class with its bourgeois morals and rough, jolly ways.⁴ However, Shakespeare wrote for the people; we have no evidence other than that he was always careful to keep the general public in mind. The theater in his day was a popular amusement for the multitude

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1. Charles Cowden Clarke, Shakespeare-Characters; Chiefly those Subordinate, London, Smith, Elder, and Co., 1863, p. 3.
 2. Logan Pearsall Smith, On Reading Shakespeare, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935, p. 121.
 3. J. Dover Wilson, The Essential Shakespeare, Cambridge, University Press, 1933, p. 19.
 4. Mary I. Curtis, England of Song and Story, Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1932, p. 190.

probably more than it was recreation for the cultured; ⁵ he gave his audiences their nobles; but in the genius of psychological insight he gave them themselves, too, with what we can only call a joyousness of interpretation that underscored a consciousness of common humanity.

His contemporary Thomas Hayward had said, "For they who write to all must strive to please all and as such fashion themselves to a multitude consisting of spectators severally addicted." ⁶ In 1601 Marston had written his contempt of public opinion:

Now as I love the light, were I to pass
Through public verdict, I should
fear my form
Lest aught I offered were unsquared
or warped. ⁷

and while Shakespeare may have sometimes felt kinship with this latter view (his Hamlet attacked the groundlings who "cared only for dumb show and noise"), ⁸ his wisdom made him more conciliatory, and, with Heywood, he kept the general public constantly before his eyes. Consequently, his scenes are rich with local color and familiar types which strengthened the rapport between his audience - that dynamic, experienced audience of the Elizabethan Age - and the players who delivered his words.

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5. Charles Dudley Warner, The People for whom Shakespeare Wrote, Hartford, The American Publishing Co., 1896, p. 309.
 6. Levin L. Schiicking, Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1922, p. 25.
 7. Ibid., p. 17.
 8. Act III, Scene 2, Line 14, as edited in G. B. Harrison, Shakespeare's Complete Works, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1948. All following quotations from Shakespeare's works will be quoted from this edition.

II

Background and Sources
for the Plebeian Characters

In Shakespeare's time in England there were four classes besides the nobility: gentlemen, citizens, yeomen, and laborers or artificers.⁹ The first two carried out political, social, and business affairs; yeomen were steady, free, usually well established in one place, perhaps working the farms of gentlemen; laborers and men of the trades were less stable, although standards of workmanship were generally high; but from this group came young serving men, as well as those roustabouts who degenerated into idle fellows, robbers, and old beggars.¹⁰ All these, nevertheless, were bound together by a common enthusiasm for England's past and a common confidence in England's future. They were men who were constantly coming into contact with persons from all parts of Europe and sailors and travelers who had seen the wonders of the New World and the Ancient East; Englishmen were so stimulated by new discoveries, new achievements, and new acquaintances, that in them Shakespeare found a ready and rousing response to his exciting plots and his art of portrayal. He was careful to show contemporary life which his hearers understood. His pure delight in human nature formed the bond between actor and groundlings; they saw themselves without realizing they did so; they simply enjoyed his episodes and laughed at his jokes.

9. Warner, op. cit., p. 315.

10. Ibid., p. 316.

Self-recognition, had they experienced it, would not have given offense, for sympathy, not satire, is the inspiration for his comedy.¹¹ His quick sense of the ludicrous was kept in bounds by a fond heart that went out to all humanity; not censorious or mean, but providing the "touch of nature which makes the whole world kin."¹² As he grew older, wiser, more experienced, he created more variety and expressiveness in his characters as well as in his verse; especially in his humorous characters was improvement of taste and judgment gained, so that from a beginning of obvious clowning, there developed new levels of quiet, lasting amusement and "indulgent knowledge of his imperfect but lovable fellow man."¹³

However, it must be borne in mind that his comics were not necessarily common people,¹⁴ nor were his common people all comic; his genius did not permit such indiscriminating classification. He did not try to separate the tragedy and comedy of life on the stage; "people surround kings, soldiers crowd about their generals; all conditions of society ... appear by turns in juxtaposition with the nature which properly belongs to them, and in the

11. John Palmer, Comic Characters of Shakespeare, London, MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1947, p. IX.

12. From Troilus and Cressida, Act III, Scene 2, Line 175.

13. Clarke, op. cit., p. 102.

14. Therefore, such a great figure of fun as Sir John Falstaff cannot be included in the characters discussed here; other comics of origin more distinguished than the plebeian are also omitted.

position which they naturally occupy;" 15 neither did he attempt to assign the role of comedy expressly to the plebeian, nor a sense of tragedy only to the high-born. As in life itself, no special quality was bestowed on only a certain class; the wonderful ambiguity of his art presents the well-rounded personality of a weaver as well as a general; of a shepherd as well as a prince. He was "a mirror of his time in things small as well as great." 16

To what extent he drew his characters from personal acquaintances has often been discussed. It seems almost positive that his common people were not creations of his imaginative powers, but were the result of a vigilant observation. "George Bernard Shaw has drawn him in 'The Dark Lady of the Sonnets' as a man with a notebook, jotting down everything he heard." 17 John Aubrey (1626-1697) has said that Shakespeare studied Dogberry from the original, and this must be true, in a greater or less degree, of all his commoners, for they possess a convincing quality of verisimilitude, the result of being drawn directly from life by one who shared in their experiences. It is easy to believe he was a good mixer in all sorts of company, in all sorts of circumstances; popular, convivial, delighted in his companions' being exactly what they were; absorbing, rather than recording, the impressions which were later to be fashioned into a warm interpretation of hu-

15. Warner, op. cit., p. 367, (quoting M. Guizot).

16. Smith, op. cit., p. 118.

17. G. B. Harrison, Shakespeare's Complete Works, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1948, p. 5.

man life. It is probable that he knew clowns, maids, tinkers, shepherds, soldiers, and tapsters by name, for his experience led him from both the villages and great houses of rural England to the streets, docks, theaters, and courts of London. 18

When at home in Stratford, he had the advantage of living amid natural scenery and in the neighborhood of Arden (where a youthful poaching prank once brought him into a brush with local law); here he was acquainted with country gentleman, squire, parson, schoolmaster, yeoman, dairy maid, shepherd, lout (how he loved a fool!). The examination of young William in his "accidence" in The Merry Wives of Windsor must be an allusion to Shakespeare's schoolboy days at Stratford:

William, how many numbers is in nouns?...What is 'fair,' William?...What is lapis, William?...Well, what is your accusative case?...I pray you have your remembrance, child. Accusativo, hung, hang, hog....What is the focative case, William? 19

In The Winter's Tale, the grouped scene at the sheep-shearing, as "clear-cut as a Grecian bas-relief," 20 undoubtedly pictures a sight familiar to Shakespeare from personal experience. He went to other country festivals with their feasts, games, and merry-making on the village green; he was in the crowd jostling about the wrestling and shooting matches of Bartholomew Fair. 21

Every village had a good little inn or tavern which served

18. Wilson, op. cit., Chapter III.

19. Act IV, Scene 1, Lines 21-53.

20. Warner, op. cit., p. 383.

21. Curtis, op. cit., p. 212.

as a social center for the convivial neighborhood folk exactly as the taverns and inns did in the city. In Elizabeth's time, most of the rude brawls and quarrels common to the manly conventions of local citizenry boiled up in the taverns; here the vagabonds of the highway and the poachers and thieves met to plot and divide their spoils,²² drinking and swearing the great oaths which Shakespeare's excellent ear caught in consistent identification with character, locality, and time. The doddering old porter in Macbeth, ignorantly trying to recall "the other devil's" name; bestial Caliban's "pied ninny" and "scurvy patch" have not the elegance of Hotspur's "God-a-mercy" nor the power of the Boat-swain's "a plague upon their howling." His deliberate realistic observation of idiosyncracies in speech and thought, as they are revealed in rustics and adventurers, enliven the characters of the plays: their speech is "rich in the floating debris of popular proverbs, sayings, scraps and tags of songs and speech,.... caught up out of air or picked up by the roadside....All this illiterate material he turned to use,"²³ to the edification of an appreciative audience. The broken English of a French physician and a Welsh parson, and the homely accents of a rustic constable enhanced the comedy delighting the crowd.

Shakespeare's time was a time of discovery, of new worlds

22. H. N. Mac Cracken, F. E. Pierce, and W. H. Durham, An Introduction to Shakespeare, New York, The MacMillan Co., 1911, p. 57.

23. Smith, op. cit., p. 68.

opening literally as well as intellectually, of new lands found; his quick intelligence was a counterpart of the spirit of the times. The voyages of Raleigh and Drake were amazing the citizens and furnishing them with much to talk about and, above all, to increase their pride. Sailors came and went as heroes and bearers of travel lore in the taverns and along the docks and in their own home towns. The poet either drew his knowledge of seamanship from accurate personal observation, or had a remarkable power of applying the information of others to his accounts of the sea.²⁴ Only remarkable familiarity could have suggested such figures as:

...the wet sea boy in an hour so rude²⁵
trying to sleep in the crow's nest, and:

...the wind shook surge, with high and
monstrous mane,

(which seemed)...to cast water on the
burning Bear,

And quench the guards of the ever-fixed Pole.²⁶

He was a familiar, as well, of the folk at the great country houses, where the atmosphere of a petty court surrounded the writers, musicians, and players who looked to the lord for patronage;²⁷ a multitude of dependents, maid-servants, guards, gamekeepers, dairy folk, and the like promoted the wide-open hospitality that was everywhere maintained.²⁸ Shakespeare was no person

24. Warner, op. cit., pp. 373-374.

25. 2 Henry IV., Act III, Scene 1, Line 27.

26. Quoted from Harrison, Complete Works of Shakespeare, p. 5.

27. MacCracken, et. al., op. cit., pp. 45-46.

28. Warner, op. cit., Chapter III.

to sit aloof in the Great Hall. Many a morning he must have been up and about early, strolling in the kitchen yards and joining the crowd lingering close to the kitchen fire. Here he picked up gossip as pithy and quips as biting as any he would hear in the coffee houses of the city. Undoubtedly, the servants would have known more about the great folk in the mansions and castles than would the street and tavern gossips; Shakespeare's shrewd portraits of the noble and powerful suggest more intimate knowledge than he could have obtained from purely social experience.

While his native countryside furnished as great wealth for his purpose as did the streets of London, the city, nevertheless, offered a wider and more varied segment of life for his consideration. Not far from Black friars, he could find himself in Lower Thames Street and pick up scraps of German language and folk lore from the Hanseatic merchants located there.²⁹ At the theater itself, the "spacious times" of Queen Elizabeth unfolded as dramatically as the play. The actor, surrounded on three sides by his audience, was in a position to study his public from the stage;³⁰ and Shakespeare, who, as many playwrights did, acted a small part now and then,³¹ acquired a feeling for what would appeal to the general taste, as well as a skill in observing the audience, which, no doubt, was blood brother to the crowd which cheered and berated

29. Warner, loc. cit.

30. Schiicking, op. cit., p. 29.

31. Edward Dowden, Shakespeare, London, MacMillan and Co., 1877, p. 11.

the strolling players and Morality Plays in his country-bred youth.³² To know that an author was seldom well-known except at court,³³ where keen interest in theatrical personalities evinced itself, makes it easy to conceive of welcome anonymity serving as a cloak to his keen-eyed, sharp-eared perception, as Shakespeare filled the simple part of gentle Adam or sepulchral ghost.

His part as manager in the theater brought him into business transactions which involved justices, clerks, and scribes, progenitors of the motley crew he displays on the stage; later wealth as householder and land-owner brought wider knowledge of legal affairs and terms.³⁴ His father had been frequently in the courts;³⁵ he himself learned the vocabulary of law from participation in these early lawsuits and from his own frequent appearances in court which stemmed at times from his personal necessities, and at times from a wish to be of assistance to a friend. In 1612 he was a witness in a lawsuit brought against his landlord, a wigmaker for the theater, whose daughter had been engaged to a young French apprentice, but whose marriage settlement became so involved that the young foreigner sued for a larger sum.³⁶ No doubt Shakespeare, by his extremely faulty memory, aided the cause of his friend; no doubt, too, his amused observation of the principals noted those strong touches of

32. Curtis, op. cit., pp. 360-363.

33. Schlicking, op. cit., p. 11.

34. MacCracken, et. al., op. cit., pp. 14-15.

35. Ibid., p. 4.

36. Ibid., p. 13.

the French nationality which he employed in the quick temper, high spirits, and light head of Lavatch the jester and the amorous Dr. Caius; his ear caught the strenuous and laugh-tickling accent of an English-speaking Frenchman and transferred it to the stage.

He frequented the shops and the streets; watched the soldiers combing the town in pairs and in groups, settling briefly before venturing anew. In St. Paul's walk, where anyone could learn anything from fashion to political scandal, he might watch the fops and ladies of the town who thronged the wide aisles and jostled the choir-boys while divine service was being solemnized in the chancel.³⁷ The vigorous speech of the mob came to him, speech full of wit and repartee and vituperation, speech of townspeople, shopkeepers, tradesmen, fashionables, to join his remembrance of the living talk of the countryside and inns, full of coarseness, but marked with the unconscious poetry of rustic speech.

To observation and remembrance, he added that which was within himself. "It is comparatively easy for a man to go about the world, book in hand, carefully noting down what he sees and hears;This is different from observation that remarks all things that are examples of the truth of a theory and system already decided upon, confirming it in that truth."³⁸ His was not merely a surface inspection of life. From the great plans, the great

37. G. B. Harrison, England in Shakespeare's Day, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1928, pp. 115-117.

38. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare, London, George Bell and Sons, 1897, p. 68.

stories, the great heroes filling his thoughts came the countless details that set them into focus, enhanced their qualities, and explained their meaning. The common man was one of those factors by which in all his plays except one, and possibly another, ³⁹ the poet-playwright either revealed the background, enhanced the reality, lightened the atmosphere, or softened the inhumanity of the general theme upon which he built each work.

39. The Merry Wives of Windsor is concerned with solid burghers and their virtuous wives; A Midsummer Night's Dream has one of its three interwoven plots presenting a group of artisans who plan and present a play.

III

Motives for their Presentation

In Shakespeare's plays, real people of the common walks of life first appear sketchily in scenes of little importance, such as the clowns that were a popular item on the Elizabethan stage, which Shakespeare used simply to please and entertain his public.⁴⁰ Speed is a professed wit who soon disappears in the plot of Two Gentlemen of Verona (1592); but Launce is a truly unconscious figure of humor, blundering into matters more productive than those of Speed's interests. His dog is his best friend; he takes beatings for his dog, and takes the dog's faults upon himself; but he is willing to give up his dog in serving his master, and takes it to Proteus's sweetheart as a present. The otherwise witless lout thereby rises above a simple comic and becomes a personality who arouses laughter, but laughter tinged with sympathy and understanding.

With these two (Speed and Launce), Shakespeare began the procession of humorous characters which, in time, abandoned the purely coarse or obvious, and became the instruments of all types and grades of clownage; a procession which went from the naive, through the high-spirited and fun-loving, into the conscious wit of the clever, to deepen finally into the pathos of the faithful fool attendant upon King Lear.

40. Smith, op. cit., p. 93.

Shallow and Silence, the two Gloucestershire justices,⁴¹ exemplify the naive: Shallow's pretensions, self-importance, constant questions, and idiotic restlessness, together with Slender's stupid parroting and reverence for his cousin, contrast sharply with the astute Feste, clown of Twelfth Night (1600). The crowd loved the humorous characters. The fact that Shallow, Bardolph, Pistol, and others who strutted through Henry IV were recreated in The Merry Wives of Windsor (though the same characters, never repetitious), shows how popular they were with Elizabethan audiences. The pompous, pedantic schoolmaster of Love's Labour's Lost (1590), a country curate, a court judge, and a country clown made good sport for the groundlings. From the pit they shouted with delight at the bewilderment of Bottom, that amateur but enthusiastic actor whose creative fire was dimmed but not extinguished by vicissitudes that would have discouraged a fainter heart, a more modest soul. They laughed as Elbow arrested a poor tramp for venery, when they knew he was incapable of sinning, and knew, too, that the constable's own wife was more guilty than the prisoner. These, for all the guffaws, were more than mere clowns; they were familiar types, recognizable to their fellows and doubly appreciated for that. To us now, they afford an artistic satisfaction such as that given by the best genre pictures, through the pleasant humor in which they are depicted, and by the sense of pleased recognition with which one sees the familiar face of a friend.

41. In 2 Henry IV (1598) and The Merry Wives of Windsor (1599).

As his comic changed from a clown to a real person, Shakespeare evolved the effective expedient of giving to his subordinate, lower-class characters a close reference to the main action of the piece. These parts, far from standing alone and unrelated, began to harmonize with the great and single end he had in view toward the developing and maturing of the play;⁴² their harmony not only fulfilled the design of the plot, but was consistent within the characters themselves. T. S. Eliot has aptly said:

...Comic relief (was) a practical necessity of the time for the writer who had to make his living by writing plays. What is really interesting is what Shakespeare made of this necessity. I think that when we turn to Henry IV we often feel that what we want to re-read and linger over are the Falstaff episodes, rather than the political hifalutin of the King's party and its adversaries. That is an error. As we read from Part I to Part II and see Falstaff, not merely gluttoning and playing pranks, indifferent to affairs of State, but leading his band of conscripts and conversing with local magnates, we find that the relief has become serious contrast, and that political satire issues from it. In Henry V the two elements are still more fused;But it is not in the histories...that we find the comic relief most nearly taken up into a higher unity of feeling. In Twelfth Night and A Midsummer Night's Dream, the farcical element is an essential to a pattern more complex and elaborate than any constructed by a dramatist before or since....The scene upon Pompey's galley in Antony and Cleopatra...is not only in itself a prodigious piece of political satire -

'A beares the third part of the world, man...!' -

but is a key to everything that precedes and follows. 43

42. Smith, op. cit., p. 96.

43. T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1937, p. 43.

The advancing of, or addition to, the business of the play was in certain instances primary, as in The Merry Wives, where respectable middle-class burghers and their wives carried out the plot; and in the Dream, where honest artisans and laborers occupied the framework of the piece. In the first, a Mrs. Quickly fussily but superficially goes about the business of courting Ann for the Doctor and for Slender; then meddles in the affair between Falstaff and his two prospective mistresses; apes the seriousness of a diplomat in dealing with Fenton; but she gets down to practical business when she is paid for her services. In the other, a Quince hands out play scripts and a Bottom claims the good parts; a set of "mechanicals" stumble through a home-made play in a maze of misdirection and verbiage, to the hilarious entertainment of all observers, on stage and off.

However, Shakespeare's commoner as a pregnant force is mostly present in a more subtle form; he furthers the affairs of the play in a more indirect fashion. In The Winter's Tale, the old shepherd and his son rescue the shipwrecked baby who grows into the lovely heroine; in Measure for Measure the keeper of the disreputable house is a necessary adjunct to the plot against Mariana; in Cymbeline, the servant disobeys his master and Imogen is saved. We learn something of young Prince Henry's wild ways and his father's fears from the tapster at the ale-house; we hear Mrs. Quickly disclose the real cause of Falstaff's death; an old man in Macbeth, recalling the night of the murders, epitomizes the preternatural atmosphere pervading the story. The bivouacked soldiers of Henry V watch him move among themselves and pass from

sentinel to sentinel on the eve of battle; a fine nature operates on an inferior one to the betterment of As You Like It; old Lear first realizes his folly in stripping himself of possessions when he watches his fool grieve over Cordelia's banishment. The plays advance by means of the action of quite ordinary beings, notwithstanding high drama of noble characters and deep tragedy.

The dramatically effective device of placing his leading figures, dramatized as they had to be, against a background touched by real life as his audience knew it, may have resulted from Shakespeare's observation of the old Morality Plays, in which realistic scenes of contemporary living were accepted as part of the performance. Tragedy, with Shakespeare, became more tragic because it lies surrounded by the common realities of life. The oppressive quality of Richard II, in which misdeeds and violence, injustice, remorse, and despair cast an almost unrelieved gloom over all, is softened and lightened by the gentle philosophy of the gardener who speaks to his fellow:

....what pity is it
That he (the king) had not so trimmed
and dressed his land
As we this garden! 44

The querulous porter in Macbeth, after a scene of murder whose impact of terror and horror has left us trembling, opens the gates, and for a brief space of oaths and complaints, carries us far from the dark picture. ⁴⁵ His groans and obscenities keep the carousing

44. Act III, Scene 4, Lines 55-6.

45. Act II, Scene 3.

of the night before us; his broad humor lightens the pressure for a moment; another moment, and the terror returns with greater force. When Hamlet stands at the grave opened for so tragic an occupant, the musing conversation with the brusque gravedigger lessens the aura of unutterable despair which attended the prince. To the gravedigger, Yorick was a pestering practical joker, whereas Hamlet recalls his social and intellectual qualities:

1. Clown: ... Here's a skull now. This skull has lain in the earth three and twenty years.

Hamlet: Whose was it?

1. Clown: A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?

Hamlet: Nay, I know not.

1. Clown: A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! A' poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

Hamlet: This?

1. Clown: E'en that.

Hamlet: Let me see. (Takes the skull) Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio - a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy...where be your gibes now? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? 46

The laborer brings to Hamlet brief diversion of his thoughts. Shakespeare's plebeian man constantly reacts on his tragic character; Lear, wandering and raving amidst the tempest, is further distressed and maddened by the fool's "wild wit."⁴⁷ Here comic humor even develops tragic passion at the same time that it relieves the force of its impact.

Shakespeare also presents familiar, living characters to lend

46. Act V, Scene 1, Lines 190-210.

47. King Lear, Act III, Scene 2.

reality to otherwise unreal or too ethereal situations; or to historical productions in which he offers the picture of a sovereign carrying out the dictates of his fate. It is plain that the dramatist does not feel that mere historical verisimilitude is of primary importance. His characters live, feel, breathe, act. In the grandeur or the despair of kings and queens, it is the little common touch that brings them into focus with ordinary and universal emotions and experiences, which know no class. In Richard II, the gardener comforts the queen; ^{he} pities her and grieves for her; he gives an air of historic fact to the play, gives an individuality to the scene. The queen has stormed at him:

How dares thy harsh rude tongue
 sound this displeasing news?
 What Eve, what serpent, hath
 suggested thee
 To make a second fall of
 cursed man?
 Why dost thou say King
 Richard is deposed?

...

Gardener: Pardon me, madam.
 Little joy have I
 To breathe this news, yet what
 I say is true.
 King Richard, he is in the mighty
 hold
 Of Bolingbroke. Their fortunes
 both are weighed.
 In your lord's scale is nothing
 but himself,
 And some few vanities that
 make him light;
 But in the balance of great
 Bolingbroke,
 Besides himself, are all the
 English peers,
 And with that balance he
 weighs King Richard down.

...

Queen: ...What, was I born to this,
 that my sad look
 Should grace the triumph of
 great Bolingbroke?
 Gardener, for telling me these news
 of woe,
 Pray God the plants thou graft's may
 never grow.

...

Gardener: Poor Queen! ...
 Here did she fall a tear; here in this
 place
 Ill set a bank of rue, sour herb of
 grace.
 Rue, even for ruth, here shortly
 shall be seen
 In the remembrance of a
 weeping Queen. 48

The soldiers in Coriolanus discuss their fallen leader in terms of their profession; their speculation and shrugging acceptance of come-what-will afford an insight into professional army life and a glimpse of the machinations by which war is produced that could not be made more vivid by a general's exhortation. In Romeo and Juliet, the serving men bite their thumbs; the nurse gabbles; Mercutio jests; without the commonplace actions of such as these, the tender, tragic story of the two young lovers would seem too ethereal to encompass the joys and sorrows of actual human love. In As You Like It, it is Touchstone's part to shed the light of reality and common sense upon the fanciful figures and diversions of the Forest of Arden. His whimsicalities are a sort of reflection of what goes on elsewhere in the play, and reduce these divertissements to their proper valuation.

More than reality is supplied by the dramatist in the contrasts in characters which he employs to move the plan of a play to its fulfillment. By contrasting noble figures with those of plebeian birth, he shows one character in action and brings it into sharp relief by its contrast with another. The lords and ladies of As You Like It, playing at simplicity, engaging in intrigue and deceit, are exposed in their falsity and pretensions by the simple credo of old Corin:

I am a true laborer; I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man's hate, envy no man's happiness, glad of other men's good, content with my harm, and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck. 49

Touchstone, with fine feeling, rebukes Le Beau, who has told with zest of the lamentations of the old father whose sons have been hurt at wrestling:

It's the first time that ever I heard breaking of ribs is a sport for ladies. 50

Old Adam bears true devotion to his young master, offering all he owns, in contrast to the light and fickle relationships among the court's fancy figures. Twelfth Night has its inconstant and inconsistent friends; in the play, Feste, the fool, conscious of his superior qualities, nevertheless lives with each after his own fashion, and, knowing their natures and weaknesses, "adapts himself to the mood of the moment."⁵¹ He is the only cool and

49. Act III, Scene 2, Lines 77-81.

50. Act I, Scene 2, Lines 145-147.

51. J. B. Priestly, The English Comic Characters, New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1925, p. 58.

consistent character in the play, an observer with wit, humor, and repartee, and by his presence betrays the follies of his betters.

The greedy and rough Launcelot bears a relation to the common idea of The Merchant of Venice, that of avarice and trickery; yet, unlike his wealthy master, he does not let his greed overwhelm him; and he, knowing that he could live more comfortably with rich Shylock, yet prefers, in accordance with the honor of his day, to attach himself in service to the poorer Bassanio.

Although Shakespeare's women are not so complex in their presentation as are his men, the less exalted are as clearly drawn, in one dimension or another, as the mistresses whom they serve. ⁵² Margaret, with her clever tongue, apes Beatrice, but since she is imitating, not experiencing true feeling, her imitation is coarse and exaggerated; she displays, by comparison, the superior wit of her mistress. ⁵³ The old nurse to Juliet, by her coarse and bawdy speech, enhances the shy virtue of the girl, whose innocence is repelled by the earthy old dame.

Myriads of contrasts come to mind. A groom visits Richard in prison when all his royal friends have deserted him; the murderers in Macbeth discuss his indecision, themselves unquestioning; the lowly servant cannot kill Imogen, though the crime is ordered by her family; the fool in his wisdom points out Lear's folly; Timon's faithful steward vainly tries to stem his master's wild extrava-

52. John Weiss, Wit, Humor, and Shakespeare, Boston, Roberts Brothers, 1876, pp. 279-281

53. In Much Ado About Nothing.

gance, and, in an honesty lost to the upper classes, refuses the bribes that are offered him. The simple beauty of the waiting woman's "I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body" ⁵⁴ shames the ruthless ambition of the guilt-crazed Lady Macbeth. The servants in Gloster's establishment sustain the dignity of their natures when they tenderly care for his poor, blinded sockets, and the one says of the torturer Cornwall:

I'll never care what wickedness
I do,
If this man comes to good. ⁵⁵

And the other replies, speaking of cruel Regan:

If she lives long,
And in the end meet the old
course of death,
Women will all turn monsters. ⁵⁶

and then, in compassion:

I'll fix some flax and whites
of eggs
To apply to his bleeding face.
Now, Heaven help him! ⁵⁷

So, clearly they show that nobility of birth without nobility of character is nothing; that virtue and self-respect win their own reward of peace and satisfaction within and the esteem of all who are worthy to bestow it.

It is the commoner who frequently divines the character of a high-born master, showing more discernment than his companions.

54. Macbeth, Act V, Scene 1, Lines 61-62.

55. Act III, Scene 7, Lines 99-100.

56. Loc. cit., Lines 100-102.

57. Loc. cit., Lines 106-107.

Speed slyly describes the old carefree Valentine to Valentine in love:

You were wont, when you laughed, to crow
like a cock; ... when you fasted, it was
presently after dinner; ... when you looked
sadly, it was for want of money. 58

Directly opposed to the clever perception of Speed's nature is the unimaginative boorishness of the country lout who brings the asp to Cleopatra. This lump, against the gorgeous Eastern magnificence, the luxury, languor, and regal grandeur of the scene surrounding the royal charmer, stands flatly and cracks his heavy jokes. The proud queen's haughty composure is no proof against his insensitiveness; his very presence lends strength to her resolve to die, rather than suffer his kind to gawk at her led captive through the streets of Rome. Such dissimilarity heightens the effect of her aristocratic pride.

With equal impact, Shakespeare uses contrasting characters to demonstrate common problems of high-born and low-born, regardless of rank, and the similarity of their response. Launce, the vulgar, enters with his dog immediately after Proteus and Julia exchange rings; his uncouth presence in the midst of elegance introduces the vulgarity of Proteus himself, who soon forgets Julia when his fancy turns.⁵⁹ The play given by Bottom and his friends, at which the lovers so lightly jeer, is not sillier than the dilemma in which they themselves so recently figured. A Pompey, in his broad, coarse humor, underscores the lack of fas-

58. Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act II, Scene 1, Lines 26-31.

59. As noted in Weiss, op. cit., p. 69.

tidiousness in the young men in the jail, who had frequented the disreputable house where he was employed. A Fabian reveals the shoddiness of Malvolio in Twelfth Night; in the play, the burlesque characters are placed side by side with the characters in which the same fault lies concealed, though in the caricature the fault "shoots forth like a wild growth in nature."⁶⁰ Orsino yearns for Olivia with as excessive a display of devotion as does Malvolio in his more exaggerated actions.

The skillful balance Shakespeare maintains between characters is equalled in the balance between characters and the mood of the play. Bottom would be out of place in Olivia's garden; Audrey would not belong in a "Wood near Athens;" Malvolio would strike a false note in the Forest of Arden. Once removed from their proper setting, the spell they cast is broken; the folly which makes them lovable seems artificial and contrived. These lowly characters are immortal because of their amazing vitality, but their vitality would disappear in an inharmonious setting, since theirs is the vitality of art.

60. Clarke, op. cit., p. 200.

IV

Guises of Presentation

The care with which Shakespeare exhibited his commoners is proof of the enjoyment with which he shaped their parts. He is not bitter in his delineations; rather, "he overlooks the scene with a detached and serene gaze free of commitment to any single purpose."⁶¹ His people simply talk themselves alive. Each has his own individual way of speaking, with a personal diction and idiom recognizable all through the play. Each is drawn, as in real life, from what he says and what he does throughout the course of the play, and from the mouths of his enemies or friends. Even when out of the scene, the remarks and comments of others keep him in character. From Bottom's admiring friends, we learn the doughty weaver is considered irreplaceable in his part; from Malvolio's tormentors, we know that the silly steward, for all his conceit, continues to be gullible.

Shakespeare's important characters sometimes act with surprising inconsistency, as when Isabella connives to trap Angelo into a marriage, or the two gentlemen of Verona renew their friendship; but in the lesser characters, consistency is more pronounced. As with his women, the playwright creates them more by a single strong interpretation, than by the complex shading in which he portrays his important characters. Mrs. Quickly is an expressive

61. Schücking, op. cit., p. 17.

counterpart of the busybody; she interferes in every conversation, elbowing her way in; her thoughts and sentences are closely inter-linked; she gives an impression of positive and energetic expression. Yet, like many of her intellect and character, she has a streak of genuine, delicate compassion, disclosed as she sits with the dying old Falstaff, - an instinctive, practical gesture to assuage his fears of death:

I to comfort him bid him a'
 should not think of God, I
 hoped there was no need to
 trouble himself with any such
 thoughts yet. 62

Juliet's old Nurse has all the garrulity of age, and true ignorance; her uncultivated mind recalls the past wholly by coincident images or facts which happened at the same time; a practical mind would recall the past by certain orderly trains of cause or effect, but she rattles on:

Come Lammas-eve at night shall she
 be fourteen
 Susan and she - God rest all Christian
 souls!-
 Were of an age. - Well, Susan is
 with God;
 She was too good for me. But, as
 I said,
 On Lammas-eve at night shall
 she be fourteen:
 That shall she, marry: I remember
 it well.
 'Tis since the earthquake now
 eleven years;
 And she was weaned, - I never
 shall forget it, -
 Of all days in the year, upon
 that day. 63

62. Henry V, Act II, Scene 3, Lines 21-23.

63. Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Scene 3, lines 16-25.

Her snobbish satisfaction at being connected with a great family is typical of the low-born; her grossness and vices are clearly unrecognized as such by herself. Her genuine love for Juliet is the redeeming trait in her crude character, just as the care with which the bad old woman in Measure for Measure keeps Lucio's child from starving is the counterbalance of her wickedness.

Emilia, the waiting woman in Othello, is a woman of coarser texture than Desdemona, with something of spite in her nature, yet she is cheerful, almost light-minded, until her husband's infamy confronts her; then she becomes serious and energetic. Hitherto blind to his baseness, she then throws off her allegiance to him with:

You told a lie, an odious, damned
 lie -
 Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie. 64

Her passionate, horrified revolt renounces him and all his dishonor. Julia's waiting-woman is smart-witted and feminine:

I have no other reason but a
 woman's reason;
 I think him so because I think
 him so. 65

Maria of Twelfth Night is a boisterous, irrepressible tomboy and tease; seeing few women, she tends to joke and talk nonsense with the men of the household; her high-spirited sense of fun involves her in the typically masculine tricks on Malvolio. The country wench Audrey is a wholly different type from the witty Maria. Her gawky ways reveal her empty head; her one idea of

64. Act V, Scene 2, Lines 180-181.

65. The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act I, Scene 2, Line 23.

marriage is set upon the merry-making and dancing, the new dress, and cakes-and-ale which will attend it; she sees no further. However, she is not calculating, as is Mopsa in The Winter's Tale; this wench has just enough of that low shrewdness which takes the place of intelligence in many otherwise stupid people, to enable her to get all she can from the pedlar; mercenary interest shows through in all she does; her ill nature betrays her in her bickering and quarreling with the other girls. These women interested Shakespeare; "he hung upon each her garment of individuality without a false gesture,"⁶⁶ yet "the chief problems of life seemed to lurk for him in the souls and lives of men."⁶⁷ He took more interest in the masculine mind than in the feminine. His country women and serving maids seem more to embody a trait, while his constables and clowns are exhibited in several facets of their natures.

Feste, in Twelfth Night, is cheerful, elastic, of untiring spirits. Nothing vexes him. He is never anxious or grave; not even the threat of the hangman subdues him. "Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage," says he. He is secretly pleased at being able to joke away his mistress's anger, but has nothing of the self-satisfied, self-important temperaments that mark the constables, Elbow and Dogberry. These ludicrous dolts plod through the plays, mangling the language and imposing their petty power on any poor

66. Weiss, op. cit., p. 282.

67. Ibid., p. 275.

tramp they can find.⁶⁸ "Dogberry is not a caricature so much as a satire on all who are intrusted with duties for which neither nature nor art ever designed them....Every jackanapes with more sail than ballast is a Dogberry full grown."⁶⁹ He miscalls words because his vanity causes him to try to sound learned, unlike Bottom, whose mistakes rise from rusticity, not from aping his superiors. He is close kin to Pistol, the swaggering, bombastic braggart of Henry IV and Merry Wives, who, with Nym and Bardolph, brawls, boasts, drinks, and thievs his way into the company of the immortals of Shakespeare. Nym's few but frank words betray his true self:

I dare not fight. I will wink
and hold out mine iron.

Pistol dares quarrel with him because he gambles on Bardolph's stopping the fight before it becomes more than a gesture.

Shallow, the justice in Henry IV, belongs, too, to the company of braggart liars; he boasts of the gay nights and days he has spent in the city, and talks familiarly of the personages whom he pretends to know. He has the nervous, gabbling speech of a totally witless man. He calls the conscripts together:

68. G. B. Harrison in his prefatory pages to the Complete Works says, of the Elizabethan age:

There was no regular police force. The sheriffs were responsible in the city....In each parish the constable represented the law; he was assisted by the watch, composed of responsible citizens who reluctantly took their turn at patrolling the parish by night. These amateur watchmen... sometimes acted with incredible stupidity....

69. Dowden, op. cit., p. 315.

Where's the roll? Where's the roll?
 Where's the roll? Let me see, let me
 see, let me see. So, so, so, so. Yes,
 marry, sir. Ralph Mouldy! Let them.
 Let them appear as I do so. Let them
 do so. Let them do so. Let me
 see. Where's Mouldy? 70

And the soldiers he is recruiting! Stupid, literal, evasive; or
 bombastic; or trying to bribe the officers, - with success!

Shakespeare's common soldiers, the professionals, whether of
 England, Rome, Egypt, or Greece, are accurately portrayed. He
 varies the individual, but keeps the identity of the class. They
 are men of the world, familiar with foreign customs and countries,
 at home with men of every class, yet never home-bodies. Light-
 hearted in a lark, yet ready for business in war, they have the
 disciplined mentality of the rank and file. Parolles' soldiers,
 in All's Well that Ends Well, know he is a coward, but because of
 his rank they do not voice their knowledge. They hold to the tra-
 dition of the service, true soldiers, shrewd and observing, yet
 close-mouthed in military matters.

The true sailors of Elizabeth's time are in the plays, as
 vividly presented. Frank, open, and prodigal, they show a con-
 tempt of danger and a clear-eyed view of the business they are en-
 gaged in which are close kin to the attitude of the soldiers. The
 captain in Hamlet who says,

We go to gain a little patch of ground
 That hath in it no profit but the name,

has no more respect for the nobles who wage the wars in which he

fights, than does the boatswain of The Tempest, when he, aware of danger but stoutly fighting the elements, is warned by Gonzalo:

Remember whom thou hast aboard

stonily replies:

None that I love more than myself.⁷¹

That rough rebuke should have been more assuring than all the soothing phrases he might have employed.

As typical of a class are the citizens who crowd the streets and towns of Shakespeare's plays. The avenues in Julius Caesar are alive with vigorous, self-assured Romans full of jubilation over his triumphs; they have quit work to go to see him; the Basilica is filled with officers and clients, the market places crowded with citizens discussing political affairs. The mob scenes in Coriolanus display the vacillating, unreasoning temper of a crowd which, listening to the various self-interested speakers about them, discuss the points, deplore one another's losses, and betray their own disappointments at lack of success. When Othello's boat is sighted in Cyprus the townspeople gather along the shore to watch, and speculate on the strange vessel which has drawn them to the beach, as people in any port are drawn by the mysterious or unexpected:

The town is empty. On the brow of
the sea
Stand ranks of people, and they
cry, 'A sail!' 72

71. The Tempest, Act I, Scene 1, Line 22.

72. Othello, Act II, Scene 1, Lines 53-54.

English crowds are no different; in Richard II citizens meet to talk and gossip about poor government, the king's death, the extreme youth of the Prince; it is a natural scene of commoners who cannot influence any matter, so resignedly wash their hands of it. "Leave it all to God," they say. Jack Cade exhorts the people in Henry VI: "Be brave!" he roars, while Bevis and Holland in the crowd solemnly talk it over and decide:

Thou hast hit it, for there's no
better sign of a brave mind than
a hard hand. 73

Added to these types enmasse are the simple shepherds, like Corin; old Adam, who offers all he owns to his master; the old shepherd and his son in The Winter's Tale, who reel under their promotion and fine clothes in an ecstasy of gratified pride; the typically curious Doctor in Macbeth; the home theatricals of Bottom and his crew, drunken tinkers, gentle gardeners, jolly hosts, devoted servants, honest burghers, faithful wives; all the wondrous variety of figures which crowd the pages of Shakespeare are before us for our contemplation and delight. To Hamlet, he gave the thoughts that must have filled his mind as he created his marvelous, living characters:

What a piece of work is a man! How
noble in reason! How infinite in
faculty! in form and moving how
express, ^{and} admirable! in action how
like an angel! in apprehension
how like a God! the beauty of the
world! the paragon of animals! 74

73. 2 Henry VI, Act IV, Scene 2, Line 21.

74. Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2, Lines 315-319.

So, with a thin third finger
 marrying
Drop to wine drop domed on
 the table,
Shakespeare opened his heart
 till the sunrise
Entered to hear him. 75

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