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Wonder and Love in The Romantic Comedies

DOLORA G. CUNNINGHAM

In several comedies, early and late in Shakespeare's career, we are expected to join the on-stage characters to contemplate with wonder—with amazement or astonishment or admiration—the unexpected turn of troubled events which leads to marriages and apparent happiness in the end. By Shakespeare's time, wonder had been established as a traditional effect of tragedy. In his masques Ben Jonson explicitly defined wonder as a primary effect of that form as he developed it. And two important recent books have traced connections between wonder and comedy.¹

I propose to sketch briefly some possible implications of these observations for Shakespearean comedy by considering the effect of wonder or the marvelous in Much Ado About Nothing and Twelfth Night. My choice has been influenced in part by the desirability of examining one example of comic wonder in a context with religious associations and another in a predominantly secular context. I had in mind also the well known fact that in recent years these two plays have been heavily subjected to ironic readings and to a process that Richard Levin labels as one of "refuting Shakespeare's endings." Levin describes this strategy incisively: "on the level of plot, [the refuters] attack its termination of the action of the play, and on the level of effect (or of 'values'), they attack its judgment of that action; and on both they try to show that the 'conclusiveness' of the ending, as a termination and as a judgment, is only apparent and not real, that it is not to be taken at face value."²

Shakespeare expects us to accept wonder as having some kind of value in


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itself and in its relations to the action that has gone before. We are presented with the wonderful as an incitement to knowledge and to pleasure; and we are asked also to consider the dramatic fact that those who participate in the happy ending must be ready to set aside their human confinement to the probable and accept an intrusion of the improbable into their lives. It is, for example, improbable or wonderful that troubled human affairs sometimes turn out well in the end. As Shakespeare experimented with various comic traditions, he seems to have seen the harmonious transformation of minds that occurs in his plays as increasingly complex or mysterious and as more and more closely linked to the miraculous connotations of wonder: "Such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it" (The Winter's Tale, V.ii.25–26).

However fragile it might seem from some angles of vision, the harmony that prevails in the final scenes of Much Ado About Nothing and Twelfth Night consists of a strange and admirable transfiguration of minds which, though not miraculous, is explicitly ascribed to the realm of wonder, beyond the scope of human reason to understand fully. When Hero reappears in Much Ado, the Friar says:

All this amazement can I qualify,
When, after that the holy rites are ended,
I'll tell you largely of fair Hero's death.
Meantime let wonder seem familiar,
And to the chapel let us presently.
(V.iv.67–71)

The Friar's lines refer specifically to Hero's rebirth, but the wonder we are directed to share at this point has been prepared for in at least three ways: by the transcendent processes at work in Claudio's repentance and reconciliation with Hero; by the rescue of the wise by the "shallow fools" who, from an ordinary human perspective, are most unlikely discoverers of truth; and by a relatively realistic portrayal in Beatrice and Benedick of the inner change that is merely announced in Claudio's repentance. Although the witty Beatrice and Benedick woo in a decidedly different mode, Claudio's confession of and sorrow for his mistake is nevertheless essential to the happy ending of the play's action. As Claudio and Hero could not be rescued without the accidentally acquired knowledge of Dogberry, so the Benedick and Beatrice war could not be happily resolved apart from the wondrous repair of the broken nuptials.

For all their mighty wit, Benedick and Beatrice are not able by their own efforts to know themselves or to rescue Hero, and their reversals are analogous to Claudio's in one respect at least: their movement from error and self-concern toward love's truth is initiated by forces outside themselves, and it is carried onward in spite of their pride in what they think they know and feel. All three characters suffer from self-absorption, with its corollary of misplaced faith in the sufficiency of one's own knowledge, and thus all three are easily led into mistakes about themselves and about others. Since Benedick and Beatrice bring impressive intelligences to bear against their own better interests, their ultimate union is also a proper object of wonder: "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts" (V. iv.91–92).

One consequence of all this Dogberry-like obtuseness, then, is to place in doubt the reasonableness of even the wisest characters, and to prepare us to be amazed at their ability to put aside their foibles so as to be eligible for the
happy ending. By significant contrast to a Don John type—"... let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me" (I.iii.12)—everyone else remains open to change amidst all the obstacles they keep putting in their own ways.

It is not my intention to argue a case for or against the functioning of Providence in the play, nor to attack or defend Claudio's brutal behavior toward Hero in the church. One can only hope not to arouse sentimental notions of Providence or simplistic concepts of character, as if Providence meant things to work out the way we think they should, and as if convincing dramatic character meant that characters should behave the way we think we and our friends behave. Claudio's legalistic repentance is not presented as heartfelt sorrow; he made a mistake, and when confronted with the evidence he is sorry and is prepared to make formal reparation. Beatrice condemns Claudio for his cruelty to Hero, but Claudio's imperfections both in sinning and in repenting do not undermine or cancel the dramatic importance of either. As Arthur Kirsch has noted:

... the anatomy of transformation is plain enough in the sacrificial overtones of Claudio's and Hero's story, but the actual experience of spiritual and psychological change is displaced onto the comic relationship of Beatrice and Benedick as well as the comedy of Dogberry and the Watch which drain the serious plot of its tragic potential at the same time they absorb its deeper implications.3

Assuming, then, some general Providential resonances in the remorse of Claudio and rebirth of Hero and in the paradoxical wisdom of the shallow fools, I should like to emphasize the skepticism about human effort and knowledge which seems to pervade the dramatic complication in Much Ado About Nothing and in Twelfth Night. In each play, with or without references to the mysterious role of Providence, the stress on the wonderful in the resolution calls attention to a crisis of knowledge on the human level.

II

In Twelfth Night there is no sudden conversion, but the ending is wondrous nevertheless. The main characters are able to turn back from their mistaken commitments and accept what turns out to be possible in the circumstances—everyone, that is, except Malvolio, who, like Don John, is a man of ill will who refuses the possibilities of change. When Sebastian appears alive and all the disguises fall, Fabian steps forth to define the general harmony as one of laughter and wonder:

Good madam, hear me speak,
And let no quarrel, nor no brawl to come,
Taint the condition of this present hour,
Which I have wonder'd at. In hope it shall not,
Most freely I confess myself and Toby
Set this device against Malvolio here,

How with a sportful malice it was follow'd
May rather pluck on laughter than revenge,
If that the injuries be justly weigh'd
That have on both sides pass'd.

(V.i.354–67)

The marvelous harmony that has been wrought in the discordant love affairs is not to be disturbed either by the quarrel between Malvolio and the plotters, which Fabian proposes be settled by confession and forgiveness, or by a sharing of the damages which each side has inflicted on the other.

One implication of this release of wonder and awe is the tempering of self-love and the re-directing of impossible emotional allegiances that occurs as the hitherto deceived lovers move away from the darkness of error and self-involvement. Now they can get beyond the egoism that made them inexplicably ignorant of themselves and of others. As they contemplate new perceptions of the truth of what and who they are with opened eyes, they are free in their wonder to reach for an enlarged emotional and spiritual awareness. They are cured of the crippling delusion of romantic love—namely, that what I want is the good because I want it—which sees the beloved as the extension of personal desire and insists that others conform to what I would like them to be. Although Valentine’s proclamation that “She is my essence” in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (III.i.82) is a classic statement of the beloved-as-absolute position, Orsino’s courtship of Olivia is also a relevant example:

Tell her, my love, more noble than the world,  
Prizes not quantity of dirty lands;  

But 'tis that miracle and queen of gems  
That nature pranks her in attracts my soul.  

(II.iv.78–94)

Viola points the way out of the maze when she places her hope in the beneficent power of Time to save Sebastian and untangle the knotted love affairs. In this courageous commitment, she also exhibits undaunted patience in adversity and a clear-eyed recognition of human limitations. Alone in Illyria, after doing what she can to plan her next move, she says: “What else may hap, to time I will commit” (I.ii.60). Later, when she reviews the tangled threads of the developing plot, she realizes that they cannot be unwound by her efforts, but must be sorted out through the traditional powers of Time to unmask error and reveal truth: “O time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t’untie” (II.ii.39–40).

To sum up briefly, things can turn out well for those who are able to accept what is given in Time, for those who remain human in adversity and in folly and who are thereby receptive to the healing possibility of Time, considered as revealer of truth and falsehood. For Malvolio, who remains frozen in the insatiable demands of the ego, “the whirligig of Time brings in [its] revenges”—that is, his self-imposed exclusion from the human relationships envisioned in the happy ending. In the comic resolution of *Twelfth Night*, the two commonplace functions of Time as destroyer of falsehood and Time as revealer of truth are happily merged. Spurious values and false disguises are exposed for what they are; and as a principle of alteration, Time provides an opportunity

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4 For another example of Shakespeare’s familiarity with this tradition, see *The Rape of Lucrece* (II. 936–40):

Time’s office is to fine the hate of foes,  
To eat up errors by opinion bred.  
Not spend the dowry of a lawful bed.  
Time’s glory is to calm contending kings,  
To unmask falsehood and bring truth to light,
for recovery from human error and frailty. Except for Malvolio, the characters are conceived of as remaining capable of changing their mistaken ways. In Illyria, what the lovers get in the end turns out to be both what is better for them and, wondrously, what they really want after all. If one says that this could happen only in a comedy, well that is the point. The extreme alternative, suggested by Malvolio’s isolation, is the decision to die emotionally and spiritually rather than settle for what is humanly possible in the circumstances of a life—the decision to live only on one’s own terms, locked up in the dark room of the solitary self.

III

I am aware, of course, that there are some who argue that there is no real change in these characters, that Benedick and Beatrice are still bickering at the end, that Benedick is still obsessed with cuckoldry, that Orsino and Olivia are as flighty as ever. But the dramatic fact remains that the action in each play points to the possibility of change from excessive, unstable feeling to “something of great constancy,” to something wonderful and extraordinary. We may be skeptical about the staying power of the contrived harmony, but to respond this simply is to abstract the ending from its context and sneak in the “truth to life” argument with its endless circularity. Our awareness of the fragility of human happiness does not vitiate the resolution of a particular dramatic situation.

My point is that it would be more profitable for us to explore the skepticism about unaided human reason which is strongly implied—if not made explicit—in these wondrous comic resolutions. As we watch the characters struggle against external adversity (the slander of Hero, the apparent loss of Sebastian) and their own faulty knowledge both of themselves and of their situation, we are clearly told that their own efforts are not enough to set them free. Instead, each play’s wonderfully contrived methods for untangling the web of error and for averting further anguish, and the emphases upon wonder in the end—these call to our attention the fact that the happy events enacted in Shakespearean comedy are in fact out of the ordinary, that they are not “true” to the everyday experience of “life.” Feste’s closing song, with its blunt reminder of everyday reality, underlines the wondrous conditions of the ending of the comedy in which the song occurs. Such events are possible, however, for we watch them happen on stage, and we are asked to contemplate with wonder a broad range of human possibilities beyond our narrow visions.