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The Country Wife.
Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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The Country Wife. Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

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Special Section

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Simonetta de Filippis (ed.), *William Shakespeare e il senso del comico*[1]

Abstract

The review of *William Shakespeare e il senso del comico*, edited by Simonetta de Filippis (2023), explores a significant scholarly undertaking that originated from the eponymous conference hosted at "L'Orientale" University in Naples on January 9-10, 2019. Among its many qualities, this volume brings together diverse voices to investigate Shakespeare's complex relationship with comedy. Structured into four sections, the volume showcases collaborative efforts from academics, young researchers, and PhD students, each offering unique perspectives on Shakespeare's handling of such an enduring dramatic genre. Contributors delve deep into the nuances of Shakespearean comedy, unravelling its layers as a genre, language, and rhetorical stance within the vast tapestry of Shakespeare's literary oeuvre. The review emphasises the volume's innovative approach, which opens the door to new and fruitful reflections on comedy as a genre investigated as a dramatic space for experimentation, a mirror reflecting social power dynamics, an object of linguistic code-mixing, and inspiration for stage adaptations. By exploring this dramatic genre not merely as a form of entertainment but as a profound expression of language and culture, the contributors provide readers with a fresh lens through which to view Shakespeare's works.

Keywords: Shakespeare; comedy; adaptation; humour; language

The volume *William Shakespeare e il senso del comico,* edited by Simonetta de Filippis, opens to new and fruitful reflections on comedy –as a genre, language, and stance –once inscribed within William Shakespeare's literary *oeuvre.* This contribution feels particularly compelling given the recent rise in academic interest in this topic, as works like Bart van Es' *Shakespeare's Comedies: A Very Short Introduction* (2016), Heather Hirschfeld's *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy* (2018), and Cartwright's *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Enchantment* (2020) prove. Stemming from the homonymous conference held at the "L'Orientale" University in Naples (9-10 January 2019), this volume is divided into four sections, each welcoming contributions from academics, young researchers, and PhD students about Shakespeare's handling of one of the most well-known, complex, dramatic genres of all times.

[1] Napoli: Unior Press, 2019. ISBN 9788867191802, pp. 320

The first section is entitled "Il senso del comico" (The meaning of comedy) and opens with a contribution by the editor of the volume, Simonetta de Filippis. In "William Shakespeare e il senso del comico. La commedia come terreno di sperimentazione" (William Shakespeare and the meaning of comedy. Comedy as a place for experimentation), de Filippis first traces the complex nature of comedy as a dramatic genre. This exploration starts with its Greek etymology, *kôsmos*, which readily associates the genre with a diverse and transgressive perspective, as well as a deep knowledge of the world. Borrowing from Cicero, who describes comedy as "imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, et imago veritatis" (23), de Filippis points to the difficulties in treating comedy like a well-defined, fully delineated genre. Contrariwise, its "liquidity or porosity" (ibid.) borrows from the complexities of real life and lends to the stage a multifaceted reflection of it. The effects of this bidirectional mechanism lie in the continual renewal, adaptation, and amplification of themes and linguistic mechanisms related to comedy. These are particularly evident in the section dedicated to the *problem plays*, which alone suggests the difficulty in approaching Shakespeare's comedies as an unproblematic genre. De Filippis' overview happily succeeds in explaining the reason behind one of the main themes of the volume, which is the ambiguous, complex nature of Shakespeare's comedy, and its role in mirroring the unsettling emotions the early modern individual was experiencing in a period of incessant socio-economic and political change.

"Il comico shakespeariano tra ambivalenza e mutevolezza" (The Shakespearean comic between ambivalence and mutability) by Laura Di Michele digs deeper into the transformative power of the comedic genre once handled by Shakespeare. In defining Shakespeare's comedy as a "trans-genre" (41), the author reflects on the socio-psychological notion of 'ambivalence.' This definition not only positively affects textual multidimensionality and interdependence (ibid.) but also draws inspiration from Ovid and Spenser, exploring the idea of 'mutability' as fertile incompleteness. The former notion is explored in *The Taming of the Shrew*, especially in the Induction scene thanks to the character of Sly, a "mediator between the stage and the stalls" (50), and to the play-within-the-play, "a fixed plot-framework of the main storyline which includes many other secondary and conflicting ones, favoring genesis and development" (50–1). Mutability is explored in *Love's Labour's Lost*, more specifically in the contrast between the "rhetoric and anti-rhetoric of its love language" (51) as well as in the images of the green world (the woods) and the blue world (the sea). This contribution ends with further proof of the successful openness and ambivalence of Shakespeare's comic writing, that is, Corinne Jaber's adaptation of *Love's Labour's Lost* for the Afghan stage (Kabul, 2005).

"Il comico come controdiscorso del senso" (Comedy as a counter-discourse of meaning) by Lorenzo Mango is the concluding contribution to the first section. In his essay, Mango explores the role of Shakespeare's clown in constructing meaning and suggests how his belonging to neither comedy nor tragedy enables him to speak both. Delineating the terminological differences between 'clown' and 'fool' and highlighting the main linguistic, physical, and acting characteristics of the former, Mango defines the clown as "a resolutive form of the spontaneous rhetoric of the earlier clowns and the premeditated status of [dramatic] texts" (69). The clown's unique position between two opposing dramatic genres enables him to build counter-discourses that blend elements of both comedy and tragedy in his interlocutor's speech. The Porter scene in *Macbeth* provides these rhetorical processes, where the scurrilous language of Porter/the clown only apparently downplays the profoundly tragic moment of Macduff and Lennox's arrival at Macbeth's gates. In "forcing tragedy through comedy, . . . the Porter literally becomes the gatekeeper of hell . . . whose only presence mentions . . . death, but in reverse" (77). Similarly, in *Hamlet*, this process is explored in the dialogue between the two gravediggers/clowns and between the first gravedigger and Hamlet, where the prince momentarily takes the place of the second clown in the exchange. Despite both plays eventually leading to a full "triumph of death" (79), Mango notices in *Macbeth* how the clown's counter-discourse is reduced to one scene, while in *Hamlet*, it becomes a structural element of the prince's identity.

The second section, "I modi del comico" (The ways of the comic), includes four contributions that deal with the comical ambiguities of specific plays and characters. In "La commedia radicale *The Merchant of Venice*: la libbra di carne, l'anello di Leah e l'ideologia mercantile" (*The Merchant of Venice*, a radical comedy: the pound of flesh, Leah's ring, and mercantile ideology), Anna Maria Cimitile borrows from Jonathan Dollimore the label of "radical comedy" as one which "interrogates prevailing beliefs . . . radical in the sense of going to their roots and even pulling them up" (96) in relation to the mercantile ideology underlying the comedy. Shylock is the only character in the play aware of the dangers of commerce as the endless and aprioristic exchange of goods, symbols, and words; thus, to him, not everything is up for sale. As proof of such a distinction, Cimitile shows how Shylock seems to be the only character to know the difference between "gift" and a valuable: he would have renounced Antonio's pound of flesh as much as he would have never given away Leah's ring, which Jessica steals from him and sells in his flight to Belmont with Lorenzo. Although not fully expanded upon, the problematisation of such aspects of the mercantile society was only possible by means of the comic structure they had been framed in.

In "Tra farsa e commedia. L'antropologia patriarcale di *The Taming of the Shrew*" (Between farce and comedy. Patriarchal anthropology in *The Taming of the Shrew*), Rossella Ciocca relies on gender studies to analyse the comedy and its power dynamics within its most well-known couple, that of Kate and Petruchio, the shrew and the shrew-tamer. Her study opens with an overview of the "cultural practices, ritual and festive models, social systems of control and sanction" as well as of the "mainly anthropological imaginative horizon of microstories, [and] local anecdotes" (177), which forge the cultural background of the main plot. As Ciocca underlines, the presence of 'shaming rituals' such as the cucking stool or the skimmington ride echo in the language of *The Taming of the Shrew* and proves how the rural, highly patriarchal past these rituals belong to still lingers in the proto-capitalist world of Kate and Petruchio. Great attention is given to farce as the dramatic engine that allows one to "performatively interpret" shame and turn it from a mechanism of physical and psychological violence to one of "comical ridicule and mockery" (125).

The third contribution to the second section, "I 'luoghi' del desiderio e riconfigurazioni dello sguardo in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (The 'places' of desire and the reconfigurations of the gaze in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) by Giuseppe De Riso, expands on the relation between gaze and space in amorous quests and identity metamorphoses. More specifically, he aims to "discuss how specific conditions of disorientation or displacement enable . . . the author to draw paradoxical, affective geographies where to trace new and surprising identity paths" (130). The journeys from Athens to the woods and vice versa coincide with the loss and acquisition of new identities on the characters' behalf: filial relationships capsize, love relationships become blurred and unstable, and even the magical world suffers its share of ontological confusion. Even though it can be distressing, such misrecognitions are necessary "tools to question gender, class and ideology as identity-making spaces" (141), which affect the spectator too. The fluidity of these categories and the characters on stage displaces the audience, prompting the audience to shift its perspective not only on the events unfolding on the stage but also within itself.

"Da Falstaff a Yorick. Il corpo e il fantasma della *vis* comica shakespeariana" (From Falstaff to Yorik. The body and the ghost of Shakespeare's comic *vis*) by C. Maria Laudando brings this second section to a close. Her analysis focuses on the character of Falstaff, a Shakespearean Janus who "embodies to the highest degree the most distinctive features of the comic tradition from an anthropological, ritualistic, and festive point of view [as well as] exudes all the ambivalences . . . and residues of the political and historical material with which Shakespeare grapples" (147). Laudando first deals with Falstaff's linguistic subversiveness and his belonging to a carnivalesque dimension,

which do not deprive him of gravity. Following New Historicist criticism, the author first presents the historical alter ego of Falstaff, i.e., Sir John Oldcastle, and then shows how the character's borderline grotesque language associates him with pamphlets parodying Puritan religious and political outbursts of the time. The character's liminality between facetiousness and gravity, investigated mainly in *King Henry IV, Part I* and *Part II*, with a brief nod to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, grants him a perpetual metamorphic process which makes him one of the Shakespearean characters with the most successfully contemporary adaptations.

The third section, "I linguaggi del comico" (The languages of comedy), deals with Shakespeare's comic language also from a linguistic point of view. This is the case with Bianca Del Villano's "La retorica della (s)cortesia in *As You Like It*: una proposta di analisi pragmatica dei discorsi di Touchstone" (The rhetoric of (im)politeness in *As You Like It*: a pragmatic analysis proposal of Touchstone's speeches). First providing the reader with some basic tenets of historical pragmatics, Del Villano offers a thorough overview of (im) polite strategies in the play and discusses their importance as "documentary witnesses, representation of a given society" and textual engines that "transform social issues in rhetoric, in *active discourse*" (166). In her analysis, Touchstone's language helps present some of the main pragmatic mechanisms, such as "claim common opinions," "seek agreement," and "joke" (174), which low-status characters may adopt to win verbal skirmishes with their superiors while saving face. In such investigation, the author also explains how these strategies comment on two fundamental aspects: the loss of feudal values, thus the loss of the coherence between word and world, and the fool's characteristic crafty politeness, which assimilates him with the figure of the skilled courtesan in disguising their sharp comments under the guise of "strategic courtesy" (173). This latter element is most evident in his wit combination of impoliteness and rhetoric of inversion, which allows him to ironically parody common rhetorical motifs, such as the courtesan's crafty politeness, in early modern England.

Angela Leonardi's "Oscillazioni del comico in *Twelfth Night*" (Variations of comedy in *Twelfth Night*) analyses the comic mechanisms foregrounding the play as dramatic bridges from light-minded, carefree merriment to complex, ambiguous forms of humour. Much of Leonardi's attention is dedicated to a close reading of the verbal and gestural exchanges between Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek and the melancholic lines of Feste and Malvolio. As investigated in the contributions by Mango and Cimitile, comedy leads to the creation of counter-discourses on themes such as death, which spark "serious meditations . . . on the meaning of comedy as an endless fluctuation between folly and wisdom, . . . life and death" (191). This is most evident in the exchanges between Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek and

in the character of Feste, the clown who has lost his comic *vis* and is now reminiscent, both visually and psychologically, of Hamlet's Yorick's skull, a signifier of past happiness. Leonardi shows Feste's status of the wise among the fools with the visual aid of Hieronymus Bosch's *Ship of Fools* (1490-1500). The comic trajectory, which first opened with harmless linguistic jokes, ends with the bleakest of remarks as Malvolio's "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (5.1.63), which grimly anticipates the closing of theatres by the Puritan parliament in 1642.

More focused on the linguistic alphabet of the play, Aureliana Natale's "Il Co-mix shakespeariano: codici, generi e linguaggi tra parole e immagini" (The Shakespearean co-mix: codes, genres, and languages between words and images) illustrates how Shakespeare's elusiveness to categorical definitions in terms of genre, codes, and languages resonates and well fits its adaptation to the genres of comic and graphic novels. Their characteristic mixture of visual and textual codes proves to be particularly effective in best preserving and conveying the deep performativity and fluidity that characterise Shakespeare's plays. An overview of the most well-known cases of such adaptation includes Walt Disney's *The Lion King* (1997), which incorporates elements of the plot of *Hamlet*; the Italian rendition of *The Taming of the Shrew* as *Paperon Bisbeticus Domatus* (1998), where Kathrine is substituted with the shrewish Scrooge MacDuff; and manga renditions, such as Sakuishi's *Seven Shakespeares* (2014) on the quest for the Bard's identity. Most attention, however, is dedicated to Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, where Shakespeare is shown in his "personal, cultural and theatrical background" (219). In this text, innovative forms of "play-within-the-comic-book" (ibid.) show new ways of presenting literary material and interrogating the source text.

The last contribution of this third section is Antonella Piazza's "*Cymbeline*: un *romance* storico" (*Cymbeline*: a historical romance). In her analysis, the author approaches the play, considered a tragedy until 2015, as a "tragi-comedy," that is "[not] a co-mix of dramatic genres, but a transition . . . from tragedy to a new type of comedy" (225). The comparison of the play with *King Lear* proves how the mixture of dramatic genres characterising the "history romance" helps resolve traditional tragical outcomes through comical pressure (224). In the play, this process is most clearly testified by the different fates awaiting Cordelia and Imogen. While the first succumbs to Lear's rage and possessiveness, the second frees herself from her father's incestuous desires and her husband's obsessive control. Besides rewriting gender relationships, *Cymbeline* redefines and eventually overcomes potentially tragic political issues already found in histories and Roman plays. The resolutive element is Imogen, the "tender air" or feminine principle, once again. Her actions and words resolve all social and political tensions within the play and grant its

happy ending by mythologically linking Augustan Rome with Cymbeline's/ James I's Britannia.

The fourth and last section, "Mettere in scena il comico" (Staging comedy), includes three contributions to theatrical adaptations of Shakespeare's comedies. It opens with Roberto D'Avascio's "La ricetta del comico: *La Dodicesima Notte* di Shakespeare nella rivisitazione di Laura Angiulli" (The recipe for comedy: Shakespeare's *Twelfh Night* in Laura Angiulli's stage adaptation). After a brief introduction to the play and its plot, D'Avascio underlines the fluidity of the characters who are "obsessed with the satisfaction of reciprocity, but with no 'inner or spiritual balance'" (257), defining *Twelfth Night* as a "hamletic comedy" (260). As in Leonardi's contribution, D'Avascio dedicates a footnote on Feste and his liminal role between wisdom and folly. Giving full attention to its adaptations, the challenge this comedy presents was successfully accepted by the director Laura Angiulli, who had first brought on stage *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*. Thanks to her careful efforts at textual reduction, Angiulli created a "dream-like setting, which hosts a theatrical dimension specifically rooted in the power of words" (263). The nearly empty stage and monochromatic lighting underline the theatrical potential of Shakespeare's text, infused with a satirical twist that immediately engages the audience when they notice that the same actor plays both Viola and Sebastian. The author eventually comments on Angiulli's decision to alter the ending, where Orsino is shown listening to the music that originally opened the play, and suggests that her choice aimed to underline the "human matter" in *Twelfth Night* as well as the director's awareness that any "reconstruction is never perfect" (268).

"Il viaggio di Falstaff: transcodificazione di un personaggio" (Falstaff's journey: the transcodification of a character) by Annamaria Sapienza focuses on Falstaff's adaptations in both melodrama and films. After overviewing the character's theatrical and historical origins and metamorphic quality, the author deals with his success in nineteenth- and twentieth-century artistic production. Sapienza first introduces Giuseppe Verdi's *Falstaff* (1893), his third melodrama based on Shakespearean plays (*Macbeth*, 1847 and *Othello*, 1887). Thanks to the fruitful collaboration with the librettist Arrigo Boito, Verdi writes a melodrama where "comedy is the very core of the dramatic writing, both the means and the end of the representation that governs its timing and rhythms" (280). The author's focus then shifts towards Orson Welles' *Falstaff: Chimes at Midnight* (1965), which is also discussed as the director's coronation of his fascination for this character, already witnessed by his *Five Kings* in 1939. Welles retraces Shakespeare's production in the movie by following the melancholic Falstaff in his metamorphic relationship with Hal and the King. Overall, Sapienza's comments on the artists' attempts at rendering Falstaff's complex comical nature show how "on the written page, in music, on the

stage and the screen it is possible to maintain something of Shakespeare's dramatic writing which still enhances its expressive tension" (290).

Paolo Sommaiolo's "Mettere in scena il mondo onirico. Il *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* nelle produzioni del Teatro dell'Elfo" (Staging the oneiric world. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adapted by Teatro dell'Elfo) brings the fourth section as well as the volume to a close. After expanding on the similarities between the world of dreams and theatre, such as their contingency and otherworldly nature, Sommaiolo discusses Salvatores' rock-punk musical *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1981-1982). Considering opposites as his creative focus, Salvatores plays with dichotomic sounds, colours, and acting registers to highlight categorical distinctions, such as night/day and the fiery passions inhabiting the Shakespearean characters. In 1988, Elio De Capitani offered Teatro dell'Elfo a new reading of the play as a tragedy of disaffection ("tragedia del disamore", 303). His adaptation gives great attention to the violence on the – mainly female – body as an anticipatory moment of an all-encompassing destructive tendency. Sommaiolo closes his essay by relating Capitani's following adaptations of the play (1997, 2010, and 2016), where comedy regains its primary role and, as such, allows the director to convey onstage an ever-changing world through the sensual, poetic, and grotesque energy deriving from Shakespeare's characters.

The volume edited by de Filippis dramatically contributes to the field of Shakespearean studies by offering a diachronic and multidisciplinary perspective on the complex subject of comedy and its Shakespearean adaptations. Each section in the volume clearly defines its focus and methodological framework and effectively expands on these aspects throughout its contributions. This approach results in autonomous portrayals of a heterogeneous yet coherent dramatic world. The volume's use of thematic *fils rouges* enhances the reader's experience. Some of these themes are quite overt, such as the investigation of Falstaff through different methodological lenses in Laudando's and Sapienza's contributions, as well as the cogency of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in De Riso's and Sommaiolo's papers. In other cases, subtle echoes within the volume can be found with recurring concepts, like counter-discourse, used explicitly in Mango's and implicitly in Cimitile's essays. Overall, the volume offers a rich and exhaustive overview of what comedy means in Shakespeare's writing, encompassing its dramatic genre, language, themes, and adaptations, providing the readers with the necessary methodological tools to approach this otherwise extremely vast and possibly confusing topic.