

The Comic in Shakespeare

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By

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There is no more dangerous literary symptom
than a temptation to write about wit and humour.

It indicates a total loss of both.

—George Bernard Shaw

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The number of books and articles on Shakespeare which are published each year is staggeringly high. Over the last fifty years there would appear to have been enough of them to carpet the Grand Canyon (or at least the Cheddar Gorge). It seems inconceivable that, after so much commentary, there is any aspect of his work which has not been thoroughly explored and colonised. Yet anyone looking for enlightenment on what is comic in the plays is likely to be surprised by how comparatively little help there is. When Shakespeare was starting out, wrote Dr Johnson in his famous *Preface*, “the rules of the ancients were yet known to a few” and he “therefore indulged his natural disposition ... and his disposition led him to comedy”:

In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is at last written with little felicity; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comic, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature.¹

This is a surprising, eccentric as well as distinctly minority view and the more usual approach for subsequent critics has been to acknowledge that there is a good deal in the plays which was designed to make an audience laugh or smile, but then either to ignore those aspects, or (more commonly) take them for granted.

The problem is partly one of nomenclature, that is to say the ambiguities which lie in the word “comedy”. What it can mean, and in fact usually does mean in this context, is a certain kind of play with a happy ending, usually in the form of a marriage between two young lovers whose path to happiness has been initially blocked by the older generation: a play which may have comic moments but is more broadly characterised by an overall tone that encourages an audience not to take anything bad which happens in it too seriously. There are of course rather more sophisticated and elaborate definitions of comedy than this one, many of them stemming in the modern era from the work of Northrop Frye;² but this will be adequate for the distinction I want to make. The point is that there are plenty of comedies in this sense which are hardly funny at all. The other meaning of the word is frequently defined as “what makes us laugh” although, as I hope to show, laughter is in fact an uncertain indicator of the presence of comedy in this second, and different sense, but again it is a definition which will serve for the moment and one which we all have to rely on from time to time, for want of a better.

Although what is comic regularly appears in comedies, these two meanings of comedy are distinct, and in my view need to be kept so: on the occasions in what follows on which I have used comedy to mean the comic I hope the context makes that usage clear, as I believe, or at least fondly hope, it does in my quotation from Johnson. But in the few standard texts from the end of the last century in which “comedy in Shakespeare” is discussed, the authors have a tendency to switch disconcertingly, and without warning, from one meaning to the other so that it becomes difficult to know what is being talked about, and this is a habit that appears to have survived into more recent times. In 2005 R. W. Maslen published a book entitled *Shakespeare and Comedy* (which is what, in happier circumstances, I would have preferred to call this one). Described as an “Arden Critical Companion”, it clearly aspired to be a standard reference work on its subject. In the first few pages, Maslen acknowledges that there is a difference between comedy as a “dramatic genre and “comic” to mean what makes people laugh or smile”, but he then says,

I shall refrain from defining the words more rigorously than this, since one of the points I wish to stress is that the comic was regarded in Shakespeare’s time as fundamentally undefinable, and comedy as a highly slippery theatrical phenomenon.³

Since Maslen offers no other explanation for what becomes, in effect, a decision to forget about any ambiguity there might be in his book's title, the words here merit some scrutiny.

That the Elizabethans thought of comedy as “a highly slippery theatrical phenomenon” seems likely enough. If there were no explicit evidence for that view, it could be deduced from the plays they wrote and that disregard for genre distinctions which stretches forwards at least as far as the somewhat anarchic organisation of Shakespeare's plays in the First Folio. That they thought the comic “fundamentally undefinable” is a different matter and, as with all these cases of generalisations about a period, the question “by whom?” always tends to impose itself. In an article published in the online journal *Shakespeare* in 2020, Rebecca Yearling began by noting how discussion of “comedy” in Shakespeare is bedevilled by the term's “two quite separate meanings”, and then claimed that “In the early modern period, literary theorists were eager to make clear distinctions between the two definitions”.⁴ It is hard to see how they could have done that without at least trying to define the comic, an enterprise they would hardly have attempted had they thought the object of their efforts “fundamentally undefinable”. Yet whether or not it could be clearly shown that they did, seems to me to have little or no relation to the obligation critics have *now* to define their terms as

rigorously as possible so that their readers can be clear about what is being discussed.

This ambiguity of “comedy” may be one of the reasons for a relative dearth of writing on the comic. The 2002 Cambridge *Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* had thirteen essays only one of which was focussed on the comic (I shall discuss it later). Among the others, two or three gave it passing attention while the majority ignored the subject altogether. The *Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy*, which came sixteen years later, is organised differently since it contains 33 contributions. In one of these, an essay entitled “Imagining Shakespeare’s audience”, Jeremy Lopez boldly tries to reconstruct what made the Elizabethans laugh and compare it with how modern directors of Shakespeare are inclined to extract laughter from their audience, but otherwise there is very little mention in this compendium of the comic in comedies, and it seems significant that in the index to a volume of 572 pages there is only one reference to William Kemp.⁵ No doubt the comic is sometimes discussed in commentaries on individual Shakespeare plays although, as far I can establish, that is not normally the case. A play usually considered as written primarily to raise laughter is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, so much so that it is often described as the nearest Shakespeare ever came to writing a farce. The editors of a recent collection of new critical essays devoted to this work divide the contributions they are introducing into

categories. There are those which emphasise “female community and female agency” and a small group concerned with the similarities and differences between “*Merry Wives* and other contemporary plays”. Then come a number of essays concentrating on “the subjects of sexuality and desire” followed by another group “informed by ecocritical theory” before the final set on the play’s “performative afterlives”. There is no doubt that these are all legitimate subjects and that, in the course of dealing with them, the question of what makes us laugh sometimes comes up; but more often than not, in this and similar collections, it occupies that “taken for granted” position I mentioned earlier.⁶

To see some of the ways in which the comic can be side-lined in writing about comedy, one could follow R. W. Maslen in his book when, after his introductory remarks, he moves on to discuss what has traditionally been regarded as the first of Shakespeare’s comedies, and perhaps of all his surviving plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. There are two obvious major sources of the comic in this work. One of these is the designedly although not in these days always entirely successful witty exchanges between not only the four upper-class principals in the play—Proteus and Valentine, the two gentlemen of the title, and their female counterparts, Julia and Silvia—but also their barely less courtly subordinates, Julia’s waiting woman Lucetta and Valentine’s page Speed, called such perhaps because of the smartness of his repartee. To evoke

at least the spirit of their exchanges one does not have to delve far into the action. At the very beginning of the play, Valentine is about to go abroad so Proteus says he will pray for his friend's safety. "And on a love-book pray for my success?" asks Valentine provocatively, knowing that what keeps Proteus from joining him on his travels is a love affair at home. "Upon some book I love I'll pray for thee", Proteus responds only to be met with, "That's on some shallow story of deep love, / How young Leander crossed the Hellespont." But he will not be teased in this fashion without sticking up for himself and counters with, "That's a deeper story of a deeper love, / For he was more than over-shoes in love". The play here on the difference between books one loves and those which take love as their subject, as well as on metaphorical and literal notions of depth, and the minor shock which then comes from introducing a colloquialism ("overshoes") into a classical context so as to produce a mild joke which is again based on the ambiguities of depth, are all part of the banter of two young men alert to how another's use of language can be misinterpreted for what are, in this case, it must be admitted, distinctly weak comic results. There is educated speech but hardly different is the exchange Proteus has shortly after with Valentine's page, Speed, who is looking for his master and compares himself to a lost sheep. That is tantamount, Proteus tells him, to accusing Valentine of being a shepherd but not necessarily the page retorts since, "the shepherd seeks the sheep, and not the sheep the

shepherd; but I seek my master, and my master seeks not me. Therefore I am no sheep”. “The sheep for fodder follows the shepherd,” is Proteus’s immediate response, “the shepherd for food follows not the sheep; thou for wages followest thy master, thy master for wages follows not thee. Therefore thou art a sheep” to which Speed can only then say, “Such another proof will make me cry “baa””.⁷ This kind of playing with logic for comic effect, which presumably had a special appeal for those apprentice lawyers from the inns of Court who are assumed to have made up part of Shakespeare’s audience, becomes very common in his plays, as does the punning and playing with words in the initial exchange between the two gentlemen of this play’s title. Numerous, far more complicated examples could be cited but to discriminate between them, trying to separate those which now strike us as feeble or whose point (the language having changed so much) can only be recovered with the help of notes, from those which can still make even the Restoration dramatists and Oscar Wilde seem flat-footed, would be a laborious business and, irrespective of what he means by comedy, it is therefore perhaps no surprise that Maslen has nothing to do with it.

The second major source of the comic in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is quite different and involves Proteus’s servant Lance. In the cast lists which found themselves tagged on to the end of a number of plays in the First Folio, Speed is described as “a clownish servant

to Valentine” and Launce as “the like to Proteus”. There is wide agreement that “clownish” is a misnomer for a fast-thinking young page like Speed (who owes a lot to similar figures in the plays of Lyly), but that the word is appropriate for Launce. In Elizabethan English it has a double meaning in that “clown” can refer to an uneducated but not necessarily stupid member of the lower classes who may be a modest artisan or what used to be called a yokel. But it is also the technical term for the actor in a theatre company who specialised in the comic parts. Between 1595 and at least 1599, for example, the well-known comedian Will Kemp was the “clown” of Shakespeare’s own company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.

The general assumption that Launce was a part tailor-made for Kemp runs into a problem of chronology. If the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is in fact a very early play, then it must have been written before 1594 when the Lord Chamberlain’s Men was formed. The solution has been to assume that Shakespeare re-wrote it in order to accommodate his new leading comedian. As he developed, he shows a discernible tendency to try to integrate the parts he wrote for the company clown into his plays’ main narrative; but in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, as we now have it, all he is chiefly doing is providing a platform for Kemp (or someone like him) to perform, two spaces or pauses in the action for what are chiefly comic interludes. In modern comedians’ parlance

they would be called “sets”. Launce does make some other, minor interventions elsewhere in the play, and there are always of course more or sometimes less legitimate thematic links to be made between his preoccupations and those of the work in general, but these are two moments when he has the stage almost all to himself.

I say “almost” because, as everybody knows, when in the first of these interludes Launce enters, no doubt thinly disguised as a manservant of the time, he is accompanied by his dog, Crab. His first address to the audience is all about Crab, as indeed is his second, longer one later in the play. Just before his entrance, there has been a scene in which Proteus, having been told by his father that he must leave Verona for Milan, has been engaged in a tearful farewell with Julia, whom he is supposed to love. Here towards the beginning of his career, but then throughout it, Shakespeare is fond of juxtaposing for satiric effect the behaviour of his upper-class characters with parodic versions of similar goings-on lower down the social scale. Having suddenly to leave one town for another may be disruptive of Proteus’s plans and relationships, but it is not too convenient for members of his entourage either. As Launce explains to the audience, everyone except Crab has been distressed that he was having to leave home so suddenly. “I think Crab my dog”, he says,

be the sourest-natured dog that lives: my mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat ringing her hands and all our house in a great perplexity, yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed one tear. He is a stone, a very pebblestone, and has no more pity in him than a dog. (2.iii, 4-10)

Launce's conversation with the audience is much longer than this (I extract only the most famous and quotable part), but despite having been written more than 400 years ago it seems to me not so very different from the material of one of today's stand-up comedians, flat on the page perhaps but funny enough when well performed.

The second scene or set in which Launce appears arises because (we learn later) he has been ordered by Proteus, who has forgotten about Julia, to take a lapdog to Sylvia as a love token but then, having had it stolen from him at the market, has thought to give her Crab instead. It is not so much Crab's size or appearance which has led to Silvia's indignant rejection but the way the dog has behaved, as his master's complaints in 4.iv make clear. Just as in the earlier scene, Launce shares his mock outrage with the audience. Here is a dog, he says, that he has had from a puppy, "one that I saved from drowning, when three or four of his blind brothers and sisters went to it"; yet as soon as they both arrived in Silvia's dining-room Crab stole a chicken leg from her plate. "O, 'tis a foul thing, when a cur cannot keep himself in all companies", he says and, in further demonstration that his dog is

someone you can't take anywhere, he describes how Crab had then consorted with "three or four gentleman-like dogs" for "a pissing while" until everyone became aware of a nasty smell. "I", he explains, like a parent who knows only too well the origin of the false notes at a school concert, "having been acquainted with the smell before, knew it was Crab." But when someone had then hauled out the dog to whip him, Launce had taken responsibility for what Crab had done and been whipped himself. "How many masters would do this for his servant?", he asks. Transmitting injury down the social hierarchy is one of the major devices of comedy but Launce is an inverter of this familiar process and says that in the past he has sat in the stocks for the puddings Crab has stolen, and stood in the pillory for the geese he has killed. The sense of the poor return he has had for these services so overwhelms him that he then turns from the audience and addresses Crab directly with a final reproach: "did not I bid thee mark me, and do as I do? When didst thou see me heave up my leg, and make water against a gentlewoman's farthingale?" (4.iv, 1-37). Crab can be imagined as quietly listening to this barrage of reproaches and fixing with a loyal, attentive and yet quizzical gaze a master who, conniving with the audience in their common understanding of the anthropomorphic delusion, is at the same time exploiting it for comic effect.⁸

I describe these two well-known episodes in some detail in order to put down a marker for what I think is at

least one important element of the comic in Shakespeare. In the opening chapter of a book in Oxford's "short introductions" series, which was published in 2016 and called *Shakespeare's Comedies* (the plural in the title licensing the concentration on genre), Bart van Es commits himself to the view that "few would feel any poorer for the loss of Speed and Launce".⁹ Since he has previously offered a short analysis of a snatch of dialogue between these two characters, the charitable interpretation of his words is that it is their interaction we could do without. As Peter Davison demonstrated many years ago, their kind of rapid crosstalk in which words are deliberately misheard or misunderstood, and which is a version of the "wit" of the upper-class characters operating at a more plebian level, can be usefully compared with the routines that old comedy duos such as Abbott and Costello, or Flanagan and Allen, would practice.¹⁰ They are not to everyone's taste so that to say we could do without them is a reasonable enough view, although not one with which I happen to agree. Yet if Van Es means what his words in fact say, then some might wonder what is left of what matters in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* once Launce is completely removed.

Humour is of course subjective. When Queen Victoria declared we are not amused, she was simply using a linguistic formula to which she was entitled in order to disguise the fact that she was only speaking for herself. Yet although different people laugh at different things,

almost all other features of aesthetic response could be described as subjective also, but not so much that communication becomes impossible. There has to be an assumption of a possible consensus and, in the case of Launce's two soliloquies, it has usually been that they work very well and are among the best elements in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the 19th century there was a prejudice against "low comedy" in Shakespeare and a feeling that he provided it reluctantly, to please "the groundlings". Like most prejudices, this one was not without some justification. In *Measure for Measure*, for example, wise old Escalus is interrogating Pompey who works for Mistress Overdone, the owner of a local brothel and the wife (Pompey explains) of nine previous husbands although "overdone by the last". Escalus asks him for his last name and when told it is Bum responds with, "Troth, and your bum is the greatest thing about you, so that, in the beastliest sense, you are Pompey the Great".¹¹ It is not hard to see why 19th century critics found it hard to reconcile these lines with their idea of a writer whom they were in the habit of referring to as "the Bard", or "the Swan of Avon". Technically speaking, Launce's humour may fall into the same "low", category as this remark of Escalus, but it is really in a different league. Even George Bernard Shaw, who was in some ways the inheritor of the tradition I am describing, could write in a review of a production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in 1895, "The scenes between Launce and his dog brought out the

latent silliness and childishness of the audience as Shakespeare's clowning scenes always do: I laugh at them like a yokel myself'.¹² If Launce could produce this response in someone who could fairly be described as having a prejudice against clowning, there may be something enduringly comic in the scenes Shaw mentions. Yet under his general rubric of *Shakespeare and Comedy*, Maslen makes only the most fleeting of references to Launce so that an outsider might be driven to ask that same question which Van Es's much more explicit dismissal excites and wonder what it could be in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* that a critic *could* be concerned to write about.

The concentration in Maslen's chapter is in fact on the four main characters whose doings, should one choose to take them seriously, are the opposite of comic. As I have already hinted, having pledged his love to Julia, Proteus forgets about her as soon as he arrives in Milan and develops a passion instead for Silvia, who happens to be the young woman to whom his best friend, Valentine, has become attached. Not called Proteus for nothing, he next treacherously helps engineer the banishment of Valentine who, on his way to another Italian town through a forest, is captured by outlaws but is then able to become their leader. Meanwhile Silvia, who has her own troubles, and has gone in search of Valentine, passes through this same forest, pursued by Proteus. Catching up with her, he is about to rape the young woman but is prevented from doing so by the sudden appearance of Valentine. Proteus

is then so visibly tortured by remorse that Valentine offers to hand Silvia over to him as a proof of their enduring friendship. Fortunately, various further revelations, and chiefly that Julia has been with the others all along disguised as a young man, make this sacrifice unnecessary and Proteus goes back to believing Julia is the one he loves after all.

If the four characters involved in these affairs were full-blooded, strongly individualised dramatic creations their actions, but particularly those of the men, would be likely to strike any spectator or reader as either absurd or despicable. The play would then seem much more tragic than comic and its happy ending nonsensical. Even as it stands, however, it could be said to throw an interesting light on the sexual politics of both Shakespeare's time and ours. This is the aspect of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* that concerns Maslen who writes well about how (according to him) the play mounts "a stalwart defence of women at men's expense", and also defies the "anti-theatrical, anti-feminist lobby" of Shakespeare's day" by illustrating, in Julia especially, that there can be moral advantages in cross-dressing.¹³ These topics have a powerful intrinsic interest but discussing them under the general heading of "Shakespeare and comedy" only seems appropriate if that last word is taken as having a single meaning.

The analysis Maslen offers of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* gives a reliable indication of how he means to

proceed and, if I have rather unfairly concentrated on it, it is because his book, even though it is now almost fifteen years old, might well be the first port of call for anyone interested in Shakespeare and comedy, in the sense of the comic. It could even be that the false impression its title gives of supplying a particular need, at least helps to explain why there is still so relatively little on that topic. Virtually ignoring Launce and Crab is nevertheless surprising given how unique they are, not only on the Shakespearean but also the Elizabethan or Jacobean stage. Michael Dobson has established that other live dogs did sometimes appear but usually only in packs, like the hunting “hounds” which may have accompanied the entry of the Lord at the beginning of the “Induction” to *The Taming of the Shrew*. The only other notable, single canine associated with a character in a play of Shakespeare’s time is the dog which accompanies Puntarvolo in Jonson’s *Every Man Out of his Humour*. But as Dobson remarks, “There isn’t anything we might be tempted to call a relationship between Puntarvolo and this nameless dog, to which he never speaks.”¹⁴ Crab and Launce are by contrast closely allied and one would have thought that the nature of their bond would have attracted more recent attention than it has. In a chapter of a book entitled *How to Do Things with Shakespeare: New Essays*, Erica Fudge has written about the relationship between the two but in the context of what is “the emerging field of animal studies in the humanities”. She concentrates on “Crab’s activities

beneath the Duke's table as a marker of absolute incivility", citing several Elizabethan texts which take an ability to relieve oneself in private as a crucial difference between animal and civilised human nature; and then goes on to note that true friendship, such an important theme of course in *The Two Gentlemen*, can only exist between civilised human beings so that "the fact that Launce finds himself inseparable from his *dog* signals his failure as a human", and that his "love for his dog" is "a violation of reason as well as a violation of the rules of friendship".¹⁵ With acknowledgements to Fudge, Laurie Shannon adopts a similar approach to Launce's second soliloquy in her contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy*. Following a reminder of the vicarious punishments Launce claims he has suffered on account of Crab's misdemeanours, she writes, "The dog still needs to grasp that fundamental contractual gesture: the ethical performance of reciprocity".¹⁶ No doubt it does, although there are dog lovers who might protest, but then this phrase, like those of Fudge, would seem to be either denying or forgetting that what Launce has to say about Crab is meant to be comic, and also what an appropriate tone might be for dealing with comedy in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or in Shakespeare's plays generally.

The topic is of course occasionally treated in introductions, articles and chapters in books. Examples here would include the chapter entitled "Shakespeare, jokes, humour and tolerance" in B. J. Sokal's 2008

Shakespeare and Tolerance or the one called “The Fun of Sex” in Stanley Wells’ 2010 *Shakespeare, Sex and Love*, both of which I refer to later. Yet as far as I can discover, the subject is almost never handled in a general way. One exception was a book published in 2007, and now out of print, entitled *Shakespeare’s Practical Jokes*.¹⁷ This was narrowly focussed, too narrowly I might say (since I wrote it myself), on a single dramatic device, the tricks played on Falstaff by Hal and Poins, the gulling of Malvolio, and more minor instances such as the way Beatrice and Benedick are persuaded to realise that they are in love with each other, or the exposure of Paroles. But it did occasionally attempt to raise broader issues about the comic in Shakespeare and it is these which I have tried to develop here in a far wider, more comprehensive context. More relevant than my book was one published by Indira Ghose in the following year. Entitled *Shakespeare and Laughter; A cultural history*, this included on its first page the declaration that, “This is not a book about comedy. It is a book about laughter, not the comic” yet it does in fact have many interesting thoughts to express about comedy, as does its much shorter follow-up, *Shakespeare in Jest*, published this year (2022). When I discuss one or two of the ideas from these in what follows, it is with that underlying grateful relief one feels at having at last found someone who has the same interests.¹⁸

One of the more obvious reasons why it is difficult to discuss the comic is because it takes so many different forms. My previous focus on the practical joke may have been too narrow but there always have to be a few organising principles. One of those adopted here is the all too evident fact that the way Shakespeare's plays were written was often conditioned by the actors he had at his disposal. In his book on *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Bart Van Es may devote only one short chapter to what is comic in them, under the chapter-heading "Wit", with a scattering of other remarks on the topic towards its end; but he is the author of an exhaustively researched and highly valuable study of the difference it made to Shakespeare to be a member of a settled theatrical company from 1594 onwards which has a very useful chapter on Robert Armin and notes how important it was that he should have replaced Kemp. This is hardly a new observation but no-one can try to think about the comic in Shakespeare, it seems to me, without giving it special emphasis. That even the physical characteristics of the actors in his company could have a significance for how he wrote is of course an obvious truth long recognised by the theatre historians on whose valuable work Van Es builds, David Grote in his *The Best Actors in the World* (2002), for example, or Andrew Gurr in his *The Shakespeare Company* (2004). A favourite example involves a minor member of the company called Sincklo or Sinckler who appears to have been unusually skinny.

He is explicitly mentioned in the Quarto version of *Henry IV Part Two* as playing the beadle who comes to arrest the Hostess in 5.iii and who is consequently the target of a barrage of abuse about thin men; but since that is a very small part, he may also have been the reason for the visual joke Falstaff makes when he is defending his choice of recruits in that play and says of “this same half-faced Shadow” that “he presents no mark to the enemy – the foemen may with as great aim level at the edge of a penknife”.¹⁹

Another familiar illustration concerns the height of the boys who played the female parts. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck's activities have led both Demetrius and Lysander to fall in love with Helena and leave poor Hermia stranded. This leads Helena to conclude that the other three are part of a conspiracy to humiliate her and, though they have been close friends since school, to fall out with Hermia. During their comic quarrel Hermia feels she detects that Helena is making fun of the fact that she is much the shorter of the two girls, that she is “dwarfish”, and responds in kind: “How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak: / How low am I? I am not yet so low / But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes.”²⁰ Despite the threat, this is a charming scene and obviously reflects a contemporary situation in which one of the boy actors involved was much taller than the other, and there are many other moments in Shakespeare where he appears to be exploiting the size or appearance of his performers.

Far, far more importantly, it seems clear that the presence of Kemp in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with not only his physique but also his particular skills, helped to determine why the so-called "clown roles" in Shakespeare's plays of the middle and late 1590s are as they are. It is assumed that he played Launce, although Crab casts a shadow of doubt over that assumption since there is no record of Kemp ever performing with a dog; and also Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost* who is a clown in both senses of the word given that he is referred to at one moment as a "swain".²¹ The list then goes on to include Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and the magnificent Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Such is the dearth of material on the comic that the chief authority on Kemp's theatrical career is still David Wiles who, in an excellent book entitled *Shakespeare's Clown* (published in 1987), speculated that Falstaff was also one of his subject's roles. I give reasons later for thinking why this might not have been so but what the list shows, even without Falstaff, is that, apart from being a well-known solo performer outside the theatre, Kemp must also have been no mean actor. Perhaps this meant he was occasionally called upon to play other roles apart from his prescribed one? A possible reason for believing this could be found in one of the many anecdotes which circulated, not about Kemp himself but Dick Tarleton, his predecessor as his country's most well-known clown, and