


1987

Character Names and Comic Flexibility in Early Tudor Drama

Frederick M. Burelbach

The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), [Playwriting Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Burelbach, Frederick M. (1987) "Character Names and Comic Flexibility in Early Tudor Drama," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 14 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol14/iss1/12>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

CHARACTER NAMES AND COMIC FLEXIBILITY
IN EARLY TUDOR DRAMA

Frederick M. Burelbach
State University of New York
College at Brockport

While re-reading collections of early Tudor plays recently, I found myself smiling as I read. Now, these plays from the 1500-1550 era are not noted for their hilarious wit, tight plot complications, or depth of characterization, and, while I could imagine opportunities in the plays for slapstick stage action, I did not have the advantage of seeing actual performances. In fact, the themes of most of these plays--primarily moralities or quasi-moralities--concern the conflict between vice and virtue, corruption and justice, and what one must do to be saved--surely not a laughing matter.

As I tried to analyze what seemed humorous about the plays, I realized that it was the result of a variety of factors: dramatic form, a relaxed treatment of the dramatic unities, flexible staging techniques, mixture of styles, heterogeneity of characters, and incongruous mingling of character names, all in the interest of a melioristic approach to life that read actual events as signs of spiritual truths. Of course, our primary interest in these papers is in names, but before we can see how

character names function in these plays we must first consider other aspects of the drama, starting with dramatic form.

Unlike later Renaissance dramas, these early plays did not follow a tight classical formula, with protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe, but instead were loosely episodic in construction. They tend, as David Bevington (From "Mankind" to Marlowe) and Lois Potter (The Revels History of Drama in English, II, 169) have pointed out, to fall into debate pairings or a "procession of characters." Examples are John Heywood's Love (1513), a series of debates concerning various meanings of the word 'love'; The Play of the Weather (ca. 1525), seen by some critics as a veiled debate on how to rule England; and The Four PP (ca. 1520), a series of more or less random conversations among four heterogeneous persons who meet by accident in an anonymous place. In Mundus et Infans (ca. 1508-1522) a boy grows to manhood and old age during the play, having encounters with various characters but in no definite plot complication and resolution. One could smile at the naïveté of the structure.

In a sense, these loose structures are imitations of life as early Tudor people saw it--a linear progression of events taking place in what Mircea Eliade calls "diurnal time" or day by day, which finds its suitable form in the pilgrimage or journey (as used by Chaucer in The Canterbury

Tales and Dante in The Divine Comedy), the procession (familiar from royal, episcopal, or mayoral processions on feast days), or the chivalric romance or picaresque tale (a series of unrelated adventures unified around a single hero). What elevates and gives dramatic intensity to these structures is the idea that every event on Earth is guided by God's Providence and can be a means to salvation. As Hamlet later said, "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow," so that each insignificant event could simultaneously participate in what Eliade called "sacred time." The very formlessness of the plays reinforces the audience's faith in Providence, as any attempt to impose obvious artistic or intellectual control could be seen as lack of confidence in God's control. The festive abandon of the plays affirms Hamlet's conclusion: "The readiness is all. Let be."

Whereas classical comedies showed "what in life is useful and to be followed, what, on the other hand, is useless and to be shunned ... in short, ... what is useful and honorable" (Joannes Rivius in 1532, quoted in Herrick, 75), the purpose of Tudor plays transcended ethics, the area of daily manners and customs, and taught the higher lessons of what is necessary for salvation. Multiple levels of representation therefore occur, equivalent to the four-fold allegorical exegesis of the Bible by medieval writers. On the lowest, realistic level, vicious youths and servants, guileful strumpets, and all the other

kinds of characters found in classical comedy are portrayed, and these fulfill the ethical purpose of that type of comedy. Simultaneously, however, these characters are representations of or metaphors for abstract mankind, vices, and virtues, and are given names appropriate for this function. Above these are still other layers of abstraction, reaching up to and being unified in the infinity of God. Consequently, the whole notion of drama as imitation of life, mirror of custom, and image of truth needs to be reconsidered: verisimilitude refers not merely to the truths reported by the senses, but also the truth about the Christian religion, about life as a whole, and the ultimate truth of God. For the good man, as Dante saw, all life was a comedy, so that any representation of goodness (whether considered at the level of realistic kindness or the abstract level of virtue) evoked joy. One rejoiced with such characters as Conscience and Perseverance in Mundus et Infans at their own spiritual integrity even when they were temporarily unsuccessful in directing Manhood to the path of righteousness. One could also rejoice even at unpleasant events, such as the hanging of the murderous thief Ismael in Nice Wanton, because they imaged the truth of God's justice.

The distinction between representation and truth, between vehicle and tenor, is treated in considerable detail by John Weld in his Meaning in Comedy. He points out that early Tudor audiences, having been trained and

experienced in recognizing this distinction by frequent typological exposition of the Scriptures in liturgy, homilies, visual arts, etc., would not only expect the vehicle to be at odds with the tenor but would gain intellectual delight by deciphering the puzzle (41-46). He refers to the kind of pleasure audiences can get out of seeing in the character Seditio, say, in John Bale's Kynge Johan (1538) simultaneously an Autolycus-like rogue, a representative monk, Steven Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, a common counterfeiter, and the abstract qualities of Treason and Seditio. The sheer multifariousness of the identities, evoked by names, is fun to unravel, as is the intellectual triumph in seeing the appropriateness of the interconnected identities. Since the same actor is playing all these roles, and since the different identities would be indicated by, at most, minor differences in costuming and accent, together with the name by which the character is called (and, importantly, labeled in the written script), the identities operate like signs or Brechtian labels to create a sense of comic distance and intellectual objectivity. Added to this is the enjoyable "multi-consciousness" (S. M. Bethel's term) of simultaneously empathizing with Seditio's amoral delight at his own cleverness, shuddering in fear that he will succeed, joyfully knowing from history that he ultimately did not succeed, and confidently expecting the effects of God's justice in punishing the human representative (Langton

and/or the counterfeiter) and expelling the abstract qualities of Treason and Sedition from England (with a patriotic garnish). All of these intellectual pleasures reinforce and substantiate the more sensual pleasures to be derived from a speech like this one:

Sed. Haue in onys a-geyne, in spyght of all my enymyes!

For they cannot dryve me from all mennys companyes;
 And, though yt were so that all men wold forsake me,
 Yet dowght I yt not but sume good women wold take me.
 I loke for felowys that here shuld make sum sporte:
 I mervell yt is so longe ere they hether resorte.
 By the messe, I wene the knaves are in the bryers,
 Or ells they are fallen into sum order of fryers!
 Naye, shall I gesse ryght? they are gon into the stues;
 I hold ye my necke, anon we shall here newes.

(Bale, Kynge Johan, 626-635, in Manly, I, 547)

One could easily parallel this speech with one from a witty slave or parasite in a Terentian comedy and enjoy the good spirits and self-satisfaction, the sexual and scatological innuendo, the jingle of meter and rhyme, and other rhetorical ornaments of alliteration, balanced phrasing, etc. But in a classical comedy one could go only one step further, to the pleasure of applying the character portrayed to contemporary ethics. The more ambitious purpose of early Tudor moralities allows for-- in fact insists upon--a much more complicated relationship between image and truth, and thus generates at least the possibility of comedy that satisfies at more intellectual,

theatrical, and moral levels. Even this short speech gains from this complication, as one stands in comic awe at the effrontery of a personified Vice who could swear "By the Mass" and, knowing that friars are one target of the play's satire and moral judgment, one delights in the paradox that Seditio (who later appears as a monk) suspects his fellows of being "fallen into sum order of fryers." The point is that this is Seditio speaking, not some young scamp with an ordinary name.

The nature of Tudor staging techniques assisted this multiple consciousness. The almost total absence of scenery and the scarcity of props fostered the notion that the plays occupied a kind of universal space, concerned as they were with matters of universal or transcendent significance. One wonders where in the world *Mundus*, the World, would have his throne in *Mundus et Infans*, and how one could meet personifications of Conscience and Folly on a village street (note that these are not merely conscientious or foolish people but the abstract qualities themselves). At most, locales are general--the English court, a village square, a roadside. Richard Southern (*Revels History*, 72 ff.) has shown how the Tudor great hall lent itself to fluid staging, with rapid entrances and exits on either side, and with areas of the bare platform serving to focus audience attention while characters might be visibly present elsewhere on stage but not immediately part of the action. Illustrations of outdoor performances, as in

Pieter Bruegel's "The Village Fête," show that all the bustle of a town fair, with conversations, cooking, carousings, flirtation, begging, and peddling, might be occurring simultaneously all around the booth stage. There are parallels with modern television and its commercial interruptions. For instance, last year news programs reported that a disastrous expedition took the lives of several people on Mount Hood in Oregon. Shortly thereafter on the same night a beer commercial depicted people skiing merrily down Mount Hood and concluded "It doesn't get any better than this." The same kind of ironic interaction could occur as an audience views, say, a dramatized peddler on stage and, by a slight glance aside, an actual peddler engaged in his trade. What more immediate application of dramatic art could there be? The staging also lends itself to deliberately ironic interfaces, as when the actor playing Sedition exits and almost immediately reappears in the role of Civil Order, a result of actor doubling (Kynge Johan, l. 313 s. d. and l. 371 s. d.). The total effect results in a comic detachment or distancing which is apt to keep audiences simultaneously aware of both the events portrayed and their allegorical or symbolic meanings. The mind moves flexibly among the multiple levels, instead of being fixated on, say, the personal problems of King John. A comparison of this play with Shakespeare's Henry V, wherein the king soliloquizes about his regal responsibilities and private

concerns, makes this difference clear. The audience gets emotionally involved with the troubled monarch rather than being pushed away to focus on his symbolic role.

Finally we can see how the interaction of character names in this total matrix contributes to the comic flexibility. I will have space for only a few examples, but they are representative of the phenomenon I wish to illustrate. In Nice Wanton we find several characters with more or less conventional names, all with obvious Biblical or Classical significances, interacting with characters named for abstract qualities. Barnabas is a wise youth who unsuccessfully tries to get his brother Ismael and sister Dalila to follow the path of righteousness. Xantippe, their mother, has badly spoiled the two. Ismael and Dalila join up with Iniquitie, and after they have entered into crime they come before Daniel the judge and Errand his bailiff and are punished. Worldly Shame blames Xantippe for their behavior and leads her into despair. It is these mixtures of characters--those with Biblical and Classical names and those with names of abstractions--that I call attention to. It is a curious and almost surrealistic worldview that could accept with equanimity the presence, in apparently a typical English village, of persons whose names not only labeled them precisely but were drawn from a multiplicity of sources. When characters named for and representing New Testament virtues and Old Testament vices interact, there occurs a

comic dislocation of sensibilities, augmented when a character named after Socrates' shrewish wife enters the picture. When Dalila converses with Iniquitie the allegorical intent is clear (although later muddied when Iniquitie finds her too wicked to stay with and exits saying "God be with ye!" [l. 260]). However, the dramatic effect is again one of comic dislocation: how can a person sing and dance with an abstraction? If belief can be suspended so that the actor can be accepted as a realistic person getting into trouble, consider the shift of mind necessary to perceive the realism giving way to allegory without complete abandonment of the original fiction. The effect is quite different from those comedies of the Renaissance and Restoration in which all of the names are lexically transparent, where a Wellborn might be kin to a Loveall or a Brainworm converse with an Allworthy. In the earlier plays, the mingling of name types produces a less unified, more flexible effect.

Name changes also contribute to this effect. In Mundus et Infans the central character is named in succession Infans, Dalliance, Wanton, Love-Lust-and-Liking, Manhood, Age, and Repentance. Character development is signified by names. This is, of course, totally unrealistic, resulting in multiple focus on the fictive events and the allegorical intents simultaneously. And in Kynge Johan several characters receive varying names: Sedition becomes Civil Order, reappears as Sedition, is later

named Steven Langton (Archbishop of Canterbury), disguises himself as Good Perfection, reappears as Treason, is identified as Father Symon of Swynsett, and finally is exiled under his original name of Seditio. Usurpyd Power appears under that name and as Pope Innocent III; Private Wealth is also called Cardinal Pandulphus, and Nobility is identified also as Duke Umfrey. Again in both these plays the allegorical intent is clear, and the kaleidoscopic name changes, shifting back and forth between real, historical names and abstract nouns, keep the allegory and the dramatic action simultaneously before the audience, letting neither dominate over the other. The result is again comic flexibility and distancing. This is particularly true in Kynge Johan, in which King John converses with these various characters without seeming to make a distinction between characters with historical names and those with abstract names. They all exist on the same levels of realism and surrealism.

When characters representing real people mingle with abstract Vices and Virtues, and when historical actions merge with fictional, representative, and allegorical actions, sudden shifts of attitude result. The effect is similar to the sudden but harmless appearances of skeletons in a funhouse or a pleasurable emotional roller coaster ride. The ride is kept comic and safe by the realization that it's only play and that God's Providence is ultimately in charge. Therefore, audiences could

enjoy the consciousness of multiple levels of reality and significance, from ordinary life to God's ultimate truth, and their own ability to participate, simultaneously and consciously, in physical, mental, and spiritual states of being. In fact, the plays are far from naive but are a tribute to the mind's agility.

Frederick M. Burelbach
State University of New York
College at Brockport

REFERENCES CITED

- Bevington, David. From "Mankind" to Marlowe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1962.
- Herrick, Marvin T. Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century. Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1964.
- Manly, John M., ed. Specimens of the Pre-Shakspearean Drama. Vol. 1. NY: Dover, 1967 (repr. 1897 ed.).
- Sanders, Norman, Richard Southern, T. W. Craik, and Lois Potter. The Revels History of Drama in English. Vol. 2. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Weld, John. Meaning in Comedy. Albany: SUNY Press, 1975.