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Comedy of Manners in William Congreve.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

The Idea of Comedy and the Comedy of Manners

In his elaborate Essay on Comedy, George Meredith notes that the flourishing of comic idea and comedy is an excellent test of the civilization of a country, and that "the test of true comedy is that it should awaken thoughtful laughter."<sup>(1)</sup> By laying stress on the relationship between the flourishing of comedy and civilization, comedy is conceived as a powerful civilizing agent having a social and critical function to perform. On the other hand, by laying down "thoughtful" laughter as a test of true comedy light is thus shed on the moral and philosophical character of comedy as a mode of thought, to be distinguished from low and superficial comedy that merely arouses physical and sensual laughter and thus deprives the comic spirit of its subtlety and reduces it to deteriorating buffoonery.

The moral and philosophical character of comedy, together with its happy entertainment, pure fun, and sincerity to the human nature, testifies to the fact that it has not only had a far greater appeal to the modern spectator

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(1) Meredith, George: An Essay on Comedy, Standard Edition, 1919, p. 88.

... raised and ~~controversial~~ <sup>controversial</sup> by the levels of the society, its function, and subject-matter. In our country, this subject has recently attracted the attention of our distinguished critics and professors concerned, who held a series of symposia organized by El Hakeim Theatre, with a view to discussing the present planning for our Egyptian Theatre as well as enlightening the artists and the public.

What concerns us most in such symposia is that it has been almost unanimously agreed that tickling the audience into laughter, as most of our recent comedies seek to achieve, should not be the only and ultimate end of comedy. The social aspect of life, it was demanded, should be seriously taken into consideration in comedy; the U.A.R. society with its healthy democratic, socialist, and cooperative values; with its new scientific and industrial achievements, free education, self-supporting farmer-owners, and the emancipation of women. What was frequently acted on the stage, it has been complained, was merely types being ridiculed on account of physical deformity or the ignorance of the world as is the case with a simple awkward villager, come, for the first time, to the city to fall an easy prey to the wilful citizens of Cairo.

It is true that comedy is above all a social art

the theatre feeling that their follies have been stripped naked and ridiculed as deviating from the agreed natural or established behaviour of men. The actors and actresses as well as the spectators are no strangers to one another; all of them belong to one and the same species, mankind.

Since comedy, as any other literary and artistic convention, owes a great deal of its ultimate growth to the earlier stages of its development, I think it would be of value to trace comedy very briefly to its earlier sources so that we may be enabled to form a concept of the idea of comedy. In the attempt to follow the most remarkable developments of the comic conception up to the Restoration Age when Congreve set to write for the stage, stress will be laid on the most dominant qualities which shaped or influenced the modern comedy of manners in general and that of Congreve in particular.

Comedy cannot be said to be the product of a certain age or the invention of a particular artist. It is as primitive as the human mind and owes its existence to the dawn of the human civilization. But the credit of making comedy an established recognized art may well be given to

the Greeks, and the Romans, for Plautus and Terence. The stream has run down along the centuries to provide the Elizabethan dramatists with models for their plays - and so onwards to Congreve and Moliere, to Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw.

No artist can be self-sufficient or have a complete meaning alone; as T.S. Eliot observed, it is by retaining and containing all the earlier stages of its growth, or by "redeeming the past from oblivion," that literature can strengthen itself and be of any significance or appreciation.

## II

According to Professor Allardyce Nicoll, the foundation of comedy was the Attic "comus" ( *κῶμος* ), a popular ritual wherein a group of revellers organized processions and sang songs of doubtful propriety in honour of Dionysus. From this "comus" comedy takes its name<sup>(1)</sup> Often the "comus" group wore masks, or dressed themselves up in a kind of animal masquerade, appearing as birds, horses, or fogs.<sup>(2)</sup> A further step was taken when the

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(1) See Appendix I, p. 180.

(2) World Drama, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1954, p. 90.

... of their poets  
... paved the way for  
social satire. About the middle of the fifth century B.C.  
comedy was officially recognized as an established dramatic  
activity and brought to Athens to be performed side by side  
with tragedy in the Athenian national festivals.

The survivals of the early comedy are those written  
by Aristophanes<sup>(1)</sup> at the end of the fifth century B.C.  
Although his first play, The Acharnians (425 B.C.), contains  
many indecent references and much buffoonery, it has a very  
serious social message to fulfil. It is an anti-war comedy  
attacking the school of thought of the time.<sup>(2)</sup> In the  
parabasis<sup>(3)</sup> to that play the author declares that his aim  
is to teach the audience to think and laugh. In The Clouds  
(423 B.C.), he ridicules the follies of the new sophistries  
then in vogue and he depends on the element of caricature  
for delineating the character of Socrates as a representative  
of such a fashion. This element of caricature was to play  
an essential role in delineating the characters in the  
comedies of manners and those of humours. A third example

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(1) Born about 448 B.C., his first play produced in 425, his  
last one in 388 B.C.

(2) See Appendix 2, p. 130.

(3) The parabasis was a cardinal element of the Old Comedy where  
in the chorus wheeled round and made direct address  
in a long melodic ode.



and he drew his characters from real life. He based his characters on real persons; he portrayed the social manners of the common people of the city, such as the slaves and the cooks and the musicians, the old gossips and the parasites of the time; the young wives and the courtesans. In The Arbitration (310 B.C.), for example, romantic love and misunderstandings help complicate the action and provide the play with pleasant comic situations resulting from making use of the farcical element. Another important characteristic distinguishing the New Comedy of Menander from both Old and Middle comedy is that it abandoned the uproaring rough laughter for thoughtful refined smiles. This reminds one of Meredith, "We know the degree of refinement in men by the matter they will laugh at, and the ring of the laugh."<sup>(1)</sup>

The Roman comic writers modelled their plays on Greek comedies. But with them comedy acquired a certain development both in its concept and in its subject-matter. The comedy of Plautus (254-184 B.C.) is essentially comedy of manners reflecting the spirit of Menander, but his characters are much more broadly delineated. This feature of Plautus had greatly influenced the writers of the "manners"

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(1) Op. Cit., p. 94.

comedy, particularly Congreve whose *Miscellany* being the happy culmination. Again, in the Comedy of the Asses, as in most of his <sup>plays</sup>, Plautus gives money a major role in the plot, which recalls to our mind the mercenary outlook that motivates the action of most of the characters of Restoration comedy. This theme, together with the blend of intriguing, farce, and comic irony, all of which characterize the comedy of Plautus, has provided dramatists as Congreve and Wilde with ever-charming themes for their plays.

The contribution of Terence (190-159 B.C.) to the world of comedy and his influence on the Restoration drama, in particular, may be summed up in the introduction of the well-bred gallant as the centre figure of the play, the portrayal of social manners of the age, and above all the skill and delight in writing witty, reflective, and epigrammatic style. His comedy, The Brothers (160 B.C.), for instance, has a sentimental plot, taking the side of the young men about town as good-intentioned and warm-hearted, and attacking the hypocrisy of the elder brothers who deceive the others and appear to their parents as the model of virtue while they are actually mean and malicious. (1)

This glance at the most dominant qualities of the

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(1) See Appendix 4, p. 181.

Greek and Roman comedy indicates that comedy, just from its very birth, was a faithful mirror of the age reflecting and, at its best, ridiculing the follies and absurdities of man with a view to elevating him to a more civilized and refined state of being.

If tragedy, the other mode of thought, seeks, as Aristotle professed, to rouse our pity and fear and thereby purge our diseased feelings and passions, comedy, on the other hand, seeks to teach us to laugh and think properly and to let sound reason and common sense prevail. If tragedy is mainly the expression of man's pride and greatness in his unyielding and glorious struggle against natural and supernatural forces, comedy is the expression of his modesty and wholesomeness in his tactful and constant battle against forces of deterioration and corruption in society, the whimsies of the heart, and vulgarizing forces of the mind.

### III

The popular idea of comedy seems to have been affected by two main notions; that of having "a happy ending", and that it should arouse laughter.

With respect to the first notion, it is obvious that a happy ending in itself does not make a play comic so much the same as death in itself cannot make a play tragic. Just

of it has been conventional for tragedy to end in a catastrophe or in the death of the hero, it has been equally conventional for comedy to end in a marriage or a celebration.

But applying such conventions to his play, without paying much attention to understand its nature and general tone, the playwright may give his play an ending that is neither relevant nor appropriate to the rest of the plot. This fault accounts for the fact that the happy endings of some comedies are both unexpected and insignificant and therefore pass unnoticed. Being irrelevant and simply imposed upon the play an ending may even arouse perplexity and confusion. Examples of such endings are those of The Way of the World, Lady Windermere's Fan, and The Good-Natured Man. Such comedies have a sobering and may be saddening effect whether they are ended with weddings or with catastrophes.

As to the second notion, it is doubtful whether comedy should necessarily produce laughter. Some of the greatest and subtlest comedies have serious effects. Of these may be counted the three comedies just mentioned, which besides exciting laughter, set our mind thinking and arouse our sympathy, if not our pity, for the characters whose follies

give to the latter of them and put them in very awkward situations unacceptable to their societies.

Any sensitive reader or spectator cannot fail to perceive the seriousness with which the character of Fainall is treated at the end of the first play when Congreve stripped him morally and showed him up to both characters and audience as a malicious intriguer and an unfaithful husband deserving the most severe comic justice.

In the last-mentioned play, Goldsmith penetrates so deeply into Honeywood's comic streak that we are induced to sympathize with that character who goes so far in his excessive false modesty as to press the courtship of some other man, not to say a villain, on his own beloved mistress.

But none of those dramatists turned his comedy into a tragedy by giving his characters some serious attributes. They have only exposed their eccentricities and stripped their follies to that extent which the comic spirit allows, no more. Goldsmith, for instance, did not turn Honeywood to a tragic figure by making him act so foolishly, because we still feel that this character's folly is no more than an odd and absurd one the cure of which is at his hand if he wishes. At the same time the damage caused by such a character's comic folly would not extend to affect the destiny of other people's life or the established order of a country or a