

# The Language of Comedy and the Drama of the Schools

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## ABSTRACT

To define comedy as the opposite of tragedy has always been a temptation to critics, for definitions of tragedy are more easily made, especially since Aristotle began by making them. In the Middle Ages, when tragedy disclosed the fall of great men from prosperity to adversity, comedy showed the happy issue out of initial difficulties. The medieval grammarians - Donatus in particular, whose essay was known even to schoolboys - were concerned above all to evolve a clear and precise antithesis between the two forms.


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## Early Elizabethan Theories of Comedy

To define comedy as the opposite of tragedy has always been a temptation to critics, for definitions of tragedy are more easily made, especially since Aristotle began by making them. In the Middle Ages, when tragedy disclosed the fall of great men from prosperity to adversity, comedy showed the happy issue out of initial difficulties. The medieval grammarians - Donatus in particular, whose essay was known even to schoolboys - were concerned above all to evolve a clear and precise antithesis between the two forms.

Tragedy, being concerned with the great, remained primarily the imitation of an action seen from outside: comedy, revealing more familiar humbler persons, tended more and more to become the imitation of fixed types. The basis of action was the contrast of such characters with each other, which led to comedy of situation or of manners according to the depth of realization. In an age when the predominant form was narrative, recited to an audience many if not most of whom would be illiterate, Chaucer's *The Monk's Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* were accepted as tragedies. They would at least be known to most of their auditors in dramatic readings

Although the critics of the Renaissance inherited many of the preconceptions of the later Middle Ages, they recovered a sense of the dramatic, and the terms tragedy and comedy were generally used with reference to plays. Tragedy was sometimes loosely applied, rather in the manner of the modern journalist, to any violent action ending with physical death. It was still generally agreed that tragedy dealt with the downfall of great nuct, was based upon historical events, and that it revealed passions, and was consequently written in a lofty style: comedy depicted ordinary people but was not based on history; it revealed the fixed basis of temperament, manners, and sentiments, and its style was varied.

For the entire sixteenth century, comedy was most readily defined by the learned not in terms of its own form and structure, but in terms of its effect upon the audience. The ultimate authority was Plato in the *Laws*, when comedy was seen as either satirical or farcical:

It is necessary also to consider and recognize ugly thoughts and persons and those which are intended to produce laughter in comedy.... For serious things cannot be understood without laughable things. And for this very reason, he should learn them both, in order that he may not in ignorance do or say anything which is ridiculous and out of place - he should command slaves and hire strangers to imitate such things, and should never take any serious interest in them himself.

Comedy as a species of cautionary tale might justifiably deal with the scurrilous and the criminal: but in general it was restricted only to follies and treated of 'no weighty matters', as Ascham observed. Sir Thomas Elyot, like Plato, saw comedy from the pedagogue's point of view.

Thomas Wilson, the author of the influential *Art of Rhetoric* (1553)- which Shakespeare himself was to read - saw all laughter as derisive.

The occasion of laughter and the means that maketh us merry... is the fondness, the filthine, the deformity and all such evil behaviour as we see to be in others... Sometimes we laugh at a man's body, that is not well proportional, and laugh at his countenance if it be not either comely by nature, or else he through folly cannot well see it. For if his talk is fond, a merry man can't want no matter to hit him home, ye may be assured.

He went on to describe the various ways in which a man may be abashed by queries, jests, sneers, and direct ridicule. Thomas Lodge declared that comedy will 'reprehend'-yet delightfully. Harrington defended comedy as making 'vice scorned, and not embraced', Pottentham because it 'tends altogether to the good amendment of men by discipline and example', while the well known passage in Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* echoes Plato.

Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he repented in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be: so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one. Now, as in Geometry, the oblique must be known as well as the right, and in Arith

tick the odd as well as the even, so in the actions of our life who seeth not the filthiness of evil wanteth a great foil to perceive the beauty of virtue,

This was naturally somewhat dangerous doctrine, as without due to Plato's caveat it could be used as the justification for a plentiful source of wild cats. It is indeed so used in Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, where Prince Hal's wildness is excused as a comedy in which he has cast himself for the role of hero.

Those Puritans who disapproved of plays on ethical grounds could query which way the learning would be taken, as did Gougeon, Stubbes, and Northbrook.

If you will learn how to be false and deceive your husbands... how to ravish, how to beguile, how to betray, to flatter, lie, sweat, forswear.. murder... poison... rebel... to consume treasure prodigally to be idle, to blaspheme... etc.,

go to the play. As Sidney notes,

They say the comedies rather teach than reprehend amorous conceits.

Your Englishman first grounds his works on impossibilities: then in three hours he runs through the world, marries, gets children, makes children men, murders monsters, and brings Gods from heaven and fetches devils from hell.

This description, which remains exact though irrelevant as applied to the later popular plays of Dekker, Heywood, or Haughton, was justly applied to clay works such as *The Cobbler's Prophecy*.

In a passage which follows his denunciation of 'gross absurdities' of story and treatment, Sidney comes nearer to the description of comedy as it was actually to evolve than in his formal definition of it.

Comedy which aimed at giving 'an imitation of life, a mirror of manners, and an image of truth' was designed directly to promote noble deeds and the pursuit of virtue. The drama special power in compelling sympathy implied that in this most excellent work it was the most excellent workman'. Drama involved the spectator more completely than any other kind of poetry, and therefore its action was decisive. Stories of thieves and murderers who had been brought to confess by seeing their deeds enacted were a common place of the day.

### General Theories of Language

The speed of development within the English language during this period produced many perplexing problems of usage. At the same time that the language was changing with extreme rapidity, it was also being employed in new ways, particularly in education and literature.

The quite peculiar badness of much early Tudor poetry needs to be recollected. It was not merely dull and monotonous, like Lydgate: it was frankly monstrous. This resulted from experiments carried on in a language which was changing too rapidly for such experiments to be fully controlled. Fantastic importations ranged from inkom Latinas and quantitative metre to Petrarchan conceits and all the courtly flourishes which went with sonneteering, Italianate manners, and foreign attire. In 1584 John Southern, a servant of the Earl of Oxford, translated Ronsard into a kind of pidgin French, in which English words are given French stresses.

Pondering, expending, and revolution with myself, your intent, affability and ingenious capacity for mundane affairs: I cannot but celebrate, and extol your magnificent dexterity above all other. For how could you have adopted such illustrative, and dominical superiority, if the fecundity of your ingenie had not been so fertile and wonderful pregnant.

In the midst of such encumbered stuff, the drama flourished in familiar and humble guise. It was conservative in its language, an element making for stability. Comic interludes were lustily coarse and even the most learned translators of Plautus were as vulgarly and vigorously given to their mother tongue as the country clown.

In learned circles it was, up to the cities, a question whether English was fit to be used at all for any but practical everyday affairs. Wilson, Cheke and Ascham preached a return to Chaucerian, and even Saxon vocabulary: Spenser, a dutiful son of Cambridge, endeavoured in *The Shepherds Calendar* to comply. Passionate national feelings, such as that upholding the Welsh and Irish languages today, ensured the triumph of English - not through the prescriptions of the grammarians but through the performance of the poets. Quite suddenly, towards the end of the fifteen-eighties, apologies for the rude, barbarous, base, vile, barren, and mis-corned' vulgar tongue gave way to triumph.

It was, however, not the triumph of nationalist purists. By the eighties, the Saxon shield-wall had everywhere given way and the foreigners were swarming through the breaches. Coinage now became rampant.' Confidence in the English language led to a general taste for gorgeousness. The late Elizabethan rhetoricians such as Peacham, France, Puttenham, and Day were ready n set out plans, after the poets had begun to practise: Sidney and Spenser were acclaimed not for the literary merits of their works but for the general service they had performed to the language. In complete and irresistible force, the literary movement swept past the reforming rhetoricians, who now found themselves derided pedants In the sixties, Ascham, Cheke, and Wilson had led the way: but Gabriel Harvey, the donnish friend of Spenser, emerged in the nineties as Harvey the ludicrous opponent of Tom Nashe. Parody of the schemes and tropes, parody of sonneteering, parody of the older tragic style and of Euphuism in comedy, testify to a complete emancipation on the part of writers from the leading-strings of academic discipline.

The changes in the language were apparent to all. Hence the large amount of time which is given to word-games in comedy is not merely a learned habit or a stage trick; it is a way of dealing with a real social issue; the problem of the English language was part of the general problem of the new secular education. The working man tried to follow in the steps of the learned: in the days when inkhorn terms were still popular, Wilson tells one or two stories of Dogberry in real life, adopting a learned speech as Shakespeare's Dogberry did.

When I was in Cambridge and a student in the King's College, there came a man out of town with a pint of wine in a pottle pot, to welcome the Provost of that house, that latch came from the court. And because he would bestow his present like a clerk, dwelling among the scholars: he humbled his three courtesies and said in this manner. Cha good even my good Lord, and well might your

Lordship vane, understanding that your Lordship was come, and knowing that you are a worshipful Pilate and keeps abominable house: I thought it my duty to come incentivante and bring you a bottle of wine, which I beseech your Lordship to take in good worth.

The Apology for Actors is special pleading, perhaps, but in the rapid discarding by the players themselves of their earlier habits there is additional evidence that the experimental period quickly passed away. Wilson described the Dogberry of King's in 1553: Shakespeare was still finding him a useful type more than forty years later: but by 1614, in the Induction to Bartholomew Fair, Jonson classes Dogberry with the Vice riding in on the Devil's back in 'master Tarleton's time' as thoroughly archaic.

The general emancipation of writers is very hard to reconstruct with imaginative sympathy. Stern and simple rules of what had always been, the illogical powers of custom and prejudice, had to be sapped; although many of the literary disputes take an outwardly logical form, this is profoundly irrelevant to the real issue, which was worked out far below the level of conscious debate. Thus the opponents and defenders of English, or of stage plays, tend always to take up a moral attitude, to stigmatize their antagonists as obscurantist, lewd, profane, full of ostentatious desire for glory or corrupting insinuations. Every issue assumes an ethical cast: for Cheke, to reform spelling was only to return the poor misused letters of the alphabet to the right and fitting roles which they were divinely ordained to fulfil. The moral iniquity of silent medial consonants, the treacherous falseness of synonyms and the wasteful indulgence in unsounded final E were almost to be counted among the deadly sins. Jonson and Marston import into their later literary quarrel a powerful note of moral self-righteousness.

### The Drama of the Schools

Although they girded at pedants, the great Elizabethans had behind them a generation of great teachers. Ben Jonson dedicated his first play to his old master Camden, with a noble acknowledgement of his debt; Shakespeare laughed at schoolmasters, but he may have been one himself. In the freedom of their experiments and their amazing capacity for assimilation, the men of the later sixteenth century were no bad advertisement for the educational system that produced them.

The extent to which that education was based on exercises in language has recently been very fully shown. The syllabus aimed at a grounding in the Latin tongue, which involved the young years of construing, of writing themes and epistles, and eventually in declamation. Debate or question-and-answer was the staple mode of instruction. The dramatists all show the effects of this highly organized system of mental drill, one of the most forcible ever evolved. It was part of the system in man schools to train the boys in play-acting. Mulae at Merchant Taylor' put his boy

to the stage to teach them good behaviour and audacity' and Udallpursued the same policy at Eton and Westminster.

The Plautine comedies of the mid-century, Ralph Roister Doister and its livelier successor Gammer Gurton's Needle, belong to Eton and Christ's College respectively. In these two plays there is no starch and no moralizing. Hodge's torn breeches and the fisticuffs of the two dams are in the same tradition as the jokes of the interludes: the songs of Ralph Roister Doister are such as might be heard in any tavern. Gammer Gurton is full of such idioms as 'Too bad' and 'Stick to it', and sown thick with words and proverbs. School plays of the Prodigal Child, popularized by Erasmus, were grafted naturally on the tradition of the English moral play and prepared the way for full drama, but they remain themselves allied to declamation and to exemplum. The boys were acting parts which held the mirror a little too close to Nature; admonition or the art of persuasion was too frankly displayed. The characters debate or quarrel in set fashion: they do not escape into a dramatic world where speech and action may move freely. Judicial, deliberative, and demonstrative speech (the three divisions of rhetoric) postulate a speaker persuading an audience, not a group of actors and spectators collaborating in a work of art. Didactic intention may be as clear in drama as in oratory, the relations between actors and audience may be as close; but the sturdy proclamation of moral commonplaces should not be so relentless.

The range of the boy actor - and the university student as well as the schoolboy might be included here - readily encompassed only lyric and farce. Their plays have some variety of style, some attempt to vary the speech according to the type of character, but perhaps such a tremendous tirade as that of Hypocrisy in Luty Juventus, which stands out so sharply from the rest in scale and in power of writing, was intended for a special professional speaker Schoolboys would be trained from the study of Plautus to appreciate variety of style, and the cultivation of such vanity would be one of the fruits of their acting. High, mean and low styles were as distinct in speech as in singing. In Like will to Live, the evil and the good characters have very different vocabularies.

Such were the triumphs and such the Gods of Lyly's comedy. It was idealistic but secular. Virtue might be mirrored, but moralizing was inappropriate. The mirror of manners was no longer contained in the schools, but in the court. There was no need for moral instruction, when the audience was composed of patrons who must be models of all the virtues and when it might even include the Phoenix of her age.

In Lyly's drama the actors were servants of the audience, as they had been for Plato. But their function was not to move laughter and contempt: it was to present the Gods in triumph. In Lyly's works the Italianate style was truly made a denizen of the stage and such awkward efforts as *Two Italian Gentlemen* (1584) forever outmoded.<sup>17</sup> His style took the literary world of his day by storm; and his achievement was more than a personal one. He provided a basis upon which others could build; later, his work might be parodied, his stiff patterns broken up, but the results remained. Security, stability, and easiness had been achieved, and the particular linguistic problems which vexed the previous generation could not recur. The English tongue was now capable of eloquence, and their language was to the generation that followed our nation's best glory'.

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