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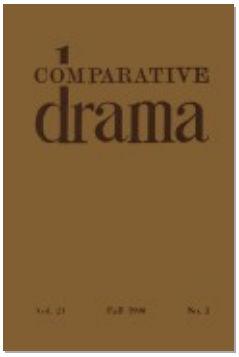

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Several of Shakespeare's plays come to their conclusions—at least in the logics of the works themselves—mainly through the agency of a central controlling character. Theseus and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*, and Prospero in *The Tempest*, for instance, all appear to wield a considerable influence over the outcome of their plays. Most often aristocratic, this figure effects the drama's dénouement by the discovery and control of information concerning the social world he or she is engaged (however temporarily) in governing. Such information, typically involving familial or romantic relationships, is obtained through disguise, deceit, and/or the assistance of a subordinate character. Although versions of this controlling figure can be found in Shakespeare's histories (e.g., Richard III, and Hal, as both Prince and King) as well as in the tragedies (e.g., Iago and Hamlet)—where, however intended, their dramatic machinations bring unfortunate and unhappy results—only in the comedies (including the romances) do such figures enjoy an apparently limitless measure of dramatic control. In doing so, they are frequently perceived as approximating some depiction of the dramatist's art. With his "great globe itself" speech (IV.i.148-58),[1] for example, Prospero traditionally—even notoriously—has been described as symbolically embodying Shakespeare's own position as playwright.

With the early examples of Marlowe's Machiavel and Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* as well as Shakespeare's Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, and following the critical lead of Bernard Spivack in his study *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, most commentators have attempted to trace the compositional

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lineage of the playwright figure back to the medieval Vice and the Renaissance Machiavel.[2] Thus Sidney Homan refers to Iago as "Shakespeare's own sinister portrait of the artist," while Sigurd Burckhardt calls him a "built-in playwright, who, presented with a donnée and glorying in his subtlety and skill, sets about shaping a play from it."[3] In an essay delineating Prospero's role as manipulative dramatist, Richard Abrams, arguing for his ultimate roots in the villain-playwright of the Machiavellian tradition, holds that "of various character-types on the Shakespearean stage, it is the Machiavel who most faithfully gives back to the playwright the image of his own powers and aspirations, his privilege to do nearly whatever he pleases within his artistic creation."[4] Although, as critics like Spivack and Abrams make clear, the Vice/Machiavel tradition undoubtedly had a significant influence on Shakespeare's development of his controlling characters, I want to suggest that in depending upon an active subordinate (e.g., Puck and Ariel) to bring about the drama's resolution, the playwright figure enacts a social dynamic into which the more independent, self-marginalizing Vice/Machiavel enters only with reluctance. This dynamic, I believe—a dynamic that plays an important role in Shakespeare's drama—is ultimately comedic rather than tragedic.

Indeed, recent investigations by Susan Snyder and Frances Teague, among others, have demonstrated that many of Shakespeare's tragedies have a powerful comedic matrix; it is in relation to the substance of these critics' conclusions as well as to much recent work on genre-mixing in the Renaissance generally that I offer my argument.[5] Acknowledging the importance of the grotesque tradition to Renaissance dramaturgy, I would like to argue that Shakespeare based his conception of the controlling playwright figure not only on the Vice/Machiavel but also on a powerful prototype from Roman New Comedy, the Plautine *poeta*—roughly translatable as "maker."[6] A *servus* or slave, the Plautine *poeta* can accomplish things for his master (usually an *adulescens amans*, or young lover) precisely because his low status in the social world of the comedy affords him a substantial latitude of agency and activity. He most often brings about the comedic resolution through an *inventio*, an inspired construction of an object or device by which he can manipulate characters and events in the drama. In what follows I set out the basic structure of the master-servant relationship in Plautus by tracing the role of the *servus* as *poeta* and by following it

with a brief explication of Shakespeare's aristocratic "playwrights" and their relation to the Plautine figure's dramaturgical powers. When Shakespeare adapts the master-slave dyad, wit and intelligence—the source of the servant/*poeta*'s power—are generally taken from the servant figure and ascribed to the aristocratic master. What remains of the Plautine complex after this alteration, however, figures importantly into the comedic praxis of Shakespearean drama. In inverting the comedic pattern of authority and agency, I believe, Shakespeare articulated certain biases concerning the politics of performance—and the performance of politics—that bear powerful implications for the entire body of his work.

Plautus' prosaic comedy embraces the *poeta* as "maker" in a classical tradition to which there is frequent allusion in Renaissance poetic theory. In *Timber, or Discoveries*, Ben Jonson provides a definition typical of poetic treatises in early modern England by answering the question "*What is a Poet?*"

> *A Poet* is that, which by the *Greeks* is call'd *kat' exochēn, ho Poiētēs*, a Maker, or fainer: His Art, an Art of imitation, or faining; expressing the life of man in fit measure, numbers, and harmony, according to *Aristotle*: From the word *poiein*, which signifies to make, or fayne.[7]

Likewise, George Puttenham, beginning *The Arte of English Poesie* with a definition of "*What a Poet and Poesie is*," states that

> A Poet is as much to say as a maker. And our English name well conformes with the Greeke word: for of *poiein* to make, they call a maker *Poeta*. Such as (by way of resemblance and reuerently) we may say of God: who without any trauell to his diuine imagination, made all the world of nought, nor also by any paterne or mould as the Platonicks with their Idees do phantastically suppose. Even so the very Poet makes and contriues out of his owne braine, both the verse and matter of his poeme, and not any foreine copie or example.[8]

Puttenham suggests ("reuerently") that a poet/*poeta* is similar to God in the way he "makes and contriues." Along with Jonson, he thus explores poetry's basis in making, or production, through the etymology of the Greek *poiein*, to "make" or "produce." This borrowing literalizes its etymology in Renaissance drama, I want to argue, by becoming one of the standard metaphors by which the dramatic *poeta*'s role in bringing about the comedic resolution is defined.

Pseudolus, wily *servus* in Plautus' play of the same name, gives a succinct explication of this metaphorical relationship. Stranded without the means to resolve his young master's difficulties, he seizes upon an idea:

> sed quasi poeta, tabulas quom cepit sibi,
> quaerit quod nusquam gentiumst, reperit tamen,
> facit illud ueri simile quod mendacium est,
> nunc ego poeta fiam: uiginti minas,
> quae nunc nusquam sunt gentium, inueniam tamen.
> (ll. 401-05)[9]

(But just like a poet, taking up his tablets, searches for what is nowhere on earth, but finds it anyway, and makes the false seem true, I'll be a poet myself: the twenty minae, that are nowhere on earth now, I'll find them anyway.)

Slave of Calidorus, a typical *adulescens amans* who has lost his lover through a pimp's breach of contract, Pseudolus takes it upon himself to rectify the situation by stealing the girl out from under the pimp's nose. The predicament is typically Plautine, running throughout his plays. With the onus of plot resolution placed squarely upon him, Plautus' *servus* learns how to triumph through inspired discovery and thus becomes "quasi poeta"—that is, "like a poet."

What Pseudolus needs to discover, significantly, is that thing "nusquam gentiumst"—which is "nowhere on earth." In the conceptual map of Plautus' dramatic world there are usually two avenues of possibility for such a discovery: above and below. Pseudolus declares later in the same passage that "ex hoc sepulcro uetere uiginti minas/ ecfodiam ego hodie quas dem erili filio" ("From this old tomb today I'll dig up the twenty minae to give my young master" [ll. 412-13]). Succor from a similar location is had in *Rudens*, where a chest holding the means of dramatic resolution is fished out of the sea (ll. 906ff). And in *Asinaria*, when the *servus* Libanus is faced with a seemingly irresoluble problem, he responds: "iubeas una opera me piscari in aere,/ uenari autem reté iaculo in medio mari" ("You might as well order me to go fishing in the air, or even go hunting in the middle of the ocean" [ll. 99-101]). Here humorous juxtaposition of the twin fixes the two places from which a resolution must eventually derive. When Libanus actually happens across a solution, the inspiration comes from above:

> unde sumam? quém interuortam? quó hanc celocem conferam?
> impetritum, inauguratumst: quouis admittunt aues,

> picus et cornix ab laeua, coruos, parra ab dextera
> consuadent; certum herclest uostram consequi sententiam.
> (ll. 258-61)
>
> (Where to find it? Whom to cheat? Where to steer this little boat? [pause] I've got the omens, the auguries: the birds let me go wherever I want, woodpecker and crow on the left of me, raven and owl on the right—they all agree; by god I'll certainly follow your advice.)

This aerial augury leads Libanus to success, giving him from above what in *Rudens* appears from below. Indeed, this trope runs throughout Plautus: the *servus* schemes toward resolution, but most often achieves it only through some form of (super) naturally bestowed or aided inspiration. In this way the *servus*-cum-*poeta* employs and directs the symbolic capital which he needs to outwit the comedy's blocking figures. Invention, significantly, is accomplished only with assistance; intrigue hinges on something outside the intriguer.

"Playwright" might be more accurate a gloss here for *poeta*, because often the tricky *servus* is shown to write and direct a play within the play in order to bring about the resolution. For example, Plautus has Pseudolus select his own actor (rejecting one applicant as unsuitable), dress him in a carefully chosen costume, and rehearse him in his part (ll. 694-766, 905-55). Toxilus, in *Persa* (ll. 159, 465ff), and Milphio, in *Poenulus* (ll. 579ff), discuss their endeavors in explicitly theatrical terminology as well. Often in Plautus, as George Duckworth has noted, "the characters frankly refer to themselves as actors and joke about stage conventions and stage machinery."[10] In this way the plays make public the mystery of comedy even as they foreground the artifice of the *poeta* figure.

Drawing from plays like *Pseudolus* (and probably also from *Amphitruo*, *Mostellaria*, *Casina*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Rudens*), Shakespeare in his works transformed the dynamic between character and plot resolution: his comedies, like his tragedies, are most often controlled by aristocrats rather than servants. Where Jonson in a play like *Every Man in His Humour* would give relatively free rein to Brainworm ("Musco"), a *servus* figure, Shakespeare locates his intriguer in the upper registers of society. Instead of a servant manipulating the action, a duke figure is accorded the imagination and control necessary for resolution. Indeed, a powerful parallel with the type of inspiration guiding Pseudolus in the Plautine comedy comes in Duke

Theseus' famous exposition in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.
> One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
> That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
> Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
>
> (V.i.7-17)

Most scholars gloss this passage by pointing to the trope of *furor poeticus* and the idea of the inspired poet which traces its origins ultimately to Plato.[11] Yet Theseus' model also remains aligned in many ways with the imaginative faculty of the Plautine *poeta*, the maker who snatches from a height or depth (cf. "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven") that "habitation and a name" which has been, until now, "aery nothing."

Shortly after this speech, in fact, Theseus embodies his definition of poet, becoming a *poeta* by grounding the conceit in dramatic application. Philostrate, master of revels, brings to Theseus a list of the plays to be considered for the nuptial ceremony. Significantly, the three plays correspond closely to the categories of Theseus' discourse on imagination. The "riot of the tipsy Bacchanals,/ Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage" (V.i.48-49) recalls the frenzied Dionysian revellers who dismembered Orpheus and coincides with the concept of madness in Theseus' speech. Ovid's "sed enim temeraria crescunt/ bella modusque abiit insanaque regnat Erinys" is rendered, in Arthur Golding's 1567 translation: "But rash/ And heady ryot out of frame all reason did clash,/ And frantik outrage ranged."[12] The "battle with the Centaurs" (V.i.44) alludes to the centaurs' attempted rape of Hippodamia, Pirithous' bride, agreeing with Theseus' "lover" even as it brings to mind, perhaps, the Duke's own abduction of Hippolyta (cf. I.i.16-17). Ovid's "tam virgine visa/ ardet, et ebrietas geminata libidine regnat" becomes with Golding "so/ Assoone as thou behilldst the bryde, thy hart began too frayne,/ And doubled with thy droonkennesse thy raging lust did reigne."[13] (It seems worth pointing out here that Antipholus of Syracuse, who enjoys at least the attention of—if not intimate contact with—Adriana,

his brother's wife, resides at the Centaur inn in *The Comedy of Errors* [I.i.9], the image of the centaur literalizing the notion of bestial lust in man.[14]) Finally, "The thrice three Muses mourning for the death/ Of Learning," the third play in Philostrate's list (V.i.52-53), recollects Theseus' poet in its allusion to the inspiring Muses. The thematic parallels between the dramas and the categories of his discourse on imagination are complete, yet Theseus rejects all three plays. What remains, then, for their nuptials?

In setting up three categories of received inspiration—and distancing himself from them—Theseus creates a space for his own powers of poetry. This space reveals itself when Philostrate mentions one play that he had neglected to mention previously because it is "nothing, nothing in the world" (V.i.78). The phrasing of this remark recalls in an interesting manner the conceit of Plautus' "quod nusquam gentiumst," that which is "nowhere on earth." To Philostrate, the nothingness of the Mechanicals' play disqualifies it from serious consideration. But both dramas require that the impossible become real—indeed, that a *poeta* figure accomplish it through this very nothingness. Thus Theseus, over all objections, chooses the play that is "nothing in the world"—the play we know as *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby*—with a short exposition on the poetic art of perceiving something where there appears to be nothing:

> Trust me, sweet,
> Out of this silence yet I pick'd a welcome;
> And in the modesty of fearful duty
> I read as much as from the rattling tongue
> Of saucy and audacious eloquence.
> (V.i.99-103)

He defends Quince's play as the more real poetry: where the drama of "The thrice three Muses" is "some satire, keen and critical" (V.i.54), the play of Pyramus and Thisby is tendered by "simpleness and duty" (V.i.83). The very fact that it is "nothing, nothing in the world" seems to remain its chief attraction to Theseus. In contrast to Lear, who fails to perceive the something behind Cordelia's "Nothing" (I.i.87ff)—an unimaginative act that contributes to their tragedy—Theseus displays a poetic insight which leads to a comedic ending. Indeed, during the Mechanicals' presentation he functions not as the worldly literary poet of "The thrice three Muses," but instead

as the active, comedic *poeta* who, standing sidestage during the dramatic production, offers commentary and quips on the play. In his careful deliberation of plays to be performed, and in his metadramatic commentary upon Bottom's special performance, Theseus symbolizes the governmental role (albeit fictive) he assumes in bringing about the comedic resolution of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: as the poetic governor of the play, he functions also as Shakespeare's aristocratic version of the Plautine *poeta*.

But although it is his actions and decisions that ultimately appear to resolve the "mortal" plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus is paralleled in this agency by Oberon and Puck in the play's green world. As Peter Brook's famous 1970 production helped to demonstrate, Oberon and Theseus (and Titania and Hippolyta) possess a great number of similarities in terms of character and dramatic function.[15] Theseus' use of Bottom and the Mechanicals in the pageant of aristocratic condescension is in fact anticipated by Oberon and Puck's use of Bottom in the erotic subordination of Titania. Oberon's dramatic function, like Theseus,' is that of comedic *poeta*. His plan for furthering the action of the fairy drama revolves around an inspired making. Having met "proud Titania" in a wood near Athens, and being rebuffed in his attempt to acquire the "changeling boy," Oberon summons Puck to his side and recalls a time when he—i.e., Oberon—

> saw (but thou couldst not),
> Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
> Cupid all arm'd. A certain aim he took
> At a fair vestal throned by the west,
> And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
> As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts. . . .
> (II.i.155-60)

This arrow, Oberon recalls,

> fell upon a little western flower,
> Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
> And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
> Fetch me that flow'r; the herb I showed thee once.
> (II.i.166-69)

Several things about Oberon's speech stand out. First is the coy allusion to Elizabeth in his reference to "a fair vestal throned by the west." What remains of particular significance about this allusion in relation to the present argument is the way it

functions as a metaphor for the politics of the drama as a whole. That is, in acknowledging their sovereign (and their acting company's ultimate patron), the playwright and actors embody the master-servant dynamic. Just as Shakespeare makes obeisance to Elizabeth in this passage, Puck listens to his master's instructions and replies, "Fear not, my lord! your servant shall do so" (II.i.268).

There is, however, a dependence of "high" upon "low" in this play. Oberon may retrieve the "love-in-idleness," it seems, only with the assistance of Puck, who can "put a girdle round the earth/ In forty minutes" (II.i.175-76). The emphasis on the physical separation of *poeta* and object or symbol of dramatic resolution is, as we have seen, typical of comedic praxis, and in employing Puck as a "wanderer" (II.i.247) Oberon testifies to the sheer dependence that upper-class characters in Roman New Comedy have upon their servants. In contrast to New Comedy, however, *servus* figures in Shakespeare are important not for their wit or intelligence but instead for their geographical and class mobility—Ariel's humanistic lesson in charity (V.i.17-20) being a late (and marked) exception to this rule.

Like Puck's, Ariel's practical role in his play, *The Tempest*, is mainly that of tool rather than autonomous character. Although he is given a powerful dramatic moment that bears witness to some kind of emotional depth—that is, when he teaches Prospero mercy—Ariel is normally employed as a tremendously mobile spy. "Thou . . . think'st it much," Prospero scolds him,

> to tread the ooze
> Of the salt deep,
> To run upon the sharp wind of the north,
> To do me business in the veins o' th' earth
> When it is bak'd with frost.
>
> (I.ii.252-56)

The importance placed on geographical mobility here—both vertical and horizontal—and in Puck's ability to "put a girdle round the earth/ In forty minutes" might be seen in part as embodying New Comedy's emphasis on the (super)natural source of invention which resolves comedic plots, and also in part as literalizing in physical terms the hyperbolic scope of imagination in descriptions such as Theseus' "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven."

The relationship between the centralized and centralizing *poetae* of Oberon/Theseus and Prospero and their *servus* accomplices, however, might also be examined in light of the *platea* and *locus* areas of the medieval and Renaissance theater. In Robert Weimann's explication, the *platea* is an "extension of the acting area" by a nonrepresentational, "unlocalized 'place'," while the *locus* is a more restricted acting area which corresponds (in terms of the medieval theater) to "a scaffold, be it a *domus*, *sedes*, or throne (the *locus*)" which can "delimit a more or less fixed and focused scenic unit."[16] The *platea/locus* division is especially useful for understanding the comedic praxis of Shakespearean drama, I would argue, in articulating the discrepancy in mobility between the *poeta* and the *poeta*'s subordinate. Shakespeare's *poeta* is most often associated with a central place from which he or she controls elements of action in the play. On the other hand, the *poeta*'s subordinate, utilizing the unlocalized *platea* space in service of the *poeta*, gathers information and temporarily supervises and manipulates other characters in the drama. While figures like Puck and Ariel are invested with a great deal of agency in regard to their powers in the *platea* space—an investment they usually repay through effective action—many other servant characters in Shakespeare enact this role with less success: the two Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors*, Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Viola/Caesario in *Twelfth Night*, and *Cymbeline*'s Pisanio are only a few of the servant figures in Shakespeare's drama who function in a less than fully instrumental capacity.

In several plays the Shakespearean *poeta* assumes this instrumental aspect within his or her own character, and it is in this apparent self-sufficiency that the *poeta* most approximates the independence usually accorded the Vice/Machiavel. In Richard III, Aaron, and Iago, for example, one witnesses Shakespeare combining the master and servant into one character. Less malignant characters, however, also appropriate the dyadic configuration, disguising themselves as anonymous members of a middle or lower class. Characters like Hal/Henry in *1 Henry IV* and *Henry V*, Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*, and Lord Lysimachus in *Pericles*, for instance, attempt in this way to gain some form of geographic and class mobility. Hal's exploits near Gadshill (II.ii), the "little touch of Harry in the night" (IV.Chorus.47), Vincentio's disguising himself as a friar, and Lysimachus as an anonymous citizen all articulate

an appropriation of high and low, near and far, centralized *locus* and dispersed *platea*. Lysimachus' "disguise," it should be pointed out, is something less than effective, as the Bawd in the brothel at Mytilene tells her companions: "Here comes the Lord Lysimachus disguis'd" (IV.vi.16-17). The immediate response here of Boult, Pander's servant, is, however, significant: "We should have both lord and lown, if the peevish baggage would but give way to customers" (IV.vi.18-19). Boult's exasperated comment (he, like Bawd and Pander, wishes Marina would submit to the brothel's customers) defines the register which disguise affords the *poeta*. That is, concealing their identities allows characters like Hal/Henry, Vincentio, and Lysimachus to move from high ("lord") to low ("lown" [i.e., "low fellow"]) and in doing so to travel in areas of society usually accessible only to servant figures.

One of these normally inaccessible areas, of course, is delimited by boundaries of gender. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Portia, who disguises herself as "Doctor Bellario" in *The Merchant of Venice*, is most most often connected by critics with Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines, characters like Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Imogen in *Cymbeline*.[17] I would like to suggest, however, that in directing the events of the courtroom drama within the drama (and what transpires, in fact, in the following act) Portia may be considered a *poeta* figure. For unlike Rosalind and Celia, Viola, and Imogen, Portia takes an extremely active—even central—role in determining the outcome of the comedy. Certainly her orders to Balthazar, one of her servants, recall Oberon even as they anticipate Vincentio and Prospero:

> Now Balthazar,
> As I have ever found thee honest-true,
> So let me find thee still. Take this same letter,
> And use thou all th' endeavor of a man
> In speed to Padua. See thou render this
> Into my cousin's hands, Doctor Bellario,
> And look what notes and garments he doth give thee,
> Bring them, I pray thee, with imagin'd speed
> Unto the traject, to the common ferry
> Which trades to Venice. Waste no time in words,
> But get thee gone. I shall be there before thee.
> (III.iv.45-55)

The breathless compression of language in this passage ("Waste no time in words") combines with enjambment to underscore a

general quickening of pace and intensity in the play as the trial scene (IV.i) approaches. Portia's instruction to Balthazar to use all "imagin'd speed"—i.e., speed as quick as the imagination—brings the mobility of Puck and Ariel to mind.

By donning Bellario's "garments," Portia takes on the role of director, controlling the confrontation at law even as she has controlled Balthazar in this passage. Her success in this legal confrontation, bringing about a change of dramatic venue from the commercial, litigious world of Venice to the green, poetic world of Belmont, signals a partial victory of the gentry over the bourgeoisie. Indeed, no less than her gender, Portia's status as a member of the gentry initially prevents her from entering into the practical—i.e., male and commercial/legalistic—world of the comedy. Taking on the garments and professional attributes of Doctor Bellario, however, she exchanges her passive role as one *chosen* from the three caskets for a more active, directorial part. Like Oberon/Theseus, Vincentio, and Prospero, Portia averts a tragic ending by altering the social alignments of character and fortune from above.

What I have tried to suggest to this point is that Shakespeare's relationship to the Plautine *poeta* and the master-servant dynamic transcends categories of genre. Rather than deploying the *poeta* trope in opposition to generic classification, however, I would suggest combining it with both character and genre analysis for a more detailed understanding of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. By way of provisional example, I would like to offer *Romeo and Juliet*'s Mercutio—an energetic, verbally sophisticated, and witty character highly reminiscent of the Plautine *poeta*—as one possible site where issues of character and genre intersect.

Mercutio's role as *poeta* becomes clear during his well-known "Queen Mab" speech (I.iv.53-103), in which he imaginatively details the nocturnal activities of "the fairies' midwife" (I.iv.54) who races through the night performing mischievous acts like those of Puck (cf. *MND* II.i.32-57). In the middle of Mercutio's speech, Romeo interrupts him with a telling remark: "Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!/ Thou talk'st of *nothing*" (I.v.95-96; italics mine). Mercutio responds:

> True, I talk of dreams,
> Which are the children of an idle brain,
> Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
> Which is as thin of substance as the air,

> And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
> Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
> And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,
> Turning his side to the dew-dropping south.
> (I.iv.96-103)

Romeo's insistence upon the *nothing*ness of Mercutio's dream oration precedes Mercutio's admission that his words are indeed "nothing but vain fantasy," a fantasy which ranges over the natural world in a manner typical of the comedic *poeta*'s ubiquitous imagination.

In this way, Mercutio's relationship to the drama is exceedingly problematic, for the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* cannot proceed with a potentially controlling *poeta* figure involved in its plot. Here Dryden's somewhat casual remarks in his "Essay on the Dramatique Poetry of the last Age" are illuminating:

> *Shakespeare* show'd the best of his skill in his *Mercutio*, and he said himself, that he was forc'd to kill him in the third Act, to prevent being kill'd by him. But, for my part, I cannot find he was so dangerous a person: I see nothing in him but what was so exceeding harmless, that he might have liv'd to the end of the Play, and dy'd in his bed, without offence to any man.[18]

To Dryden, Mercutio's skillfully drawn character came to an unjust and untimely end. What Dryden failed to realize is that, while not harmful or "dangerous" to any person, Mercutio remains anathema to the idea of tragedy itself. As witty, empowered *poeta*, Mercutio can discern and act in a way inimical to tragedy. Thus he is killed off not because he would be the death of Shakespeare, but because he would be the death of the *tragedy* of *Romeo and Juliet*. As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the potential tragedy of Hermia and Lysander (burlesqued by the Mechanicals' play of Pyramus and Thisby) is averted by Oberon, Puck, and Theseus, with Mercutio alive *Romeo and Juliet* might very well have turned out to be a romantic comedy. The difference between the two plays is the presence in the comedy of *poeta* figures.

In this way character type can be seen as one of the central determinants of genre in Shakespearean drama, with agency an important, even crucial, part of a play's generic composition. As I hope to have demonstrated in the above remarks, Shakespeare's transformation of the received comedic model of Roman New Comedy entails a revised master-servant dialectic—or, at the very least, a temporary alteration of the duke figure through

costume and disguise. Changing the social relationships of the comedic model which he inherited, Shakespeare consistently pushed agency upwards on the social scale. In the politics of this revision, Shakespeare stresses a deference to political authority that goes far beyond a merely aesthetic transformation of his dramatic sources. It reveals, I suggest, an essential conservatism underlying and infusing the practical basis of his dramaturgy.

NOTES

1 All quotations from Shakespeare in this essay are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

2 Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 28-59.

3 Sidney R. Homan, "Iago's Aesthetics: *Othello* and Shakespeare's Portrait of an Artist," *Shakespeare Studies*, 5 (1969), 141; Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 273.

4 Richard Abrams, "*The Tempest* and the Concept of the Machiavellian Playwright," *English Literary Renaissance*, 8 (1978), 44. On Prospero as magician in the Faustian tradition, see Alvin B. Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician: Shakespeare's Image of the Poet in the English Public Theater* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 146-59. Throughout my remarks here I am particularly indebted to Bernard Knox, "*The Tempest* and the Ancient Comic Tradition," *English Institute Essays (1954)*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 52-73.

5 Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), and Frances Teague, "*Othello* and New Comedy," *Comparative Drama*, 20 (1986), 54-64. On genre criticism concerning Renaissance literature generally, see *Renaissance Geners: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986).

6 I concentrate on Plautus as primary source for Shakespeare's background in Roman New Comedy because it appears that his comedies, rather than those of Terence, formed the basis of Shakespeare's dramatic borrowing. Although T. W. Baldwin has argued for Terence's *Andria* as providing the structural basis of comedies such as *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* (*Shakspeare's Five-Act Structure* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1947], pp. 665ff), neither Kenneth Muir (*Shakespeare's Sources: Comedies and Tragedies* [London: Methuen, 1957]) nor Geoffrey Bullough (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-75], 8 vols.) are able to cite any significant, specific use of or borrowing from Terence in Shakespeare's plays.

7 *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52), VII, 635 (ll. 2346-51).

8 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys D. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936), p. 3.

9 All Latin quotations from Plautus are from W. M. Lindsay's edition in the Oxford Classical Texts series (1904; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 2 vols. The translations are my own.

10 George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 135.

11 See, for example, Leo Salingar, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 278-81; E. C. Pettet, "Shakespeare's Conception of Poetry," *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 3 (London: Wyman and Sons, 1950), pp. 29-46; and *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (1940; rpt. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 8-23.

12 *Metamorphoses* XI.13-14 (ed. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library [1916; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984]; for Golding's translation, see *Shakespeare's Ovid*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1961).

13 *Metamorphoses* XII.220-21.

14 See also Lear's "Down from the waist they are Centaurs,/ Though women all above;/ But to the girdle do the gods inherit,/ Beneath is all the fiends' " (IV.vi. 124-27).

15 Some critics dismiss the possibility of doubling due to the fact that Oberon and Theseus (and Titania and Hippolyta) "trip over each other in the wings" at IV.i.104-05. It is the only instance of its kind in the play, however, and it is hard not to agree with Stephen Booth, who argues that ironic parallels between the realms of fairy and human render the possibility of doubling entirely likely ("Speculations on Doubling in Shakespeare's Plays," *Shakespeare: The Theatrical Dimension*, ed. Philip C. McGuire and David A. Samuelson [New York: AMS Press, 1979], pp. 103-31).

16 Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 74, 79.

17 For a critical bibliography and useful discussion of crossdressing on the Renaissance stage, see Jean E. Howard, "Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), 418-40.

18 John Dryden, "Defence of the EPILOGUE: Or, *An Essay on the* Dramatique Poetry *of the last Age*" [*The Conquest of Granada II*], in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1956-79), XI, 215.