Humours Characters and Attributive Names in Shakespeare's Plays

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SHAKESPEARE'S INTEREST IN NAMES as more than tags for distinguishing one character from another manifested itself early in his career. In general, he carried over names from his source works, or when altering such names or adding characters with new ones, chose his invented names on grounds of propriety for poetic utterance, or of mood, or of national origin. There are, however, a number of names throughout the canon which have figurative overtones. One such group clusters around personality traits or around the character's occupation. English has no one technical term for describing this type of nomenclature. Label names, charactonyms, or attributive names are some that have been used.[1] The device, of course, belongs to a very old literary tradition.

Early English drama abounds in examples. The morality plays or works such as Bale's *King John* and Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* well illustrate the technique. Yet Shakespeare's immediate predecessors – Lyly, Greene, Peele, Marlowe, and Kyd – showed little interest in such nomenclature. Shakespeare's fascination with the possibilities of attributive names, therefore, was partially a return to an older tradition. As he played the name game, Shakespeare did not limit himself to any one genre. The comedies, tragedies, and histories all contain characters whose appellations have been determined by their traits or occupations.

Two examples from early works will show how deliberate the technique is. In *2 Henry VI* there is a scene (II.iii) in which Peter, an armorer's apprentice, is to fight his master. It is a serious scene because Peter has accused the armorer of treason. In calling for the bout to begin, the Earl of Salisbury asks the apprentice, "Sirrah,/what's thy name?"

> *Peter* Peter, forsooth.
> *Sal.* Peter! what more ?
> *Peter* Thump.
> *Sal.* Thump! Then see thou thump thy master well.

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[1] G. Wilson Knight prefers *label names*. See his "What's in a Name?" *The Sovereign Flower* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 170–172. Harry Levin employs the term *charactonyms*. See his "Shakespeare's Nomenclature," *Essays on Shakespeare,* ed. Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 64.

It is not the play on words alone which is significant here, but the origin of Peter's last name, taken from a necessary activity in making armor. Shakespeare underscores this by having Peter refer to his hammer in the speech preceding the above-quoted question of Salisbury.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, a comedy of approximately the same period, the comic characters have a scene (V.i) in which they plan their presentation of the Nine Worthies. At the conclusion of their pseudo-learned discussion of who will play whom, Holofernes, the schoolmaster, addresses the constable whose name is Dull: "*Via*, goodman Dull! thou hast spoken no word all this while." Dull replies, "Nor understand none neither, sir." They interchange additional remarks in this vein. Then Holofernes tops off the conversation with the comment, "Most dull, honest Dull." There is nothing particularly brilliant in these two examples; Shakespeare is playing with words and does so using minor characters in minor episodes. Yet the trend to the employment of charactonyms is established.

Shakespeare usually reserved the device for characters of his own creation rather than for those retained from his source works. With brand new characters not only did he know precisely why he was adding them to his story line, but also how the name designation could aid in achieving the effect he was after. With few exceptions, he restricted attributive names to the lower class characters. This applies both to those who have speaking roles and those who are only alluded to such as Master Smooth, the silkman, and Jane Nightwork (whose calling is obvious) in *2 Henry IV* or to Jane Smile in *As You Like It*. Such appellations, moreover, appear almost exclusively in the comedies and in the comic scenes of two history plays – *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*.

Within drama, comedy offers the most potential and freedom for working with attributive names. History is bound by its very subject matter. Tragedy does not offer much scope because the characters, particularly the leading characters, have to be treated as complex individuals. A charactonym tends to reduce the many facets of a character's personality which the playwright wishes to explore. It may also destroy individuality. The same holds true in general for the upper class characters of Shakespeare's comedies. For brushstroke techniques, however, and for quickly limning a character whose function in the script is limited, the charactonym has great flexibility. And there is one form of comedy that it becomes particularly suited to: humours comedy.

Humours comedy has its origin in medieval medical theory in which the body was thought to contain four fluids which controlled man's behaviour: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. In proper proportion these fluids produced a well-balanced individual; an excess of one could cause a distortion of personality.

. By the 1560's the strictly medical conception had begun to break down, with a broader psychological definition replacing it. The term *humour* was extended to eccentricities of character, even to a whim or a caprice. It was taken into literature in this sense, and by 1592 writers were placing the actual word in their works to express any number of aberrations in personality.[2] Just about this time the word begins to appear with some frequency in the dialogue in Shakespeare's plays. These early plays, the first of two groups in which frequency count reveals a sensitivity to this new "in" word,[3] do not show a corresponding use of attributive character names or of humours-style characterizations. In other words, so far as our subject is concerned, in the period 1590–1594 Shakespeare was working on two different tracks. The link up between attributive nomenclature and humours terminology or characterization remained to be made.

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[2] For an account of the humours movement in English literature, see Charles Read Baskervill, "English Elements in Jonson's Early Comedy," *Bulletin of the University of Texas* (1911), pp. 34–75; Benjamin Boyce, *The Theophrastan Character in England to 1642* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947); Percy Simpson, ed., *Ben Jonson's Every Man in his Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1919), pp. xxxvi–lxiv.

[3] The count for the following chart has been taken from Marvin Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968–1970), 6 vols. The variant forms of *humour* — *humoured, humorous, humors,* and *humour letter* — have been included in the total figures.

Periods	Plays	Frequency
I (1590—1594)	*The Comedy of Errors*	6
	Love's Labour's Lost	9
	The Taming of the Shrew	7
	The Two Gentlemen of Verona	0
	1 Henry VI	0
	2 Henry VI	3
	3 Henry VI	0
	Richard III	5
	Titus Andronicus	4
II (1594—1600)	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*	1
	The Merchant of Venice	2
	The Merry Wives of Windsor	25
	Much Ado About Nothing	7
	As You Like It	8
	Twelfth Night	3
	Richard II	2
	King John	5
	1 Henry IV	8
	2 Henry IV	7
	Henry V	13
	Romeo and Juliet	5
	Julius Caesar	9

In 1596, the new fashion for humours-type characterizations – in which interest had further been fanned through Casaubon's translations of some of Theophrastus' character sketches back in 1592 – spread to the drama through the work of George Chapman. His *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* appeared in February, 1596, followed a year later by *An Humorous Day's Mirth*.[4] The success of *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* – it established a performance record for the Lord Admiral's Men in the period 1594–1597 – probably prompted Shakespeare to try his hand at incorporating the new humours techniques into his plays. He first attempts humours portrayals in *2 Henry IV*. I believe he was working on this play in early 1597 and put it aside to turn out *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that same spring in answer to a special command of Queen Elizabeth.[5] His work, *2 Henry IV*, is a history play. Yet on its fringes appear characters possessing traits commonly assigned to humours types. The very label applied to Falstaff and his cronies in the *dramatis personae* of the Folio text shows the playwright's interest in the new fad. Here Falstaff and company are called "Irregular Humorists." Actually, there is only one real humours character among them – Pistol, the braggart. And his name pinpoints his eccentricity of character. In the words of Oscar J. Campbell, Pistol "shoots

Periods	Plays	Frequency
III (1600–1608)	*Troilus and Cressida*	3
	All's Well That Ends Well	0
	Measure for Measure	0
	Pericles	0
	Hamlet	1
	Othello	3
	King Lear	0
	Macbeth	0
	Timon of Athens	3
	Antony and Cleopatra	0
	Coriolanus	1
IV (1609–1613)	*Cymbeline*	1
	The Winter's Tale	1
	The Tempest	0
	Henry VIII	0

[4] In both these plays not only is there deliberate use of humours psychology in character delineation, but the word *humour* is freely bandied about in the dialogue. Yet in neither work does Chapman employ attributive names, with the possible exception of Lemot in *An Humorous Day's Mirth*. From his function in the play as a practical joker and manipulator of a series of love intrigues, Lemot must rely on words. Hence his name represents a combining of the French *le* and *mot*.

[5] See my *Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), Chap. IX.

off his store of verbal ammunition at the slightest provocation."[6] This high-flown rant in "Cambyses vein" he preserves in both *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and in *Henry V*.

Though not listed among the "irregular humorists," other humours characters – regular humorists – appear in the play, and, significantly, each bears an attributive name. We meet the empty-headed, old country justice, Master Shallow and his taciturn compatriot, Justice Silence. And what could be a better appellation for that piece of mutton who says of herself that she is meat for Falstaff (II.iv.135) than Doll Tearsheet ? Even the minor characters of the comic scenes, although not completely developed as humours characters, bear attributive names. The recruits whom Shallow has gathered for Falstaff are called Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, and Bullcalf. As Falstaff addresses each of them (III.ii), he manages to make some remarks reflecting on their names. Earlier in the play (II.i), the constables selected to arrest Falstaff are called, appropriately enough, Master Fang and Master Snare. And then there are those characters who are merely alluded to, Master Smooth, the silkman and Jane Nightwork.

In Shakespeare's use of attributive names, *2 Henry IV* stands as pivotal. On the one hand it reflects his earlier interest in charactonyms in their simplest form – mirroring a specific personality or occupation trait of a character who has no significant role in the play. On the other, it shows him combining the possibilities of humours characterization and character appellation. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* shows greater sophistication in these respects than does *2 Henry IV*. Several humours characters appear in *The Merry Wives*. Three hold important roles in the plot: Master Ford, Dr. Caius, and Master Slender. Ford's humour is jealousy. All Windsor knows, as Mistress Quickly relates, that "he's a very jealousy man." Ford even talks of it openly with others, and in private says of himself, "God be praised for my jealousy" (II.ii.308). So intense is this emotion that Ford becomes despicable enough to hire another man, Falstaff, to seduce his wife. In this action Shakespeare exploits Ford's humour to increase the complications of the main plot.

Dr. Caius and Slender appear in the subplot where they serve as the second and third wooers, respectively, to Anne Page. They are basically the two grotesques frequently found as suitors to the *amorosa* in Italian comedy.[7] By casting them as humours figures, Shakespeare has skillfully retained their grotesque function. Dr. Caius is portrayed as a choleric

    [6] *Shakespeare's Satire* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 74.
    [7] Oscar James Campbell, "The Italianate Background of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Essays and Studies in English and Comparative Literature*, University of Michigan Publications in Language and Literature, VIII (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1932), pp. 99–112, *passim*.

Frenchman.[8] It is his choleric nature that causes him to send the challenge to Parson Evans, thereby setting that subplot in motion. Slender is the country gull: no sooner does he arrive in town than he is robbed. He is completely passive in the suit to Anne Page, and cannot even woo her without his Book of Songs and Sonnets. As his name implies, he is slender, and "he hath but a little wee-face; with a little yellow beard." Slender of body and slender of mind is this country gull. From a psycho-medical point of view, just as Caius is constructed along the lines of a choleric individual, Slender follows the pattern of the phlegmatic. His stupidity, complexion, and yellow hair would instantly identify him to an Elizabethan audience as one with an excess of the phlegmatic humour.[9]

Slender is the only one of these three characters with an attributive name. One cannot second-guess Shakespeare here as to why he did not use the device with Ford and Caius. All the other humours characters in the play bear attributive names. They do, however, have decidedly minor roles. Two we have met before, Shallow and Pistol. Shallow is still the talkative, empty-headed country justice of *2 Henry IV*, and Pistol is the blusterer full of sound and fury. Simple, Slender's servant, though scarcely delineated, lives up to his name. While not a true humours character, Mistress Quickly cannot be overlooked as in line with her name she rapidly flits around town in her capacity as go-between.[10] The last to consider is Nym, who, as his name proclaims (it is from Middle English *nimen* "to take") is a rogue and filcher. And his overworked phrase "That's my humour" serves to clinch his generic origin.

The Merry Wives of Windsor becomes Shakespeare's first major contribution to the comedy of humours genre. And it clearly shows that in 1597 Shakespeare was experimenting with the permutations and combinations of charactonyms and humours delineation. In this, he was following in the footsteps of George Chapman, with Ben Jonson hard on his heels. Though Shakespeare was writing humours comedy before Jonson, it was Jonson who developed a scheme for this type of drama and built out of the genre a carefully constructed theory of characterization. His work could not have escaped Shakespeare's attention, for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's company) produced Jonson's first humours comedy, *Every Man in His Humour*, in 1598. The following year they did *Every Man out of His Humour*.

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[8] John L. Stender, "Master Doctor Caius," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine,* 8 (January 1940), 133–138.

[9] J. B. Bamborough, *The Little World of Man* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 95.

[10] She bears the same name in the three *Henry* plays, but the connotative attribute of her name is most forcefully demonstrated in *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

Shakespeare's interest in humours comedy in the years 1596–1601 is further demonstrated by the frequency with which he uses the word *humour* in his plays at this time. A count reveals that this is the second and last period of his career in which it appears significantly, especially in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry V*.[11]

I suggest this close exposure to Jonson's work is responsible for the masterful linking of humours characterization and attributive names manifest in Shakespeare's last romantic comedies, *As You Like It*, dated around 1599–1600, and *Twelfth Night*, about 1600–1601. *As You Like It* has three characters with attributive names: Jaques, Touchstone, and Oliver Martext, the latter two not being humours figures. Martext is a slight character whose name reflects on him as a bumbling country priest. Touchstone, as a witty jester, occupies himself with a great deal of discourse on court and country life. In this sense he is little more than a commentator whose function is revealed in his name, for a touchstone is "that which serves to test or try the genuineness or value of anything" (*NED*).

But Jaques has a new dimension to him. He is a full-fledged humours character with an apt charactonym. Jaques is the malcontented traveler who can "suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs." He exhibits all the symptoms described by Jonson in the prologue of *Every Man out of His Humour* of both the individual suffering from melancholia in the psycho-medical sense and the individual affecting a pose. In this blend he is the most complex humours character yet created by Shakespeare.[12] And with his constant railing and his disposition to shun company, he functions as the anti-love figure of the play. At the end he is the only one who will not be present at the weddings. In satirizing this satirist, Shakespeare has given him a most appropriate name. Unfortunately the passage of time has caused its meaning to be lost and its pronunciation changed. Jaques, as it was pronounced in Elizabethan English, puns on *jakes* "a privy." Students and many actors give it the French pronunciation [ʒaːk] or make it disyllabic, which on occasion it is.

The punning is involved. It reflects on the character of this melancholy traveler through an allusion to Sir John Harington's pamphlet of 1596, *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*, which is about the introduction of the toilet. Harington himself is punning on the ancient warrior's name (a jakes) with ill-smelling intent. The name also links Jaques' melancholy humour with the privy in more scientific fashion. "Melancholy," notes J. B. Bam-

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[11] See chart, note 3.

[12] See Oscar James Campbell, "Jaques," *Huntington Library Bulletin*, No. 8 (October, 1935), pp. 71–102; Z. S. Fink, "Jaques and the Malcontent Traveler," *Philological Quarterly*, 14 (1935), 237–252; E. E. Stoll, "Shakspere [*sic*], Marston and the Malcontent Type," *Modern Philology*, 3 (1905–1906), 281–303.

borough, "both caused dyspepsia and was caused by it. Ill-digested food bred corrupt humours, which by definition were kinds of melancholy; on the other hand the natural function of the melancholic humour in digestion, which was to assist the retention of the food, led in excess to constipation."[13] These connotations would have been instantaneously apparent to an Elizabethan audience.

What Shakespeare accomplished with one character in *As You Like It*, he extends to three in *Twelfth Night* – and in more artistic fashion. For not only are Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Malvolio humours characters with perfectly matched attributive names, but unlike Jaques, they are also very much a part of the action line of the play. As humours characters, each has been constructed around a different psycho-medical humours trait while at the same time reflecting social affectation or eccentricity. And two of them are of the nobility.

Sir Toby Belch has the least subtle name of the three. In characterization, his affinity for wine – obviously reflected in his name – is not solely an eccentricity. He is in personality and physical makeup the sanguine individual.[14] His build, complexion, movements, even his voice match the stereotype of the sanguine man. Predominating in his personality are such traits as merriment, quickwittedness, and a fondness for eating and drinking.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek is the country gull, affecting the manners of a sophisticated courtier. In appearance and manner, he is the phlegmatic individual. Maria's description of him before he enters (I.iii) as a fool, a quarreller, and a coward sets the keynote instantly. Upon Andrew's entry, Toby calls attention to his long, blondish hair – a physical attribute of the phlegmatic. Phlegmatics were thought to have white, unhealthy skins; they also were supposedly susceptible to respiratory ailments.[15] While Andrew's health is not commented on in the play, Shakespeare, I believe, was drawing upon a stock portrait which an Elizabethan audience would have conjured up from his name, Aguecheek. Add his gullibility and cowardice and we get the typical phlegmatic of the day, a character well worth lampooning.

Malvolio too is a gull, but a more complex one. Maria aptly describes him as "an affectioned ass, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths; the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him" (II.iv.161–164). To his social affectation must be added his self-love. From a psycho-medical point of view, Malvolio is almost a text-book

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[13] Bamborough, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

portrait of the choleric man. He has the physical as well as the mental characteristics associated with this humour. The traits can be summed up thus: "[I]n moderation choler made men bold, valiant, warlike, rash, ambitious and quarrelsome; in gross excess it produced violent, causeless rages, arrogance, envy, jealousy, suspiciousness, discontent, malice and revengefulness."[16] Indeed, these are the very traits we see Malvolio display before our eyes. What more appropriate appellation for this character, then, than Malvolio, ill-willed ?[17]

As noted, each of these characters is constructed around a different humour and labeled with a name that reflects it. To complete the quartet of humours, Shakespeare portrays Orsino as a melancholic duke. However, as was his custom, Shakespeare did not endow his upper class major character with a charactonym,[18] even though Orsino is ridiculed for his attitude as a melancholy lover.

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare successfully superimposed a humours comedy on a romantic comedy. After this play he abandons humours characterization. At the same time, his interest in attributive names falls off, although it never disappears completely. Of the works of the period 1601 to the end of his career, only *Measure for Measure* (1604) has a noticeable number of characters with attributive names.

Shakespeare's handling of attributive names and humours characterization follows a cycle that runs throughout his career. He perceives a new dramatic trend, form, or character type on the Elizabethan stage; he experiments with it, perfects it, and then goes off in a new direction. So having given his audiences what they willed with such consummate skill in *Twelfth Night*, it was time for our Will to embark on a new way.

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[17] Leslie Hotson believes Shakespeare was satirizing Sir William Knollys, Comptroller of the Queen's household, in Malvolio. Hotson thus sees the name as a commentary on Knollys' character, i.e., *Mala-voglia* — "Ill Will or Evil Concupiscence"; he also sees it as an allusion to Knollys' pursuit of Mall Fitton, i.e., *Mal-voglio* — "I want Mall." Aguecheek, Hotson proposes, comes from *Agu-chica*, i.e., "Little-wit," a shortened form of *agucia chica* or *agudeza chica*. This is a reflection on what Hotson theorizes is Aguecheek's Spanish origin. See *The First Night of Twelfth Night* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 108, 115.

[18] Compare Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, another melancholic without a charactonym.