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Lyly

One must, I think, concede, that Lyly has developed a distinct and individual comic form, as far as one can ascertain, in view of the fact that the plays of many of his colleagues in the genre of Elizabethan Court Comedy have been lost, including those which were apparently most ~~highly~~ favoured. It is true that he has achieved cultured comedy, and a heightened consciousness of language and a certain elegant drollery within the limits of his chosen genre..

Miss Bradbrook's claim that his is a practical as opposed to a text-book form cannot be so easily conceded however. If one assumes that the text-book form is the neo-classical Terentian or Plautine form, then it can be fairly maintained that this was an eminently practical form, and proved more fruitful in the long run than Lyly's hybrid form derived from basically undramatic models. Plays like The Comedy of Errors remain to ~~this~~ day more actable, simply because they do not require the Gothically fantastic staging of ~~Lyly~~, and yet display a greater symmetry and control in their development. Miss Bradbrook herself cannot conceal her preference for Mother Bombie which is the most Italianate of Lyly's plays, and is yet the closest to popular traditions and the vigour of speech.

While Lyly is not labouring to produce plays on classical models, his plays are "rooted in the Schools" and much of their wit and patterning is directly based upon techniques taught in the Schools, techniques of oratory and debating which have not been transformed by their transplantation. Too many of the jokes are of the kind which one might call undergraduate, relying on bowdlerised Latin and misuse of specialist knowledge, like the howlers which keep schoolteachers and no-one else on a roar through the ages.

Gran. What made Manes run from his master the other day.

Psyl. Manes had reason, for his name foretold as much.

Man. My name? How so, sir boy?

Psyl. You know that it is called Mons, a movendo because it stands still.

Man. Good.

Psyl. And thou art hamed Manes, a manendo, because thou runnest away.

On the other hand, Sir Tophas is ^aboldly sketched, droll portrait, to which his successors are clearly indebted.

Heere is a speare and shield and both necessary; the one to conquer, the other to subdue and overcome the terrible trout.....

I will withdraw to the river and there fortifie for fish, for there resteth no minute free from fight.

The economy of the portraiture is one aspect in which it remains unique.

The laborious moralising which characterised the more primitive comic forms is not so pronounced in Lyly's work, (although he is not averse to an induction played by abstract personifications) but it is still there. Many of the set speeches are sustained moral platitudes like the ones the lads would have had to prepare as part of their school curriculum, but the moralising is never consistent or serious. No issue emerges clearly, for the devil's advocate speaks from one side or another, sooner or later, to call all certitudes into doubt. Lyly is didactic all right, but he never shows what is to be done, but only how it is to be done. He educates to manners and modes of expression, and not to virtuous action... He is precisely the sort of teacher who would have called down Greville's wrath...

Then if our arts want power to make us better,
What foole will think they can us wiser make?
Life is the wisdom, art is but the letter,
Or shell, which men oft for the kernel take,

While it is true, and can be proved from dozens of explicit statements, that Lyly is not adopting a superior tone and that he desires to entertain his audience and not to educate them (except in the way that I have mentioned) I would put a rather different construction on this than would Miss Bradbrook. What is irritating about Lyly is precisely what is irritating about a great many schoolmasters. On the one hand he clings to his eminence as master of the school, superior in certain skills of civilisation, and on the other he goes in fear of all the people who maintain him in that position, the State, the board of governors, the parents committee, and as a result he speaks in ambiguities and empty formulae. He may teach, say, the techniques of political action, without ~~judging~~ encouraging the children to judge the political parties which will eventually gain their support.

Lyly demonstrates the methods of polite discourse without ever indicating the greater good that they will serve. Sidney may illustrate confidently the principles that will govern the noble man's actions in certain situations, Lyly cannot afford to allow any character to be involved in a situation where anything more than a formula will be required. Even within the tradition of advice to the monarch Lyly cannot speak out: he is forever in the position of the subjects of Midas, and what emerges is not so often the grace of compliment (which is much more winningly achieved in Summer's Last Will and Testament) as the greyiness of servility.

Miss Bradbrook's reference to Lyly's moral inadequacy as the humility of the true artist at this point strikes me as pure hokum. Certainly it is a classic example of begging the question. I can understand her antipathy for the kind of criticism which will accept a sermon in lieu

of a work of art, but on the other hand the sheer confusion of the glimpses of the moral universe which Lyly cannot avoid altogether and cannot commit himself to with any firmness, is disturbing and underlies his failure at all levels.

The notion of the debate is crucial to Lyly's imagination and composition and I cannot hope to do justice to Hunter's careful but frustrating analysis of the plays in this light. There is a corollary to the adoption of the debate form which Hunter does not see, and that is that in debating nothing is good or bad but the pleading makes it so. In the Schools students were often called upon to write praise of qualities inherently despicable and vituperation of the good. In Lyly the debates are never concluded, and there is no hint of an arbitrator save the audience. No firm basis in any sort of truth is maintained, not even in the confident assumption of common humanity. A kind of basic scepticism and frivolity underlies all Lyly's writing and blights it.

A simple case in point is the speech of Alexander in Campaspe.

Two loving worms, Hephaestion! I perceive Alexander cannot subdue the affections of men, though he conquer their countries. Love falleth like dew as well upon the low grass as upon the high cedar; sparks have their heat, ants their gall, flies their spleen. Well, enjoy one another I give her thee frankly, Apelles. Thou shalt see that Alexander maketh but a toy of love, and leadeth affection in fetters, using fancy as a fool to make him sport or a minstrel to make him merry. It is not the amorous glance of an eye can settle an idle thought in the heart; no, no, it is children's game, a life for seamsters and scholars: the one, pricking in clouts have nought else to think on, the other pricking fancies out of books, have little else to marvel at. - Go Apelles, take with you your Campaspe; Alexander is cloyed with looking on that which thou wondrest at.

Hunter's interpretation of Alexander's behaviour is all

very well except that the writing will not bear it out. Hehpaestion's defence of love may be a masterful way of inferring the sovereign's real feelings without him being forced to demean himself, but why should the utterance of love for the noble captive Campaspe be demeaning? That same Hephaestion tells Alexander that the victory he has won over his feelings is the noblest of his life, and yet the writing of this speech gives no effect either of stifled love or of magnanimity. A greater compass would have been required for this, a freer concept of style. Instead Alexander says stuffily and ungraciously that love is for the foolish and the idle, and beneath the man of action. He is not belying an emotion: it plainly does no longer exist. The state of mind he is now in would have been thoroughly approved of by Euphues who could have warned him ~~that~~ women love with the basest part of themselves and a man demeans himself to succumb to their gross passion.

It is not simply the surprising word worms (which one fatuous commentator assures me is a term of affectionate contempt) but the whole tone of Lyly's imagery of ants and flies and grass, together with the ponderously inept parison which reveals Alexander as a blasphemous prig.

The whole difficulty centres around Lyly's much vaunted control of tone, which I would simply deny. This is an occasion where ~~the~~ tone ought to reveal the precise relationship of Alexander's words to his feelings, and the magnitude of his victory over them. It cannot be maintained that it does.

The end result is that humanity itself suffers at Lyly's hands. The order and grace which he reputedly adds to the vigour of the contemporary comic form in fact sap its vigour and its dignity. Nashe makes his queen the greater compliment because he can offer it in a vitally human context: Lyly's elegant fictions are always less than life size.

The claim of control of tone implies a power of variation. There is no value in control of tone unless there is something to control, and the result should presumably be the development of tone in every instance delicately adjusted to the mood and temper of the scene. This is precisely what Lyly has not got. Something as superficial as the ~~ill-trained~~ efflorescences of Latin tags would reveal that. The control of tone is directly connected with the sureness of moral sight which is kept constantly aware of relative significance, and it is this kind of confidence that Lyly cannot allow himself.

Miss Bradbrook justly points out how the exclusions and negations from Lyly's style are an index to his aims. They are actually also an index to his methods of achieving them. It is noticeable that Lyly is seldom bawdy (but when he is, he is remarkably so, especially in Mydas, I,ii) but it is not true that he is not often prurient and suggestive, at a level of sophistication which robs the innuendo of its lustiness and makes it effete and sniggering. One shrinks to think of the little eyasses handling the scene between Venus and Vulcan, in which Venus emerges as a nymphomaniac starlet cajoling her decrepit sugar daddy, or Sapho vamping Phao in the yew interchange, or Pandora helpless in the degrading situations in which Lyly misogynistically places her. Love's Labour's Lost is probably Shakespeare's bawdiest play, but we never find a situation comparable ~~with~~ in its titillating effect with Sapho's febrile bedchamber.

In Shakespeare the bawdry is a matter of picking up intricate verbal and visual correspondences. High sexual awareness is demanded, but even higher verbal and imaginative awareness. Moreover, lust, when seen as a component of love, or in innocent isolation (and not in a waste of shame) is not seen by Shakespeare as a disease. However, in the respect of his sexual sanity, Shakespeare tellingly reflects his

affinity with a more realistically oriented community than the Euphuised gentlewomen towards whom Lyly has such an ambivalent attitude.

I would not ~~imply~~ imply by this that Lyly never has the delicacy, grace and charm which has been attributed to him, but I would want to limit drastically the significance of his contribution to elegance and formal beauty. The first version of the Arcadia was in circulation when he began writing these plays and it excels him on both counts. There is no point in reiterating Bond's arguments about the unoriginality of the Euphuistic style itself, or indeed ~~in~~ in attacking Miss Bradbrook's breezy assumption that Eliot's sophisticated dictum about ancient authors will do instead of evidence for Lyly's significant influence on his successors. The whole question of Lyly's seminal importance cannot be decided in the scope of this gallimaufrey, but Hunter's resolute refusal to talk in terms of originality are persuasive.

His attempts to show Lyly's autonomous excellence on the other hand are not.

It seems to me vain to pretend that such an interchange as this demonstrates "delicate observation of manners and witty evocation of refined attitudes,...

Eur. I confess that I am in love, and yet swear that I know not what it is. I feel my thought unknit, my eyes unstayed, my heart I know not how affected or infected, my sleeps broken and full of dreams, my wakeness sad and full of sighs, myself in all things unlike myself. If this be love, I would it had never been devised.

Tel. Thou hast told what I am in uttering what thyself is. These are my passions, Eureka, my unbridled passions, my intolerable passions, which I were as good acknowledge and crave counsel as to deny and endure peril.

The movement of these lines is intolerably prosy. Each sentence has a complete and rounded form, so that it ends with a falling and sententious inflection. There is perhaps a gesture towards the most primitive kind of mimesis in the use of the heaping figure in Telusa's speech but the total is not anything like the delineation of a subtly observed frame of mind. In fact the information content of the two speeches might be rendered.

Eur. I feel terrible, cannot sleep, think. It must be love, dammit.

Tel. Me, too.

While in this case I am forced to doubt Hunter's judgment and suspect him of trailing his coat, the examples cited by Wilson Knight in his essay on Lyly strike me as much more felicitous, although I would dispute his ultimate conclusions. Numerous examples of that meaty, glossy, stylised turn of phrase which is Lyly at top form could be cited, but not whole plays. [In particular, I would say that The Woman in the Moon has not been done justice. In this play, Lyly's sweet facility in the lyric mode has been used to good effect, especially in the scenes where Pandora is at the mercy of the moon.] Generally one may say that Lyly's songs have charm and are themselves an important contribution to the literature of the period, and their function in his choric fantasies is intrinsic and obvious.

On the other hand, Euphuism as it is transplanted into the plays is their chief limitation. (Indeed it is not so much an oral mode as a visual one: Lyly's symmetry will not work at the aural level, although it leaps to the eye. On the other hand, the subtler and less rigid patterning of The Arcadia seems to emerge only at the aural level, and then it is remarkably readable and beautiful.) Lyly is at his most charming when he is least the Euphuist. Miss Bradbrook's references to his

the smooth enamel of his style, its steely strength and what not are not convincing.

In fact, Lyly's style provides him with a poor substitute for conviction and dramatic vision. Its thoroughly mastered architecture is his only source of confidence. It is applied to situations which are only dimly conceived. There is not always a body inside the garment of style, which is at all events almost always too big. There is no coherent vision of men, manners or morals which could only be expressed through this medium. Lyly can speak with detachment but never with authority; he can speak artfully but never ironically; he often unwittingly reveals the pusillanimity and silliness of much human conduct, but he cannot make any comment upon it; he does gesture towards a world where men's actions and ideals take on a new significance, but he is afraid to enter in.

Germaine Greer

FOR MRS RIGHTER

from

Germaine Greer.