The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's Comedy*

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MESSENGER *Your honour's players, hearing your amendment,*
Are come to play a pleasant comedy. . . .
BEGGAR *. . . Is not a comonty a Christmas gambold or a tumbling trick?*
LADY *No, my good lord; it is more pleasing stuff.*
BEGGAR *What, household stuff?*
LADY *It is a kind of history.*
BEGGAR *Well, we'll see it. Come, madam wife, sit by my side and let the world slip. We shall ne'er be younger.*
—*Induction to* The Taming of the Shrew

Recent literature has accustomed us to the conscious use of mythical and ritual prototypes as a means of organizing the life of our time in the absence of a self-imposing tradition. *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* expressed life in a modern city by representing it as recapitulating basic myths and rituals. Such creative ordering of experience by earlier archetypes has involved, in our time, a kind of explicit awareness of analogies not necessary in earlier periods, when traditional symbolic values came to the writer as a matter of course with his themes and materials. Psychology and ethnology have developed a corresponding set of generic names—"the Oedipus complex," "the fertility spirit," "the rebirth archetype." In earlier cultures such pat-

* C. L. Barber, "The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's Comedy," *The Sewanee Review,* Vol. LIX, No. 4 (Autumn, 1951), pp. 593–611. The interpretation outlined in this essay is more fully developed in C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: a Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom,* Princeton, 1959 (Meridian Paperback, 1962). [Footnotes in this selection have been renumbered.]

terns were implicit in particular observances and did not need to be named. We have to name them, because for our cosmopolitan and relativistic mentality no particular symbolism is any longer self-evident. Our literary criticism is recognizing and describing in the writing of the past underlying configurations which earlier readers did not need to discriminate consciously. After the Nineteenth Century's preoccupation with the individual in society, with characters in drama, we are recovering, about art at least, an awareness of the creative function of form. To explore patterns which drama has in common with ritual is one way to develop this awareness, to see how the role precedes the character, how the larger rhythm of the whole action shapes and indeed creates the parts:

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

This essay will attempt to describe a major pattern in Shakespeare's gay comedy—the comedy before *Hamlet* and the problem plays. Proof by citation will not be feasible within the limits of an article; and I shall not be able to indicate in detail where my generalities do and do not apply to particular plays. But Shakespeare is so familiar that if I can express a notion of the dominant mode of organization of the comedy, the reader will be able to try it on the plays for himself. Shakespeare's gay comedy is fundamentally saturnalian rather than satiric. It dramatizes pleasure as release from normal limitations, and the judgments implicit in its humor primarily concern the relation between man and nature, not relations between social classes or types. The plays give form to feeling and knowledge by a movement which can be summarized in the formula: *through release to clarification.*

This pattern for organizing experience came to Shakespeare from many sources, both in social and artistic tradition. It appeared, for example, in the theatrical institution of clowning: the clown or Vice, when Shakespeare started to write, was a recognized anarchist who made aberration obvious by carrying release to absurd extremes. The cult of fools and folly, half social and half literary, embodied a similar polarization of experience. One could formulate the saturnalian pattern effectively by referring first to these traditions: indeed, Shakespeare's first completely masterful comic scenes were written for the clowns. I have chosen, however, first to approach the pattern of the gay plays by looking at them in relation to the social rituals of Elizabethan holidays. The festival occasion provides a paradigm for the organization of impulse and awareness not only of those comedies where Shakespeare drew largely and directly on holiday motifs, like

Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and *Twelfth Night,* but also in plays where there is relatively little direct use of holiday, notably *As You Like It,* and *Henry IV.* The language that described festive occasions, or was used in them, provides a more adequate vocabulary than that of any other tradition for making explicit the "form in mirth" of the plays about pleasure. The attitudes adopted on holiday were archetypes in English Renaissance culture for the attitudes adopted about pleasure whenever people set out to have a good time.

We can get hold of the spirit of Elizabethan holidays because they had form. "Merry England" was merry chiefly by virtue of its community observances of periodic sports and feast days. Mirth took form in morris-dances, sword-dances, wassailings, mock ceremonies of summer kings and queens and of lords of misrule, mummings, disguisings, masques—and a bewildering variety of sports, games, shows and pageants improvised on traditional models. Such pastimes were a regular part of the celebration of a marriage, of the village wake, of Candlemas, Shrove Tuesday, Hocktide, Mayday, Whitsuntide, Midsummer-eve, Harvest-home, Hallow-e'en, and the twelve days of the Christmas season ending with Twelfth Night. Custom prescribed, more or less definitely, some ways of making merry at each occasion. The seasonal feasts were not, as now, rare curiosities to be observed by folklorists in remote villages, but landmarks framing the cycle of the year. Shakespeare's casual references to the holidays always presume that his audience is familiar with them:

> As fit as ten groats is for the hand of an attorney . . .
> as a pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a morris for May Day,
> as the nail to his hole. . . .

The whole society observed the holidays. Elizabeth's court, on occasion, went a-maying; it always had a Midsummer bonfire, and kept the Christmas season with high revels. So did the noble households. In the entertainments tendered Elizabeth during her summer progresses, traditional festive observances were developed in masque, pageant or play.[1]

Study of the historical process by which holiday came to be trans-

[1] The most authoritative and complete summary of court festivities is E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage,* Oxford, 1923. Folk festivities of the Elizabethan period are treated with equal authority in *The Medieval Stage,* Oxford, 1903. These two books, and especially the latter, contribute more than any other work by recent scholars to enable one who is not a folklorist to look at Shakespeare's drama from that point of view. Chambers himself, when he finally came to write about Shakespeare, did little or nothing with this part of his immense knowledge.

lated into conscious art leads through the occasional literature produced for aristocratic entertainments. But my concern here is to describe the saturnalian pattern as it was finally worked out in dramatic materials. For this purpose, connections of details are less important than the correspondence between the whole comedy and the whole festive occasion. The holiday archetypes provide a way of talking about an underlying movement of feeling and awareness which is not adequately expressed by any one thing in the play, but is the play. At this level, one cannot say just how far the analogies between ritual and art show an influence, and how far they reflect the fact that a holiday occasion and a comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern in our culture, of a basic way that we can polarize our human nature, moving through release to clarification.

I. Release and Clarification in the Idyllic Comedies

Release, in the idyllic comedies, is expressed by making the experience of the whole play like that of a revel.

> Come, woo me, woo me; for now I am in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent.

Such holiday humour is often abetted by directly staging pastimes: dances, songs, masques, plays extempore, etc. But the fundamental method is to shape the loose narrative so that "events" put its persons in the position of festive celebrants: if they do not seek holiday it happens to them. A tyrant duke forces Rosalind into disguise: but her mock wooing with Orlando amounts to a Disguising, with carnival freedom from the decorum of her identity and her sex. The misrule of Sir Toby is represented as personal idiosyncracy, but it follows the pattern of the Twelfth Night occasion; the flyting match of Benedict and Beatrice, while appropriate to their special characters, suggests the customs of Easter Smacks and Hocktide abuse between the sexes. Much of the poetry and wit, however they may be occasioned by events, is controlled in the economy of the whole play to promote the effect of a merry occasion where Nature reigns.

F. M. Cornford, in *The Origins of Attic Comedy,* points to invocation and abuse as the basic gestures of a nature worship behind Aristophanes' union of poetry and railing. The two gestures were still practiced in the "folly" of Elizabethan Maygame, harvest-home, or winter revel: invocation, for example, in the manifold spring garlanding customs, "gathering for Robin Hood"; abuse, in the customary license to flout and fleer at what on other days commanded respect. The same double way of achieving release appears in Shakespeare's

festive plays. There the poetry about the pleasures of nature and the naturalness of pleasure serves to evoke beneficent natural impulses; and much of the wit, mocking the good housewife Fortune from her wheel, acts to free the spirit as does the ritual abuse of hostile spirits. A saturnalian attitude, assumed by a clear-cut gesture toward liberty, brings with it an accession of "wanton" vitality. In the terms of Freud's analysis of wit, the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibition is freed for celebration. The holidays in actual observance were built around the enjoyment of vital pleasures: in the summer, love in out-of-door idleness; in the winter, within-doors warmth and food and drink. But the celebrants also got something for nothing from festive liberty—the vitality normally locked up in awe and respect. E. K. Chambers found among the visitation articles of Archbishop Grindal for the year 1576 instructions that the bishops determine

> whether the ministers and churchwardens have suffered any lord of misrule or summer lords and ladies, or any disguised persons, or others, in Christmas or at Maygames, or any morris dancers, or at any other times, to come unreverently into the church or churchyard, and there to dance, or play any unseemly parts, with scoffs, jests, wanton gestures, or ribald talk. . . .[2]

Shakespeare's gay comedy is closer to Aristophanes' than to any other great comic art because the matrix for its awareness of life is the form of feeling of such saturnalian occasions as these. Dicaeopolis, worsting pompous Lamachus in *The Acharnians* by invoking the tangible benefits of Bacchus and Aphrodite, acts the same festive part as Sir Toby baffling Malvolio's visitation by an appeal to cakes and ale.

The *clarification* achieved by the festive comedies is concomitant to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and "nature"—the nature celebrated on holiday. The process of translating festive experience into drama involved extending the sort of awareness traditionally associated with holiday, and also becoming conscious of holiday itself in a new way. The plays present a mockery of what is unnatural which gives scope and point to the sort of scoffs and jests shouted by dancers in the churchyard or in "the quaint mazes of the wanton green." And they include another, complementary mockery of what is merely natural, a humor which puts holiday in perspective with life as a whole.

The butts in the festive plays consistently exhibit their unnaturalness by being kill-joys. On an occasion "full of warm blood, of mirth," they are too preoccupied with perverse satisfactions like pride or greed to "let the world slip" and join the dance. Figures like Malvolio and

[2] *The Medieval Stage,* Vol. I, p. 181, note 2.

Shylock embody the sort of kill-joy qualities which the disguised persons would project on any of Grindal's curates who would not suffer them to enter the churchyard. Craven or inadequate people appear, by virtue of the festive orientation, as would-be-revellers, comically inadequate to hear the chimes at midnight. Pleasure thus becomes the touchstone for judgment of what bars it or is incapable of it. And though in Shakespeare the judgment is usually responsible—valid we feel for everyday as well as holiday—it is the whirligig of impulse that tries the characters. Behind the laughter at the butts there is always a sense of solidarity about pleasure, a communion embracing the merrymakers in the play, and the audience, who have gone on holiday in going to a comedy.

While perverse hostility to pleasure is a subject for aggressive festive abuse, highflown idealism is critized too, by a benevolent ridicule which sees it as a not unnatural attempt to be more than natural. It is unfortunate that Shakespeare's gay plays have come to be known as "the romantic comedies," for they almost always establish a humorous perspective about the vein of hyperbole they borrow from Renaissance romances. Wishful absolutes about love's finality, cultivated without reserve in conventional Arcadia, are made fun of by suggesting that love is not a matter of life and death, but of springtime, the only pretty ring time. The lover's conviction that he will love "for ever and a day" is seen as an illusion born of heady feeling, a symptom of the festive moment:

> Say "a day" without the "ever". No, no, Orlando! Men are April when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives.

This sort of clarification about love, a recognition of the seasons, of nature's part in man, need not qualify the intensity of feeling in the festive comedies: Rosalind when she says these lines is riding the full tide of her passionate gayety. Where the conventional romances tried to express intensity by elaborating hyperbole according to a "pretty," pseudo-theological system, the comedies express the power of love as a compelling rhythm in man and nature. So the term "romantic comedies" is misleading; "festive comedies" would be a better name. Shakespeare, to be sure, does not always transform his romantic plot materials. In the Claudio-Hero business in *Much Ado,* for example, the borrowed plot involved negative behavior on the basis of romantic absolutes. The caskets story in *The Merchant of Venice,* again, is romantic narrative which, though handled gayly and opulently, has not been given a festive orientation: Fortune, not Nature, is the reign-

ing goddess. Normally, however, as in *Twelfth Night,* he radically alters the emphasis when he employs romantic materials. Events which in his source control the mood, and are drawn out to exhibit extremity of devotion, producing now pathos, now anxiety, now sentiment, are felt on the stage, in the rhythm of stage time, as incidents controlled by a prevailing mood of revel. What was sentimental extremity becomes impulsive extravagance. And judgment, not committed to systematic wishful distortion, can observe with Touchstone how

> We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

To turn on passionate experience and identify it with the holiday moment, as Rosalind does in insisting that the sky will change, puts the moment in perspective with life as a whole. Holiday, for the Elizabethan sensibility, implied a contrast with "everyday," when brightness falls from the air. Occasions like May-day and the Winter Revels, with their cult of natural vitality, were maintained within a civilization whose sad-brow view of life focused on the mortality implicit in vitality. The tolerant disillusion of Anglican or Catholic culture allowed nature to have its day, all the more headlong because it was only one day. But the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a "misrule" which implied rule, so that the acceptance of nature was qualified. Holiday affirmations in praise of folly were limited by the underlying assumption that the natural in man is only one part of him, the part that will fade.

"How that a life was but a flower" was a two-sided theme: it was usually a gambit preceding "And therefore take the present time"; but it could also lead to the recognition that

> so from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
> And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot . . .

The second emphasis was implicit in the first; which attitude toward nature predominated depended, not on alternative "philosophies," but on where you were within a rhythm. And because the rhythm is recognized in the comedies, sentimental falsification is not necessary in expressing the ripening moment. It is indeed the present mirth and laughter of the festive plays—the immediate experience they give of nature's beneficence—which reconciles feeling, without recourse to sentimentality or cynicism, to the knowledge they convey of nature's limitations.

In drawing the parallel between holiday and Shakespeare's comedy, it has been hard to avoid talking as though Shakespeare were a

primitive who began with nothing but festival custom and invented a comedy to express it. Actually, of course, he started work with theatrical and literary resources already highly developed. This tradition was complex, and included folk themes and conventions along with the practice of classically trained innovators like Lyly, Kyd, and Marlowe. Shakespeare, though perfectly aware of unsophisticated forms like the morality and the jig, from the outset wrote plays which presented a narrative more or less in the round. In comedy, he began with cultivated models—Plautus for *The Comedy of Errors,* and literary romance for the *Two Gentlemen of Verona;* he worked out a consistently festive pattern for his comedy only after these preliminary experiments.

In his third early comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost,* instead of dramatizing a borrowed plot, he built his slight story around an elegant aristocratic entertainment. In doing so he sketched, in thin and overfanciful lines, the holiday sequence of release and clarification which comes into its own in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* This much more serious play, his first comic masterpiece, has a crucial place in his development. To make a dramatic epithalamium, he expresses with full imaginative resonance the experience of the traditional summer holidays. He thus finds his way back to a native festival tradition remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy. And in expressing the native holiday, he is in a position to use all the resources of a sophisticated dramatic art.

A combination of participation and detachment was necessary to express holiday pastimes as three-dimensional drama. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the expressive significance of popular cult is kept, while its literal, magical significance is mocked. The lovers, like folk celebrants on the eve of May-day, "run gadding to the wood overnight." In the woods they take leave of judgment, immersed in irrational impulse under the influence of a Summer Lord and Lady who preside over the cleanly wantonness of nature. Oberon and Titania enter the great chamber to bring the blessings of fertility to the bridal couples, as country gods, half English and half Ovid, would bring their powers in tribute when Elizabeth was entertained, and as the group of folk celebrants making their quête would "bring in summer" to the village and manor house. Instead of garlands of flowers, Shakespeare uses poetry about "the rose distill'd" and "field-dew consecrate." The game is translated into dramatic and poetic action, the personifications of pageantry into dramatic personalities. But the magical events of holiday, when they are understood as human experience, are hu-

morously recognized as mental, not actual happenings. The whole action in the magic wood is presented as a release of shaping fantasy which leads to clarification about the tricks of strong imagination. We watch a dream; but we are awake, thanks to a pervasive humor about the delusive tendency to take fancy literally, whether exhibited in love, or in superstition, or in Bottom's mechanical dramatics. It is part of the aristocratic urbanity of Titania, Oberon and their jester Puck to intimate in their own lines that they do not exist. So perfect an expression and understanding of folk cult was only possible in the moment when it was still in the blood but no longer in the brain.

Shakespeare never made another play from pastimes in the same direct fashion. But the pattern for feeling and awareness which he derived from the holiday occasion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes the dominant mode of organization in subsequent comedies until the period of the problem plays. The relation between his festive comedy and naïve folk games is amusingly reflected in the passage from *The Taming of the Shrew* which I have used as an epigraph. When the bemused tinker Sly is asked with mock ceremony whether he will hear a comedy to "frame your mind to mirth and merriment," his response reflects his ignorant notion that a comedy is some sort of holiday game—"a Christmas gambold or a tumbling trick." He is corrected with: "it is more pleasing stuff . . . a kind of history." Shakespeare is neither primitive nor primitivist; he enjoys making game of the inadequacy of Sly's folk notions of entertainment. But folk attitudes and motifs are still present, as a matter of course, in the dramatist's cultivated work, so that even Sly is not entirely off the mark about comedy. Though it is a kind of history, it is the kind that frames the mind to mirth. So it functions like a Christmas gambol. It often includes gambols, and even, in the case of *As You Like It,* a tumbling trick. Though Sly has never seen a comedy, his holiday mottoes show that he knows in what spirit to take it: "let the world slip;" "we shall ne're be younger." Prince Hal, in his festive youth, "Daff'd the world aside and bid it pass." Feste sings that "Youth's a stuff will not endure."

II. Release and Clarification in the Clowning and in *Henry IV*

The part of Shakespeare's earliest work where his mature patterns of comedy first appear clearly is, as I have suggested, the clowning. Although he did not find a satisfactory comic form for the whole play until *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the clown's part is satisfactory from the outset. Here the theatrical conventions with which he started writing already provided a congenial saturnalian organization

of experience, and Shakespeare at once began working out its larger implications. It was of course a practice, going back as far as the *Second Shepherd's Play,* for the clowns to present a burlesque version of actions performed seriously by their betters. Wagner's conjuring in *Dr. Faustus* is an obvious example. In the drama just before Shakespeare began writing, there are a great many parallels of this sort between the low comedy and the main action.[3] One suspects that they often resulted from the initiative of the clown performer; he was, as Sidney said, thrust in "by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters"—and the handiest part to play was a low take-off of what the high people were doing. Though Sidney objected that the procedure was "without deceny or decorum," such burlesque, when properly controlled, had an artistic logic which Shakespeare was quick to develop.

At the simplest level, the clowns were foils, as one of the aristocrats remarks in *Love's Labour's Lost:*

> 'Tis some policy
> To have one show worse than the King's and his company.

But burlesque could also have a positive effect, as a vehicle for expressing aberrant impulse and thought. When the aberration was made relevant to the main action, clowning could provide both release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit. Shakespeare used this movement from release to clarification with masterful control in clown episodes as early as *Henry VI, Part II.* The scenes of the Jack Cade rebellion in that history are an astonishingly consistent expression of anarchy by clowning: the popular rising is presented throughout as a saturnalia, ignorantly undertaken in earnest; Cade's motto is: "then are we in order when we are most out of order." In the early plays, the clown is usually represented as oblivious of what his burlesque implies. When he becomes the court fool, however, he can use his folly as a stalking horse, and his wit can express directly the function of his role as a dramatized commentary on the rest of the action.[4]

In creating Falstaff, Shakespeare fused the clown's part with that of a festive celebrant, a Lord of Misrule, and worked out the saturnalian implications of both traditions more drastically and more

[3] William Empson discusses some of the effects achieved by such double plots in *English Pastoral Poetry,* New York, 1938.

[4] See C. L. Barber, "The Use of Comedy in *As You Like It,*" *Philological Quarterly,* Vol. XXI, No. 4 (October, 1942).

complexly than anywhere else. If in the idyllic plays the humor of perspective can be described as a looking outward from a reigning festive moment to the work-a-day world beyond, in the two parts of *Henry IV* the relation of comic and serious action can be described by saying that holiday is balanced against everyday and doomsday. The comedy expresses impulses and awareness excluded by the urgency and decorum of political life, so that the comic and serious strains are contrapuntal, each conveying the ironies limiting the other.

The issue, so far as it concerns Prince Hal, can be summarized quite adequately in our key terms. As the non-historical material came to Shakespeare in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth,* the prince was cast in the traditional role of the prodigal son, while his disreputable companions functioned as tempters in the same general fashion as the Vice of the morality plays. At one level, Shakespeare keeps this pattern; but he shifts the emphasis away from simple moral terms. The issue, in his hands, is not whether Hal will be good or bad, but whether his holiday will become his everyday, whether the interregnum of a Lord of Misrule, delightful in its moment, will develop into the anarchic reign of a favorite dominating a dissolute king. Hal's secret, which he confides early to the audience, is that for him Falstaff is merely a pastime, to be dismissed in due course:

> If all the year were playing holidays
> To sport would be as tedious as to work.

The prince's sports, accordingly, express not dissoluteness but a fine excess of vitality—"as full of spirit as the month of May"—together with a capacity for looking at the world as though it were upside down. His energy is controlled by an inclusive awareness of the rhythm in which he is living: despite appearances, he will not make the mistake which undid Richard II, who lived saturnalia until it caught up with him in earnest and he became

> a mockery king of snow
> Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke. . . .

During the battle of Shrewsbury, when in Hotspur's phrase "Doomsday is near," Hal dismisses Falstaff with "What, is it a *time* to jest and dally now?"

But of course Falstaff is not so easily dismissed. Hal's prodigal's role can be summarized fairly adequately in terms of the holiday-everyday antithesis. But no formula derived from words current in Shakespeare's work is adequate for the whole effect produced by the dynamic interplay of serious statement and comic counter-statement in the drama

as a whole. The more one reads the two *Henry IV* plays, the more one feels that Shakespeare was doing something with Falstaff which he could not summarize, which only the whole resources of his art could convey. His power of dramatic statement, in developing saturnalian comedy, had reached to primitive and fundamental modes of organizing experience for which general terms were not available in his culture.

It is here that our modern command of analogies between cultures can help—by providing a vocabulary to describe the pattern given dramatically by Shakespeare. We can read in Frazer how such figures as the Mardi Gras or Carnival first presided over a revel, then were tried, convicted of sins notorious in the village during the last year, and burned or buried to signify a new start. In other ceremonies described in *The Golden Bough,* mockery kings appear as recognizable substitutes for real kings, stand trial in their stead, and carry away the evils of their realms into exile or death. One such scapegoat figure, as remote as could be in space and time from Shakespeare, is the Tibetan King of the Years, who enjoyed, until very recently at least (if not even now), ten days' misrule during the annual holiday of Buddhist monks at Lhasa. At the climax of his ceremony, after doing what he liked while collecting bad luck by shaking a black yak's tail over the people, he mounted the temple steps and ridiculed the representative of the Grand Lama, proclaiming heresies like "What we perceive through the five senses is no illusion. All you teach is untrue." A few moments later, discredited by a cast of loaded dice, he was chased off to exile and possible death in the mountains.[5] One cannot help thinking of Falstaff's catechism on honor, spoken just before another valuation of honor is expressed in the elevated blank verse of a hero meeting death: "Can honor take away the grief of a wound? no . . . What is honor? a word. What is that word honor? What is that honor? air." And Hal's final expulsion of Falstaff, which so offended humanitarian nineteenth-century critics, appears in the light of these analogies to carry out an impersonal pattern, not merely political but ritual in character. After the guilty reign of Bolingbroke, the prince is making a fresh start as the new king. At a level beneath the moral notions of a personal reform, we can see a non-logical process of purification by sacrifice—the sacrifice of Falstaff. The career of the old king, a successful usurper whose conduct of affairs has been skeptical and opportunistic, has cast doubt on the validity of the whole conception of a divinely ordained and chivalrous kingship to which Shakespeare and his society were

[5] See James G. Frazer, *The Scapegoat,* London, 1914, pp. 218–223.

committed. But the skeptical and opportunistic attitude has been projected also in Falstaff, who carries it to comically delightful and degraded extremes. In turning on Falstaff as a scapegoat, in the same way that the villagers turned on their Mardi Gras, the Prince can free himself of the sins, "the bad luck," of his father's reign, to become a king in whom chivalry and the sense of divine ordination are restored.[6]

The use of analogies like the scapegoat rituals can be misleading, or merely amusing, if the pattern is not rigorously related to the imaginative process in the play. Janet Spens, a student of Gilbert Murray's, wrote in 1916 a brief study which attempted to establish the presence of ritual patterns in Shakespeare's work.[7] Although she throws out some brilliant suggestions, her method for the most part consists of leaping intuitively from folklore to the plots of the plays, via the hypothesis of lost intermediary folk plays. But the plots, abstracted from the concrete emphasis of their dramatic realization, can be adjusted to square with an almost unlimited range of analogies. Miss Spens argues, for example, that because Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* is enigmatically detached from personal concerns, and

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[6] The old king, about to die, says

> all the soil of the achievement goes
> With me into the earth.

The new king says

> My father hath gone wild into his grave;
> For in his tomb lie my affections. . . .

The image in these two passages of getting rid of sin or appetite by burying it appears again in Hal's final, menacing joke about Falstaff's belly, symbol of the misrule to which he has subscribed:

> Know the grave doth gape
> For thee thrice wider than for other men.

But an extended treatment is necessary to show how the scapegoat pattern is concretely symbolized. Shakespeare's culture did not afford general terms for the sacrificial part of it, so that there are no summary passages for quotation. L. C. Knights, in discussing *Henry IV, Part I* in *Determinations* (ed. F. R. Leavis, London, 1934) [See in this collection p. 186.], acutely explored a number of imaginative connections between Falstaff's counterfeiting and the king's. He concludes that Falstaff, himself corrupt, completely undercuts irrational honor in Hotspur and hollow majesty in Bolingbroke, so that the play is a drastic satire on the institutions of war and government. "Thus ever did rebellion find rebuke" is to be taken with ironic scorn by the audience. This is an anachronistic, philosophical-anarchist interpretation which Shakespeare's heroic lines simply cannot admit. But the only way to avoid it, once one has faced the fact that Falstaff's role acts on the historical part, is to recognize that in the irrational rhythm of the whole action, misrule works to consolidate rule.

[7] *An Essay on Shakespeare's Relation to Tradition,* Oxford, 1916.

because in accepting the prospect of death at Shylock's hands he says "I am the tainted wether of the flock," he "is" the Scapegoat. To be sure, at a very general level there is a partial analogy to scapegoat rituals, since Antonio is undertaking to bear the consequence of Bassanio's extravagance; and perhaps the pound of flesh motif goes back ultimately, through the tangle of legend and story tradition, to some such ceremonial. But there is no controlling such analogies if we go after them by catching at fragments of narrative; and one can understand, on that basis, the impulse to give up the whole approach as hopelessly capricious.

The case is altered, however, if attention is focused, not on this or that group of people in this or that story, but on the roles the persons are given in the play. When we are concerned to describe dramatic form—the rhythm of feeling and awareness in the audience which is focused through complementary roles in the fable and implemented by concrete patterns of language and gesture—then the form of rituals is relevant to the form of the plays as a parallel expression of the same kind of organization of experience. Shakespeare arrived at Falstaff's speech on honor, which has a function so extraordinarily similar to the heretical speech of the King of the Years, by working out the implications of the clown's established role—in the directions suggested by the saturnalian customs and sensibility of his time. The pattern of all clowning involves, moment by moment, the same movement from participation to rejection that appears at large in scapegoat ritual: the clown expresses our aberrant impulses for us; but he undercuts himself, or is undercut from outside, so that we can divert sympathy to laughter. In *Henry IV* Shakespeare developed a scapegoat's role for Falstaff which writes this movement large. In other words, Falstaff's part in the story is a manifestation of the meaning of the saturnalian form itself.

The sort of interpretation I have proposed in outline here does not focus on the way the comedies imitate characteristics of actual men and manners; but this neglect of the social observation in the plays does not imply that the way they handle social materials is unimportant. Comedy is not, obviously enough, the same thing as ritual; if it were, it would not perform its function. To express the underlying rhythm his comedy had in common with holiday, Shakespeare did not simply stage mummings; he found in the social life of his time the stuff for "a kind of history." We can see in the Saint George plays how cryptic and arbitrary action derived from ritual becomes when it is merely a fossil remnant. In a self-conscious culture, the heritage of cult is kept alive by art which makes it

relevant as a mode of perception and expression. The artist gives the ritual pattern aesthetic actuality by discovering expressions of it in the fragmentary and incomplete gestures of daily life.[8] He fulfills these gestures by making them moments in the complete action which is the art form. The form gives life meaning.

[8] One can watch this process, carried out with a modern consciousness of psychological and historical implications of artistic form, in the Circe episode of *Ulysses*. Joyce uses a version of the saturnalian pattern, though what is released is often so shameful by everyday standards that amusement converts to shock or pathos. He casts Bloom as a clown and dramatizes the aberrant motives latent in his responses during the past day by having him act out a series of scapegoat roles. Exemplars of the pattern taken from contemporary life are syncretized with archetypes as diverse as the hunting of the wren on St. Stephen's Day and the sacrifice of the Messiah. See in particular pages 469 to 499 (Modern Library edition), where Joyce merges an astonishing variety of temporary king ceremonials with modern equivalents, to provide a social correlative for an upsurge in Bloom of libidinal egotism followed by anxiety and counterwishes for punishment.