with great sensitivity and precision the details of this unique visual document of 1646. In its careful arrangement of portraiture and still life the work reveals not only Lady Anne's prominent ancestry but also her fine education and strength of character as suggested by the kinds of books depicted in the background. She commissioned this work in order to celebrate her victory concerning her inheritance in a law suit which began when she was 15 and ended when she was in her fifties.

The book features 77 black-and-white illustrations, the only colour plates serving as dust cover. The front cover depicts the young courtier, playwright and patron Thomas Killigrew with his brother-in-law, both in the state of mourning and melancholy. This and other works are interpreted by Malcolm Rogers in a fine essay which provides valuable insight into the life of one of the most intriguing and controversial contemporaries of Van Dyck.

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Camille Wells Slights. *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993. Pp. viii, 290.

The title of Slights' book suggests plurality of consideration, but the volume embarks upon a more singular exercise, exploring "how the ten comedies from *The Comedy of Errors* through *Twelfth Night* represent the problems and satisfactions of people living together in an ordered commonwealth" (p. 4). This notion of an unproblematically posited "commonwealth" undermines attempts throughout the book to engage and accommodate a variety of critical approaches and cultural interpretations. And yet Slights is clearly familiar with recent critical trends, as indicated by her full bibliography and variety of analytical gestures. She might have exchanged more fully with recent criticism or asserted more fully her own defining methodology. After all, it seems rather late in the day to be challenging the "traditional view" that Shakespeare's early comedies are simply romantic excursions into the experience of love. Having detected, however, a "relative neglect of the social dimensions of the comedies" (p. 4), Slights issues just such a challenge. She proposes to go beyond the "festive" comedy approach of C. L. Barber and the "green world" comedy approach of Northrop Frye — derived as they are, Slights claims, from psychological models — to examine the social nature of Shakespeare's early comedies. And yet most recent critical responses to Shakespearean comedy, including issue-oriented studies of gender, race, class, or history, anthropological rite or carnivalesque celebration, take some measure of the social dimensions involved.

On the question of critical approach, Slights is content with suave irony: "These

post-structuralist times provide us with no consensus about the purpose of the critical endeavour or the nature of the literary text except, perhaps, that there are no stable, unmediated texts and no disinterested, non-ideological criticism" (p. 6). She explains her own methodology as follows: "I draw ideas and insights from formalists, new and old historicists, feminists, sociologists, historians, and cultural anthropologists, for I believe that erecting barriers between post-structuralist theory and humanist scholarship is counterproductive" (p. 6). Her refusal of barriers is admirable. But critics more rigidified or more self-conscious than Slights will see the book either as widely informed or loosely generalized in terms of organizational context.

The book organizes two chapters apiece — each chapter deals with a specific play — under a broadly suggestive rubric: *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew* appear under "Belonging"; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost* explore "Cultural Values and the Values of Culture"; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice* comprise Part Three, "Change and Continuity;" Part Four, "Court and Country," involves *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; and Part Five details "Renewal and Reciprocity" in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Six of the chapters appeared previously in respected literary journals, four of them with titles unchanged. The chapters themselves have been revised lightly in the interests of comparison, book-length consensus, and accommodation of recent scholarship.

Historicist, feminist, and other post-modern approaches are touched upon but de-emphasized in favour of old-style critical discussion, discussion that leads the reader sensibly through the plays in terms of language, action, character and theme. The readings presented are well-informed, conscious of contemporary culture, and often shrewd in their grasp of particular dramatic detail. Slights is a gifted writer and incisive reader. But her readings are strictly consensus readings of otherwise problematic comic dreams, dramas of comic distortion, discord, and moment-to-moment fracture, that often resist and reconfigure comfortable interpretations. Comic "conventions" are appealed to at key points where they might just as easily be questioned, and "happy endings" are consistently insisted upon. Plot and circumstance are often rehearsed, while problems of gender, class, and politics are touched upon but elided with a view to the reinforcement of optimistic liberal society and its consensus value, as in the following examples: "Kate's transformation from despised shrew to happily married woman suggests that civilisation depends on people with critical attitude towards it" (p. 50). "The Christians essentially force Shylock to do what he ought to do voluntarily: provide for his daughter" (p. 146). "The narrative patterns of *The Merry Wives* draw heavily on the conventions of the pastoral tradition and dramatize its assumption that outside the pressures and rigidities of sophisticated society people can achieve harmony with their environment" (p. 168-9).

Admittedly, three plucked passages do not a critique make, and there is much to admire in Slights' attempt to work with a loosely-conceived theory of social generosity and responsibility within these disparate plays. But after some 235 pages of discussion

— the best of which is contained in the nature versus nurture argument of the chapter on *As You Like It* and the minor-key Bakhtinian response to *Much Ado About Nothing* — Slights draws to a close with decidedly mixed messages, stating: “While I agree that they grind no polemic axes, I have tried to demonstrate that the ten plays discussed in this book offer acute commentary on social situations and behaviour” (p. 236). They certainly do offer such commentary, but Slights asserts agreement too easily. Despite her scruple on the topic, polemic axes *have* been ground throughout. Slights even itemizes a few of them on the same page: “In the process of dramatizing the integration of marginal figures into an Italian city state, *The Taming of the Shrew* portrays contemporary English marriage customs, while *Love’s Labour’s Lost* examines the dynamics of courtly factionalism and the political implications of changing educational patterns. Geographical and chronological distance allow *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *As You Like It* to explore such indigenous institutions as nascent capitalism, colonialism, and primogeniture” (p. 236). I only wish Slights had ground her polemical axes more, had considered Shakespeare’s comic commonwealths as political and problematic as well as social and ordered.

Traditional in method, *Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths* presents itself with a point to make about social consensus in the early comedies. To Slights, these plays represent imagined social communities finally triumphant over dissention through reasserted social homogeneousness. Not all will agree with such accommodation. The book itself is handsomely designed and printed, although the surname of the late A. Bartlett Giamatti is misprinted in the three places where it appears. Written in a lively style by a scholar who obviously loves her material and who brings intelligent but safe associations to bear upon her interpretations, *Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths* will be of informative benefit alike for graduate students and first-time readers of Shakespearean comedy.

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