Shakespeare and comedy

With images from the Birmingham Shakespeare collection

All the world's a stage

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts

As You Like It

Although Shakespeare lived and wrote some 400 years ago, his sharp observations of human nature are still very true and valid today. No more so they appeal to us than in his comedy plays. From the merely foolish to the crafty, practical jokers and hypocrites, Shakespeare's comic characters display an understanding of the world and humanity of the deepest kind, all delivered brilliantly with the medium of laughter.

The role of the comedies

The role of the comedies in the theatrical world is similar to the role of carnivals in real life. They are an alternative to the official order where one can express a different opinion, where traditional hierarchy doesn't apply, and clowns and fools can mock the authority. Shakespeare draws on his knowledge of folk traditions (the Lord of Misrule etc.) to create characters and situations in his comedies that are funny, individual, and well loved by the public, as well as being keen observers and critics of society. In tune with Elizabethan theatre traditions, they offer wit and laughter by the bucket full in the shape of Shakespeare's fools/clowns/jesters/jokers.

The fool

The fool is a stock character in Shakespeare. Feste, Touchstone and King Lear's fool and many others are the paid entertainers hired by aristocratic households to provide amusement. While in real life the court jester would have been usually a poor or disabled boy, Shakespeare's fool is foolish only on first appearance.

Touchstone (As You Like It). Illustrated by Hugh Thomson, 1909 S 313.1909

Mr Andreae as Feste, Twelfth Night, 1900. Postcard S 601.52

King Lear

Behind the jokes and nonsense burbling (motley), there is a witty and rather well-read character who only pretends in order to make a point, as King Lear discovers in the words of his jester:

The lord that counselled thee

To give away thy land

Come place him here by me

Do thou for him stand.

The sweet and bitter fool

Will presently appear.

The one in motley here

The other found out there.

Andrew Leigh as the Fool, King Lear, Stratford upon Avon Memorial Theatre, 1937. Production photo S 601.32

In many of the comedies the fool is the driving force of the plot. King Lear's fool is a well-liked boy, showing great tenderness towards the old king and gets Lear's sympathy *('Dost thou call me fool, boy?'*). This familiar double act between the king and his fool carries the action in the early parts of the play to reveal the major themes of power, love and madness.

The fool's joke is: who is the real fool here? The character that is supposed to be the object of everybody's laughter reveals the real life fools. Touchstone is an experienced commentator on life in court:

I have trod a measure;

I have flattered a lady;

I have been politic with my friend, smooth with mine enemy;

I have undone three tailors….

There is privilege in the position of the court jester to say things that others might be executed or punished for. The clown is the only one permitted to tell the truth and get away with it because it all comes under the veil of laughter.

Twelfth Night

As a ‘corrupter of words’ Feste (Twelfth Night) uses his wit to create wordplays and puns that strike a deep meaning, whether it is about love or lust or money – ‘Youth’s a stuff will not endure….’’.

For all the foolery, however, the clown always knows where to draw the line and the limitations of his freedom:

I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are;

They’ll have me whipped for speaking true,

thou’lt have me whipped for lying;

And sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace.

Shakespeare departs further from the comic convention with Feste in Twelfth Night. Despite his job as the court entertainer, in reality Feste is neither funny, nor festive. He often thinks of death and his mood is melancholic *(‘Youth’s a stuff will not endure’* or ‘*Come away, come away death’*). A mood induced perhaps by his disillusion with court life full of hypocrisy and out of touch with reality (‘Nothing that is so is so’). A kind of disillusionment that gets expressed right until the end of the play: ‘*But that’s all one, our play is done’.*

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Shakespeare’s fools don’t always stick to convention. Each and every one is an individual. Speed (Two Gentlemen of Verona), as its name suggests, is quick and witty:

Speed: You conclude that my master is a shepherd, then, and I a sheep?

Proteus: I do…

Speed: Nay, that I can deny by a circumstance.

Proteus: It shall go hard but I’ll prove it by another.

Speed: The shepherd seeks the sheep, and not the sheep the shepherd, but I seek my master, and my master seeks not me. Therefore I am no sheep

In contrast, Lance is from poor background, uneducated and easily confused. His role is more pure clowning, giving the audience a chance of respite from the action in the play. He has little to do with the rest of the characters and one can make an educated guess that was created to allow some famous comedians of the day (Will Kemp) to show their virtuosity. Here is his famous scene representing his farewell with his family:

Nay, I'll show you the manner of it.

This shoe is my father.

No, this left shoe is my father.

No, no, this left shoe is my mother.

Nay that cannot be so neither.

Yes, it is so, it is so, it hath the worser sole.

This sole with the hole in it is my mother, and this is my father. ……. I am the dog.

No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog.

O, the dog is me, and I am myself.

Ay, so,so.

Speed and Lance, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Stratford upon Avon Shakespeare Memorial theatre, 1938. Production photo S 601.53

The scene above follows immediately the parting of Proteus (his master) and tearful Julia and makes an amusing and ironic contrast to the lover's separation.

Both servants in Two Gentlemen of Verona like to make fun of their masters. Speed doesn't miss a chance to mock his master Valentine's love for Sylvia. This is his explanation on the signs of love:

First, you have learned, like Sir Proteus, to wreathe your arms like a malcontent.

To relish a love-song like a robin redbreast; to walk alone like one that had the pestilence.

To sigh like a schoolboy that had lost his ABC; to weep like a young wench that had buried her grandam…..

Masterly playing with the words, Speed is ridiculing Elizabethan tradition of romantic love. In the famous Scene 1, act 2 of the play he creates fun by repeating and interpreting every single word of Valentine and Sylvia's conversation. Most fun is derived from the brilliant dialogues and witty exchanges between the two servants Speed and Lance when discussing a certain milkmaid's character:

Speed: 'She hath many nameless virtues'

Lance: That's as much as to say 'bastard virtues', that indeed know not their fathers and therefore have no names.

Similar wit is expressed in the conversations of Luciana, Adriana, and the servant Dromio in The Comedy of Errors. Despite being one of the early plays, The Comedy of Errors demonstrates the full dramatic potential of foolery. Clowns and servants are there to express the ridiculous in court life. Fools are everywhere. Ruled by 'neither rhyme, nor reason', they exist to entertain. Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus, the twin servants of Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus provoke thoughts and de-mask their master's true intentions. Dromio E's language is full of puns and extended plays on words when he describes his conversation with his master's twin brother:

'Tis dinner-time', quoth I . 'My gold' , quoth he.

'Your meat doth burn', quoth I. 'My gold', quoth he.

'Will you come home?' quoth I. 'My gold', quoth he.

The device of answering something completely different to what has been asked is an endless source of laughter. In the later comedies Shakespeare develops further the image of the fool who becomes more intelligent, witty and sarcastic. Where Lance and Bottom are simply foolish, Touchstone analyses – *'Such a one is a natural philosopher'*. He lives on paradox and wordplay, creating new conceptions, introducing new ideas and doubts to expose the ridiculous. Touchstone offers his observations with self-irony, parodying court manners and wise men:

Says, very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock.

Thus we may see' quoth he, 'how the world wags:

'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,

And after one hour 'twill be eleven;

And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,

And then from hour to hour we rot and rot.

As a court jester, his job is to expose true foolishness and bring things down to earth. He is at his best when targeting Orlando's romantic love with the language of working people:

I remember when I was in love, I broke my sword upon a stone and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile, and I remember the kissing of her batlet, and the cow's dugs that her pretty chapped hands had milked…

Or when joking about the ways of life in the country:

And this our life exempt from public haunt,

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.

Unprincipled and opportunistic, adaptable and with no illusions, he grows quickly from the 'clownish fool' at court to the 'worthy fool' in the forest, which gives freedom to his playful irony *('The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool'*). Sensible and pragmatic, Touchstone cannot refuse himself bodily pleasures (his marriage to Audrey) and truly deserves his label of the 'material fool'.

Merry Wives of Windsor

One of the best loved comic characters in Shakespeare is Falstaff. He gives life and colour to the plays (Henry IV and Merry Wives of Windsor) with his vices – eating, drinking, womanising. Here is Hal's description of Falstaff:

Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon….

Full of wit and self-irony, Falstaff takes on different poses – the young man, a religious man etc. Never admitting defeat, even when caught on the spot for lying, he is full of farcical self-admiration when explaining how he tackled his robbers –'*if I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish'*. The audience easily warms towards him because of his youthful attitude to life, humour, and ability to get himself out of tight corners. He enjoys the good things in life and is full of merriment and cheer. His tough appearance, however, is hiding a more poetic side which shines through even when he is planning his next crime:

Marry, then sweet wag, when thou art king, let us not that are squires of the night's be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon…..

Shakespeare's comedies continue the medieval tradition of chivalry, public punishment, and satire. Merry Wives of Windsor is centred around the de-masking and public humiliation of the male sexual criminal – Falstaff. Here the keen adulterer Falstaff suffers a series of defeats at the hands of mistress Ford and mistress Page. In the first one he is carried out of the house in a basket of dirty linen and dumped in Themes:

Have I lived to be carried in a basket like a barrow of butcher's offal, and to be thrown into the Themes? Well, if I be served such another trick, I'll have my brains ta'en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a New Year's gift.

Time after time he gets bitten and thrown out for his mischief. His last indignity is caused by the Windsor children, dressed as goblins and fairies, which give him a fright while waiting for his meeting with both wives. In the good old comic tradition, he is made a scapegoat, getting what he deserves as a way of public punishment and law enforcement.

Shakespeare comedies are brought alive by Falstaff, Touchstone and the other jesters/fools/larger than life characters. But laughter is delivered by many other comic devices which Shakespeare borrows with mastery from the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. He takes on the traditional comedy format where the comic element comes from the audience appreciating the convention (the comedy should be light-hearted, full of jokes and end happily). His dramatic talent, however, shines in the way he stirs the action towards surprising conclusions, introducing some serious thought and themes on the way and multi-level experiences rather than just pure amusement.

Mr Phelps as Sir John Falstaff. Illustration from the Forrest collection S 790.1

The Comedy of Errors, illustrated by John Austen,1939 S 193.9 Q

The Comedy of Errors

In some of his early comedies Shakespeare shows the full potential of foolery that derives from mistaken identity. As the name suggests, The Comedy of Errors is full of mistakes. The comic arises from a series of mistaken identities introduced by 2 sets of twins: Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus and their servants Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus. Both masters and servants not just mistake each other but confuse the rest of the characters in the play. In Act 2, scene 2 Adriana believes she is talking to her husband Antipholus of Ephesus when in fact she talks to his brother, making the conversation completely irrational:

To me she speaks; she moves me for her theme.

What, was I married to her in my dream?

Or sleep I now, and think I hear all this?

What error drives our eyes and ears amiss?

Impersonation, substitution and disguise

Shakespeare is a master of character reinvention and uses various comic devices to move the plot and create comic situations. Impersonation, substitution of one character with another, disguise and cross-dressing are just a few to mention. Disguise is one of the most frequently used tools and allows character and plot to develop with bigger freedom, to hear and learn things they are usually not able to do, to invent new identities, create mood, adventure, and laughter. Rosalind (As You Like It), disguised as a boy with her friend Celia is able to find out Orlando's true feelings for her without revealing herself. The plot gets very complicated as she is not only dressed as a boy, but a boy pretending to be a girl:

He was to imagine me his love, his mistress;

And I set him every day to woo me.

It was a usual practice in Shakespeare's times that women were played on stage by young boys, but in As You Like It this is taken to an extreme – a girl dressed as a boy pretends to be a girl. Similarly, Viola (Twelfth Night) is dressed as a page boy. This creates a different set of problem as Olivia falls in love with her. Disguise is the device that allows Shakespeare to complicate and multilayer his comedies, making them deeper and more interesting before delivering the surprising solutions of the endings.

Lily Brayton as Viola, His Majesty’s Theatre, London, 1901 S 601.52

Using the full spectrum of comic dramatic devices allows Shakespeare to create many memorable scenes of confusion, discovery, laughter, social satire, merriment, festivity, hilarity, but above all entertainment. The comic effect if often achieved by different levels of knowledge of the characters about what is happening. But the advantage is always on the audience’s side who know more than any of the characters. At the end of each play and after all the complications, Shakespeare’s writing talent manages to deliver satisfactory closures and well-rounded solutions to the difficulties, provoking thoughtfulness in the process and unquestionable enjoyment all the way.