



# Shakespeare

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## Shakespeare with Tears

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*Why, at the end of Shakespeare's comedies, do we feel like crying?*



Some people cry at weddings, some at funerals. I cry at performances of Shakespeare's comedies. Not the tragedies, usually: I can sit dry-eyed through Hamlet's death speeches to Horatio, but let Hero unveil herself to Claudio, or Viola and Sebastian clutch each other, or Hermione move, and I start to well up. I don't actually bawl, mind you, or sob uncontrollably, but tears begin to flood my eyes and sometimes slide down my cheeks if I don't stop them, and I almost invariably feel that lump in my throat that used to embarrass me but doesn't anymore.

The first time it happened was in January of 1971, at a matinee of the Peter Brook production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a heady experience all around: spending semester break in New York with friends; parking myself outside the box office to wait for returned tickets; finally getting

a seat, a great one, sixth row center; finding the two places next to me empty until the lights began to dim, when down the aisle and into my row swept the befurred Rudolph Nureyev and his date; and the performance itself, with the trapezes and the mock Mendelssohn and the tie-dyed costumes and Sara Kestleman and Alan Howard (I can still hear the imperious power in her inflection of "I am a spirit of no common rate"; I can still hear his slight pause—this was at the height of the Vietnam War—just before the last word of "and all things shall be peace"). In short, I felt a sense of awe, and yet it wasn't merely occasion or presentation.

There was something about the play itself—and I knew this at the time—that provoked reverence and even melancholy. The most recent onset of the waterworks was last December at an RSC Touring Company performance of *The Comedy of Errors* in a high-school gymnasium in a rather dreary town called Braintree on the east coast of England. The regularity and strangeness of this response raise a fascinating critical problem: what do tears have to do with happy endings? I want to try to account for the peculiar combination of elation and *tristesse* that marks my experience of Shakespearean comedy. Or, put another way, why is that middle-aged man sniffing?

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Literary critics have known since the time of Northrop Frye what audiences have always known,

that the end of comedy is marked by union, clarification, and joy. Regardless of the particular kind—farcical, romantic, drawing-room, sit-com, pastoral, musical, whatever—comedy gives its audiences a feeling of uplift and warmth in the last few minutes. The boy gets the girl, and the girl gets the boy; youthful desire overrides parental command; error is corrected, malice exposed; lost children are restored to their families. That foolish humans are able to triumph over obstacles and transcend their own limitations implies a positive reading of human experience. Comedy looks to the future, past the wedding that concludes the staged action to the off-stage sexual union that ensures continuation of the family and the race. This conclusion is the occasion for jokes, for smiles, for nudging each other with elbows. And yet the more complicated and sophisticated the comedy, the more likely it is that this feeling of triumph and pleasure will be subverted or at least inflected with melancholy or wistfulness.

Always there is a drag on the communal feeling of happiness, and it is this worry, this hesitation, that I want to try to account for. Of course Shakespeare has built such a counterweight into the endings of many of his comedies—a problem that remains unsolved, a character who isn't reconciled to the group, a reminder of failure or even death. Take all those Antonios, for example. Leaving aside Prospero's brother in *The Tempest*, who doesn't respond verbally to his brother's forgiveness, there

is the merchant of Venice who must surrender his friend Bassanio to Portia; and *Twelfth Night* features the sailor who rescues, protects, and then loses his beloved Sebastian. Audiences usually feel a degree of sympathy for these solitary figures, and modern directors have learned to exploit this tenderness, often arranging a slow, solo exit for the loner, sometimes with a follow-spot on a shadowed stage. To highlight the outsider thus is to variegate the emotional palette at the end of the show.

Sometimes the unaccommodated character is a central figure, a Shylock or a Malvolio. In these cases our worries about the unresolved conflicts he represents keep us from joining wholeheartedly in the festivity that occupies most of the cast. The delicate emotional tone at the end of Shakespearean comedy is very much affected by how the director handles these anti-comic figures and incidents. A sympathetic, abused Malvolio, for example, can dampen the joys in the last moments of *Twelfth Night*; an obnoxious steward, on the other hand, can increase the final festivity. Jonathan Miller's National Theatre production of *Merchant*, with Olivier as Shylock, ended with Jessica weeping as she hears in the background the singing of the Kaddish, the funeral prayer for her dead father.

In one early comedy everyone is denied festivity. *Love's Labor's Lost* ends not with a wedding but, to put it loosely, with a funeral: just at the point of

comic resolution, the Princess of France learns of the death of her father, and the expected marriages are postponed for a year, with the wisecracking Berowne sentenced to spend that year telling jokes to the "speechless sick" and "groaning wretches." Shakespeare has deliberately flouted the comic convention and thus cast doubt upon the happiness for which it usually stands. As Berowne puts it, "Our wooing doth not end like an old play:/Jack hath not his Gill." The audience is led to hope that at the end of the stipulated year the lovers will be united, but the chill of mortality permeates the theater, and the comic ending is compromised.

## II

It's hardly surprising that these antiphonal strains should affect us emotionally and darken our sense of the ending. What is perhaps unexpected is that we should be moved to tears not by the shadows but by the brilliance of the light. In other words, an audience may be affected by the apparent justice of the happy ending, by the good fortune with which the plot is concluded, by the fulfilled wishes of the persons onstage. The *cognitio* that concludes the action satisfies the spectator by fulfilling the logic of the fiction. These tears may be drops of joy, an emotional identification with what Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poetry*, refers to as the "form of goodness." Arguing that imaginative literature has greater power to move

people than does philosophy, Sidney insists that even "hard-hearted evil men . . . will be content to be delighted—which is all the good-fellow poet seemeth to promise—and so steal to see the form of goodness (which seen they cannot but love) ere themselves be aware, as if they took a medicine of cherries." Sidney's didacticism, his belief that instruction can be smuggled into art under the cover of the delightful, may strike us as quaint, and Shakespeare's own comic practice implies that he himself didn't buy that part of the theory. But Sidney's Platonism, the suggestion that people are inevitably attracted to images of the good and the beautiful, is less implausible. We like symmetry, correspondences comfort, twins delight us. As Isabella says about the Duke's scheme for saving Claudio, "the image of it pleases." Whether by nature or by nurture, audiences rejoice when Jill gets Jack because it confirms the hope that follies are not fatal, that happiness is possible.

Moreover, the playwright has contrived to intensify this wish-fulfillment. In the first place, the stories he has chosen to dramatize strike an emotional chord in most of us. From *The Comedy of Errors* forward, many of his plots divide the family or threaten some kind of loss, sometimes even death. It is well established that Shakespearean comedy exhibits a kind of double focus, deriving from its origins in Roman comedy on one hand and tales of adventure and transformation on the other. Even when most of the action is given over to the

beating of servants or to mudfights in the forest, the finale usually depends upon a series of meaningful reunions: father and daughter (*As You Like It*), brother and brother (*Errors*, *As You Like It*), brother and sister (*Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*), husband and wife (*Errors* and, if you're counting fairies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Sometimes the separation is what we might call pre-familial, as when Helena gets the roving Demetrius returned to her in the fourth act of *Dream*. And, by the end of his career, Shakespeare exploits this romantic trope with a kind of self-conscious audacity, as in the multiple reunions of *Cymbeline*: brothers and sister, father and daughter, father and sons, king and banished counselor, master and servant, husband and wife, Rome and Britain.

The second of these joyful intensifiers is Shakespeare's cultivation of the sense of grace, the feeling that we have dodged a bullet. Some benevolent force—call it Providence, Nature, Fate, all right, call it God—has given the characters what they don't expect and what, for the most part, they don't deserve. Audiences very often groan at those hoary comic devices that secure the happy ending ("My father had a mole upon his brow. /And so had mine"), but it is this very implausibility that fosters the sense of unmerited good fortune. Even in farce such as *Errors* this tone is latent, and Shakespeare amplifies it in the romances, most effectively in the miraculous revival of Hermione at the end of *The*

## *Winter's Tale.*

The third factor that opens the floodgates is the poetic intensity of the endings. I don't mean that the language is especially elaborate or flowery; in fact, it is often the reverse, as the poet downshifts to a kind of reverential simplicity. The acoustic signals are subtle, based chiefly on multiple forms of repetition—twins again—but they are potent:

**HERO.** [*Unmasking*]

And when I liv'd, I was your other  
wife;

And when you lov'd, you were my  
other husband.

**HELENA.**

And I have found Demetrius like a  
jewel,

Mine own, and not mine own.

**ROSALIND.**

[*To Duke Senior*]

To you I give myself, for I am yours.

[*To Orlando*]

To you I give myself, for I am yours.

**DUKE SENIOR.**

If there be truth in sight, you are my  
daughter.

**ORLANDO.**

If there be truth in sight, you are my  
Rosalind.

**MARINA.**

My name is Marina.

Readers may supply their own favorite line, but whichever ones they choose, I suspect that each or all will evoke the same mixture of joy and melancholy, with a touch of reverence.

**III**

Is all this mere sentimentality? I can hear the voice of the skeptic mocking my misty eyes and rushing me off to a Susan Hayward movie. (Actually, some feminist critics have recently undertaken a defense of sentimentality, so my weakness may become voguish.) But the effect I am describing is more complicated than plain wish-fulfillment. It may, in fact, be the opposite of wish-fulfillment. I suspect that one generator of my tears is a pensive recognition that life is not like Shakespearean comedy, that the "forms of goodness" which the dramatist has constructed are fictional creations distinguished mainly by their distance from actual experience.

Similarly, the sense of grace, of unwarranted escape from danger or error, may also involve its opposite. That is, I may weep *because* Sebastian has escaped drowning, found his sister, and been handed a rich and beautiful wife.

Shakespeare seems to be calling attention to the unreality of representation, inviting his audience to relish the temporary perfection unavailable in the actual world, and to recognize and lament its transience. This is what Robert Frost meant when he called poetry "a momentary stay against confusion." Outside the charmed circle of the theater, lost children are not returned; wicked brothers rarely repent; statues do not come to life. And I think that my tears stand as an acknowledgment of that incongruity, of the gap between theatrical fiction and mortal fact.

In the lit-crit business these days there are worse things than being called a crybaby, and one of those worse things is to be called an "essentialist." In other words, it is considered presumptuous to imagine that one's responses to art are universally shared, naive to think that a sixteenth-century English aristocrat reacted to a Shakespearean comedy in the same way that a twentieth-century high-school student does. There is some justice in the demand that historical difference be respected, of course, and yet, if applied too rigidly, that doctrine would outlaw the possibility of any shared theatrical experience. What I have done here is to describe my response to Shakespeare's comedy in

the hope that others have felt something similar. Theater, after all, is the most social of forms, and comedy by definition not only emphasizes the values of the group but also creates a temporary community of spectators. Mostly they are laughing, but I suspect that I am not the only one with moist eyes. ▶

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