



## Interrogating the Eucatastrophic Theory of Comedy

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### Abstract

Existing theories of comedy revolve around certain fixed poles like comic characters, categories or situations. Laughter theories are also considered part of such theorization although laughter may be found in other forms of literature including tragedy. Some theorists have focused on the comic emotion and its catharsis, the function of comedy, or why an issue is socialized in comedy. Regrettably, the uniqueness of the form has hardly drawn any serious critical attention. The popular definition of comedy as a play with a happy ending can be problematized, for all characters are not happy at the end and sometimes discomfiture does not entail any disgrace. Although no stuff is inherently comic, certain stuff is not fit for comic treatment which always expresses a particular attitude to folly or oddity. A close scrutiny reveals that in comedy the playwright carefully removes all stings from the tangled situation so as to convince the audience that the exhibited threat is not going to be catastrophic. As the audience is assured about the merry outcome of the dramatized conflict, they feel tickled rather than worried. In a dark comedy or a problem play the audience cannot respond to the mounting tension in a relaxed manner and the final joyous turn of events is somewhat abrupt. Such plays are eucatastrophic, and hence qualitatively different from a true comedy where *everything begins and runs well before it ends well*.

Key words: Comic emotion, Laughter, Comic stuff, Threats manqué, Eucatastrophe.

Although a large number of heterogeneous texts – from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to Shaw's *Arms and the Man* or Pinter's *The Birthday Party* – bear the name of comedy, only a handful of critics have shown interest in theorizing about comedy. There is much truth in the observation of Gerald Mast

that 'no single definition adequately includes every work traditionally recognized as comic and excludes every work traditionally recognized as non-comic' (3). Todd McGowan traces the paucity of theory in this regard to the very nature of comedy and claims that theorizing involves reflection and reflection

'dissolves the comic moment and transports us to another plane of experience': 'The immediacy of comedy renders theorizing about it almost impossible' (4). In the Introduction to *Comedy/Cinema/ Theory*, Andrew Horton objects to theorization because theoretical writing on comedy from Aristotle to Freud tends to be 'essentialist' (3) rather than descriptive. Yet theorizing is central to serious academic exploration; without theory it is impossible to identify the distinctness of a genre or to distinguish it from others very close to it.

Existing theories of comedy seldom try to explore the unique nature of the form. These generally revolve around certain fixed poles like *stock comic characters* (clownish or roguish – that is ignoble or deformed), *stock situations* (eavesdropping, mistaken identity, speaking at cross purposes), *categories of comedy* (romantic comedy, comedy of humours, comedy of manners, comedy of ideas, comedy of menace) etc. It is often held that laughter is the soul of comedy and hence laughter theories deserve recognition as theory of comedy although laughter may be found in other forms of literature including tragedy. Incidentally, laughter is a psycho-physiological response stimulated by the detection of inappropriateness, deviation or deformity in any form. Aristotle describes the 'ridiculous', which he treats as a subdivision of the *ugly*, as 'mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others' (33). Thomas Hobbes looks upon laughter as 'sudden glory' at the discovery of one's own eminence vis-à-vis the lack of judgment in other characters: 'Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER' (45). For Immanuel Kant the secret of laughter is the abrupt deflation of the bubble of expectation: 'Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing' (203). Sigmund Freud argues that laughter releases the psychic energy that would have caused repression of emotions expressed by the laughing agent: 'the expenditure on the pity, which was already prepared, becomes un-

utilizable and we laugh it off" (295). Henry Bergson explains laughter as assertion of life's elasticity, a revolt against 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living' (49). While these discussions do shed some valuable light on the secret of laughter, they are silent on the question of its opulence and its function in comedy.

The theories of comedy that have drawn critical attention in recent times are also worth glancing at. Susan Purdie singles out 'affective distancing' as the characteristic of the genre dramatic comedy (7). Leon Golden has elaborated the Aristotelian theory of comedy and commented upon two of its aspects generally bypassed by critics – Aristotle's notion of the comic emotion and the nature of comic catharsis. Golden argues that tragic emotions like *pity* and *fear* are related to 'undeserved misfortune' – pity springing from the recognition of undeserved-ness, fear from the recognition of one's own vulnerability. What is diametrically opposite to pity is 'indignation' evoked by circumstances involving unjustified good fortune, as Aristotle mentions in *Rhetoric*: 'if we sympathize with and pity those who suffer undeservedly, we ought to be indignant with those who prosper undeservedly' (231). Golden who considers indignation as the seminal comic emotion, proceeds to argue that 'comedy accomplishes, through the representation of incidents which evoke our 'indignation' (*nemesian*) the catharsis, i.e., the intellectual clarification of such incidents' (288). Dwelling upon Hegel's idea that comedy brings together disparate elements, Todd McGowan directs his attention to the social function of comedy which may be corrective or conservative. He analyses the causes of the two opposite reactions to comedy: 'One reaction sees comedy as a subversive form that forces the social order to confront its contradictions, while the other sees it as an ideological form that creates an imaginary synthesis in order to obscure those contradictions' (12). In 'Comedy and the World' Robert Heilman argues that by

making us laugh at deviations in conduct or manners, comedy acts as a civilizing force. In *The Comic Compulsion* (1978) Joseph Moses contrasts 'passion and boundless desire' which are subjects for lonely exploration of the self with their 'bounded and limited counterpart' appropriate for comic treatment: 'It is accurate, rather than cynical, to say that comedy does not treat of love; what it treats of is courtship and marriage – love reflected in the social mirror' (Quoted in Henkle 210). Elucidating this view Roger Henkle shows why a feeling or a situation needs to be 'socialized' – it must be 'placed within certain assumed norms of behavior or valuation' to be 'treated humorously' (210). All these discussions are useful and help us understand the nature of comic emotion, the mode of comic catharsis, the purpose of social orientation in comedy, also the function of comedy as an art form. But these theories do not help us recognize a true comedy, nor do they help us distinguish true comedy from other works sharing some common features with comedy.

The reason why these theories fall short of grasping the uniqueness of the genre is not very difficult to find out. The approach of these critics is social or cultural, rather than a genre-focused structural approach. There are of course critics who have adopted the structural approach. Gerald Mast for example has adopted a structural approach and discovered eight patterns like the *picaro*, the *reductio ad absurdum* underlying all types of comic art forms. While the number may be increased by identifying a few other recurring patterns, the focus of the present study is not every type of comic art but comedy as a *dramatic form*. Of all these theorists Elder Olson is certainly a glorious exception. He strikes a very suggestive note when he says that while tragedy 'imitates an action which it makes serious', comedy 'imitates an action which it makes a matter for levity' (36). How the action is imitated in a way that 'makes a matter for levity', however, remains to be explored and examined at length.

One problem with the structural view of comedy, as pointed out by Robert D. Hume, is that it nearly always 'tends to place heavy emphasis on the resolution of the problem which gives the comedy its basis' (89). In 'On Fairy Stories', originally a lecture delivered in 1939, J.R.R. Tolkien uses the term '*eucaastrophe*' as an exact antonym of tragedy. Out to vindicate the singularity of the fairy tale genre, Tolkien notes that fairy tales never 'deny the existence of the *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure'. But a good fairy story always denies 'universal final defeat'; there is always 'a *sudden* and *miraculous* grace', 'the *sudden* joyous turn' (75) immediately before the catastrophe. However, my contention is that a true comedy is seldom *eucaastrophic* in the sense Tolkien uses the term. In most cases the happy ending is foreshadowed in comedy in a well recognizable manner.

Incidentally, the term 'happy ending' needs critical scrutiny before the contention of the essay is argued in depth. Literally taken, 'happy ending' implies that no one is left disconsolate at the end of a comedy. Who does this 'no one' refer to? Does it refer to the characters of the play, to the members of the audience, or to both? The audience is no doubt pleased for being entertained by the comic show. But one would be guilty of affective fallacy if one tries to define the character of a play in terms of audience response. Again, if one considers the *dramatis personae*, all of them are certainly not happy at the end of a comedy – some characters must suffer discomfiture so that the comic spirit might triumph in the long run. Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Caliban in *The Tempest*, Mrs. Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer* are anything but happy at the end of the play. The issue may further be problematized. Every sort of discomfiture is not a disgrace. When Marlow in *She Stoops to Conquer* stands exposed and it is established that 'impudence' and 'un-smartness' both are traits of his complex character, he has to kiss the dust. But he profits from this discomfiture, because in the process he outgrows the embarrassing disorder of his

personality. Again, in Shaw's *Major Barbara*, Barbara's defeat in her fight against her father Andrew Undershaft carries no humiliation. It points to a positive transformation of her character. She ultimately finds a nobler justification for her ideals – that noble works must be done for their own sake, that one must get rid of the *bribe of bread* or bribe of *heaven*. Pinter's *The Birthday Party* apparently ends happily when the storm is over and after the departure of the tormentors calm is restored in Meg's house. But neither the audience nor Meg and her husband can relax happily because of the prolonged season of tension and due to the anxiety about the fate of Stanley. Cheerfulness cannot prevail even when the storm is over as gloomy reflections linger in the mind of the audience.

A close look at the structure of a play with a happy ending reveals another more complex aspect of the issue. Horton rightly argues, 'No plot is inherently funny... any plot is potentially comic, melodramatic, or tragic, or perhaps all three at once' (1). Nothing is intrinsically comic or tragic in the art world – everything here is *constructed*. In other words, the material of art is amorphous and it can be shaped into any form – comic or tragic – as willed by the author. *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both deal with the theme of star-crossed lovers – the first is a tragedy, the second a comedy. Therefore, obsession with happy ending to the exclusion of other contributory factors would not be a correct theoretical approach. A critic of rare insight, Dr. Johnson recognizes the value of 'intermediate incidents' and justly maintains that exclusive focus on the denouement may lead to an anarchy whereby plays by 'changing the catastrophe were tragedies to-day, and comedies to-morrow' (16). One may recall here two notorious Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare. By slightly changing the play's ending, James Howard staged *Romeo and Juliet* as tragedy and comedy on alternate nights; Nahum Tate rewrote *King Lear* with a happy ending in which Cordelia is married to Edgar at

the end of the play, however inappropriate it might be aesthetically.

Therefore, happy ending alone does not determine the character of the form; there are other more important factors. What merits first attention here is the difference between the comic and the tragic *weltanschauung*. Tragedy always makes one feel that the cosmic order responsible for human calamity is out of joint and any effort to set it right is bound to miscarry. In *King Lear*, Lear's perplexing question after the death of innocent Cordelia, sums up this anarchic state: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/And thou no breath at all?' (5.3. 306-307). Contrastively, the comic disorder is mostly personal, familial or due to a reparable flaw in the social system. Since adversity here is projected as a weaker force, comedy is a glorification of human ability to bring adversity under control. E. G. Ballard rightly maintains that the comic view on evil is that it is a 'not a function of fate nor of cosmic order; rather it is the function of human and social disorder' (468). For example, in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* the root of trouble is battle, and bloodshed causing long or permanent separation of spouses. But Aristophanes' presentation is humorous, for here wives decide to sex-starve their partners in order to ensure peace. Incidentally, how social flaws are mended defines the nature of comedy. Comedy is *progressive* when it sets out to challenge and revamp social norms as in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. It is *conservative* when the norm-jerking creases are ironed out with implicit recommendation of conformity with the norm, as in Ashley Dukes' *The Dumb Wife of Cheapside*.

Although no stuff is inherently comic or tragic as argued before, some stuff is generally eschewed in comedy. If such stuff is forcibly shaped into a comedy, the work of art is likely to become bland or insipid in taste. One understands why in the Prologue to *Every Man in His Humour* Ben Jonson observes that comedy aims to 'sport with human follies, not with crimes' (2). Although both are misguidance, it is

wrong to confuse the pranks of Tony Lumpkin with the villainy of Iago. Iago misguides to ruin Othello, Tony to amuse himself at the expense of Marlow and Hastings. The former is crime, the latter folly. Folly is stupidity of the human kind, illustrated, say, by Bottom's passion for acting – for playing all roles from tyrant to lover, and even the role of a lion in order to impress the audience with his only dialogue, roaring. Although undesirable, folly is excusable because it is not ridden with any grave consequence. A misdeed becomes a crime and hence unfit for toying with when it is associated with evil – in motive, action and consequence. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, the 'disdainful youth' avoiding Helena, and smears his eyes with the love-juice. As a result of this 'misprision', as Oberon foresees, 'Some true love turn'd, and not a false turn'd true' (3. 2. 91). But it is not 'crime', for Puck had no intention to do any harm to anybody and the unpleasant consequence of his action could be forestalled.

It is interesting to note that Jonson not only comments on the stuff ideal for comic treatment but also on the art of its representation. By maintaining that the comic playwright *sports* with folly Jonson defines the comic attitude to folly. Unlike a satirist who singles out oddity for denigration, the comic playwright is more tolerant in his attitude and exhibits folly in an amusing style for the obvious purpose of diverting the audience. While the satirist unsparingly *exposes* folly to shame others into its recognition, the comic playwright *exhibits* folly amusingly because to him folly, to borrow Goldsmith's words, 'is rather an object of mirth than uneasiness' (2. 473-74). This applies also to satiric comedy where the barbs of satire touch us but cannot make us bleed as they do in satire. Laughter in satire has an end beyond diversion and hence it cannot tickle us without making us blush or bleed. Comic laughter entertains more than it hurts because the playwright is more interested in diagnosing folly than in flogging it. True, there is a grain of

truth in Lady Sneerwell's remark in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* that 'there is no possibility of being witty without a little ill-nature' (18). Yet comic laughter is seldom too close to what Andre Breton phrases *humour noir*, which borders on malice and cynicism. Comic laughter is meant for pure relaxation and is seldom borrowed from melancholy or seldom mingled with pathos. That is why Tony Lumpkin in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* rails at the sentimentality of Kate and Neville who like a book 'the better, the more it made them cry' (41). One reason why there is profusion of laughter in comedy is that laughter unrelated to pathos always serves as a potent antidote to melancholy and gloomy reflections.

It is therefore wrong to wax eloquent upon happy ending ignoring the force of other conditions that collectively account for the singularity of the genre. In comedy conflicts not merely resolve happily but things are conceived facetiously so as to generate delectable vibes that vibrate all through the play. In Aristophanes' *The Birds* there is a conflict between the divine and the avian worlds. The birds occupying the middle air plan to raise a wall for obstructing sacrificial smoke that the gods thrive upon. The sheer absurdity of the idea of erecting a wall in the air and that too for starving the immortals is grippingly risible. It is therefore not so surprising that in comedy threats *manque* are often presented as real threats. For instance, in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, brushing aside his son's objections, Anthony Absolute commands him to marry a girl who is none other than Lydia, the girl of Captain Absolute's own choice. In order to create a festive mood, comedy carefully removes all stings from what is otherwise bitter or distressing. That is why characters in comedy often profit from pains and punishment frequently proves a blessing in disguise. In *As You Like It*, if Rosalind is banished by the Duke Frederick, she is befriended by Celia and together they 'go ... in content/To liberty, and not to banish

ment' (1.3. 139-40). It is not that such sweet accidents are found only in Shakespearean 'romantic' comedy. These abound even in satiric comedies. For instance, in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, having lost their way Marlow and Hastings go to the very house where they are expected as guests. In Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* if Jack adopts the name 'Ernest' to humour his fiancée, in the long run it transpires that his true Christian name is 'Ernest', his darling's favourite.

So in comedy what really matters is how the jolly mood is evoked, how tension is neutralized and the audience/ readers are prepared for the happy ending. To wit, how the tune is set is as important as the tune itself. In comedy proper there is always an embedded hint that the dramatized conflict is going to resolve agreeably. This assurance that the brewing storm is actually fraught with merry possibilities relieves the tension and readies the audience for the merry turn-out before the curtain-drop. One may refer to the opening scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where amidst the fearful cry of the crew, one hears the prophetic words of Gonzalo that Boatswain's face bears 'no drowning mark on him; his complexion is perfect gallows' (1.1. 31-32). Failure to catch this subtle hint may result in the preponderance of sombre reflections related to the shipwreck and watery grave of the crew. So in Scene 2 the audience is convinced through the voice of Ariel that 'Not a hair perish'd;/ On their sustaining garments not a blemish,/ But fresher than before' (1.2. 217-19). Once the looming misgivings are blown off, the sighs and lamentations of Ferdinand and Alonso tickle rather than depress the audience. One may also refer to Act 1 Scene 2 of *Twelfth Night* where Viola breaks down in grief that her brother Sebastian is drowned. Here the Captain assures her that when the ship split and Viola managed to escape in a boat, he saw her brother clinging to a 'strong mast' 'Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,/ I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves' (1.2. 15-16). The allusion to

Arion who is believed to have safely reached the shore from mid sea on the back of a dolphin encourages the audience to look forward without resigning to despondency. This comforting remark of the Captain prepares the audience well ahead for the sweet discovery that Sebastian has survived the ship-wreck.

Thus, in a comedy the playwright subtly assures the audience that the dramatized conflict, although grave, is not going to be catastrophic. While the characters on the stage fret, fume or sigh in a tangled situation because something is hidden from their knowledge, the audience can respond to the same situation in a relaxed mood and relish the ignorant reaction of the characters. In *The Rivals* the audience is amused by the crisis of Lydia Languish that she is being forced to be wedded against her will because the audience knows it to be a pseudo crisis. From the conversation of Fag and Coachman (Act 1, Scene 1) the audience is already in possession of the useful information that 'Captain Absolute and Ensign Beverley are one and the same person' (5). In Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, Kately's suffering due to 'poisoning' is an incident not of concern but of profuse humour. This is because Wellbred's remark, 'O strange humour, my very breath has poisoned him!' (66) has convinced the audience that Kately's grimaces are not caused by any real toxicity. Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Demetrius's infatuation with Hermia and indifference to his admirer Helena cannot cast any shadow of dismay on the mind of the audience. The words of the Fairy King Oberon prepare them for a happy resolution of the complication: '...ere he do leave this grove/ Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love' (2.1. 245-46). In the subplot of *She Stoops to Conquer* Mrs Hardcastle tries to marry Neville to Tony Lumpkin with a mercenary motive while she is actually in relation with Hastings and wants to marry him. The situation could have been tension-ridden had the author not taken the audience into confidence in this matter. The conversation of Kate and Miss Neville leaks to

the audience the secret that Tony 'holds out stoutly' against his mother and wants to see Neville 'married to anybody but himself' (1. 220-21). Again, in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* Gwendolen and Cecily mistakenly suspect each other as rival. Gwendolen says, 'If the poor fellow has been trapped into any foolish promise, I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand', and Cecily retorts, 'Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married' (518). Their accusations and counter-accusations perplex the audience not a whit. They remain unconcerned as they know that both the girls are in relation with different persons assuming the same name to please their ladylove. Thus, in a true comedy there is no cloud without a silver lining. As the dramatist is in secret understanding with the audience, the tension that might have cracked the cheerful mood is always made lighter in a manner that even a crisis becomes stuff for diversion rather than for melancholy.

One may contrast this with the situation in a problem play where accidents do not bring good luck but land one in real trouble. Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* waits for the capital punishment for indulging in consensual premarital sex leading to the accidental pregnancy of Juliet. Claudio's sister Isabella cannot save him without sacrificing her virginity to Angelo. One feels disconcerted when Isabella, otherwise an epitome of virtue, gives her consent to the 'bed trick' involving Mariana in order to save her brother. Anxiety about the impending doom coupled with conflicting responses to the issues of liberty, sex, marriage and ethical conduct keep on racking the nerve of the audience all though, making it virtually impossible for the audience to celebrate when all thorns are removed by the Duke at the end of the play. Since the joyous turn of events is not adumbrated and the audience not prepared well ahead for the comic denouement, the final relief appears a windfall.

The buoyancy, the facetious mood that neutralizes misgivings and accounts for the singular comic pleasure, is missing. One understands why *Measure for Measure* is described as a 'dark' or 'black' comedy which must not be confused with comedy proper. Dark comedy is *dark* principally because of the unpreparedness for the merry outcome and the scantiness of humour. So the load of gloom cannot be lifted and the happy ending seems to have been thrust upon. Since it is eucatastrophic, to borrow Tolkien's phrase, the audience fails to respond to the merry developments in a relaxed mood and hence cannot rejoice in the triumph when the central characters get out of the crisis unscathed.

The conclusion that proceeds from the discussion is that in a true comedy the denouement is seldom abrupt, it is foreshadowed and the audience is well prepared for the happy ending. Some clues must be there to suggest that the cloud of crisis will clear up without causing any major damage to anybody. This creates ample space for situational irony – while the dramatis personae fret under the crisis they encounter, the audience savour their ignorant gestures in a carefree mood because they are well enlightened about the merry outcome. Therefore, a true comedy never allows any alienation from the possibility of merriment. It is therefore a half-truth that in a comedy *all's well that ends well*. It's time we re-phrased the definition because in comedy *all's well that begins and runs well before it ends well*.

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