



Shiraz University

M. A. Thesis In English Literature

**TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF RENAISSANCE
COMEDIES: SHAKESPEAREAN ROMANTIC
COMEDY AND BEN JONSON'S
SATIRIC COMEDY**

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September 2013

**In the Name of God,
the Compassionate, the Merciful**

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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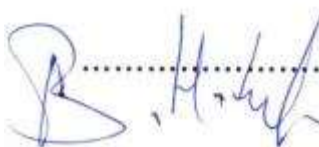
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In the Name of God

Declaration

Here by, Fatemeh Mohammadi (908930), student of English Literature, Faculty of Literature and the Humanities, certify that this thesis results from my own research and whenever I have utilized other sources, I have clearly referenced them. I also declare that the research and the title of my thesis are novel. I also promise not to publish the findings of this research and not to make it accessible by others without the permission of Shiraz University, which holds the copyright of this research.

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To My Dear Professor,

Dr. Amrollah Abjadian,

My Dear Parents,

And

My Beloved Arash

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ABSTRACT

TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF RENAISSANCE COMEDIES: SHAKESPEAREAN ROMANTIC COMEDY AND BEN JONSON'S SATIRIC COMEDY

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Although satire is not dominant in the comedies of the ancient Greece and Rome, Ben Jonson, a classicist, has proved a master in integrating satire into comedy. The Renaissance comedy does not rely solely on realism and satire; it approaches romance and romantic emotions. Jonson does not consider romantic comedy as a real representative of the genre, for, in his view, comedy should be concerned with people's behavior in the real life; it should ridicule the follies and deficiencies and correct them in spite of the fact it is merrily ended. Shakespearean or romantic comedy, on the other hand, avoids the criticism of human weaknesses. The subject of this type of comedy is love and poetry and its plot is based on a love story that ends in fulfillment and happiness. The plot of such a play is not so complex and it does not profit by any moral or satiric themes. It crosses the difficult way of love successfully and leads to fulfillment in the end. The conflict between these two types of comedy is not just interpreted in accordance with their sense of realism; it is their insistence on the different human intentions that make the distinction.

Key Words: Renaissance, Comedy, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. 1. Background of the Study

1. 1. 1. Comedy and Its Origins

Comedy, like tragedy and satyr plays, comes originally from a choral presentation. It was disliked by Hellenic philosophers, because it aims primarily to amuse and strives to provoke smiles and laughter. The qualities of comedy were first stated in Plato's *Republic*:

If there are amusing things which you'd be ashamed to do yourself, but which give you a great deal of pleasure when you see them in a comic representation or hear about them in private company-when you don't find them loathsome and repulsive then isn't this exactly the same kind of behavior as we uncovered when talking about feeling sad? There's a part of you which wants to make people laugh, but your reason restrains it, because you're afraid of being thought a vulgar clown. Nevertheless, you let it have its way on those other occasions, and you don't realize that the almost inevitable result of giving it energy in

this other context is that you become a comedian in your own life (Book 9).

Here Plato inaugurates a historically tenacious distinction which faces the rudeness of “laughter and clowning” to the dominion of reason. It is believed that the comic exists outside of the subject that is leading to a conception of the human subject as an essentially important creature for whom the comic is a momentary identity that may be met on occasion. Plato denigrates comedy in the *Republic* to categorize and index subjectivity for the aim of educating the ideal person in the ideal state (Stott 18). To Plato, watching the ridiculous is likely to make us act as buffoons at home. Segal says,

It is interesting to note that both Plato and Freud see comedy as affecting man's inner desire to "break rules." But while the Greek philosopher objects to comedy because it may lead its spectators to enact the disgraceful things they see on stage, the psychoanalytic view is the exact opposite! Drama to Freud affords man the opportunity to “act out” (inwardly) the potential aberration, thereby serving a useful social function. (234)

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, which stands as one of the most important treatises ever written on drama, believes that comedy, unlike tragedy, has got no clear-cut history. It is believed that comedy, from its appearance in ancient Greece, has been related to the fertility rites and the rituals in honor of Dionysus. Aristotle says,

Comedy is . . . an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. . . . Comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously. . . . Comedy had already taken definite shape when comic poets, distinctively so called, are heard of. (*Poetics*, section 5)

According to Aristotle the origin of comedy is obscure. Comic performances began in Athens at the City of Dionysia about the year 487 or 486 B. C. It was performed by “volunteers” rather than by professional actors in a state-sponsored contest. As stated by Aristotle, comedy had been invented in Megara, Athens’ neighbor and the infrequent sneering references to the inexperienced Megarian humor, in Aristophanes and in other places, proposes that in the fifth century B. C. there was some “awareness” of the beginning of one more old local comic tradition (O’bryhim 4).

It is said that no Greek dramatist has written both tragedy and comedy. Howatson and Chilvers, in *Oxford Concise Companion to Classical Literature*, say,

When at the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates forces Agathon, who wrote tragedies, and Aristophanes, who wrote comedies, to admit the same man could write both, the admission was intended to be paradoxical.

Comedy had reached a great state of “artistic perfection” in Greece three centuries before any form of drama was written in Rome. Roman comedy, in its modern form, appears in the works written by Plautus and Terence, the Roman writers of comedy, who are actually the adaptors of Greek comedy. Their plays are actually imitations of the original Greek ones; they retain the same themes, characters, costumes, and even the settings of the stage (Duckworth 18).

Epicharmus, the first of the Greek writers of comedy, thrived in the first half of the fifth century B. C. Many great writers of the ancient Greece have referred to him as both a dramatist and a philosopher. However, today there exist only a limited number of fragments that make it difficult to have an accurate estimation of his dramatic career. Among his extant comedies, we find a number of “mythological travesties” that demonstrate the struggle between the incarnate abstractions. There are also some social comedies relying on his contemporary life. It is believed that the type of comedy known today as the comedy of manners was first introduced in the works of Epicharmus. His mythological parodies, which later became a common subject for the later Athenian comedies, deal mainly with hilarious versions of the widely popular stories of Odysseus and Heracles (Duckworth 18).

Regarding the structure and the plot of his comedies nothing is precisely known and the authenticity of some of the extant fragments has gone under severe question. His comedies are written in “Doric Greek verse,” in form of dialogues consisting of both iambic trimeter and trochaic tetrameter and there is no track of a chorus or the leader of it. It is believed that, according to both the internal and external

evidence, all of his comedies are short in length. Most of them comprise about four hundred lines. Even though he is considered to be primitive in his dramatic career in comparison with his successors, he is still worthy to be entitled as the leading ancient writer of comedy. There is no doubt that he has had a great influence on the comedy of Athens and at the same time on the Greek mime, but his works have never been a direct source for the Roman dramatists. Nevertheless, he has influenced Plautus indirectly (Duckworth 19).

1. 1. 2. Greek Old Comedy

The earliest extant comedy is Aristophanes' *Acharnias* which was produced about 425 B. C. The other comedies written during that period are all called "Old Comedy" or "Aristophanic Comedy." The term "Old Comedy" refers to Aristophanes' eleven extant comedies, which take their titles from their performing chorus, and the comedies written by Cratinus and Eupolis from which only some fragments have survived. This type of comedy was primarily concerned with "sex and excretion." Such comedies required at most four actors and a chorus whose members did not exceed twenty four (*Oxford Concise Companion to Classical Literature*).

The Athenian comedy first developed from the worship of Dionysus, god of the wine and fertility. Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (section 4), declares that comedy "originated with the leaders of . . . phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities." The Phallic element in the Greek old comedy is believed to have originated from the Dorian farce or mime. It is also believed that the "animal-

masquerade” is the actual source of the old comedy due to the fact that the chorus members of the fifth-century Attic comedy would camouflage by animal shape (Duckworth 20).

Critics have agreed that the earliest official comic performance in Athens happened around the year 486 B. C. Of the earlier comedy writers of that era nothing is known except some names such as Chionides, Magnes, and Ecphantides. On the other hand, Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes have been credited as the greatest writers of the comedy of the age when the mythological parodies were of great favor. This type of comedy was first developed by Epicharmus and later favored even by the writers of middle comedy. Fantasy, politics, and other popular themes for comedy provided many different subjects and personalities that could be freely ridiculed and criticized. However, Crates is considered as the most significant writer of old comedy who, in Aristotle’s view, is “the first who, abandoning the “iambic” or lampooning form, generalized his themes and plots” (*Poetics*, section 5). It is Crates, in whose works, under the influence of Epicharmus, the social comedy is believed to have nurtured. This type of comedy, which is considered to be the precursor of the Greek middle and new comedies, includes such scenes of everyday life, inebriated persons, and love-intrigues that were later developed and expanded in the works of other fifth-century writers of comedy such as Phrynichus and Pherecrates (Duckworth 21-22).

Almost all of the comedies written in this era are lost except the eleven extant comedies written by Aristophanes. However, these eleven plays give us an erroneous impression of old comedy. It is believed the fifth-century comedy as a whole is Aristophanic,

possessing the same qualities of “fantasy and satire, and beauty and indecency.” Aristophanes, whose last two comedies have some features of the middle comedy, is considered by many scholars as the greatest comedy writer of all ages. His themes vary greatly from literature to philosophy and politics. In his comedies, Aristophanes, mingles both beauty and genius with extensive comicality and forthrightness that is considered typically Greek and scarcely obscene in its modern sense. His comedies are completely domesticized, scandalized, and filled with travesties (Duckworth 21-22). Aristophanic comedy is “full of parody,” especially of the epics of Homer, of the contemporary poetry of the Pindarian grand style and the new composers of the dithyramb and tragedy, especially the plays of Euripides (Storey and Allan 213).

The end of the period named Greek old comedy is believed to be 404 B. C. rather than 388 B. C. which is considered as the date of Aristophanes’ last comedy. His last two comedies mark the beginning a transition to a newer kind of comedy as they are less imaginative and more commonplace. They resort lesser to such elements such as chorus, dance, and song and even make less use of action.

1. 1. 3. Greek Middle Comedy

Middle comedy that is marked by the fall of Athens in 404 B. C. and the accession of Alexander in 336 B. C. is considered principally as an age of transition in the long history of Greek drama. Due to the fact that this period of time in ancient Greece is known as the age of experimentation, no single drama can be considered as its

representative. In this era, the popular plays of fantasy and criticism thrived for a short period of time, but they were increasingly succeeded by mythological parodies and social comedy. However, unlike tragedy that by the fifth century B. C. became unexceptional and conventional, comedy paved its way through great development and change and endured exceptionally popular among the Athenians during the fourth and third centuries B. C. Athenaeus, one of the comedy writers of the third century, claims that he has read about eight hundred plays of the middle comedy out of which, unfortunately, nothing is extant. The only evidence present today is more than a few “hundred short fragments” that are quoted in later anthologies and by the grammarians (Duckworth 23).

In this period, whose greatest poets are Antiphanes and Alexis, who have totally composed more than five hundred plays, chorus became less colorful and less conspicuous. The language of the plays was greatly influenced by the commonplace language and an exceptional attention was given to the construction of the plots. Duckworth, in his *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, says,

Plays on mythological themes were popular, but more and more the action dealt with everyday life and often centered about a love story and its complications. As to characters, in addition to family types (husbands, wives, sons, slaves), the parasite, the soldier, the courtesan appeared more frequently. Titles like *The Perfumer*, *The Doll-maker*, *The Jeweler*, *The Twins*, *The Sister*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope* reveal clearly

the increasing trend toward social types and themes.

(23)

1. 1. 4. Greek New Comedy

Critics have been so conservative not to make a sharp distinction between the two types of comedy composed in the periods of middle and new comedy. Any division of these two periods is believed to be highly arbitrary. It is the modern sense that favors a twofold organization of these two types. Duckworth, in his *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, declares,

That Aristophanes and Menander represent entirely different phases in the development of comic drama cannot be doubted. There was apparently a sharp break at the end of the fifth century in both form and content, but the work of Antiphanes and his contemporaries developed into that of the following period without any violent choice. Dramatists like Eubulus and Alexis bridged the transition and lived also in the period of New Comedy. (25)

The comedy writers associated with the period of new comedy lived in a world of transition which, under the dominion of Macedonians, was faced with a hugely cosmopolitan taste. The collapse of the widely accepted codes of patriotism and the absence of any public taxes led many people to accumulate wealth and seek pleasure, while there were others still seeking unworldly pleasure in

philosophical doctrines to complete the mastery of themselves through the use of reason or the hunt of virtue. Dockworth declares,

It was a world in which wars, sudden reversals of fortune, the enslavement of men and women, the separation and reunions of families, were frequent. It was inevitable that the playwrights would find in such a period rich material for drama and would reflect in their plays the society and the spirit of the times. (25)

Sixty-four writers are associated with the Greek new comedy among whom Diphilus, Philemon, and Menander are the most famous. It is believed that each of these three has composed over a hundred plays. It is also believed that over fourteen hundred other comedies were written by other comedy writers of the age such as Philippides, Demophilus, Posidippus, Apollodorus of Carystus, and Theognetus of whose works not even a single play has endured throughout the collapse of the Graeco-Roman civilization. However, the 1905's discovery of the papyrus fragments attributed to Menander at the area of the ancient Aphroditopolis opened a new horizon to the modern scholars of the Greek new comedy. This collection which is considered as the milestone on the way of critics towards the discovery of the features of the new comedy and famous as the Cairo papyrus comprises eight comedies among which three plays are well preserved in order to be read and appreciated and five comedies exist only in parts. Anyway, there is no guarantee that the works of other dramatists of the age would undergo the same themes and represent the characters in such subtle and sophisticated manner as that of Menander. It is believed that while Menander cares little for farcical