

## Shakespeare's Comedies of Love

Essays in Honour of Alexander Leggatt

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The essays collected in the volume are written in honour of a distinguished Shakesperean scholar Alexander Leggatt who made considerable contribution into studying and understanding Shakespeare's love comedies which were often unjustly disregarded by serious critics of the XXth century. The authors of the volume successfully continue the conversation about Shakespeare's comedies demonstrating new possibilities of their reading. The essays presented cover a wide range of approaches to Shakespeare's love plays which are quite diverse and insightful.

The collection opens with a comprehensive introduction; written by one of the editors of the volume Karen Bamford which gives a synopsis of all essays included outlining the general logistics of the issue. It should be noted from the very beginning that the book is very logically structured – it has three parts: the first features the context for Shakespeare's comedies of love, the second – focuses on Shakespeare's plays as such, and the third presents performance based criticism reconstructing some most innovative and imaginative productions of Shakespeare's comedies. All this allows to rate this collection as highly professional and efficient in terms of its scholarly contribution into Shakespeare's studies. It is only natural that certain things provoke questions or counter arguments.

The first section comprises three essays. In her paper 'The Comedy of Love and the London Lord Mayor' Show' Anne Lancashire gives a vivid account of the theatre spectacle presented annually for the new lord mayor of London. Being very interesting by itself from historical perspective it does not seem to have much connection to Shakespeare, giving however a general background of the theatre life of his time. As for Philip D. Collington's 'A "Pennyworth" of Marital Advice: Bachelors and Ballad Culture in *Much Ado about Nothing*' it provides a fresh network of cultural references for the play giving analysis of popular English ballads of the time definitely adding new levels of meaning and implications which otherwise may escape modern readers and spectators. A very interesting material is introduced by Katherine West Scheil in her 'Shakespeare's Comedies

and American Club Women'. She shows how Shakespeare's comedies helped nineteenth-century American women to bring about the debates about gender roles and such taboo topics as female sexuality and the like.

The second part is the largest in the volume as it presents different critical approaches to Shakespeare's comedies. It demonstrates a great variety of angles under which the immortal plays can be considered and reconsidered. Thus in "'Five thousand year a boy": Love as Arrested Development' John H. Astington shows the provocative function of Cupid-like characters – Moth, Cesario, Ganymede (I would probably add Puck). The author arrives at an interesting conclusion that 'The boy as an object of love, a player in love's game is a further displacement, and sophistication, of an ancient icon. He remains invested with the uncertainties and ambiguities of his original, and as represented by Cesario and Ganymede as thoroughly a theatrical creation as Benvolio's Cupid, if of far richer theatrical meaning and consequence'. (79)

David Bevington in his 'Love's Labour's Lost and Won' on the contrary focuses on the adult male characters convincingly tracing their development from immature anxieties of 'hesitant wooings' to 'full manhood' showing the guiding role of young heroines in this process, who are often idealized. He finds the culmination of this motif in the courtship of Henry and Kate in 'Henry V', though I would argue that history plays should not be discussed together with comedies without any differentiation - the thing quite often done in this volume. This is exactly what happens in the following essay – 'Affecting Desire in Shakespeare's Comedies of Love' by Paul Budra. The author justly points out that effective seduction in Shakespeare's theatre occurs only in history plays, giving examples from 'Henry VI', 'Henry VIII' and 'Richard III', while young characters of his comedies fall in love and marry but 'they are not allowed to mechanically affect desire in each other, to push each other's desire button. That technique is the province of villains...' (107). He gives an interesting digression into Elizabethan popular culture where comedies in public theatre were basically associated with lust, while Shakespeare's goal must have been different. As Budra comments, 'These plays contain many erotic complexities but that eroticism is independent of the desire affected by the techniques of seduction.' (107) I would only add that the world of Shakespeare's romantic comedies is organized according to the laws different from his other plays – it is the world of Renaissance utopian humanism where eventually Jack will always have Jill without using any artificial techniques.

In 'A Spirit of Giving in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*' Alan L. Ackerman draws unexpected but convincing parallels between Shakespeare's comedy and Plato's *The Symposium* which could have partially been the source of certain basic themes and motifs of the play such as 'relations between old and young, of parents and offspring both biological and philosophical, of love and knowledge, of passion and reason, of homogeneity and distinction, of the commensurable and the infinite, of pedagogy and generosity'(113). All these issues are carefully explored by the critic in the play.

Not willing to diminish the quality of the other essays I find Susan Westfall's 'Love in the Contact Zone: Gender, Culture and Race in *The Merchant of Venice*' a most insightful and prolific study of Shakespeare's most 'uncomfortable' play. Borrowing Mary Louise Patt's notion of 'contact zones', areas where cultures meet to negotiate power and to express, in rhetorical structures, the various tensions that inform relationships between genders, generations, religions and ethnicities, the author shows how 'seventeenth-century concerns about miscegenation, feminism and homoeroticism continue to preoccupy performers and audiences today'(127). Combining the tools of modern criticism with historical approach she gives deep analysis of all complexities and ambiguities inherent in the play, also referring to the means different directors and actors used to solve them. Such an approach helps to avoid a straightforward interpretation showing how 'the various contact zones represented in the play form a mobile and diverse kinship system, in which a character may belong to many families'(151).

In 'The Unity of *Twelfth Night*' Arthur F. Kinney successfully manages to reconcile traditional tendency of old criticism to find structural and ideological unity in the play and postmodern assumptions of multiplicity and diversity of any work of art by showing that the twinning of Viola and Sebastian suggests the paradigm of the whole play with its 'growing division between the inner sense of things and the outer portrayal of them, much as the revels of *Twelfth Night* anticipate the revelation that will follow'(164) thus proving that the old and the new critical approaches are not altogether incompatible.

Alan Somerset in his deep and interesting article 'The Baby in the Handbag: "Family Matters" in Shakespeare' traces the development of family reunion motif from the first comedies up to the romances of the late period. Actually the utmost attention is paid to the latter and the author justly proves that here this

motif acquires a more powerful significance. What I personally object to is complete ignoring of the change of the genre structure which actually occurs already in the so-called “problem plays” and definitely influences the treatment of the motifs recurrent in all of Shakespeare’s plays, this one including, reflecting the general change in his world outlook.

In the last section we find essays devoted to most interesting theatre productions of Shakespeare’s comedies: R.B. Parker’s “‘Songs of Apollo’: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in 1961”, C.G. McGee’s ‘Smitten: Staging Love at First Sight at Stratford Festival’, G.B. Shand’s ‘Romancing *The Shrew*: Recuperating a Comedy of Love’. No wonder, two of the essays focus on the *Merchant of Venice* – Jill L. Levenson’s ‘Love in a Naughty World: Modern Dramatic Adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*’ and Helen Ostovich’s ‘Staging the Jew: Playing with the Text of *The Merchant of Venice*’ - showing the ways modern directors deal with the “uncomfortable” subject. All the essays carefully reconstruct the productions taking into account all the details of staging and interpretation both by directors and actors so that the readers feel as spectators watching the show. The most vivid and colorful of all is probably R.B. Parker’s “‘Songs of Apollo’: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in 1961” which also contains references to other productions of this “unscenic” play.

So, by way of conclusion it can be said that we are presented with a quite prominent collection of critical essays which although not being a completely illuminating rediscovery of Shakespeare is definitely another proof that ‘the conversation about Shakespeare’s comedies of love is never over and that each successive generation of readers will have much to say about them’(XXIV).