

# The Shakespearean comic and tragicomic

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*The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic: French Inflections*. By Richard Hillman. Pp. viii + 240. Manchester University Press, 2020. Ebook £80, Hb. £80.

The theatres are open again, and you are about to watch *Twelfth Night*. Flicking through the programme notes, you read about Malvolio’s similarity to Pierre Victor Palma Cayet, a sixteenth-century French author and pastor who served in Catherine de Bourbon’s household. You learn that a pamphlet in 1595 accused Cayet of false piety, ambition, and attempting to woo the Baroness d’Arroz, a noblewoman well above his station. To impress the Baroness, Cayet had a portrait made ‘auec vn visage fraiz & gaillard, la barbe rase, vn chapeau gris, deux pendans aux oreilles, composez de rubis’ (‘with a countenance lively and gay, his beard shaven, a grey hat, two pendants at his ears composed of rubies’, trans. Hillman here and throughout).

In a phrase that recalls Fabian’s comment that ‘If this were play’d upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction’ (3.4.127–8), the pamphlet’s author noted the situation’s theatrical potential, ‘lesquelles certainement eussent apporté plus de recreation, representees au peuple sur vn theatre, que d’edification en l’Eglise’ (‘which certainly would have afforded more recreation, represented to the public in a theatre, than edification in the church’). The question is: how does learning about Cayet change how you experience the play?

You might wonder if Cayet was a model for Malvolio, though Richard Hillman does not make this claim when he introduces us to Cayet in Chapter 4 of *The Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic*. Or you might hope that knowing about a contemporary French figure

takes you closer to interpreting the play as Shakespeare's earliest readers and audiences would have done. We can be confident that someone, somewhere in Shakespeare's England knew about him, but Hillman does not present much evidence that Cayet would have been well known to an English audience (though he does note that the 1595 pamphlet's re-publication in 1599 would have made it more accessible).

Fundamentally, though, the anecdote's intrinsic interest does not hinge on whether it tells us what was in Shakespeare's head or whether some audience members who were well up on French current affairs would have laughed knowingly as Malvolio's humiliation played out on stage. Cayet reminds us that Malvolio's character is not a uniquely English creation that only Shakespeare could have devised. A French Protestant like Cayet (who converted to Catholicism in the wake of this pamphlet controversy) could just as easily be mocked for pursuing an inappropriate object of desire as could 'a kind of Puritan' (2.3.131) like Malvolio. Different circumstances, same joke. Identifying continental analogues for Shakespeare's plays is a traditional mode of criticism, but it has rarely been more necessary, even radical, in times when the idea that Shakespeare belongs to European as well as English culture is not taken for granted. For instance, Michael Dobson's recent review of Margaret Tudeau-Clayton's monograph *Shakespeare's Englishes* for the *London Review of Books* (2 July 2020) spoke up for 'Shakespeare's abstention from a limitingly English agenda' by giving various examples of Shakespearean continuities with continental culture from Elizabethan London to present-day Gdansk's new Teatr Szekspirowski.

Moreover, the anonymous pamphlet attacking Cayet, and Cayet's subsequent *Responce* (also 1595), offer Hillman, and us following him, a new perspective on Malvolio's turn from self-delusion to self-righteousness. Cayet's later treatise on Purgatory (1600) inspires Hillman to view Malvolio's punishment through the lens of revenge tragedy, as a 'parodic purgation of his gross faults by Maria and company in a hellish experience from

which he duly emerges as a parody of a vengeful ghost'. Is there a historical basis to this reading of how Cayet's work places a different accent on the play's ending? Perhaps. In any case, this is a lively and novel modern reading of what makes Shakespeare's play distinctive that is rooted in deep immersion in Shakespearean and early modern French drama.

*Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* is nonetheless keen to establish how likely it is that those producing and consuming sixteenth-century English drama would have known about intriguing French parallels and analogues that we might spot today. Hillman rarely declares that he has found a new source during his illuminating discussions of a dozen or so French plays, prose works, and other contemporary texts in relation to Shakespearean comedies and tragicomedies. He does argue that in *Measure for Measure* 'there are clear signs that Shakespeare knew' Claude Roillet's tragedy *Philanire* (printed in 1563 and 1577), a translation of the same author's Latin play *Philanira* (1556). One sign is that the play's Angelo-figure is called a 'Preuost' (Latin *praetor*), which chimes with the jailor in Shakespeare's play being named 'provost', a term used nowhere else in the Shakespearean canon. Another sign, 'less decisive as evidence, but nonetheless suggestive', is the following phrase from early in the play in which the heroine repeats the word 'measure':

le cas

Est plus leger que ne croit pas

Son preuost, mais de la mesure

De rigueur si pres il mesure

Tout delit, qu'il n'y a mefaict

Qu'il ne soit par le sang defait.

(the case is less serious than is believed by his provost, but by such a strict measure of harshness does he measure every offence, that there is no misdeed that is not by blood repressed)

Such parallels are indeed tantalizing but inconclusive as proof that Shakespeare knew the French text. The same might be said for the relation between Nicolas de Montreux's comedy *Diane* (c. 1592) and *A Midsummer's Night Dream* that Hillman proposes at the start of Chapter 2 (repeating a claim he first made in *Review of English Studies* a decade ago). 'The likelihood of direct influence seems strong indeed' once we notice how Shakespeare's Helena spurns Demetrius' declarations of love in a way that resembles how Montreux's *Diane* does, a uniquely close resemblance by comparison with the other known analogues, chiefly Montreux's own source, Jorge de Montemayor's *Diane*. 'Strong' is not 'certain', though. Similarly open to debate is Hillman's vision of a Shakespeare who is 'a "literary dramatist", searching out more or less recondite material by reading in line with recent intellectual trends' (alluding to Lukas Erne's celebrated but contested study *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*).

The book is not structured to prosecute cases for new sources; it is, however, anxious to show that its readings plausibly reflect how early modern readers and audience members experienced Shakespeare's plays. We register this as the discussion of *Diane* swiftly turns to examine how the French comedy changes the way we see Shakespeare's handling of magic, a move explicitly made in order 'to shift the ground from influence to intertextuality'. This notion of intertextuality is central to the book's method, and implies that we are following a historical reading. It is indebted to Michael Riffaterre's understanding of how readers are 'diverted, repositioned and generally destabilised by a perception of anomaly against the background of established norms – that is, by "agrammaticalité" (ungrammaticality)'. The

adjoining footnote – bothersome to locate in my electronic review copy, which lacks hyperlinks – directs us back to the longer argument in favour of reconstructing the hypothetical reader-auditor’s experience that Hillman made in *Intertextuality and Romance in Renaissance Drama* (1992). The same emphasis on early readers and audiences is felt in his more recent work on Shakespearean tragedy, *French Origins of English Tragedy* (2010) and *French Reflections on the Shakespearean Tragic* (2012). The title word ‘inflections’ in this new book acknowledges the primary position of Italian generic models for Shakespeare’s comedies and tragicomedies, but asserts that the experiences of readers and audiences were also filtered through the generic and cultural norms of French precursors they may have known.

A good illustration of this method is Chapter 4’s discussion of Henri de Barran’s *Tragique Comedie Françoise de L’homme iustificié par Foy* (*Mankind Justified by Faith: Tragicomedy*, 1554). Barran’s *L’Homme* is a dramatic template for a Protestant arc of fall, suffering, and redemption. The protagonist breaks through his superficial adherence to Old Testament law to discover within himself the life-giving charity and mercy of Christ’s ministry as narrated in the New Testament. For readers who come to the *Merchant of Venice* with a memory of Barran’s play, ‘the intertextual effect is to align the dramatic centre of gravity of Shakespeare’s play with its nominally central personage [i.e. Antonio] more closely than is usually felt to be the case’. Hillman underlays this reading with evidence that early modern readers or audience members could have felt this effect, pointing here and elsewhere in the book to date of publication and the number of extant copies (five in this case, of which one is in England).

However, these gestures to a work’s availability are not the same as evidence of what Shakespeare’s readers and audiences actually read. Other scholars have been gathering clues: Jean-Christophe Mayer and Laura Estill, for example, have used commonplace books,

readers' marks in books, and other manuscript evidence to learn more about the mental habits of Shakespeare's early readers; Cyndia Susan Clegg has scrutinized what material we might expect sections of Shakespeare's audiences to have been reading. Hillman admits in Chapter 1 that he is often working from conjectures: 'the intertextual relation will need to be presented in the more limited form of a frank postulate, a way some audience members or readers may reasonably have responded'. His study works from 'the understanding that the texts involved – and the term "text" is to be taken in the broadest possible sense – were conceivably accessible, by means ranging from print circulation to cultural commonplace, and thus may be considered as belonging to a shared discursive space'.

As we saw with Cayet, though, such unproven assumptions are not needed to validate Hillman's work. It is enough that *Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic*'s examples make an eye-opening and durable case that there were indeed many Anglo-French 'cultural commonplaces' that belonged in a 'shared discursive space'. Reflecting on his critical practice back in 2010, Hillman accepted that 'risks are being run' in not being able to prove that early readers would have read the texts as he does, but that these risks 'boil down to the universal (and usually immeasurable) one of criticism itself: that of being beside the point'. It would also be risky to assume that a meaningful number of early modern English readers would have known most or all of the texts mentioned in Hillman's latest work. There is less risk but still much to gain in working towards the more basic, less empirically exacting, but highly worthwhile goal of comparing English and French dramatic commonplaces.

Once we accept (as the monograph never quite does) that Hillman's French-inflected readings have much to teach us whether or not they are authentically early modern, we are liberated to appreciate *Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic*'s merits more fully. Chapter 2 glances across at *Romeo and Juliet* during a longer reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* next to Marie le Jars de Gournay's prose narrative *Proumenoir* (*Promenade*, 1594) and its

source, Claude de Taillemont's *Discours des champs faëz* ('Discourses of the Fairy-Enchanted Fields', 1553). Hillman lingers over Old Capulet's forlorn commentary towards the play's conclusion:

All things that we ordained festival,  
Turn from their office to black funeral:  
Our instruments to melancholy bells,  
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast;

(4.4.84–7)

Hillman speculates that we are seeing Shakespeare simultaneously consulting both French sources: 'This looks like a case where Shakespeare's representation may have drawn details from Taillemont, interpretative depth from Gournay.' This guess distracts us from the sensitive comparisons being made, which call attention to poignant details like the musical instruments being put away, as found in Taillemont, and to the emotional charge that Shakespeare and Gournay generate by having Old Capulet and Othalcus (Gournay's equivalent character) both make wedding preparations before realizing that they actually need to arrange the funeral of the respective brides-to-have-been, Juliet and, in *Proumenoir*, Alinda.

Chapter 5 offers an extended comparison between François de Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* (1583) and *Pericles*, showing how Belleforest's narrator and Gower present their versions of Apollonius' story as a 'Tragique comedie'. The reader familiar with Belleforest's narrator is well placed to appreciate how Gower, too, mediates the ancient tale's mixture of tragic experience and reversal of fortune, showing that Apollonius needs knowledge and virtue to come through safely. Once more, it is noteworthy but ultimately incidental to the



close comparison which follows that Volume 7 of Belleforest's *Histoires*, which contains the story, was reissued in 1595, and so may have been widely available in early modern England. In one case, Hillman does offer an authoritative judgement on how early modern readers and audiences would have interpreted a play. This is Chapter 3's account of contemporary French politics in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which evaluates how a general knowledge of current affairs, rather than specific French texts, changes our response. The discussion needs to be read in full to appreciate Hillman's subtle conclusion that it is 'indispensable' to the comic resolution that 'an audience's attempts at narrow political interpretations should take place – and that they should fail, just as the lovers' wooing fails, following the failure of their fatuous academy: these prove to be two sides of the same solipsistic coin'.

*Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* uncovers multiple new points of contact between English and French dramatic cultures. It illuminates shared preoccupations, structures, characters, and other dramatic features that took on specific forms to match dramatic or literary imperatives in the hands of skilled writers on both sides of the Channel. While we may instinctively want to know whether such and such a text was known to the dramatist and his reader-auditors, we do not need to fret too much about the probability that it was known widely in England. The book's principal contribution is towards situating Shakespeare within a wider European tradition: Hillman singles out work in this area by Louise George Clubb and Michele Marrapodi on Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance, to which we might add, for example, recent work on English and Spanish stages by scholars such as José A. Pérez Díez.

For this reason the French texts considered in *Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* are not only significant to anglophone readers in proportion to how likely it is that Shakespeare, his readers, and his audiences knew them. They matter to anyone seeking to read early modern dramatic genres more sensitively. As a translator, Hillman has laboured to

make early modern French plays more accessible in English through his work for the series *Scène Européenne: Traductions introuvables* (available in print and for free online). He has translated and edited several works discussed in this book – Montreux's *Diane*, Gournay's *Proumenoir*, and Barran's *L'Homme iustifié par Foy* – as well as others (such as two dramatic adaptations of Sidney's *Arcadia*) that only merit a footnote in this study. *Shakespearean Comic and Tragicomic* is too modest to insist that the quality of its readings is enough to demonstrate why English readers today should get to know such texts. These French texts are a forceful reminder that Shakespearean drama has close French antecedents, and, as Hillman shows in myriad ways, they can invigorate how we read and watch Shakespeare's work.

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