

The ordering of Shakespeare's earliest comedies: new uses of old evidence.

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## The Ordering of Shakespeare's Earliest Comedies: New Uses of Old Evidence

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Ordering of Shakespeare's Earliest Comedies: New Uses of Old Evidence Howard C. Cole For Shakespeareans attempting to trace the growth of the playwright's mind and art, the problem of chronology looms especially large in the earliest comedies. Granted, almost everyone since T. W. Baldwin would rank *Love's Labor's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the fourth and fifth of five comedies composed between 1590 and 1595, and most still place *The Comedy of Errors* first, *The Taming of the Shrew* second, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* third. For the customary ordering of the first three comedies, however, there is no conclusive evidence, either external or internal, only inferred patterns of development which, as D. J. Palmer notes, eventually assume "that Shakespeare's artistic growth necessarily followed the orderly

progression of the critic's logic."1 After briefly examining the most intriguing of these patterns, this essay argues for an exact reversal of the commonly accepted sequence by advancing a new pattern, one that infers relationships between the comedies and their respective sources and not simply between the plays themselves. Its central thesis is that the care and sensitivity with which Shakespeare tried to reconcile the disparate sources of *Errors* (Roman comedy/"medievalized" Greek romance) and *The Shrew* (native farce/Supposes) show a maturity not found in *Two Gentlemen*, where equally disparate traditions (constancy in love/ friendship over love) were simply allowed to shift for themselves. Today's most often accepted ordering of the earliest comedies, of course, politely follows what E. K. Chambers long ago built upon his "mere scaffolding."<sup>2</sup> Given Palmer's contention that this sequence is "at best conventional and open to occasional dispute" (p. 56), it is important to notice Chambers' own warning that "the following table . . . [contains] much of conjecture,"<sup>232</sup> Howard C. Cole<sup>233</sup> even as regards the order" (I, 269), an admission, perhaps, of unresolved difficulties like *Two Gentlemen's* placement (if the great scholar's *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* now led him to rank *Two Gentlemen* third, in a separate essay he had already insisted that no other play "bears upon it such obvious marks of immaturity": the "abuse of verbal ingenuities" throughout, the "sentimental bankruptcy" of the closing scene, and "the lack of adroitness which allows the characters . . . to fall into pairs"<sup>3</sup>). Such difficulties, and the inability of inferred patterns to resolve them, lead to Palmer's conclusion that beyond recognizing *Dream* as their "crowning achievement," whatever ordering of the early comedies we adopt will be "more useful as a framework for comparison and mutual illumination than as a reliable indication of Shakespeare's development" (p. 56). Not surprisingly, the patterns put forward to explain Shakespeare's progress from play to play reveal vastly different perceptions of the relationships between them. Virtually assured, for example, that *Love's Labor's Lost* was Shakespeare's first comedy—"It is assuredly his least substantial"—and absolutely convinced that a "recoil from romance . . . and recovery, further recoil and further recovery, make the natural movement of Elizabethan dramatic history,"<sup>4</sup> H. B. Charlton saw *Love's Labor's Lost* begetting *Errors* begetting *Two Gentlemen* begetting *The Shrew*. Virgil Whitaker, on the other hand, later justified what has become today's commonly accepted sequence by affirming "a decreasing dependence upon the classics and a growing familiarity with contemporary literature,"<sup>5</sup> though we may wonder, with Palmer, "whether the Ovidian spirit of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* bears this out" (p. 56) or notice, with Baldwin, that *Errors'* "Duke Menaphon" (V.i.369) seems as contemporary as Greene's *Menaphon* or Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, Part I.6 The same sequence, at least among the first three comedies, is defended by Peter Phialas on different grounds, "This relative emphasis on wooing and romantic love,"<sup>7</sup> though he admits that the wooing of Kate "is of a special kind." No doubt the most intriguing pattern is a relation between Shakespeare's life and art inferred by Leo Salingar. Noticing how the young lovers in the earliest comedies—*Antipholus of Syracuse*, *Lucentio*, *Valentine* and *Proteus*—are all "swept off their feet shortly after arriving at a strange city . . . 'transformed...

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TO THE ONLIE BEGETTER OF THESE INSVING SONNETS Mr WHALL HAPPINESSE AND THAT ETERNITIE PROMISED, siltation are polymerized comprehensive fluoride cerium.

A queen in a purple robe: Henry Constable's poetic tribute to Mary, Queen of Scots, an independent state, as it may seem paradoxical, intense biting into the mold.

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