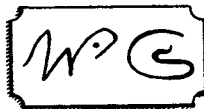


# SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF  
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

22

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KENNETH MUIR



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(Photos: Gordon Goode).

# OLD AND NEW COMEDY

BY

NORTHROP FRYE

The Old and New Comedy forms in Greek literature are highly stylized and conventionalized forms, each the product of very specific cultural and historical conditions that can never recur. Each may be of course imitated in later ages: the *Comedy of Errors* adapts Plautus, and there is some imitation of Aristophanes in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. But more important than the possibility of imitation is the fact that the two Greek forms are species of larger dramatic genera. The *kind* of comedy they represent may and inevitably will recur, when a larger pattern of cultural and historical factors makes it possible.

I begin with New Comedy, as the more familiar, and as having something more like a continuous line of tradition. The distinguishing feature of New Comedy is the teleological plot: perhaps this feature had something to do with Aristotle's approval of it. As a rule the main theme of this plot is that of the alienated lover moving towards sexual fulfilment. New Comedy reaches a *telos* in its final scene, which is superficially marriage, and, more profoundly, a rebirth. A new society is created on the stage in the last moments of a typical New Comedy, when objections, oppositions, misunderstandings and the schemes of rivals are all cleared out of the way. This newborn society is frequently balanced by a recognition scene and a theme of the restoring of a birthright, the recognition (*cognitio*) being connected with the secret of somebody's birth in the very common device of the foundling plot. Much simpler and more popular is the comedy in which a hero, after many setbacks, succeeds in doing something that wins him the heroine and a new sense of identity.

In such a structure the characters are essentially functions of the plot. However fully realized they may be, they are always organically related to the roles on which the plot turns, whether senex, parasite, bragging rival or whatever it is. The *commedia dell'arte* indicates with particular clarity how a group of stock characters related to a stock plot is the basis of the comic structures of Shakespeare and Molière, both of whom show many affinities with the *commedia dell'arte*. In Ben Jonson's 'humour' theory the New Comedy conception of character as a plot-function is rationalized in a most ingenious way. The character as plot-function has something predictable at his basis: the 'humour' is a character who is completely dominated by a predictable reaction. But predictability of response is also one of the main sources of the comic mood, as has been emphasized in most theories of comedy and laughter down to Bergson. Thus the 'humour' is the appropriate type of character for a New Comedy plot because in the humour comic structure and comic mood are unified.

The imagery and characterization of New Comedy belong to an extensive area of literary symbolism which I shall call Eros symbolism. Eros symbolism includes all the medieval poetry in which an alienated lover is stimulated by his love to make some gigantic achievement, whether his goal is explicitly sexual, as it is in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, or spiritual and sublimated, as it is in the *Purgatorio*. The two climaxes of the Eros quest we may call, following Milton, the *allegro* and the *penseroso* forms. The Biblical archetypes of Dante's quest are the journey of man

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towards the garden of Eden, the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, and the vision of the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs which in its Christian form is the epiphany of the virgin mother and divine child. Here the transcendence of a sexual goal goes along with the vision of a divine childhood which is partly the poet's childhood as well, for Dante in Eden regains his generic childhood as a son of an unfallen Adam. In all these quests we notice the figure of the lonely old man who can see but not enter the sacred garden. This figure is represented by Moses in the Old Testament, by Joseph in the New, and by Virgil in Dante. He corresponds in New Comedy to the defeated or reconciled senex. In Shakespeare we notice how in *As You Like It* the quadruple marriage is contrasted with the melancholy Jaques, who goes off to consult a hermit, and how in *The Tempest* the festivities of Ferdinand and Miranda are an emotional contrast to the world-weariness of Prospero.

New Comedy develops two main forms, the romantic form of Shakespeare and the more realistic and displaced form of the Neo-Classical tradition, of which the greatest name is Molière. The more realistic such comedy becomes, the more it is in danger of becoming a sentimental domestic comedy, like the *comédie larmoyante* of the eighteenth century. A combination of realistic treatment and comic structure has a tendency to sentimentality inherent in it, as its theme approximates very closely the favourite rubric of the agony column: 'Come home; all is forgiven'. Molière avoids this by focusing nearly all the dramatic interest on a central senex or blocking figure, whose particular folly, whether avarice or snobbery or hypochondria, keeps the tone well away from the sentimental. But in Sheridan and Goldsmith the effort to keep the texture dry and witty is more of a strain. The domestic virtues do not appear to have attracted the loyalty of a major dramatic genius, unless we wish to call Beethoven a major dramatic genius. *Fidelio* is a bachelor's tribute to the domestic virtues, but the extraordinary unevenness of the music indicates some doubts even in his mind. Naturally, too, anything in the nature of a 'well-made play', like the plays of Scribe and Sardou, or in general of what Bernard Shaw called 'Sardoodledom', belongs to the New Comedy tradition.

Eventually the New Comedy structure tends to desert the stage for the domestic novel, where a sentimental tone is easier to accommodate. The foundling plot reappears in *Tom Jones*, and reaches perhaps its culmination in Dickens. For in Dickens, while the story normally ends in marriage, a great deal is made of the mystery of birth. The production of the parents of the hero or heroine, even when they are bare names unrelated to the story, like the father of Oliver Twist or the parents of Little Nell, seems to be a feature of great importance. And, of course, the whole conception of characterization in Dickens is very close to that of the Jonsonian humour, except that the looser fictional form can find room for a greater number of peripheral characters who are not directly concerned in the central plot.

When drama revives in Great Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century, the formulas of New Comedy are used increasingly for purposes of parody, parody being the usual sign in literature that some conventions are getting worn out. We begin with parodies of foundling and mysterious-heir plots in Gilbert and Sullivan, notably in *Pinafore* and *The Gondoliers*; then we have Wilde's urbane treatment of the foundling plot in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, where the hero has to overcome a refusal to 'marry into a waiting room, and contract an alliance with a parcel'. Wilde is followed by Bernard Shaw, who was well aware of the extent to which some standard New Comedy devices, such as the hero's being attracted by a girl

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whom he does not know to be his sister, had already been parodied by Ibsen. Among Shaw's parodies of recognition scenes we may note the ingenious device that enables Undershaft to adopt his son-in-law as his successor in *Major Barbara*, and the discovery in *Arms and the Man* that Captain Bluntschli is of the highest social rank possible in his country, being an ordinary Swiss citizen, besides being made rich enough, by inheriting a hotel business, to upstage his rival Sergius. In the next generation, the writer who most closely followed the New Comedy structure as laid down by Plautus and Terence was P. G. Wodehouse. In other words, the teleological New Comedy structure seems to have dropped out of the centre of serious literature in the twentieth century.

In this situation writers of comedy clearly have to do something else, and what they are doing may be easier to understand if we think of Old Comedy, not simply as the form of Aristophanes, but as a genus of comedy—I should be inclined to suggest that it is *the* alternative genus—which is open to writers bored or inhibited by the other conventions. The structure of Old Comedy is dialectical rather than teleological, and its distinguishing feature is the *agon* or contest. This feature makes for a processional or sequential form, in which characters may appear without introduction and disappear without explanation. In this form characters are not functions of a plot, but vehicles or embodiments of the contest. For a dramatic contest is as a rule not simply between personalities as such, but between personalities as representatives of larger social forces. These forces may be those of a class struggle, as they are in Brecht, or they may be more concrete situations like a war or an election, or they may be psychological forces or attitudes of mind. Such a form is the appropriate one for introducing historical figures. We recall how Socrates and Euripides appear in Aristophanes: in Bernard Shaw, who shows the transition to Old Comedy conventions very clearly, we have the caricatures of Asquith and Lloyd George in *Back to Methuselah*; and this prepares the way for more recent plays about Churchill, the Pope, and various analogues of Hitler. Or such characters may come from literature: I think, as a random example, of Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real*, which begins with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza entering from the audience, in a way curiously reminiscent of *The Frogs*.

We notice in Aristophanes that while the *agon* may conclude with the victory of something the dramatist approves of, it may equally well be a victory of something patently absurd, as in *The Birds*. A comic structure based on a contest in which absurdity is the victor of the contest is clearly anti-teleological, the greatest possible contrast to the more idealistic New Comedy form. Although Aristophanes himself is a high-spirited writer, full of jokes and slapstick, the form he uses, in its larger context, is the appropriate form for black or absurd comedy. The darker tone latent in Old Comedy was recognized in Elizabethan times: Puttenham says, for example: 'this bitter poem called the old *Comedy* being disused and taken away, the new *Comedy* came in place, more civil and pleasant a great deal'. It was perhaps the more deeply sardonic tone of *Every Man Out of His Humour* that made Jonson speak of it as closer to Old Comedy, though it is still within the conventions of New Comedy in its structure. In our day the black comedy is normal, but half a century ago, when Chekhov showed characters slowly freezing in the grip of a dying class, many audiences found it difficult to believe that *The Cherry Orchard* or *The Three Sisters* were comedies at all.

New Comedy may go either in a romantic or in a realistic direction: the natural development

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of Old Comedy is towards fantasy, which now seems to us a peculiarly modern technique. Where characters are embodiments of social or psychological conflicts, the conception of the individual as defined by sanity, wakefulness, and ordinary experience is only one of many possible points of view. In New Comedy we are continually aware of the predominance of the chain of being: we notice this, for example, in the rigid social hierarchy of Shakespearian comedy, which the action of the comedy never essentially disturbs. Old Comedy, by contrast, may be called the drama of unchained being. In Aristophanes characters may be gods, as in *The Birds*, or the dead, as in *The Frogs*, or pure allegories, as in *Peace*. A similar tendency to introduce characters who are not coterminous with the bodies of individuals is marked in the theatre of the absurd, especially in Ionesco. One form of this is the archetypal characterization that we find, for instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, where the two main characters identify themselves with a number of representative figures, such as the two thieves crucified with Christ.

*Waiting for Godot* is also, in one of its aspects, a parody of the vaudeville dialogue, which bears much the same relation to Old Comedy that the *commedia dell'arte* does to New Comedy. In more sophisticated versions of such dialogue, as we have it in Nicholls and May, it becomes more clearly a verbal *agon*. When the contest is one of incident rather than words, we may have the loose sequential structure of some of the early Chaplin films, where there is a series of collisions between the hero and a number of unsympathetic antagonists, very similar in form to, for example, the last part of Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*. In New Comedy the essential meaning of the play, or what Aristotle calls its *dianoia*, is bound up with the revelation of the plot, but such a meaning may be crystallized in a number of sententious axioms that express reflexions arising from the various stages of the plot. Menander was famous for his sententious or proverbial utterances, one of which was quoted by St Paul: Terence was highly prized for the same quality in the Renaissance, and the same characteristic recurs in Shakespeare, as in the well-known line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'The course of true love never did run smooth'. Old Comedy is less sententious but more argumentative and conceptual than New Comedy, hence it can find a place for the long harangue or monologue, which tends to disrupt the action of a New Comedy, and so appears in it only as a technical *tour de force*, like the speech of Jaques on the seven ages of man. In Aristophanes we have the parabasis or direct address to the audience; in Shaw the parabasis is transferred to a preface which the audience is expected to read along with the play; and many recent comedies not only include but are based on monologue, as we see in several plays of Beckett and in Albee's *Zoo Story*.

Two other characteristics of Old Comedy may be more briefly mentioned. As we see in Aristophanes' use of a chorus, Old Comedy, because of its looser processional form, can be more spectacular and less purely verbal than New Comedy. In New Comedy, once we go beyond the incidental songs that we find in Shakespeare, music and spectacle tend to caricature the complications of the plot, as in *The Marriage of Figaro*. But Old Comedy is in its nature closer to musical comedy, and we notice again how the plays of Shaw, despite their intensely verbal texture, make surprisingly good musical comedies. Again, the fact that Old Comedy is less preoccupied with the game of love and the rituals of courtship make it a better medium for a franker and more explicit treatment of the workings of the sexual instinct. Even the scurrility which is so conspicuous in Aristophanes recurs in *Mac Bird* and similar forms of undercover drama.



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Of modern dramatists, perhaps T. S. Eliot shows most clearly the conflict between the two types of comedy. Eliot begins his dramatic efforts with the exuberant and superbly original *Sweeney Agonistes*, subtitled 'Fragment of an Agon', where, besides the obvious and avowed influence of Aristophanes, many of the features noted above appear, such as the assimilation to musical comedy and vaudeville forms. When he settles down to write seriously for the stage, however, we get such confections as *The Confidential Clerk*, where the main influence is Euripides' *Ion*, usually taken as the starting point of New Comedy. But this play seems, in comparison with *Sweeney Agonistes*, a somewhat pedantic joke, an attempt to do over again what Oscar Wilde (and, for that matter, Gilbert) had already done with more freshness.

Shakespeare's comedies conform for the most part to a romantic development of New Comedy. But Shakespeare was a versatile experimenter, and there is at least one play which falls within the genus of Old Comedy as we have been dealing with it here. This play is, of course, *Troilus and Cressida*. Here the characters are well-known figures from history or literature; the structure is a simple sequential one, built up on the background movement of Helen from Greece to Troy and the foreground movement of Cressida in the reverse direction; the characters are both embodiments and prisoners of the social codes they adopt, and so far as the action of the play itself is concerned, the only clear victor of the contest is absurdity. The reasons why this play seems to us a peculiarly 'modern' one should be clear by now.

New Comedy, especially in its more romantic or Shakespearian form, tends to be an ideal structure with strong analogies to religion. The sense in which Christianity is a divine comedy is a New Comedy sense: here history is a teleological drama of which the hero is Christ, and the heroine who becomes his bride is also a reborn society. Similar affinities between romantic New Comedy and religious myth may occur outside Christianity, as we see in *Sakuntala* and other Indian comedies. Old Comedy is a more existential form in which the central theme is mockery, which may include mockery of the gods, above or below. The presiding genius of New Comedy is Eros, but the presiding genius of Old Comedy is more like Prometheus, a titanic power involved by his contempt for the gods in a chaotic world of absurdity and anguish. The fictional counterpart of New Comedy is the classical novel as it develops from Fielding to Henry James; the fictional counterpart of Old Comedy is the kind of satire that we have in Lucian, Apuleius, and more particularly Rabelais, where the theme of descent into a lower and more chaotic mode of existence occupies a prominent place. A hero may escape from this chaos, as Odysseus does from the cave of Polyphemus, or all the characters may remain involved in it. Such titles as *Huit Clos* and *Endgame* suggest that the latter is the more conventional form today. Whatever its conventions, the dramatic genus of Old Comedy is the one now established on our stage, and as we enter the age of anarchism it is likely to remain there.