

COMEDY IN SHAKESPEARE'S YORKIST TETRALOGY

BY WALDO F. MCNEIR

The pattern of English history from Richard II to Richard III is comic in the sense that it includes usurpation, troubles, a respite, suffering, expiation, deliverance. Because the form of the cycle is all-inclusive, Shakespeare incorporates the condition of the damned into the comic pattern. This produces a variety of parallels and contrasts: double plots and double-dealing, incongruent elements of the pathetic and the risible, mixed modes of character portrayal and development. Comic elements in the Yorkist tetralogy have received little attention.

Henry VI, Part 1 offers opportunities for comic stage spectacle. It calls for almost as much acrobatic leaping about on the walls of Orleans and Rouen, climbing up and jumping down, demanding as many gymnastic stunts as were required by the catwalk, trapezes, and swings used in Peter Brooks's recent production of a *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Some of the stage directions could hardly be carried out except comically, as when "The French leap over the walls in their shirts," appear half-undressed, and then "fly, leaving their clothes behind" (II.i).

The episode in which Talbot outwits the threatening Countess of Auvergne, as Shakespeare handled it, isn't in Hall's *Union* or Holinshed's *Chronicles* (II.iii). S. L. Bethell is mistaken when he writes, "All of the incidents given comic treatment [in the Yorkist plays] are to be found in the sources.¹ As the Arden editor suggests,² this incident may be derived from the Robin Hood cycle; if so, it is related to Munday's two-part play on Robert Earl of Huntingdon (1598), and to the earlier lost *Comedy of Robin Hood and Little John* (1594). Most of the comedy in the Yorkist plays is black, but Talbot's turning the tables on the Countess is light, the comic *topos* of the trickster tricked. Talbot can't be physically anything like the Countess's description of him: "a child, a silly dwarf! . . . this weak and writhled shrimp" (22-23); he jokes with the Dragon Lady and forgives her. Richard Burbadge probably played Talbot. If the Countess is a boy on stilts, that could give her a Brobdingnagian perspective, and the humor of the encounter would take on another dimension.³

In the Parliament House scene (III.i) the servants of the bitter enemies, the Bishop of Winchester and the Duke of Gloucester, pelt each other with stones that are called "pebbles" by the ineffectual Mayor, hardly missiles to "pelt so fast at one another's pate / That many have their giddy brains knock'd out" (82-83). The servants keep skirmishing despite attempts to stop the uproar (stage direction: "Enter in skirmish with bloody pates"). The first two servants withdraw to a surgeon's, and the third "to see what physic the tavern affords" (146-48). This boisterous scene is thematic like the opening street brawl between the servants of the Montagues and the Capulets.

Shakespeare was already attracted by the paradoxes we find in his more mature work.

The treatment of Joan La Pucello was comic to an Elizabethan audience. It appealed to jingoism, terror of traffic with spirits, and male chauvinism. The heroic Amazon of the French is a villainess to Shakespeare's audience. She communes with fiends, and so she is a witch; she humiliates Englishmen with her unnatural masculine power, and so she must be extirpated as a threat to male sovereignty. Spenser's Britomart is an Amazon with a magic spear, seeks aid from Merlin, and humiliates many of her male opponents. But Britomart never loses her femininity; she uses a magic weapon and magic advice for good, and she is always in quest of her beloved Artegall. Hence no comparison can be made between the two. The real parallel is between Joan and Spenser's Radagon, both intolerable women's libbers. Joan's capture, confession, and condemnation are a satisfying retribution brought upon an unsexed monster.

The cowardice of Sir John Falstaff in *Henry VI, Part 1* (he is so called throughout in the first Folio) shames him, but not his successor of the same name in the *Henry IV* plays. When Shakespeare had to think of a substitute for Oldcastle in the *Henry IV* plays, he thought of Falstaff in *Henry VI, Part 1*. To the Elizabethans, cowardice was a comic vice, as seen in Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, Lyly's *Sir Thopas*, Sidney's *Dametas*, Spenser's *Braggadocchio*, and later in Shakespeare's *Parolles*.

In *Henry VI, Part 2*, adulterous Margaret of Anjou succeeds Joan La Pucelle as England's scourge and becomes its Queen. Incongruously, she is the wife of saintly King Henry. Such incompatibility as theirs is a source of marital jokes about recalcitrant wives and patient husbands from the Noahs in the Corpus Christi cycles to Maggie and Jiggs. Margaret chafes at Henry's holiness; her contempt for religion parallels La Pucelle's "false" piety and is in contrast with it. Margaret's and Henry's union mocks matrimony, reducing it to absurdity. Shakespeare has only to follow his historical sources to make us want to throttle Margaret and kick Henry. She is more blatant in her relations with her lover, the Duke of Suffolk, than Edward II's Queen Isabel with the younger Mortimer in Marlowe's play, later than Shakespeare's and influenced by it. Margaret's tantrum of self-pity, when Gloucester is murdered and Suffolk is banished, is an overwrought tapestry of lies (III.ii). Her parting from Suffolk has been compared to the parting of Edward II and Gaveston, Richard II and his Queen, and Romeo and Juliet; but it is more turgidly melodramatic than any of these, and in the context of a debauched society a satiric revelation of their grotesque fantasy of themselves. After stiff-necked Suffolk's execution, done by politically wise pirates (IV.i), when his severed head is delivered to Margaret and she cuddles it and waters it with her tears in her husband Henry's presence, she outdoes Boccaccio's and Keats's Isabella. La Pucelle was a comic witch; Margaret is a comic bitch.

The Duchess of Gloucester's seance is serious because she is doomed to suffer the fall that in her *hubris* she plans for others, but it has its comic side. I suspect a burlesque intent in the conjuring scene that occurs in the Duke of Gloucester's garden (I.iv), as his termagant Duchess is duped by trashy hire-

lings and brings about her own and her husband's downfall. Greene may have thought that Shakespeare was encroaching on his patented stage magic, and this may be one reason why he attacked the "upstart crow" in *A Groat'sworth of Wit* (1592). The Duchess's kleptomaniac in stealing occult information that she can't use adds a peculiar twist to crass political anomalies. Her husband Gloucester's good intentions can't cope with a tough, pragmatic world; the Duchess compounds his difficulties by prying into the cloudier supernatural world.

Gloucester's ruthless exposure of the ludicrous imposter Simpcox (II.i) also exposes the King's credulity. Henry wants to believe in pious miracles; the Duchess of Gloucester wants to believe in impious marvels. "Blind" and "crippled" Simpcox is as palpable a fraud as the Duchess's conjurer, witch, and priests. The bogus "miracle" of St. Alban is a comic anecdote, like a fabliau or a Canterbury tale. Its source in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is as completely humorless as most of Foxe's stories, although, as Curtius shows,⁴ in the medieval *vita sancti* jest penetrated earnest in a way that it could not in Reformation propaganda. As Gloucester forces the King to see the unwelcome truth when the blind cripple runs away after the Beadle has hit him once, another irony becomes apparent, that of Gloucester's own inability to see his Duchess's drift. I think Margaret's response to the exposure of Simpcox, "It made me laugh to see the villain run," would be that of any audience, regardless of their feeling about her.

Act II, scene iii, contains two travesties of justice: the removal of Gloucester as Protector and the sentence of his Duchess, which are not comic; and the ridiculous trial by combat between the cowardly Peter Thump and his drunken boss Thomas Horner, which parodies chivalric ceremony⁵ and carries the same thematic import as the brawling servants in *Henry VI, Part 1*. Contrasting effects in these juxtaposed episodes illustrate Shakespeare's technique of putting together disparate developments.

The court-martial of Suffolk under commoners turned pirate is good ridance of anarchistic self-interest among the upper classes. In another significant placing of scenes, the insurrection of Jack Cade and his land pirates follows immediately and fills the remainder of Act IV (ii-x) with chaos. Cade's rebellion is satiric comedy which breaks down customary associations; yet these scenes are preceded by the same thing with the collapse of government in the hands of a predatory aristocracy, similar to the breakdown of order when Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund seize power in *King Lear*. Cade's revolt is a logical outcome of prevailing conditions founded on illogic. This is not what S. L. Bethell means when he says, "The theme of disorder, confusion, inversion, topsyturvydom, is expressed through a deliberate and witty use of logical and rhetorical fallacy."⁶ He forgets the prentices in the pit, his pedantic analysis of "the techniques of logic and rhetoric, so well understood by the Elizabethans" suggesting that expertise in these matters was necessary to understand the montrosity of Cade's rebellion. More to the point is Willard Farnham's book, *The Shakespearean Grotesque*, with a chapter on "Diabolic Grotesqueness" in which he remarks: "Behind Caliban as launcher of revolution there is the early clown Jack Cade in *Henry VI, Part 2*. But in him there is little that points forward to Caliban's kind of grotesqueness . . . The dramatic

treatment of Cade in his pretentious bid for kingship is one of harshly satiric rejection, not one of comic acceptance."⁷ One may agree with this but still question the suggestion that satiric rejection cannot be comic.

Jack Cade plans to make England into an alternative university with no entrance requirement other than illiteracy, open class rooms, unstructured courses in such vocational subjects as meat-cutting, basket-weaving, death to the peerage, and book-burning. Clearly a Lord of Misrule with a jaunty air, he is hardly festive. The rebels make headway and shake the shaky Establishment. A grisly sight is the heads of Lord Say and his son-in-law carried atop poles and made to kiss at every corner, more shocking than the sight of Macbeth's head carried on a pole where it belongs. But disorder does not triumph. Mere mention of a French invasion turns Cade's fickle followers against him, and he slinks away to an ignominious end from one Alexander Iden, Esq., a small landowner of Kent and a thoroughgoing prig.

How are we to respond to Jack Cade's homicidal demagoguery? Not with the simple-minded moralizing of his ghost in *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), ruminating on the God-given power of reason to keep lust and will in check so that men will not aspire to rise above their place, and especially never to "presume our princes to resist." This Tiny Tim philosophy is as much out of character for the cutthroat Cade as for the overweening nobles whom he threw into panic. The comic catharsis of Cade's rebellion is the same as that of Gulliver's discovery that both High-heels and Low-heels, like Shakespeare's Haves and Have-nots, are pernicious rodents. Once the threat of Cade has passed, Yorkists and Lancastrians fall to carving each other up at the Battle of St. Alban's.

The last of the *Henry VI* plays refines the comedy of gangsterlike deceit and treachery. Bethell says that *Henry VI, Part 3* has "no comedy at all."⁸ He can't be right, if laughter and tears are psychological cousins; or if comedy and tragedy alike sprang, both in ancient Greece and medieval Europe, from rites developing in different directions; or if we believe, in any sense, that Hamlet's intellectualizing and agonizing make him a potentially ridiculous fellow, saved from being so because Polonius is Hamlet turned comic-side out, or that *Antony and Cleopatra* is a see-saw affair that celebrates the triumph of Love and the triumph of Folly as inseparable. Shakespeare had no monopoly on the "funny/tragic," which was present in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama from *The Spanish Tragedy* to *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. But the Yorkist plays are political history, you say. To put the matter in contemporary terms, they have a serio-comic aspect if the Watergate break-in and the erased tapes are comic, as they are to Art Buchwald, Bill Mauldin, and many others who are neither columnists nor cartoonists. In *Henry VI, Part 3*, the sinister comedy of the two preceding plays comes to a head before it erupts in *Richard III*.

King Henry, thirty-four years old when his last play begins, remains a retarded child. He cravenly yields to York's demands and disinherits his son (I.i). How the lamb ever got a son on "the she-wolf of France" is puzzling. Henry's reluctance to give up a crown that he is unfit to wear recalls the witless surrender of Mycetes in *I Tamburlaine*. At the insistence of his own adherents, because he brings nothing but bad luck to his own cause (II.ii), Henry

retires before the Battle of Towton to his molehill—he is a mole in the Great Chain of Being—to indulge in pathological yearning for the “soft” primitivism, to use a term of Lovejoy and Boas, that he imagines to be the condition of pastoral life (II.v). His battlefield speech has been called “flat, fatuous.”⁹ When captured by gamekeepers (III.i), he blames the inconstancy of the humble hinds he envied and wanted to join; he is oblivious of the ironical joke that history has played on him, but Shakespeare isn’t. Henry goes down, up, and down for the last time, like a Cartesian diver, when he is murdered in the Tower by Richard Crookback. One critic remarks, “Richard is almost justified in getting rid of such a bore.”¹⁰

The ingenuity of some directors fails them with the part of Henry, for the same reason that the Morality hero is less interesting than the unequivocal Vices. This need not be so. The portrayal of Henry gains in realism as his unfitness to rule clashes glaringly with the determination of Clifford, Margaret, and Warwick to keep him on the throne that he doesn’t want, and also as it clashes with the determination and success of the Yorkists in elevating the unfit Edward as a foil who is lecherous, self-indulgent, egoistic, and ambitious—all that Henry isn’t. To Shakespeare, vacuity is as entertaining as viciousness; and Golding should be as entertaining as Francis Quicksilver in *Eastward Ho!*

As Henry burrows deeper, like one of Beckett’s characters, digging his own grave, Margaret fights against interment with him, flourishing for a while as Lancastrian general, more Amazonian than Joan La Pucelle but without the extenuating shadow of Joan’s unifying nationalism. Only the loss of a loved son and an unloved husband can reduce Margaret to a feminine role in *Richard III*, broken and forlorn. Shakespeare shapes history to this end for her; unlike Thomas Hardy, he needs no Spirits Sinister and Ironic as commentators. In the Yorkist tetralogy Margaret emerges from the chronicles as a throbbing human being in her life story of victory and defeat. In the course of her career she is as timidly deceitful as Bianca, more shrewish than Katharina, as resourceful as Portia, more sentimental than Olivia, as managerial as Rosalind, as shameless as Helena, as viperish as Cleopatra, and finally more possessively ruinous than Volumnia.

At the zenith of Yorkist power, King Edward begins to rut for Lady Grey, a widow with three grown or half-grown sons. Since she declines to become his mistress, but so coyly that she whets his appetite, he foolishly decides to make her his Queen. His blunt declaration, “I aim to lie with thee,” calls for lascivious pawing and feeble defense. This spectacle draws twelve sardonically bawdy asides from Edward’s brothers Clarence and Richard. Division between York’s sons is foreseen at the turning point of the play (III.ii). Edward’s folly is as disastrous as Henry’s in marrying Margaret. Henry marries with illusions that he soon loses. Edward is a confirmed wencher and marries without any illusions, which makes him the bigger fool.

The scene in which news of Edward’s haste to bed with Lady Grey reaches the French court (III.iii) develops into a parody of the dynastic marriage game, which is as ruthless as that played at Netherfield Park, but much more dangerous. Pride and prejudice are present in the game at the French court, and they are laughable there, too. King Lewis does a double reversal, at first stalling

about foreign aid to defeated Queen Margaret and her son, hedging his oath to support Henry, then pleasantly venal in giving his sister Bona to King Edward as a wife, and finally when furiously affronted he promises Margaret any aid to overthrow perfidious Edward. Lewis is almost as disgusting as Octavius Caesar bestowing his chaste sister Octavia on the libertine Antony. Margaret needs more help than Lewis can, or will, give. Bona is spiteful from disappointment. Warwick changes sides because Edward's move without consulting him mocks his conception of his own importance. Most surprising is the temporary rehabilitation of Margaret, who comes off best, and without trying to run the show for a change. Yet the ease with which she embraces the turncoat Warwick shows her unscrupulousness. If this scene were merely domestic in context, its exhibits of venality, pique, deflated ego, and opportunism, along with its brilliant control of reversals and ambivalences would place it with the best scenes in the city comedies of Jonson, Middleton, and Massinger.

As critics have come to realize, *Henry VI, Part 3*, like its predecessors, sustains interest in a variety of situations and personalities. The counterpoint of character and political issues is complex. Comic incidents are identifiable within a great range, and these, it seems to me, have contributed to the success of these eminently actable plays in both Elizabethan and modern times before a Shakespearean audience attuned to ironic peripeties accompanying political tensions, and incongruous disparities between the pretensions of policy (saying) and the actualities of outrage (doing), along with "the common curse of mankind—folly and ignorance."

Before going on to the last and greatest play of the Yorkist tetralogy, I should like to mention the compulsive categorizing of Northrop Frye, who doesn't know what to do with the Elizabethan history play. He drags it into his *summa*, which has sometimes been confused with that of St. Thomas Aquinas, under a sub-subheading called "The Rhythm of Association: Lyric," where it gets two paragraphs. The gist of it is that history merges easily with tragedy, but "There seems to be a far less direct connection between history and comedy: the comic scenes in [Shakespeare's] histories are, so to speak, subversive."¹¹ They are, indeed, as I have suggested in describing the main import of the comic scenes in the *Henry VI* plays. But I suspect that Frye is thinking of the subversiveness of Falstaff in the two parts of *Henry IV*.

Richard III, as a whole, is a subversive play. As I have pointed out elsewhere,¹² Shakespeare's portrayal of its protagonist begins at the end of *Henry VI, Part 2* (V.i), where Richard has no right to be, gradually develops, and becomes clear in his soliloquy in the middle of *Henry VI, Part 3* (III.ii), where the histrionic Richard makes his bow, already acting as he ticks off the assets of his dissimulative skills in double-dealing. He does not overestimate himself. It has been observed that, "Throughout *Henry VI, Part 3*, Richard usurps the pivotal, initiatory role that had been played by the women of the earlier plays — Joan . . . and Margaret."¹³ Hapless Henry, before Richard murders him at the end of *Henry VI, Part 3* (V.vi), calls him "Roscius," a Renaissance byword for versatility in role-playing.

Richard lives up to this accolade in his own play, with his own scenario and casting. He always acts for two audiences: for his dupes and accomplices in the play which he directs on the stage, and for us in the theater. We

become his confidants in crime, forced into *our* roles by Shakespeare's calculated concentration of four of Richard's five self-revealing soliloquies in the first three scenes of the play. As he winks at us, smiles, snorts, chuckles, and hugs himself in gleeful anticipation, we become prepared to enjoy with him his virtuosity in villainy. The stripping of our defenses lays bare our "unofficial" selves — George Orwell's term, quoted by Tillyard¹⁴ — the same selves to which Falstaff strongly appeals in the *Henry IV* plays.

Richard's outrageous performance when he wins Lady Ann in the second scene, nothing of which appears in the chronicles, wins us as well as her. We watch in fascination as his other dupes, such as the fatuously overconfident Hastings, fall like duck pins. His triumph as both actor and politician (III.vii) occurs when he is persuaded, against his will, to accept the crown. He and Buckingham stage what I have called "an Im-morality play of the first order."¹⁵ Richard is posed "aloft" between two bishops with a prayer book in his hand, a stylized grouping which Alice Venezky likens to the familiar tableau of a pageant sovereign surrounded by personified virtues.¹⁶ It is the kind of show designed to appeal to bourgeois piety. Richard is the prince of players, and the anti-prince of princes. Thomas More in his *History of King Richard III*, incorporated by Holinshed into his *Chronicles*, and Shakespeare's main source, draws an extended analogy between this episode and a stage play.¹⁷ The stage metaphor, a favorite of More's,¹⁸ must have impressed Shakespeare.

We see Richard's mastery of as many character parts as Roscius played to bedazzle everybody, as he switches rapidly from one role to another. He is a witty villain amused at the cleverness of his multiple deceptions. Toward the end, of course, his continuous play-acting fragments him, and he loses cohesion as an individual. He begins to break immediately after he becomes King, a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic destruction of normal values in the police state. The doom-saying Margaret, now a vengeful crone, has witnessed what she calls "A dire induction," and she hopes "the consequence will prove as bitter, black, and tragical" (IV.iv.1-7). Her hope is more than fulfilled, but she is not around to see it. When the ghosts of all Richard's victims appear to him in his nightmare (V.iii), he is deep in schizophrenia, the occupational neurosis of actors; but his nightmare has a therapeutic effect. Histrionic to the end, he rallies for a final appearance, or farewell performance, at Bosworth Field that is as theatrical as if he and not Shakespeare had staged it.

The Lancastrian plays are not my subject here, but I will venture the opinion that much of their humor is not different in kind, but only in degree, from the comedy in the Yorkist plays. The later histories are equally ironic but less sardonic, as I have recently tried to show in connection with the new tone of the comedy that crops up near the end of *Richard II* (V.ii-iii), in the handling of the Oxford conspiracy, which genially descends from the serio-comic to the farcical.¹⁹ Almost inevitably, when we think of the Lancastrian plays, we think of them as graced by the disgraceful Falstaff, who would score so high on the GRE verbal-aptitude test that he wouldn't be admitted to Jack Cade's kind of alternative university, if he deigned to apply; but of course he would scorn it because he is Dean of the one of his own design already in operation.

If *The Comedy of Errors* and an early version of *Love's Labor's Lost* preceded the Yorkist tetralogy (1588-1592), these comedies give few hints of the overreaching greed, incalculable chicanery, and preposterous incongruity in character and event of the plays dealing with the dark period of English history from 1420 to 1485. When Shakespeare, after a lapse of several years, resumed his sequence at the wrong end with the plays covering English history from 1398 to 1420, he had behind him the two earlier comedies, and also *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Moreover, it is likely that interspersed between *Richard II* (1595) and *Henry V* (1599) are *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. In any event, such speculation aside, Shakespeare from the beginning was capable of the detachment required for the integration of a comic perspective and history, just as he later injected a comic perspective into most of his tragedies.

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON
EUGENE

- ¹"The Comic Element in Shakespeare's Histories," *Anglia* 71 (1952), 82.
- ²Andrew S. Cairncross, ed., *The First Part of King Henry VI* (London, 1962), p. 40, note.
- ³The role of the Countess is assigned by T. W. Baldwin to William Eccleston, who was probably apprenticed to the comedian William Kemp, and who played comic ladies; *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, 1927), Appendix VII, pp. 416-22.
- ⁴Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (New York, 1953), Excursus IV, "Jest and Earnest in Medieval Literature," pp. 425-28.
- ⁵See my "Trial by Combat in Elizabethan Literature," *NS* 15 (1966), 101-12.
- ⁶Bethell, pp. 89-92.
- ⁷(Oxford, 1971), pp. 153-54.
- ⁸Bethell, p. 82.
- ⁹H. M. Richmond, *Shakespeare's Political Plays* (New York, 1967), p. 57.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*
- ¹¹*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 283-84.
- ¹²"The Masks of Richard the Third," *SEL* 11 (1971), 167-86.
- ¹³Richmond, p. 60.
- ¹⁴E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London, 1944), pp. 289-90.
- ¹⁵"The Masks," p. 181.
- ¹⁶*Pageantry on the Shakespearean Stage* (New York, 1951), pp. 131-132, 168.
- ¹⁷Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1808; repr. New York, 1965), III, 396.
- ¹⁸Richard S. Sylvester, ed., *The History of King Richard III*, in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven, 1963), II, 258.
- ¹⁹"The Comic Scenes in *Richard II*: V.ii and iii," *NM* 73 (1972), 815-22.