THE ENGLISH COMIC CHARACTERS
BULLY BOTTOM

ON any reasonable chronology of Shakespeare's plays, Bottom is the first of his great comic figures. Once we are through the door of Peter Quince's house, when all the company is assembled there, we are at last in the presence of one of the foolish Immortals; we come to celebrate a staggering feat of parturition, for here, newly created, is a droll as big as a hill. Before this, Shakespeare has shown us through a little gallery of amusing figures, but we have seen no one of the stature of "sweet bully Bottom." In The Comedy of Errors, the two Dromios and the rest are nothing but odd curves in a whimsical design. The comedians of Love's Labour's, Lost are well enough in their way; the picked and spruce Don Armado, Holofernes with his "golden cadence of poesy," Sir Nathaniel and Moth, all capping one another's fantastic phrases; but they are little more than quaint shadows that caper for an hour or so on the sunlit lawns of that park in Navarre and then flit out of mind when the sun goes down. In The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Speed and Launce (and the dog) are not so much indi-
vidual creations as lively examples of an admired formula for comic relief, the Elizabethan equivalents of our cross-talk red-nosed gentry. Bottom is neither a curve nor a shadow nor a formula, but a gigantic individual creation, the first of the really great comic figures. "Bottom," writes Dowden, magnificently professorial, "is incomparably a finer efflorescence of the absurd than any preceding character of Shakespeare's invention." And a pity it is that we cannot slip into that comic English Athens and tell Bottom to his large solemn face how fine an efflorescence of the absurd he is, if only because the very extravagance of the phrase would summon back old times to his mind, and before we knew where we were we should find ourselves with tattered play-bills of Pyramus and Thisbe in our hands and the whole queer story would be out. The absurd would effloresce before our very eyes.

Bottom is easily the most substantial figure in the piece. This is not saying a great deal, because A Midsummer Night's Dream has all the character of a dream; its action is ruled by caprice and moonlit madness; its personages appear to be under the spell of visions or to walk and talk in their sleep; its background is shadowy and shifting, sometimes breaking into absolute loveliness, purple and dark green and heavy with the night scent of flowers, but always something broken, inconsequent,
suddenly glimpsed as the moon's radiance frees itself for a little space from cloud and foliage; and the whole play, with its frequent talk of visions, dreams, imagination, antique fables and fairy toys, glides past like some lovely hallucination, a masque of strange shadows and voices heard in the night. The characters are on three different levels. There are first the immortals, who have nothing earthy in their composition and are hardly to be distinguished from the quivering leaves and the mist of hyacinths, tiny creatures spun out of cobwebs and moonshine. Then there are the wandering lovers, all poetry and imagination, driven hither and thither by their passionate moods. Lastly there is Bottom (and with him, of course, his companions), who is neither a flickering elf nor a bewildered passionate lover, but a man of this world, comfortably housed in flesh, a personage of some note among the artisans of Athens and, we have no doubt, in spite of certain unmistakable signs of temperament in him, a worthy dependable householder. We suspect that he has, somewhere in the background, a shrewish wife who spends her time alternately seeing through her husband and being taken in by him, for he is essentially one of those large, heavy-faced, somewhat vain and patronising men, not without either humour or imagination, who always induce in women alternating moods of irritation and adoration. Among his fellow
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artisans, Bottom is clearly the ladies’ man, the gallant. He it is who shows himself sensitive to the delicacy of the sex in the matter of the killing and the lion, and we feel that his insistence upon a prologue, “a device to make all well,” is only the result of his delicacy and chivalry. Snout and Starveling, who hasten to agree with him, are simply a pair of whimpering poltroons, who have really no stomach for swords and killing and raging melodrama and are afraid of the consequences if they should startle the audience. But Bottom, we feel, has true sensibility and in his own company is the champion of the sex; he knows that it is a most dreadful thing to bring in the lion, that most fearful wild-fowl, among ladies, and his sketch of the prologue has in it the true note of artful entreaty: “Ladies, or, Fair Ladies,—I would wish you,—or, I would request you,—or, I would entreat you,—not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours.” Such a speech points to both knowledge of the sex and long practice, and given friendly circumstances, the speaker might be a very dangerous man. We should like to see Bottom making love among his own kind; the result would have startled some of his critics. As it is, we only see him, crowned with an ass’s head, suddenly transformed into the paramour of the queen of the fairies, and even in a situation so unexpected, so remote from his previous experience, he acquits himself, as we shall
see, very creditably. What would happen if one of the gentlemen who call friend Bottom "gross, stupid, and ignorant," let us say the average professor of English literature, suddenly found himself in the arms of a very beautiful and very amorous fairy, even if his head were not discoverable by immediate sight but only by long acquaintance to be that of an ass? He would probably acquit himself no better than would Snout or Starveling in similar circumstances, and Shakespeare took care to wave away his Snouts and Starvelings and called the one man to that strange destiny, that "most rare vision," who was worthy of the occasion. Bottom, as Hazlitt said, is a character that has not had justice done him: he is "the most romantic of mechanics."

Against the background of the whole play, which is only so much gossamer and moonlight, the honest weaver appears anything but romantic, a piece of humorous, bewildered flesh, gross, earthy. He is a trades-unionist among butterflies, a ratepayer in Elfland. Seen thus, he is droll precisely because he is a most prosaic soul called to a most romantic destiny. But if we view him first among his own associates, we shall see that he is the only one of them who was fit to be "translated." Puck, who was responsible for the transformation, described him as "the shallowest thickskin of that barren sort," the biggest fool in a company of fools; but Puck
was no judge of character. Bottom, though he may be the biggest fool (and a big fool is no common person), is really the least shallow and thickskinned of his group, in which he shows up as the romantic, the poetical, the imaginative man, who naturally takes command. We admit that he is conceited, but he is, in some measure, an artist, and artists are notoriously conceited. The company of such tailoring and bellows-mending souls would make any man of spirit conceited. Old Quince, who obviously owes his promotion to seniority and to nothing else, is nominally in charge of the revels, but the players have scarcely met together and Quince has scarcely had time to speak a word before it is clear that Bottom, and Bottom alone, is the leader. Quince ("Good Peter Quince," as Bottom, with easy contempt and patronage, calls him) is nothing but a tool in the hands of the masterful weaver, who directs the whole proceedings, the calling of the roll of players, the description of the piece, the casting of the parts, and so forth, step by step. The other members of the company not having a glimmer of imagination, the artist among them, the man of temperament, takes charge. And he alone shows any enthusiasm for the drama itself, for the others are only concerned with pleasing the Duke; if they do badly, if they should, for example, frighten the ladies, they may be hanged, whereas if they do well, they may receive a little pension.
When Bottom is missing, just before the play is due to begin, and the other players are in despair, their talk plainly shows what it is they have at heart:

**Snug.** Masters, the Duke is coming from the temple, and there is two or three lords and ladies more married: if our sport had gone forward, we had all been made men.

**Flute.** O sweet bully Bottom! Thus hath he lost sixpence a-day during his life; he could not have, 'scape sixpence a-day: an the Duke had not given him sixpence a-day for playing Pyramus, I'll be hanged; he would have deserved it: sixpence a-day in Pyramus, or nothing.

The heart has gone out of the performance, left as it is to these Flutes, Snugs, and Starvelings who can dream of nothing more than sixpence a-day; but as soon as Bottom, the enthusiast, the romantic, the artist, returns, all is changed, for the leaven of art and imagination begins to work again:

**Enter Bottom**

**Bottom.** Where are these lads? where are these hearts?

**Quince.** Bottom!—O most courageous day! O most happy hour!

**Bottom.** Masters, I am to discourse wonders: but ask me not what; for, if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything, right as it fell out.

**Quince.** Let us hear, sweet Bottom.

**Bottom.** Not a word of me. All that I will tell you is, that the Duke hath dined. Get your apparel,
good strings to your beards, new ribbons to your pumps; meet presently at the palace; every man look o'er his part; for the short and the long is, our play is preferred. In any case, let Thisbe have clean linen; and let not him that plays the lion pare his nails, for they shall hang out for the lion's claws. And, most dear actors, eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath; and I do not doubt but to hear them say it is a sweet comedy. No more words: away! go; away!

And they and we with them are hustled off to the palace, heartened and invigorated, ready to agree with Flute and Quince that bully Bottom has the best wit and the best person of any handicraft man in Athens.

When the players are first met together and the parts are being given out, it is not just Bottom's conceit that makes him want to play every part himself. Of all those present, he is the only one who shows any passion for the drama itself, the art of acting, the enthralling business of moving and thrilling an audience. The others are only concerned with getting through their several tasks in the easiest and safest manner, with one eye on the hangman and the other on the exchequer. But the creative artist is stirring in the soul of Bottom; his imagination is catching fire; so that no sooner is a part mentioned than he can see himself playing it, and playing it in such a manner as to lift the audience out of their seats. He is set down for the principal part, that
of the lover, but no sooner has he accepted it, seeing himself condoling and moving storms ("That will ask some tears in the true performing of it: if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms, I will condole in some measure"), than he regrets that he cannot play a tyrant, for he is familiar with Ercles' vein and even shows the company how he would deal with it. Then when Thisbe is mentioned, he sees himself playing her too, speaking in a monstrous little voice. The lion is the next part of any importance, and though it consists of nothing but roaring, Bottom has no doubt that he could make a success of that too, by means of a roar that would do any man's heart good to hear it, or, failing that, if such a full-blooded performance should scare the ladies, a delicately modulated roar that would not shame either a suckling dove or a nightingale. Even when he is finally restricted to one part, that of Pyramus, he alone shows an eagerness to come to grips with the details of the part, particularly in the matter of beards, undertaking as he does "to discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfect yellow." All this shows the eagerness and the soaring imagination of the artist, and if it shows too an unusual vanity, a confidence in one's ability to play any number of parts better than any one else
could play them, a confidence so gigantic that it becomes ridiculous, it must be remembered that vanity and a soaring imagination are generally inseparable. It is clear that a man cannot play every part, cannot be lover, tyrant, lady, and lion at once; but it is equally clear that every man of imagination and spirit ought to want to play every part. It is better to be vain, like Bottom, than to be dead in the spirit, like Snug or Starveling. If it is a weakness to desire to play lover, lady, and lion, it is a weakness of great men, of choice, fiery, and fantastic souls who cannot easily realise or submit to the limitations pressing about our puny mortality. The whole scene, with our friend, flushed and triumphant, the centre of it, is droll, of course, but we really find it droll because we are being allowed to survey it from a height and know that the whole matter is ridiculous and contemptible. These fellows, we can see, should never have left their benches to follow the Muses. But to the gods, the spectacle of Bottom, soaring and magnificent, trying to grasp every part, would be no more ridiculous than the spectacle of Wagner perspiring and gesticulating at Bayreuth: they are both artists, children of vanity and vision, and are both ridiculous and sublime. We can see how droll Bottom is throughout this scene because Shakespeare, having seated us among the gods, has invited us to remark the droll aspects of the situation; but to
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Flute and Starveling Bottom is a man to be admired and wondered at, and probably to Flute's eldest son (that promising young bellows-mender), to whom he has condescended on one or two occasions, our droll weaver is the greatest man in the world, a hero and an artist, in short, a Wagner. We have but to seat ourselves again among the gods to see that "the best in this kind are but shadows," at once droll, heroic, and pitiful, capering for a little space between darkness and darkness.

Once Bottom is metamorphosed, we no longer see him against the background of his fellow artisans but see him firmly set in the lovely moonlit world of the elves and fays, a world so delicate that honey-bags stolen from the bees serve for sweetmeats and the wings of painted butterflies pass for fans, and here among such airy creatures, Bottom, of course, is first glimpsed as something monstrous, gross, earthy. It would be bad enough even if he were there in his own proper person, but he is wearing an ass's head and presents to us the figure of a kind of comic monster. Moreover, he is loved at first sight by the beautiful Titania, who, with the frankness of an immortal, does not scruple to tell him so as soon as her eyes, peering through enchantments, are open. A man may have the best wit and the best person of any handicraftsman in Athens and yet shrink from the wizardries of such a night, being compelled to wear the head of an ass, deserted
by his companions, conjured into fairyland, bewilderingly promoted into the paramour of the fairy queen and made the master of such elvish and microscopic attendants as Peas-blossom and Cobweb and Moth. But Bottom, as we have said, rises to the occasion, ass's head and all; not only does he not shrink and turn tail, not only does he accept the situation, he contrives to carry it off with an air; he not only rises to the occasion, he improves it. Now that all the whimsies under the midsummer moon are let loose and wild imagination has life dancing to its tune, this is not the time for the Bottom we have already seen, the imaginative, temperamental man, to come forward and dominate the scene, or else all hold upon reality is lost; that former Bottom must be kept in check, left to wonder and perhaps to play over to himself the lover and the lion; this is the moment for that other, honest Nick Bottom the weaver, the plain man who is something of a humorist, good solid flesh among all such flimsies and whimsies, madness and moonshine. Does the newly awakened lovely creature immediately confess that she is enamoured of him, then he carries it off bravely, with a mingled touch of wit, philosophy, and masculine complacency: "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that: and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together now-a-days; the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them
friends. Nay, I can gleek upon occasion.” And we can see the ass’s head tilted towards the overhanging branches, as he gives a guffaw at his "gleeking" and takes a strutting turn or two before this astonishing new mistress.

"But nothing takes him by surprise in this sudden advancement. His tone is humorous and condescending, that of a solid complacent male among feminine fripperies. When his strange little servitors are introduced to him, the Duke himself could not carry it off better: "I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you"—then turning regally to the next: "Your name, honest gentleman?" Good Master Mustard-seed is commiserated with because "that same cowardly, giant-like ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your House"; all are noticed and dispatched with the appropriate word; it is like a parody of an official reception.

In the next scene, we discover him even more at his ease than before, lolling magnificently, embraced by his lady and surrounded by his devoted attendants, who are being given their various duties. "Monsieur Cobweb, good monsieur"—and indeed there was probably something very Gallic about this Cobweb—"get your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipp’d humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good monsieur, bring me the
honey-bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, monsieur; and, good monsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not. I would be loth to have you overflowed with a honey-bag, signior." Bottom is clearly making himself at home in Elfland; he is beginning to display a certain fastidiousness, making delicate choice of a "red-hipp'd humble-bee on the top of a thistle." And if Puck won the first trick with the love philtre and the ass's head, we are not sure that Bottom is not now winning the second, for every time he addresses one of his attendants he is scoring off Elfland and is proving himself a very waggish ass indeed. Even his remarks on the subject of music ("I have a reasonable good ear in music: let us have the tongs and the bones") and provender ("I could munch your good dry oats. Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay: good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow") have to our ears a certain consciously humorous smack, as if the speaker were not quite such an ass as he seems but were enjoying the situation in his own way, carrying the inimitable, if somewhat vulgar, manner of the great Bottom, pride of handicraftsmen, even into the heart of Faerie.

If he shows no surprise, however, and almost contrives to carry off the situation in the grand manner, we must remember that he, like Titania, is only dreaming beneath the moon-coloured honeysuckle and musk roses; the
enamoured fairy and all her attendant sprites are to him only phantoms, bright from the playbox of the mind, there to be huddled away when a sudden puff of wind or a falling leaf brings the little drama to an end; and so he acts as we all act in dreams, who may ourselves be "translated" nightly by Puck and sent on the wildest adventures in elfin woods for all we know to the contrary. When Bottom awakes, yawning and stiff in the long grass, his sense of wonder blossoms gigantically, and the artist in him, he who would play the tyrant, the lover, the damsel, and the lion, leaps to life: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream,—past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream." So fiery and eager is that wonder and poetry in him which all the long hours at Athenian looms have not been able to wither away, as he stands crying in ecstasy in the greenwood, that we cannot be surprised that his style, which he very rightly endeavours to heighten for the occasion, should break down under the stress of it: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was." But no matter; the dramatic enthusiast in him now takes command: Peter Quince (whom we did not suspect of authorship) shall write a ballad of this dream, to be called Bottom's Dream,
and it shall be sung, by a newly resurrected Pyramus, at
the end of the coming play; and off he goes, his head
humming with plans, back to the town to put heart into
his lads. There he plays Pyramus as Pyramus was
never played before; takes charge of the whole company,
does not scruple to answer a frivolous remark of the
Duke’s, and finally speaks the last word we hear from
the handicraftsmen. We learn nothing more of him,
but perhaps when the lovers were turning to their beds
and the fairies were dancing in the glimmering light,
Bottom, masterful, triumphant, was at Peter Quince’s
with the rest, sitting over a jug or two and setting his
fellow players agape with his tale of the rare vision.
There was a poet somewhere in this droll weaver and so
he came to a poet’s destiny, finding himself wearing the
head of an ass (as we all must do at such moments),
the beloved of an exquisite immortal, the master of Cob-
webs and Peas-blossoms, coming to an hour’s enchant-
ment while the moon climbs a hand’s-breadth up the
sky—and then, all “stolen hence,” the dream done and
the dreamer left to wonder. Such is the destiny of poets,
who are themselves also weavers.

It is a critical commonplace that these Athenian
clowns are very English, just as the setting that frames
them is exquisitely English; and it follows very naturally
that the greatest of them is the most English. There is
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indeed no more insular figure in all Shakespeare's wide gallery than Bottom. A superficial examination of him will reveal all those traits that unfriendly critics of England and Englishmen have remarked for centuries. Thus, he is ignorant, conceited, domineering; he takes himself and his ridiculous concerns seriously and shows no lightness of touch; knowing perhaps the least, he yet talks the most, of all his company; he cannot understand that his strutting figure is the drollest sight under the sky, never for one instant realises that he is nothing but an ignorant buffoon; the soulless vulgarity of his conduct among the fairies smells rank in the nostrils of men of taste and delicacy of mind; in short, he is indeed the "shallowest thickest of that barren sort," lout-in-chief of a company of louts. But something more than a superficial examination will, as we have partly seen, dispose of much of this criticism, and will lead to the discovery in Bottom of traits that our friendly critics have remarked in us and that we ourselves know to be there. Bottom is very English in this, that he is something of a puzzle and an apparent contradiction. We have already marked the poetry and the artist in him, and we have only to stare at him a little longer to be in doubt about certain characteristics we took for granted. Is he entirely our butt or is he for at least part of the time solemnly taking us in and secretly laughing at us? Which of us has not
visited some rural tap-room and found there, wedged in
a corner, a large, round-faced, wide-mouthed fellow, the
local oracle; and, having listened to some of his pro-
nouncements, have laughed in our sleeves at his ignorance,
dogmatism, and conceit; and yet, after staying a little
longer and staring at the creature’s large, solemn face, a
face perilously close to vacuity, have noticed in it certain
momentary twinkles and creases that have suddenly left
us a little dubious about our hasty conclusions? And
then it has dawned upon us that the fellow is, in his own
way, which is not ours nor one to which we are accustomed,
a humorist, and that somewhere behind that immobile
and almost vacuous front, he has been enjoying us,
laughing at us, just as we have been enjoying him and
laughing at him. It is an experience that should make
us pause before we pass judgment upon Bottom, who is
the first cousin of all such queer characters, rich and ripe
personages who are to be found, chiefly in hostelries but
now and then carrying a bag of tools or flourishing a
paint-brush, in almost every corner of this England,
which is itself brimmed with puzzling contradictions, a
strange mixture of the heavy butt and the conscious
humorist. Bottom is worlds away from the fully con-
scious humour of a Falstaff, but we cannot have followed
him from Peter Quince’s house to the arms of Titania
and seen him in Bank Holiday humour with his Cobwebs
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and Mustard-seeds, without noticing that he is something more than a rustic target. He is English, and he is conceited, ignorant, dogmatic, and asinine, but there stirs within him, as there does within his fellow workmen even now, a poet and humorist, waiting for the mid-stimmer moon. And lastly, he is not dead, he has not left us, for I saw him myself, some years ago, and he had the rank of corporal and was gloriously at ease in a tumble-down estaminet near Amiens, and there he was playing the tyrant, the lover, and the lion all at once, and Sergeant Quince and Privates Snug and Starveling were there with him. They were paying for his beer and I suspect that they were waiting, though obviously waiting in vain, to hear him cry once more: "Enough; hold or cut bow-strings."
TOUCHSTONE

As the sunlight filters through the leaves of Arden, scattering gold along its paths and deep into its glades, and the persons of the company there, who "fleed the time carelessly, as they did in the golden age," pass and repass, hardly distinguishable, in their travel-stained russet and green, from the background of forest, we notice that two figures stand out in sharp relief. One is the sad-suited Jaques and the other is Touchstone, bright in his motley. The eye sets these two apart from the rest of the company, and so too does the mind of the spectator, for indeed Jaques and Touchstone stand apart; they are in the forest, but, unlike the others for the moment, they are not of the forest; they remain detached, unconquered by any prevailing enthusiasms, critical. This fact has often been noted by the commentators, and the matter has been put very shortly by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: "The comedy, then, is less a comedy of dramatic event than a playful fantastic criticism of life: wherein a courtly society being removed to the greenwood, to picnic there, the Duke Senior can
gently moralise on the artificiality he has left at home, and his courtiers—being courtiers still, albeit loyal ones—must ape his humour. But this in turn, being less than sincere, needs salutary mockery: wherefore Shakespeare invents Jaques and Touchstone, critics so skilfully opposed, to supply it.” Jaques can be set aside for the moment, left to his endless contemplation: our business is with the critic in motley.

To many it will seem strange that a comic figure should have any claim to the title of critic, whatever that title may happen to mean. But Touchstone is no ordinary comic figure; he is the representative, and easily the best representative (Falstaff stands by himself), of a special class of comic figures. Unlike most other humorous characters, he has no unconscious absurdities, and that is why he cannot be counted among those who wear the fine flower of the ridiculous; he is not laughable in himself, he is only droll by vocation. Although he is a Clown, a Fool, he is obviously a superior member of his order; he is no common buffoon making the most of some natural deformity and finding his fun in bladder play and monkey tricks, but the first of Shakespeare’s great Fools, a professional wit and humorist, who publishes his jests and sarcasms daily at the dinner-table instead of bringing them out in octavo in the spring and autumn publishing seasons. Our laughter is his applause.
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It may be sometimes necessary for him to turn himself into a butt, a target for his witty superiors, for, as Celia remarks, "the dulness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits"; but actually there is little of Celia's or anyone's wit that is whetted on the dullness of Touchstone. Certainly for us he is no mere butt, for we laugh with him and not at him. Even when he is gabbling nonsense, and that is not often, he is, of course, angling for a laugh and usually preparing to launch some shrewd home-truth. Nor must it be forgotten that the fashion in wit changes, and that the poor nonsense that Touchstone occasionally achieves once passed for wit. When Elizabeth's dramatists and poets were all scribbling and the playhouses were packed, language was like a new glittering toy that had only to be tossed rapidly from speaker to speaker to set the house in a roar. Those were the days when bearded gentlemen, resting between two epics of endurance and courage, could get drunk on metaphors and similes and dance with delight under a shower of puns: language was not yet locked up in dictionaries but grew apace, new words glimmering on the horizon like Eldorado. The verbal battledore and shuttlecock played by Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone in the first act of As You Like It may seem a poor game to us now, but there was a time; before a ball had bounced at Lord's or Wimbledon, when it was as enthralling as
good cricket or tennis. And even in these scenes there is a taste of the "dull fool's" real quality. The Duke puts the matter in a nutshell when he says of Touchstone: "He uses his folly like a stalking-horse, and, under the presentation of that, he shoots his wit." Indeed, as Jaques surmised, motley is the only wear for a satirist, who will be allowed to utter the most unpleasant truths so long as he jangles his bells. After all, we murmur; as we see the shafts striking home, it is only the Fool: thus our superiority remains unassailed and vanity sits more firmly than ever on its throne.

Jaques too bears witness to the quality of Touchstone. In that famous speech, describing their meeting in the forest, he recognises a fellow philosopher, in his new acquaintance:

One that hath been a courtier;
And says, if ladies be but young and fair,
They have the gift to know 't: and in his brain—
Which is as dry as the remainder biscuit
After a voyage,—he hath strange places cram'd
With observation, the which he vents
In mangled forms. . . .

And ever afterwards, he pursues Touchstone through the greenwood as the lovers pursue their ladies, and it is doubtful if some of Touchstone's escapades are not staged purely for his amusement; though Touchstone,
with the detachment of the genuine humorist, is quite capable of acting foolishly merely for the satisfaction of enjoying his own folly. There is, of course, a strain of patronage, of easy contempt, in Jaques' attitude towards Touchstone; but then rank has not been forgotten even in Arden, where the courtiers are only playing at adversity, are only staging a pastoral. Moreover, this same strain is discovered in Jaques' attitude towards everything and everybody. This cynic-sentimentalist deserves a word to himself. Ever since the delighted commentators have made the discovery that Jaques is not merely the poet's mouthpiece but a distinct character like the rest of the personages in the comedy, they have pressed hard upon him and abused him without stint. He is almost regarded as the villain of the piece. One would suppose that critics are themselves men of thought rather than men of action, even though they are often more active than thoughtful, and yet, oddly enough, the very sight of a contemplative character, such as Jaques, always sends them into a rage. From their diatribes it would be easy to imagine that all the harm in the world is done by the few eccentric persons who stand on one side to watch the tragi-comedy of existence and are content to find entertainment in their own thoughts. That the melancholy of Jaques is not a very serious business, that it is a piece of whimsical self-
indulgence, half play-acting, goes without saying; but there is room in Arden for his whims just as there is for the antics of the Duke, the courtiers, and the lovers. Though Duke Senior criticises Jaques somewhat roughly, actually there is as much to be said for the one as for the other. Indeed, Jaques is the more consistent, for at the very end, hearing that the usurping Duke has taken to religion, he decides to join him:

Out of these convertites
There is much matter to be heard and learned.

Whereas Duke Senior, for all his comfortable talk after lunch, surrounded by his admiring courtiers, of “sermons in stones, and good in everything,” shows no great reluctance to return to “the envious court” when his time comes. But though we preach tolerance for Jaques, we need not be blind to his defects. His attitude of mind is sickly. And as he has the apparent softness, so too he has the real hardness of the chronic querulous invalid. Although he can weep over wounded deer, we feel, and rightly too, that there is really something hard, inelastic, griping about his mind. This is because he is that not unfamiliar type, the pure seeker after sensations: he does not identify himself with anything in the whole world, but uses experience as if it were merely a restaurant to dine in; he can enjoy, for he
enjoys his cynicism, his tears, his exquisite disillusion, and not least, for it gives support to all the rest, his massive feeling of superiority, but it is impossible for him to be really happy because never for a single moment can he forget himself. Tasting life is not living any more than dabbling a hand in the water is swimming. Jaques has never waved farewell to pride and secure self-possession and dived into experience, there to discover real sorrow and joy, genuine bitterness, and, perhaps, lasting contentment. He has, like so many of his kind, travelled widely (he boasts of it, you remember, to Rosalind, and is neatly dismissed), but actually he has gained little by it. He imagined, as most of us have done at some time or other, that under the enchantment of distance the one drastic step could be taken, that in some far-off country, among alien faces and to the strange music of foreign tongues, he could somehow slip out of himself, throw off at last the burden of the peering, shivering self, and so do that which he had long affected to despise, namely, grapple with reality, plunge into the wash and roar of real emotions and risk all; but having imagined this, he found that distance had no magic so potent, and so slipped back into delicate untruth. Love is the enemy of such sentimentalism, whose pallid shoots are scorched by the sun of its joy or beaten down by the hail of its sorrow; and, it will be noticed, the lovers in the forest,
Orlando, Rosalind, have little time to spare for Jaques, and dismiss him and his elaborate but flimsy humours with a shrug. He on his side is clearly uneasy in the presence of Love and its votaries and is significantly delighted with Touchstone’s mockery of the passion. After all, what is love but the passionate awareness of other selves, and what has this—alas!—to do with Jaques and all his kind?

Now, as we have seen, Jaques and Touchstone stand in somewhat similar relation to the rest of the company. They are “the critics,” detached from the main action, observing, mocking. Whatever departs from sincerity receives a flick of the whip from them; or, if you will, they supply the chorus to the piece; one, the sad-suited gentleman, this somewhat eighteenth-century figure with his exquisite sensibility and his lack of real warm human sympathy, plays the part of cynical-sentimental-moralistic chorus; the other, motleying for more than mere beef and ale, an embassy from the Spirit of Comedy, supplies the comic chorus. But while these two seem to run together most of the way, Touchstone parodying to Jaques’ applause, there is a very real and very important difference in their respective attitudes. Motley is a better critic than Melancholy. He is a better critic because, unlike Jaques, he does not completely detach himself from his fellow mortals but identifies himself
with them; he does not say, in effect, "What beasts you are!" but "What fools we are!"; and so, like a true comic genius, he is universal. He does not stand entirely apart, but plays the courtier and the pastoral lover like the rest, only taking care that everything he does shall be plunged into his own atmosphere of exaggeration and absurdity; he parodies humanity, which looked at from one angle is fundamentally ridiculous, in his own activities and in his own person; and he does this not simply because he is a Fool, a professional humorist, but also because he is by temperament and inclination a kind of comic philosopher. In this leafy republic of Arden, with its moralising gentlemen, rhyming lovers, passionate shepherds, where so many moods and whims are being dandled throughout the long golden days, the Comic Spirit, scenting profitable negotiations, has established its embassy, and Touchstone, full-dressed in his motley, is the ambassador.

The two persons who know him best and who are responsible for his being in the forest, at all, Rosalind and Celia, rather miss his real character: they see the Fool but are blind to the comic philosopher. To them he is "the clownish fool." It is true that Rosalind has her suspicions. When the three of them, wandering in the forest, chance to overhear the passionate Silvius describe the effect of passion, Rosalind exclaims:
Alas, poor shepherd! searching of thy wound,
I have by hard adventure found mine own.

and Touchstone, very characteristically, makes the whole thing ridiculous by the use of a few grotesque images:

And I mine. I remember, when I was in love I broke my sword upon a stone, and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile: and I remember the kissing of her batlet, and the cow’s dugs that her pretty-chapp’d hands had milk’d: and I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her; from whom I took two cods, and, giving her them again, said with weeping tears, *Wear these for my sake.* We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

At which Rosalind remarks:

Thou speak’st wiser than thou art ’ware of;

and Touchstone replies, enigmatically:

Nay, I shall ne’er be ’ware of mine own wit till I break my shins against it.

But then two romantic young ladies, grappling with the problem of lovers and fathers, are no audience for a humorist of Touchstone’s metal. Though both have wit and humour of their own, one of them, Rosalind, being famous for her high spirit, much of Touchstone’s humour is of that mysterious and faintly disquieting kind that they and all their sisters would now describe
as either "silly" or "vulgar." It has a trick of reducing everything to one grotesque level; there is nothing that it cannot twist into matter for a laugh or, at least, a sardonic grin; and against this kind of humour, a very mannish affair, the feminine mind, which has hallowed chambers that must be spared the jangle of motley's bells, has always vigorously protested. Rosalind's humour—and what would Arden be without her ripple of laughter!—is very different from Touchstone's; it does not try to lay bare the tangled twisted roots of the Tree of Life, but plays, like a wavering gleam of sunshine or a cluster of bright birds, in its high foliage; it is indeed playfulness, girlish high spirits, rather than humour, something April-hearted, forever dancing on the very edge of tears. Rosalind, once in the forest and certain of her lover, is a happy woman who knows that now her greatest ship is snugly in port she can afford to frolic for an hour at the quayside. Secure in her knowledge of their love, she can torment and tease her bewildered Orlando now just as afterwards she will continue to torment and tease him and his children after him.

But if Rosalind and Celia hardly testify to Touchstone's quality as a humorist, they do show us, in one flash, something of his quality as a man. They pay him a magnificent compliment, for they single him out to be their companion in their flight to Arden. "Would
he not be a comfort to our travel?” whispers Rosalind, plotting. Celia replies: “He’ll go along o’er the wide world with me; leave me alone to woo him.” This shows us a new Touchstone. Companions for such a journey are not lightly chosen, even by a Rosalind: our comic philosopher is clearly a man to be depended on; Motley covers a stout heart. And if Rosalind’s suggestion tells us much, Celia’s reply tells us even more: “He’ll go along o’er the wide world with me”; this demure young lady knows her power; she has the Fool in thrall. He is not then altogether in the service of the Comic Spirit; his detachment is not complete, for now, it seems, he shows himself to be a romantic at heart, ready to exchange his comfortable berth at court, that dinner-table which is the field of glory for the humorist, for the discomforts and dangers of secret flight. Celia’s father, Duke Frederick, may not appear an ideal master for a Touchstone, for he passes from crude villainy to equally crude conversion, and it is not of such unwhole-some persons that a humorist’s best audience is composed; but nevertheless he seems to have held Touchstone (“the roynish clown, at whom so oft your Grace was wont to laugh”) in some esteem, and it says much for the Fool’s devotion and courage that he should have quitted such a post to go with the “foolish runaways.” When the three of them stagger into the forest, Rosalind crying,
"Well, this is the Forest of Arden," and Touchstone replying, "Ay, now am I in Arden; the more fool I; when I was at home, I was in a better place; but travellers must be content"; he speaks only the bare truth. He has flung away safety and comfort and applause for a lady's whim, and has thereby betrayed his genial cynicism. Remove the motley, the cap and the bells, the irreverent jests and sarcasms, the ripe disillusionment, and there remains Touchstone the romantic, set wandering by a glance from his lady's eye, a wave of her hand. Thus he arrives in Arden.

Romance, however, having enticed him into her own green Arcadia, has to be content with that and nothing more, for once there, Touchstone returns to his ancient loyalties and promptly goes about his own business of parody and mockery, of clowning illuminated by criticism. The chief targets for his wit are the pastoral life, which the Duke and his companions are busy praising with suspicious enthusiasm, and the passion of love, which is leading so many of the gentle foresters into delightful affectations and whimsies. Touchstone brings scepticism into the greenwood. Hear him with Corin, the old shepherd:

CORIN. And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touchstone?

TOUCHSTONE. Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself,
it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd’s life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now, in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. . . .

“Zimmermann’s celebrated work on Solitude,” Hazlitt remarks, “discovers only half the sense of this passage.” Touchstone does indeed lay a finger, not merely upon the defects of a pastoral life, but upon those human limitations that prevent our declaring, with any sincerity, that any way of life is perfect; we cannot—more’s the pity!—be in two places at once, cannot have our cake and eat it too; so every gain enumerated by Touchstone is quickly followed by its corresponding loss, every positive by its negative, and all cancels out. Well might he conclude by asking, “Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?” He enjoys himself hugely in the company of this shepherd, to whom he is “Master Touchstone,” the gentleman from the court, and not the “dull Fool” or “the roynish clown”; and it is good to hear him discussing the likeness between shepherds and courtiers, to see him trotting his simple companion from quip to quip, for he does it all with immense relish, and all somewhat condescendingly and with a hint of negligence, like
a professional conjurer practising a few tricks in front of his landlady. When he concludes by rebuking Corin for playing Pander in Arcadia:

That is another simple sin in you; to bring the ewes and the rams together, and to offer to get your living by the copulation of cattle; to be bawd to a bell-wether's and to betray a she-lamb of a twelve-month to a crooked-pated, old, cuckoldly ram, out of all reasonable match. If thou be'st not damn'd for this, the Devil himself will have no shepherds; I cannot see else how thou shouldst 'scape,

he appears to be unconsciously parodying the hyperesthesia of Jaques, who considered Duke Senior as much a usurper as his brother Frederick because he hunted the deer, the "native burghers" of the place. Most of Touchstone's whimsicalities are of this kind, a distorted reflection of what passes elsewhere in the drama.

When Touchstone does at last meet the Duke, he is at pains to prove that he has been a courtier:

If any man doubt that, let him put me to my purgation. I have trod a measure; I have flatter'd a lady; I have been politic with my friend, smooth with mine enemy; I have undone three tailors; I have had four quarrels, and like to have fought one.

There is no habitual practice of the courtier's, from dancing to sending shopkeepers into bankruptcy, foreign to him, he tells us; and then there follows his famous thrust at those elaborate codes of Honour fashionable
among gallants of the time. The quarrel that he almost fought was upon the Seventh Cause:

Upon a lie seven times removed;—bear your body more seeming, Audrey;—as thus, sir: I did dislike the cut of a certain courtier's beard: he sent me word, if I said his beard was not cut well, he was in the mind it was: this is call'd the Retort Courteous. If I sent him word again, it was not well cut, he would send me word, he cut it to please himself: this is call'd the Quip Modest. If again, it was not well cut, he disabled my judgment: this is call'd the Reply Churlish. If again, it was not well cut, he would answer, I spake not true: this is call'd the Reproof Valiant. If again, it was not well cut, he would say, I lied: this is call'd the Countercheck Quarrelsome: and so to the Lie Circumstantial and the Lie Direct.

Jacques. And how oft did you say his beard was not well cut?

Touchstone. I durst go no further than the Lie Circumstantial, nor he durst not give me the Lie Direct; and so we measured swords, and parted.

Jacques. Can you nominate in order now the degrees of the lie?

Touchstone. O sir, we quarrel in print, by the book; as you have books for your good manners: I will name you the degrees. The first, the Retort Courteous; the second, the Quip Modest; the third, the Reply Churlish; the fourth, the Reproof Valiant; the fifth, the Countercheck Quarrelsome; the sixth, the Lie with Circumstance; the seventh, the Lie Direct. All these you may avoid, but the Lie Direct; and you may avoid that too with an if. I knew when seven justices could not
take up a quarrel; but, when the parties were met themselves, one of them thought but of an if, as, *If you said so, then I said so*; and they shook hands, and swore brothers. Your *if* is the only peacemaker; much virtue in *if*.

All this was very much to the point at the time, for the book to which Touchstone refers, *Of Honour and Honourable Quarrels* (with chapters on the Lie and its circumstances), had appeared only a few years before the play, and was probably much in use. Now, the satire passes us by, for as individuals we have long ago let such nonsense go whistling down the wind; but sanity comes first to individuals and only leavens whole communities after long ages, and we can still observe empires and republics occupied with these questions of honour and honourable quarrels, and their foreign offices giving one another the Reproof Valiant and the Countercheck Quarrelsome, and so going forward to the Lie Direct before they set twenty thousand cannon roaring for honour’s sake. Perhaps the Fool still titters in Arden.

So Touchstone goes wandering about the greenwood, lounging from one group to another, now mimicking Orlando’s bad verse, now dismissing a yokel, now joining the tuneful pages in a catch:

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This carol they began that hour,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
How that a life was but a flower
In spring-time, the only pretty ring-time.
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their voices coming down the years to us and their lovely idle words outlasting so many treatises and grave proclama-
tions; and so he wanders, fleeting the time between duke and shepherd, courtier and lover. And as it is both his business and his pleasure to mock the fashion of the hour, he does not fail to play the pastoral lover himself. If Orlando must have his Rosalind, Oliver his Celia, Silvius his Phebe, so Touchstone must have his Audrey. For making this somewhat hasty and unequal alliance, he has been taken to task by some of his harsher critics, one of whom claps him forthwith into the dock and proceeds with the charge: "He (Touchstone) does the contrary to Rosalind and Orlando: he misuses this natural life of retirement, in the intention of again casting off Audrey at a convenient season. He uses the oppor-
tunity which here presents itself, without possessing the fidelity which according to Lodge's romance should belong to the place. He seems equally devoid of the morality of either town or country." Which shows us how dangerous it is to play the fool in some companies. The fact is that Touchstone cannot worm his way into the idyll; there is no conventional shepherdess, no lovely pink-and-white and entirely unreal Phebe, for him; he stays outside the pastoral and remains in this world, and so has to be content with an Audrey, that is, with the kind of damsel really to be found in the countryside.
neither superlatively beautiful nor intelligent, but a great
gawky country lass. With poor Audrey’s unconscious
aid, he contrives to stage a most adroit parody of pastoral
love as it was depicted by the poets: his sceptical humour
lets the east wind of reality into this great artificial palm-
house that we call Arden.

He can indite verses as good as, if not better than, those
of Orlando, and he certainly has more wit, but—alas!—
his lady, being no Rosalind but a genuine creature of the
countryside, can understand neither:

When a man’s verses cannot be understood, nor a man’s
good wit seconded with the forward child, understanding, it
strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little
room.—Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical.

Audrey, good soul, cannot even pretend to poetry, and
has, indeed, a most disarming knowledge of her own
limitations, even confessing to a want of beauty, which
may be joined in time, in Touchstone’s opinion, by other
defects, notably sluttishness. None of this, however,
disturbs the ironist in motley for an instant: he revels in
the incongruity of it all. And while the other lovers,
triple-dyed in romance, are swearing eternal constancy,
he is calmly welcoming a doubtful ceremony by a doubtful
parson because “he is not like to marry me well; and
not being well married, it will be a good excuse for me
hereafter to leave my wife.” But he is only seeing all
round the question. Just as there is a possibility that, after all, the romantic lovers may not be true to one another for ever, so too it is possible that Touchstone may cleave to his Audrey a little longer than a couple of months or so. It is absurd that he should take up with her at all, waving aside, 'with the most delightful air of condescension, her faithful William; but then, what would you, surely it is all absurd, this business of courtship and marriage; rapid mating is in the air and reason has set behind a cloud and Audrey will do as well as another, nay, better than most, because she allows him more scope for his quips; and for the rest—"As the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his curb, and the falcon her bells, so man hath his desires; and as pigeons bill, so wedlock would be nibbling." The relation between Touchstone and his stolid mistress is really nothing but the reverse side, the unpoetical, comic, gross side, of the relation between Orlando and Rosalind, all ardour and bloom and young laughter, beyond the reach of disillusion. Shake them up together and out of them both could be fashioned the actual relations between most men and women in this world; and Shakespeare, who knew most things, knew this too, and so gave us both sides of the question. By the time he came to create Touchstone, his comic relief had become something more than buffoonery flung in at random, it had become comment, criticism.
That Touchstone's courtship of Audrey, as Hazlitt remarks, "throws a degree of ridicule on the state of wedlock itself," must be admitted, but both his vocation and his natural bent of mind urge Touchstone towards ridicule, and there is, in the last resort, more to be said about his queer courtship than this, more, indeed, than has apparently been said anywhere. That he is not seriously in love is obvious enough, but this is probably only because he cannot be entirely serious about anything. Even his surprisingly romantic devotion to his young mistress Celia, probably has a comical air: we have not heard him on the subject. Yet it is quite possible that a lapse of time that would find Oliver deserting Celia and taking to the forest again, to haunt the neighbourhood of Phebe, now the bored wife of Silvius, would also find Touchstone and Audrey still jogging along together, the gentleman still making mysterious jests and criticisms, and the lady fixing her stolid gaze upon the solid fruits of his jesting and not troubling her head about his whims and fancies. Geniuses, we are told, commonly find their mates among such peasant women, who alone can root them in the earth. For all their Martext and their mock marriage, these two, like the rest of the lovers, come in the end to face Hymen and are duly despatched—

You and you are sure together,
As the Winter to foul weather,
—a simile that in such a climate as this suggests a more than common security in their relation. And consider, before we leave him, Touchstone’s introduction of his Audrey to the Duke: “A poor virgin, sir, an ill-favour’d thing, sir, but mine own.” This, it will be said, is not the speech of a man in love; nor is it, but it might very well be the speech of a humorist, a dry, sceptical humorist, who is as near to being in love as he is likely to be. “An ill-favour’d thing, sir, but mine own”: the great romantic lovers could never have uttered this; Rosalind is not Orlando’s “ill-favour’d thing”; and yet the phrase, whose popularity is proved by its frequent misquotation, like a well-shot bolt goes hurtling home and we hear from far-away, faintly but unmistakably, the ringing bell that proclaims the truth of its aim. This world being what it is—and how well Motley knows the world—it describes with more accuracy than all the honeyed, golden speeches of our Romeos and Antonies the actual feelings that men and women, not poets and born lovers, ever ready to shower glittering words upon any newly found deity, but workaday men and women, have for one another; and as your mood runs, you may throw the emphasis upon “the ill-favour’d thing” and laugh away the follies of youth; or, more justly, you may wait for the end of the phrase and see the significance, the odd pathos that somehow finds its way into all human
relations, of the last three words, "but mine own," and so fall to wondering rather than laughing or perhaps to doing both at once. And no matter which colouring your mood takes on, you will find some correspondence in colour, some answer, in Touchstone, deep in Arden, for is he not parti-coloured, being in Motley? 'A râte fellow.
THE ILLYRIANS

If you take ship from the coast of Bohemia—having made your last bow to Perdita and Florizel—and sail for a day in a westerly direction, you will presently arrive at Illyria. There you will find the love-sick melancholy Duke, seated among his musicians, polishing his images and doting upon the "high-fantastical"; and go but a little way out of the city and you will come upon the stately Countess Olivia among her clipped box-trees, pacing the lawns like some great white peacock, while her steward Malvolio, lean, frowning, and cross-gartered, bends at her elbow. There too, if you are lucky, you may catch a glimpse of the rubious-lipped lovely Viola, stretching her slim legs and swinging her pert page's cloak between the Duke's palace and Olivia's house, delicately breathing blank verse. And if there should come to your ears the sound of drunken catches, and to your nose the smell of burnt sack and pickled herrings, then look for Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, and his friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and with them, it may be, that dainty rogue, Maria, darting about like
The English Comic Characters

some little black and white bird, and Feste the Clown, with his sharp tongue, bright eyes and strange bitter-sweet songs. In and out of doors, there is good company in Illyria, good company whether it is high or low, sober or drunk.

Our present inquiry takes us into the society of the low, the drunken and disreputable company, the comic Illyrians. (It is difficult even to sound the name and remain sober.) Whether Malvolio, who was himself neither drunken nor disreputable but essentially a "grave liver," should have place in the company, is a very debatable question. Most of the comic scenes in the play revolve around him, and it is his antics, his sudden rise and his awful collapse, that form the basis of most of the broader comedy of the piece; his self-love and swelling vanity, which make him an easy butt for Maria and her grinning troupe, his gravity and pompous airs, are all served up, without mercy, for our entertainment. Yet Malvolio, strictly speaking, is not a comic character. He stands outside the real comic tradition. Although Shakespeare gives some of his speeches a most delicious flavour of absurdity, he does not treat Malvolio as he treats his purely comic figures, whom he regards not merely with a humorous tolerance but with positive delight and relish, encouraging them, as it were, to indulge their every whim. The difference between,
let us say, Malvolio and Sir Andrew Aguecheek is that Shakespeare handles the one and dandles the other. Sir Andrew is really a much more contemptible figure than the serious and capable steward, but then he is so manifestly ridiculous that he evades criticism altogether, escapes into a world of his own, where every fresh piece of absurdity he commits only brings him another round of laughter and applause. Times change, and we are more likely to regard Malvolio with some measure of sympathy than was Shakespeare; indeed, in spite of his vanity, to us he is a figure not untouched by pathos, for the possibility of Olivia falling in love with him (and she admits his value as an employee) appears to us not entirely preposterous, nor do his portentous gravity and puritanical airs seem to us so offensive, now that our Sir Tobies have been steadily rebuked in the manner of Malvolio for at least two generations. Sir Toby's famous reply—"Dost thou think, because thou art 'virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale"—cuts the ground from under the feet of a very large number of our energetic fellow-citizens, whose apparent business it is, Malvolio-like, to attend to our private affairs and superintend our morals; and Sir Toby was fortunate in being able to make such a rejoinder without being suppressed. Malvolio, we may say, has been steadily coming into his own for a long time, so that it is difficult for us to regard him
as an unpleasant oddity as Shakespeare did. And perhaps it says something for our charity that, sitting as we are among ever-diminishing supplies of cakes and ale, we can still see something pathetic in this figure.

Shakespeare's sympathies were so wide and his dramatic genius so universal that it is always dangerous to give him a point of view and dower him with various likes and dislikes. Nevertheless it is true to say that certain types of character very clearly aroused his dislike; and it is also true to say that these are the very types of character that appear to have some fascination for our world. In short, his villains are rapidly becoming our heroes. Thus, Shakespeare clearly detested all hard, unsympathetic, intolerant persons, the over-ambitious and overweening, the climbers and careerists, the "get on or get outs" of this world. When the will and the intellect in all their pride were divorced from tolerance, charity, a love of the good things of this world, they formed the stuff out of which the Shakespearean villains were made. But the Bastard and Iago and Richard the Third are the very characters that some of our modern dramatists would select to adorn three acts of hero-worship. So too, to come down the scale, our friend Malvolio, the puritan, is, under various disguises, the hero of almost one-half of all the American novels that were ever written. Shakespeare, looking steadily at Malvolio with his self-
love ("O, you are sick of self-love," cries Olivia to him) and his intolerance, contrives that he shall be covered with ridicule, but never regards him as a comic figure. In spite of his absurdities there are fermenting in him too many of those qualities that Shakespeare detested for him to be a figure of fun. While this conceited and over-ambitious steward struts cross-gartered on the lawn for our entertainment, there flutters across his path, for one fleeting moment, the terrible shadow of that other ambitious underling, Iago. So Malvolio is deceived, abused, locked up and treated as a madman for a short space, and this is his purgation, for Shakespeare saw that his soul was in danger and so appointed for him two angels of deliverance, namely, Maria and Sir Toby Belch.

In the very first speech that Sir Toby makes, when we discover him talking with Maria, he remarks that "care's an enemy to life," and this we may take to be his philosophy. His time is spent in putting a multitude of things, oceans of burnt sack, mountains of pickled herrings, between himself and the enemy, Care; and he may be shortly described as a Falstaff without genius, who would have made the fat knight a very able lieutenant. Undoubtedly, he is a very idle and drunken old rip, who forgets his position, which, as the uncle of the Countess, is considerable, his years and his manners, and passes all his time in low company, in the society of his inferiors,
either because, like Maria, his niece's chambermaid, they
devise entertainment for him, or because, like Sir
Andrew, they serve as butts and cat's-paws. But not-
withstanding his devotion to sherris sack—and it is doubt-
ful if we ever see him sober—unlike Falstaff Sir Toby
does not live altogether in an ideal comic world of ease
and merriment; by much drinking of healths and
singing of catches and fool-baiting, and with the assistance
of a kind of rough philosophy, a tap-room epicureanism,
he certainly tries to live in such a world; but common-
sense and a knowledge of this world's uses keep breaking
in from time to time. In spite of his idleness and love
of mischief, he is shrewd enough on occasion. Thus,
he does not propose to deliver Sir Andrew's ridiculous
challenge to the supposed Cesario, because, he declares,
"the behaviour of the young gentleman gives him out
to be of good capacity and breeding; his employment
between his lord and my niece confirms no less: therefore
this letter, being so excellently ignorant, will breed no
terror in the youth,—he will find it comes from a clod-
pole." He is in no doubt as to the capacity of his admiring
dupe, Sir Andrew, who is only encouraged to remain
as the suitor of Olivia in order that Toby may amuse
himself and mulct the foolish knight of his ducats. His
apparently innocent defence of Sir Andrew in the opening
dialogue with Maria ("He's as tall a man as any 's in
Illyria”—and the rest) is, of course, mere impudence, one wag winking at another. Then later, when the confusion between Viola and her brother complicates the action, Sir Toby changes his mind about Cesario, as he has a right to do on the evidence before him, and remarks: “A very dishonest, paltry boy, and more a coward than a hare: his dishonesty appears in leaving his friend here in necessity, and denying him. . . .” And he it is who has the wit to see that the joke against Malvolio has gone far enough—“I would we were well rid of this knavery.” Although he vastly enjoys stirring up unnecessary strife and egging on two apparent cowards to fight one another, he shows no reluctance to taking part in any quarrel himself and is certainly no coward. When he himself is hurt, it will be remembered, he makes no complaint (“That’s all one: ’has hurt me, and there’s the end on ’t.—Sot, didst see Dick surgeon, sot?”), and though this stoicism simply covers a fear of being ridiculed, it does argue a stout nature.

Sir Toby, then, is by no means a simpleton. Nor is he, on the other hand, a comic genius like Falstaff, whose world has been transformed into an ideally comic world, whose whole life, whose every speech and action, are devised to further ease, enjoyment, and laughter. Sir Toby, in his own coarse, swashbuckling manner, is witty, but he is not the cause of wit in other men. He
does not transform himself into an object of mirth, content so long as men are laughing and the comic spirit is abroad, but, like any bullying wag of the tap-room, looks for a butt in the company. He is really nothing more than an elderly schoolboy with a prodigious thirst and far too much spare time on his hands: the type is not uncommon. Having a more than usual amount of energy, both of brain and body, and no serious powers of application and no sensible objects upon which to expend such energy, his one problem is how to pass the time pleasantly. As he happens to have his existence in a romantic and idyllic world of love and dalliance and fine phrases that offers no employment to a robust and prosaic middle-aged gentleman, and as he, unlike our country squires and retired majors, cannot turn to golf and bridge, there is nothing for it but cakes and ale, the roaring of catches, verbal bouts with the chambermaid and the clown, and mischievous antics played at the expense of such creatures as Malvolio and Sir Andrew. Men so situated always seek out low company and are never at ease among their equals. But once among his cronies, Toby enjoys himself with such rollicking abandon that he communicates his enjoyment to us, so that we would not for the world have him different. There is about this drunken, staggering, swaggering, roaring knight, such a ripeness and gusto that his humours are infectious, and
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once we are in his riotous company decency and order seem intrusive and positively ill-natured. He has leave to keep us out of bed all night, and we would not stint him of a drop of sack or a single pickled herring. Falstaff apart, there never was a better bear-leader of a fool. With what a luxury of enjoyment he draws out and displays to us the idiocies of the guileless Sir Andrew:

Sir Andrew. I'll stay a month longer. I am a fellow o' the strangest mind i' the world; I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether.

Sir Toby. Art thou good at these kickshawses, knight?

Sir Andrew. As any man in Illyria, whatsoever he be, under the degree of my betters; and yet I will not compare with a nobleman.

Sir Toby. What is thy excellence in a galliard, knight?

Sir Andrew. Faith, I can cut a caper.

Sir Toby. And I can cut the mutton to 't.

Sir Andrew. And I think I have the back-trick simply as strong as any man in Illyria.

Sir Toby. Wherefore are these things hid? wherefore have these gifts a curtain before 'em? are they like to take dust, like Mistress Mall's picture? why dost thou not go to church in a galliard, and come home in a coranto? My very walk should be a jig; I would not so much as make water but in a sink-a-pace. What dost thou mean? is it a world to hide virtues in? I did think, by the excellent constitution of thy leg, it was form'd under the star of a galliard.

Sir Andrew. 'Ay, 'tis strong, and it does indifferent
well in a flame-coloured stock. Shall we set about some revels?

Sir Toby. What shall we do else? were we not born under Taurus?

Sir Andrew. Taurus! that's sides and heart.

Sir Toby. No, sir; it is legs and thighs. Let me see thee caper....

Once in his cups, how magnificently he overrides mere precision in speech and commonsense and rises into a poetical kind of nonsense of his own: "To hear by the nose, it is dulcet in contagion. But shall we make the welkin dance indeed? shall we rouse the night-owl in a catch that will draw three souls out of one weaver? shall we do that?" With what gusto does he enter into the matter of the duel between Sir Andrew and the disguised Viola, alternately breathing fire into them and then damping it with a report to each one of the other's fury and prowess. He bustles from one to the other in a very ecstasy of pleasure. Sir Andrew, he tells Fabian, "if he were open'd, an you find so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea, I'll eat the rest of the anatomy"—a remark worthy of Falstaff himself—Sir Andrew is not anxious to fight, but Toby fans his few smouldering embers of courage into a blaze and compels him to send a challenge:

Go, write it in a martial hand; be curt and brief; it is no matter, how witty, so it be eloquent and full of;
invention: taunt him with the license of ink: if thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss; and as many lies as will lie in thy sheet of paper, although the sheet were big enough for the bed of Ware in England, set 'em down: go, about it. Let there be gall enough in thy ink; though thou write with a goose-pen, no matter: about it.

Then gives him some further encouragement when the challenge is written:

Go, Sir Andrew; scout me for him at the corner of the orchard, like a bumbaily: so soon as ever thou see'st him, draw; and, as thou drawest, swear horrible; for it comes to pass oft, that a terrible oath, with a swaggering accent sharply twang'd off, gives manhood more approbation than ever proof itself would have earned him. Away!

We can almost hear Toby smacking his lips over the vision of Sir Andrew letting fly a terrible oath, with a swaggering accent sharply twang'd off. Then, with an ever-increasing relish for the situation and with his images swelling at every fresh turn of the farce, Sir Toby confronts Viola with a tale of her incensed opponent awaiting her, "bloody as a hunter," "a devil in private brawl: souls and bodies hath he divorced three; and his incensement at this moment is so implacable, that satisfaction can be none but by pangs of death and sepulchre: ho'nob is his word; give't or take't . . ." —a terrifying picture. Back again he goes to Sir
Andrew, now to damp the knight's faint ardour with an equally terrifying account of his adversary: "Why, man," roars the mischievous old toper, "he's a very devil; I have not seen such a sirago. I had a pass with him, rapier, scabbard, and all, and he gives me the stuck-in with such a mortal motion, that it is inevitable; and, on the answer, he pays you as surely as your feet hit the ground they step on. They say he has been fencer to the Sophy." "Pox on 't," cries the startled Sir Andrew, out of his simplicity, "I'll not meddle with him." But there is no escape for him, even though he should part with his horse as the price of that escape. It is only the unexpected entry of Antonio that robs us of the climax and, possibly, Sir Toby of the horse, but the artful and mischievous knight, who has known something of the satisfaction of those lesser gods who prompt our tyrants and prophets and further our wars and revolutions to pass pleasantly their idle aeons, has had his fun. He has contrived a tale that, with humorous embellishment, will keep any company uproarious between one round of sack and the next, between chorus and chorus.

But if we have enjoyed Sir Toby's antics so much that we have no desire for his immediate amendment, we must leave him with some misgiving, for at the conclusion of the piece we plainly see that those very gods of mischief whom he has emulated in this affair of the duel have now
selected him as the victim of their sport. They who have allowed him to season his sack with so many herrings in pickle, have now devised for him a rod in pickle. This is nothing less than his marriage with Maria, of which we learn from Fabian’s explanation of the joke against Malvolio at the end of the play. We are told:

“Maria writ the letter at Sir Toby’s great importance (i.e. importunity—though this is not strictly true); in recompense whereof he hath married her.” Alas!—poor Toby. We had seen the possibility of such an alliance throughout the play; indeed, scene after scene had shown us Toby edging nearer and nearer to his doom. We had heard him declare, “She’s a beagle, true-bred, and one that adores me,” in all his fateful masculine complacency. When the Malvolio jest was at its intoxicating height, we had heard him shower compliments on the artful little soubrette, “Excellent wench” and the rest, had caught him declaring to Sir Andrew and Fabian, in the ecstasy of his enjoyment, “I could marry this wench for this device, and ask no other dowry with her but such another jest.” We have heard him cry to her, “Wilt thou set thy foot o’ my neck?” and “Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip, and become thy bond-slave?” Yet, with the sound of such dangerous speeches, verbal gun-cotton, still ringing in our ears, we had thought that the old fox might yet
sniff the air, scent danger and then bolt for freedom. But no, he has walked into the trap. He has been snared, like many another man, not only by a woman but by his own philosophy. "Care's an enemy to life" he has told himself, and with so much idleness on his hands, with so rich an appreciation of japes and jests, with so great a capacity for mischief and the staging of whims, what could be better than an alliance with Maria, who has proved herself the very queen of humorous strategy, a "most excellent devil of wit," and a most generous purveyor of cakes and ale? Alas!—had this been any other man's reasoning, he would have seen the folly of it. As it is, he marries, so that the perfect life of comic ease and merriment that he is always attempting to build up may have another prop, and does not realise that he is simply bringing it all down in one awful crash. Who doubts for a moment that what Olivia, with her stately displeasure, could not do, Maria, the erstwhile accomplice and fellow mischief-maker, but now the wife, will accomplish within a very short space; that Maria the chambermaid, with a comically sympathetic view of sack, catches, and late hours, is one thing, and Maria the wife, with a husband to reform, is another; that the very wit that could devise such unseemly jests will henceforward be occupied, not in devising others, but in schemes, equally efficacious, for preventing husband Toby
from reaching that large freedom he hitherto enjoyed? As a last bulwark against care, he has taken Maria to wife, and now, without a doubt, the old freedom has vanished and care is about to return in an undreamed-of measure. Toby's philosophy has undone him, and he falls; 'but he falls like a great man. We have caught his days at their highest point; nevermore shall we see him, free, spacious, as rich and ripe as a late plum, all Illyria his tavern, a prince of gusto, good living, and most admirable fooling; from now on he will dwindle, take on a cramped and secretive air, and lose his confidence and zest, for now he will always be discovered, his Maria's reproaches still shrilling in his ear, a cup too low.

Of one of Sir Toby's boon companions, Feste the Clown, there is little to be said. Viola, after a bout of wit with him, sums up the matter admirably:

This fellow's wise enough to play the Fool;
And to do that well craves a kind of wit:
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time;
Not, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eyes. This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art:
For folly, that he wisely shows, is fit;
But wise men's folly, shown, quite taints their wit.

This is an accurate description of Feste's own practice, for as he lounges in and out of the scene, it will be noticed
that always he plays up to his company. He is a professional entertainer and gives his audiences what he knows will please them. The love-sick Duke feeds upon melancholy, and so to him Feste sings "old and antique" songs and takes delight in his art, but as soon as he has finished the last note of Come Away, Death, like the brisk professional he is, he himself shows no trace of melancholy or of any emotion, but is his usual self in a moment, detached, observant, critical, taking his leave with a sly dig at the Duke's melancholy and inconstancy. With the other serious characters, he acts the professional fool but always with a certain reserve and dignity and always with one eye upon the main chance, conjuring another coin into his hand with an ingratiating witticism. Malvolio he really dislikes because the proud and puritanical steward has a contempt for both him and his office (a contempt that Shakespeare himself had probably met with in some Malvolios of his acquaintance), and so he does not scruple to play Malvolio the cruelest trick of all by pretending to be Sir Toby the parson. With Sir Toby and Maria, Feste appears at his ease and, as it were, with his wit unbuttoned, bandying broad jests with them; while for the delectation of Sir Andrew, a great admirer of his, he utters the first nonsense that comes into his head. Indeed, in this company of boon companions and midnight caterwaulers, his humour is
all for wild nonsense of a Rabelaisian cast. Such ridiculous speeches as “I did impeticos thy gratillity; for Malvolio’s nose is no whipstock; my lady has a white hand, and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses” cast a spell over the rural wits of Sir Andrew, who pronounces it to be “the best fooling, when all is done.” (There is apparently a lower level of intelligence and humour than Sir Andrew’s; it is to be found in those commentators who have pored for hours over these nonsensical speeches of the Clown’s and have then complained that they could make little of them.) And though we may not agree that this “is the best fooling, when all is done,” most of us have regretted that we were not present at the previous meeting of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and the Clown, when, according to Sir Andrew, the Clown was in very gracious fooling and spoke of Pigrogromitus and of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus. Perhaps this is one of the delights that Heaven has in store for us, or for those of us who are only fit for a Heaven slightly damaged and humanised. Wind and rain outside; indoors a clear fire and a few tall candles, with sack in plenty; Sir Toby, straddling and with nose aglow, on one side; Sir Andrew gaping on the other; and the Clown before us, nodding and winking through his account of Pigrogromitus and the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus; the whole
to be concluded by the catch of *Hold thy peace, thou knave*, with the possibility of being interrupted at any moment by a Malvolio in his nightshirt—here is a hint for the commander of the starry revels.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek is one of Shakespeare’s family of simpletons: he is first cousin to Slender and Silence. Life pulses so faintly in this lank-haired, timid, rustic squire that he is within a stride of utter imbecility. He is really the very opposite of Sir Toby, who is for ever in mischief simply because he has more energy and brains than he knows what to do with, being without any serious purpose, whereas Sir Andrew follows Toby into mischief simply because he is deficient in both energy and brains, and for ever takes the line of least resistance. Without a shred of either self-respect or self-confidence, without volition, courage or sense, he is any man’s prey, a toy-balloon blown hither and thither by the slightest breeze. His social standing and wealth are just sufficient to leave him independent of any occupation or control, a free agent, but being what he is, it means that they are just sufficient to leave him at the mercy of the first rascal he meets. At first sight, it seems astonishing that a comic character of any dimensions could possibly be created out of such material, and, indeed, only great genius could have taken these few straws and made of them a creature whose every odd remark and quaint
caper is a delight. But it is Sir Andrew’s amazing simplicity, his almost pathetic naïvety, his absolute lack of guile, that make him so richly absurd. And with these there goes a certain very characteristic quality, the unanalyzable factor, that is present in every remark he makes; every speech has a certain Aguecheek flavour or smack that is unmistakable; even as we read we can hear the bleating of his plaintive little voice. His best trait is one that he shares with every simpleton, and that is a childlike capacity for enjoyment, which is really born of a sense of wonder, the ability to marvel at and relish the commonest things, to see the world innocently and freshly, a sense that withers among brighter wits and natures richer in experience but blooms for ever with the extremes of humankind, the utter simpletons and the great geniuses. Sir Andrew has this capacity, and it entitles him to a place at the revels. In spite of his starts and frights, his loss of two thousand ducats and his broken head, it is clear that he has enjoyed himself hugely in the company of his admired Sir Toby, and that he will return to his distant estate bubbling with a confused tale of strange happenings and great personages that will be meat and drink to him for years. It is true that he has been everybody’s butt, but then he does not know it; he is happily protected from all such discoveries and will be all his life; so that he might almost be said to
have the best of the laugh, for whereas the others are living in this world, he is still dwelling in Eden.

There are a thousand things that could be said of this simple creature, for there is probably no better text than a fool, but one particular aspect of him invites our attention. What really tickles us about Sir Andrew, over and above the unanalysable drollery of his speeches, is not what he thinks and feels but the fact that he should not be able to conceal what he thinks and feels. There is somewhere at the back of all our minds a little Sir Andrew Aguecheek, giggling and gaping, now strutting and now cowering, pluming himself monstrously at one word and being hurled into a fit of depression by the next; but most of us contrive to keep this little fellow and his antics carefully hidden from sight for the sake of decency and our own self-respect. Some of Sir Andrew's ingenuous remarks have the same effect, or should have the same effect, upon us as the sight of a monkey, which presents us with a parody of human life that is highly diverting but that leaves us somewhat shamefaced: after seeing so many things done openly that we ourselves do in secret, we blush, partly for the monkey that it should make a public show of itself, and partly for ourselves who have so much that is better concealed. The mind of Sir Andrew, such as it is, is as plain to sight as the dial of the parish clock. Almost every remark he makes,
innocently revealing, as it does, the ebb and flow of his poor self-esteem, is not only a piece of self-revelation but also a revelation of all our species: this zany, naked to our sight, is uncovering the nakedness of statesmen and philosophers, popes and emperors. How delicious in its candour is his reply to Sir Toby's bantering charge of being "put down": "Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has: but I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit." How swiftly following the thought that he may be no better than the ordinary in some particular comes the possible explanation, the eating of beef, to raise the phoenix of his vanity again from its ashes. He remains, at some charge to his purse, with Sir Toby as a suitor to Olivia; and yet it is clear that the whole idea is Sir Toby's, for Olivia plainly does not favour Sir Andrew, and he knows it, nor does he himself feel any passion for the lady: he has simply allowed himself to be persuaded, caught in the web of Sir Toby's imagination and rhetoric. How swiftly too his vanity plumes itself again at Sir Toby's artful prompting in the matter of his accomplishments; he can cut a caper, he tells us with a delicious affectation of detachment, and thinks he has the back-trick simply as strong as any man in Illyria.

In the matter of scholarship, which most gentlemen
of his time affected, his simplicity and candour are nothing less than wholesome and refreshing. When Sir Toby declares that “not to be a-bed after midnight is to be up betimes”—and then, plunging into the depths of his learning, brings forth an adage from Lily’s grammar—“And dilisculo surgere, thou know’st”—Sir Andrew provides us with the rare spectacle of a man acting honestly in the face of a classical quotation, by replying: “Nay, by my troth, I know not: but I know, to be up late is to be up late.” So too when Sir Toby asks if our life does not consist of the four elements, he replies, indifferently, “Faith, so they say; but I think it rather consists of eating and drinking”—a notable answer. Again, when the Clown asks whether they will have a love-song or a song of good life, and Sir Toby decides for the former, Sir Andrew speaks for all the novel-readers of our circulating libraries but with more sincerity than they can ever muster when he adds: “Ay, ay: I care not for good life.” Most excellent too is his critical observation in reply to the Clown’s remark that the knight, Sir Toby, is “in admirable fooling”: “Ay, he does well enough if he be disposed, and so do I too: he does it with a better grace, but I do it more natural.” And what could be more revealing than his cry at the indignation meeting after the visit of Malvolio. Maria has said that the steward is sometimes a kind of Puritan.
The Illyrians

"O!" cries Sir Andrew, "if I thought that, I'd beat him like a dog." When pressed for his exquisite reason, he confesses to having none: indeed, he has no reason at all, but the excitement of the occasion has heated his poor wits and he wishes to make some full-blooded declaration and stand well with the company, like our Sir Andrews who sit in their clubs and tell one another they would "shoot 'em down." How pathetically he echoes Sir Toby. Even when the latter remarks that Maria adores him, Sir Andrew, not to be left out, instantly lights a pitiful rushlight of amatory remembrance: "I was adored once." Yes, he, Sir Andrew, was adored once: it is not true, but for the moment he thinks it is and so contrives to take his place among the swaggering fellows, alongside Sir Toby. And perhaps best of all, the very sweet distillation of ingenuousness, is his whisper in the shrubbery when Malvolio, having read the letter, is rehearsing his part as the Countess's husband. As soon as mention is made of "a foolish knight," Sir Andrew is in no doubt as to the person—"That's me, I warrant you." And when his guess is confirmed by the actual sound of his name, he is almost triumphant—"I knew 'twas I, for many do call me fool," a remark that smacks more of complacency than resignation, as if to be known as a fool did at least single him out for some notice. And how revealing, too, is his conduct
during the duel episode. He has been told that Olivia has only shown favour to Cesario in order that her more backward suitor, the knight, should be encouraged to accost: he must redeem his credit either by valour or by policy; and so he declares for valour, for policy he hates. And so he sends a challenge that, notwithstanding his complacent view of its "vinegar and pepper," deserves a prominent place in any collection of diplomatic documents:

Youth, whatsoever thou art, thou art but a scurvy fellow. Wonder not, nor admire not in thy mind, why I do call thee so, for I will show thee no reason for 't. Thou comest to the Lady Olivia, and in my sight she uses thee kindly: but thou liest in thy throat; that is not the matter I challenge thee for. I will waylay thee going home; where if it be thy chance to kill me, thou kill'st me like a rogue and a villain. Fare thee well; and God have mercy upon one of our souls! He may have mercy upon mine; but my hope is better, and so look to thyself. Thy friend, as thou usest him, and thy sworn enemy,

ANDREW AGUECHEEK.

Never, in the whole history of the duello, was such good citizenship exhibited in a challenge. And when Sir Andrew learns that his adversary has been fencer to the Sophy and is a fire-eater, he is swift to declare that he will not meddle with him, and that had he known that the fellow had been so valiant and so cunning in fence, he would have seen him damned before he would have
challenged him. And, of course, Sir Andrew is only talking sense: it would have served the fellow right not to have been challenged. Later, when he has struck Sebastian and has received a pummelling in exchange, he tells Sir Toby to let Sebastian alone: "I'll go another way to work with him; I'll have an action of battery against him, if there be any law in Illyria: though I struck him first, yet it's no matter for that." No matter at all: he feels, as we all do, that the law is on his side. Our last glimpse of him is somewhat moving, for he has a broken head, received in the company of Sir Toby, who has himself been given "a bloodycoxcomb," but nevertheless his admiration and faith are undiminished; had Sir Toby not been in drink, he tells the company, things would have fallen out very differently; and at the last, he cries: "I'll help you, Sir Toby, because we'll be dressed together." But his idol turns and rends him, calling him an ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave, a thin-faced knave, a gull. These are hard sayings but not too hard for Sir Andrew to swallow, and perhaps they made their peace together afterwards. If not, we can only hope that our simpleton went on his travels and somehow in the end contrived to find his way into Gloucester and into the orchard of Justice Shallow, for there he would find company after his own heart, the great Shallow himself and Silence and Slender, and take
his place among such boon companions, seat himself at
the pippins and cheese and try to disengage from his
tangled mind such confused memories as remained there
of Illyria and the roystering Illyrians, his foolish face
aglow beneath the unfading apple blossom.
FALSTAFF AND HIS CIRCLE

THE Falstaff of the above title is, of course, the famous fat knight of Henry IV., parts 1 and 2, and has nothing to do with the impostor, the up-river bully, the provincial dupe, of the Merry Wives of Windsor. If there is any one who, at this late date, thinks the two are the same, who imagines that our Sir John, companion of Prince Hal, could be successfully gulled by wives of Windsor or any other place, then this essay is not for him: let him read elsewhere, particularly in the works of Maurice Morgann, Hazlitt, and Mr. A. C. Bradley. Our concern, then, is with the two parts of Henry IV. and, as a kind of melancholy epilogue, Henry V. With the exception of Hamlet, no character in literature has been more discussed than this Falstaff, who is, like Hamlet, a genius, fastening immediately upon the reader's imagination, living richly in his memory, and inviting comment and interpretation that varies with the personality and point of view of every new reader. So splendid is the progress of this great figure in the earlier part of the drama, when he bestrides all Cockaigne.
like a colossus, so strange and puzzling is his rejection by
the new king, so melancholy his end, with a heart "fracted
and corroborate," that he engages all our attention and
interest, dwarfing everybody with whom he comes into
contact. For this reason, the comic grotesques who
form his circle and are his foils, Pistol, Bardolph, Hostess
Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, Justice Shallow and his cousin,
Silence, have hardly been noticed, although most of the
comedy in the second part of *Henry IV.* is of their making.
But though we would rather bask in the warmth and light
of this great sun of humour, the fantastic little planets
that revolve about it deserve some attention. We will
leave Sir John in peace for a while, nodding over his
tankard, and creep away to the anteroom where his friends
and followers are assembled.

Bardolph, attendant to Sir John and corporal in his
service, is not witty in himself, but he is certainly the
cause that wit is in other men. His face is his fortune,
for at sight of it the comic fancy takes wing. His
famous nose, that everlasting bonfire which Falstaff says
has saved him a thousand marks in links and torches, is
for ever igniting gunpowder trails of comic metaphor.
Such a nose is not cheaply burnished, and Falstaff contends
that the sack Bardolph has drunk would have bought lights as cheap at the dearest chandler's in Europe; but Bardolph's nose, that salamander consuming the fire of sack, has not been an unprofitable investment. This is proved by the fact that Bardolph has been with his master two and thirty years, after first being hired or "bought" in St. Paul's churchyard, where masterless servants, usually bad ones, were to be had at that time. That he has served his master very faithfully there can be no doubt: it is he who supplies us with one of the most striking tributes to Falstaff's ascendancy over his companions and to his power of winning affection, for after his master's death it is he who cries: "Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in Heaven or in Hell!"—a genuine cry this, for ever thrown in the blank face of the universe by bereaved humanity. But his real value lies in his nose, warming to life innumerable jests. With such a face near at hand, Falstaff need never be at a loss—though it is only fair to say that there are never any signs that he is at any time at a loss, for his wit gushes out of a perennial spring. It is only right that a comic philosopher should be followed by such a gorgeous caricature of a nose. Bardolph is his admiral, bearing the lantern in the poop; he is the Knight of the Burning Lamp; Falstaff never sees his face but what he thinks upon hell-fire and Dives that lived in purple; and he tells the
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Hostess, when she says that Bardolph is poor and therefore cannot pay the knight’s bill, to “look upon his face; what call you rich? let them coin his nose, let them coih his cheeks.” Even the diminutive page finds matter for his newly fledged wit in Bardolph’s face. Does he not tell the Prince that Bardolph called to him through a red lattice—“and I could discern no part of his face from the window: at last I spied his eyes; and methought he had made two holes in the alewife’s new petticoat, and so peeped through.” This is indeed to be, in Gadshill’s phrase, “a purple-hued malt-worm.” During their long association the number of jokes that Falstaff must have made at the expense of Bardolph’s face must be beyond computation; the imagination boggles at the very thought; and we may say that Falstaff has indeed coined his man’s nose and cheeks. What could be better, as an example of Falstaffian humour, than his offering Bardolph as security to Master Dombledon for two and twenty yards of satin for a short coat and slops? He would not be without Bardolph for the world, and neither would we. We are sorry he comes to such a bad end.

But if Bardolph is good, his superior officer, Ancient Pistol, is even better. His character is that of the common tavern bully of the period, a fellow who tries to make up, for his want of courage and ability by his boldness of
address, a mad moustachio'd, loud-voiced craven, whose scars are the marks of pots hurled in tavern brawls and of public beatings. This is a character that brags and swaggers his way throughout Elizabethan comedy, as much a formula as the roaring retired Indian Army major "("By gad, sir") in modern farce. But Pistol differs from the other fellows of his class in the fact that he has a mode of speech all his own. Indeed, he is actually one of those comic characters that hardly pretend to real existence at all and are obviously nothing but grotesque shadows, figures from a comic day-dream. Pistol's type was common enough, but the Ancient himself is not of this world. He is a walking parody of dramatic high-falutin. How many of his speeches are actual quotations from old plays and ballads we do not know, and probably never shall know, however the commentators may busy themselves tracking down his wild phrases, but it obviously does not matter; nearly everything he says sounds like a quotation from some bombastic drama; and all of it has a note of its own, the real Pistol ring. Most of the phrases he uses, strained and high-flown as they are, would be a trifle ridiculous even in their context, even though they express overwhelming emotion and refer to matters of great moment, the massacre of a family or the ruin of great empires, but brought in as they are by a ragged, drunken rascal to
heighten a tavern quarrel or to silence a rustic, they are ludicrous in the extreme. So much can be said by way of explanation, but no more, for the fact is that it is the actual choice of phrases that matters, the individual flavour of the words, with which only our appreciation of the ridiculous can cope. The comic idea in Pistol is very slight and is amply covered by what has been said above; it is his actual speeches themselves, which we could not possibly invent for him, that make him so funny; and for this reason there are many admirable persons, lacking the ability to taste, as it were, the absurdity of a phrase, who cannot enjoy Pistol. Thus an intelligent foreigner, who knew his Shakespeare, would perceive that Pistol is a loud-mouthed, swaggering, cowardly bully, of a type familiar in the literature of the time, and leave it at that. He would miss the glorious absurdity, just as many insensitive or over-serious English readers do. For all his passion for quotations, Pistol really has a style of his own, particularly when roused and in Ercles’ vein. We can recognise it at once. “Hold hook and line, say I”; “Have we not Hiren here?”; “Die men like dogs! give crowns like pins!”; “What! we have seen the seven stars”; “Shall we have incision? shall we imbrue?”; “Base is the slave that pays”; “Let gallows gape for dog; let man go free”; so many of his pithy and weighty phrases leap to the mind that we
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feel that we could easily compile a Pistol calendar. He is funny enough when he is driven out of the tavern, breathing bad blank verse, but he is even funnier when he bursts into Shallow’s orchard with the great news. It is his ability to reach the tragic height on the smallest provocation that makes him so ludicrous. When he tells Falstaff that he is now one of the greatest men in the realm, and Silence, emboldened by his wine, calls attention to goodman Puff of Barson, some dim rural idol of his, what could be more ludicrous than Pistol’s tremendous “Puff! Puff in thy teeth, most recreant coward base!” or his retort upon a further interruption, this time in song, by Silence?—

Shall dunghill curs confront the Helicons?
And shall good news be baffled?
Then, Pistol, lay thy head in Furies’ lap.

Nothing less than blank verse, and blank verse at its wildest, will satisfy Pistol in a moment of excitement. How he raves of “golden times, and happy news of price,” of “Africa and golden joys”; and as he stands there under the apple trees raving, a whole school of drama is being parodied by this ragged grotesque. There is one common type of romantic literature that is summed up to perfection in the single question he addresses to Shallow; “Under which king, Besonian? speak or die.” After
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the great collapse, Pistol marries Hostess Quickly (and we would give much to hear the phrases he used to assault that battered heart), goes to the French wars, there to steal and run away, and, like Bardolph, comes at last to a bad end. He is not a caricature of something in life, but of something in literature; his flesh is paper, and his blood ink. He has not been without his influence, for more than once when the tragic dramatist or the high-falutin writer of romances has lost his head, some echo of Pistol has reached us and there has flitted across the scene this grotesque shadow, this strutting parody, out of Shakespeare's comic fancy, and we have been back again in the Boar's Head Tavern or in Shallow's orchard, our tragedy or romance crumpled to nothing, dissolved once more in laughter.

In his somewhat ruthless dispersal and final hunting down of all Falstaff's old associates, so that no shadow should fall on the new and rather easy glory of his hero, Shakespeare was unnecessarily cruel to Dame Quickly, hostess of the Boar's Head Tavern, who is killed off "i' the spital." It may well be, however, that with Falstaff gone, and with him all the old days and roaring nights, she grew careless at the end. Nor can we deny, however friendly we may be towards the dame and her companion, Doll-Tearsheet, that both these ladies were in a fair way to encounter that malady to which they
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succumbed. Nevertheless, the Hostess Quickly of the greater part of Henry IV., though no better than she should be, is at least something better than a ruffianly old trull, and we cannot help feeling that she was deliberately smirched when the blow had to fall upon Falstaff and all his friends. She is the mother of a great line of comic Cockney landladies, charwomen, and the like, in her wandering but vehement speech, her absurd mispronunciations, her oscillation between a native delight in mirth and easy living and an equally innate desire for respectability and a good name in the parish. The type changes very little. Both she and Doll, and particularly Doll, who has forfeited all title to it, are lovers of respectability. Nothing could be truer to nature than Doll’s shrill abuse of Pistol, the mere ensign, when his captain is present and willing. The whole scene, with the gross raillery of Falstaff and Doll (and Hostess Quickly’s sentimental delight in it—“By my troth, this is the old fashion; you two never meet but you fall to some discord”); the pretended delicacy of the easy dames, with their mutual encouragement, two women among men; Doll’s delight in Falstaff as a man of war; his lordly “What stuff wilt have a kirtle of”—the secretly delighted male; the whole scene of broad comedy through which there flickers, as a glance of firelight, a touch of natural unforced sentiment (Doll’s “Come, I’ll
be friends with thee, Jack: thou art going to the wars; and whether I shall ever see thee again or no, there is nobody cares” is masterly), is a creation of sheer genius, and lifts Shakespeare as high above his fellows as does any of his great tragic scenes, for they tried in play after play to make such scenes come to life and yet did nothing like this, seemingly thrown out carelessly.

But there is not a moment when the Hostess is not alive, not a sentence of her speech that does not ring with truth to nature. How admirable is her oscillation between anger at Falstaff’s debts and continued borrowings and lies and her pride in his patronage and delight in his company. He has her under a spell, and after abusing her heartily is able not only to escape his present debt to her, but to borrow money from her and then exclaim, with a wave of the hand, “Hostess, I forgive thee: go, make ready breakfast; love thy husband, look to thy servants, cherish thy guests; thou shalt find me tractable to any honest reason; thou see’st I am pacified.” She has all her sex’s delight in a plausible and ingratiating rascal, particularly when he bends, like Jove, from a superior social station. Nothing could better illustrate the characters of both persons concerned than her account of how Falstaff swore to marry her “sitting in my Dolphin-chamber, at the round table, by a sea-coal fire, upon Wednesday in Wheesow week, when the Prince