

# 1 - SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

## 1.1 - Defining the terms “comedy” and “humour”.

First of all, in order to develop this paper taking a close look at the concepts of comedy and humour is required and therefore searching the dictionaries to see what the definitions for these terms are will be very useful.

According to the Wikipedia, comedy has a classical meaning (comical theatre) and a popular one (the use of humour with an intent to provoke laughter in general). In the theater, its Western origins are in ancient Greece. Tragedy is a genre characterized by a grave fall from grace by a protagonist having high social standing. Comedy, in contrast, portrays a conflict or agon (Classical Greek ἀγών) between a young hero and an older authority, a confrontation described by Northrop Frye as a struggle between a "society of youth" and a "society of the old".(1)

The word "comedy" is derived from the Greek κωμοιδία, which is a compound either of κωμος (Classical Greek κῶμος) (revel) and ωιδος (singer), or of κωμη (village) and ωιδος: it is possible that κωμος itself is derived from κωμη, and originally meant a village revel. (1)

Amongst its styles, the Black comedy, the Satire, the Parody, the Political Satire, the Adage, Irony or the Alternative Comedy can be found. (1)

For the Oxford English Dictionary, comedy should be a stage-play of a light and amusing character, with a happy conclusion to its plot. Such are the comedies of the ancient Greek and Latin writers, and of the modern stage. But in the Middle Ages the term was applied to other than dramatic compositions, the ‘happy ending’ being the essential part of the notion. (2)

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(1) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy>

(2) <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

As it can be seen, the use of humour or, at least the attempt to achieve it is an essential part of the comedy. Therefore, it is necessary to define the term humour.

Trying to find a clear explanation, it has been found the wikipedia saying that Humour (also spelled humor) is the ability or quality of people, objects, or situations to evoke feelings of amusement in other people. The term encompasses a form of entertainment or human communication which evokes such feelings, or which makes people laugh or feel happy.

The origin of the term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which stated that a mix of fluids known as humours controlled human health and emotion.

A sense of humour is the ability to experience humour, a quality which all people share, although the extent to which an individual will personally find something humorous depends on a host of absolute and relative variables, including, but not limited to geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education and context. For example, young children (of any background) particularly favour slapstick, while satire tends to appeal to more mature audiences. (3)

Some claim that humour cannot or should not be explained. Author E. B. White once said that "Humour can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." Another explanation is that humour frequently contains an unexpected, often sudden, shift in perspective. Nearly anything can be the object of this perspective twist. This, however, does not explain why people being humiliated and verbally abused, without it being unexpected or a shift in perspective, is considered funny. Another explanation is that the essence of humour lies in two ingredients; the relevance factor and the surprise factor. First, something familiar ( or relevant) to the audience is presented. ( However, the

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(3)<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humor>

relevant situation may be so familiar to the audience that it doesn't always have to be presented, as occurs in absurd humour, for example). From there, they may think they know the natural follow-through thoughts or conclusion. The next main ingredient is the presentation of something different from what the audience expected, or else the natural result of interpreting the original situation in a different, less common way. (3)

When looking at the Oxford English Dictionary, the matter turns out to be not that clear. Therefore, it can be found many different meanings for the term, going from Any fluid or juice of an animal or plant, either natural or morbid. (Chiefly in medieval physiology; now rare) (4)

, the greek concept of body fluids (In ancient and medieval physiology, one of the four chief fluids (cardinal humours) of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy or black choler), by the relative proportions of which a person's physical and mental qualities and disposition were held to be determined)(4)

, and finally

getting to the one of major interest which is That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun. Also the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject. (4)

## **1.2 - Comedy Conventions**

Along this part, the main goal is to comment on the comedy conventions and, specially, Shakespearean comedy conventions. There will be also an analysis of what differentiates comedy from other genres such tragedy, Historical plays... The intention is to demonstrate that a comedy, usually, has a set of rules that are important to follow in order to create the atmosphere and emotional landscapes necessary to make people laugh. Because that is the main goal of a comedy: to make people laugh so much, that they forget their real problems for a while. However, there are other aims such as social criticism, and comedies can also be used for didactic purposes since each comedy can be seen as a lesson to be applied in human lives.

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(3) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humor>

(4) <http://dictionary.oed.com/>

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When an author is writing a comedy, he must know that there are a set of rules that he must follow, because, indeed, those conventions/rules are what the audience is waiting for in order to start laughing. However, some authors prefer to break down those rules and shock the audience. Nevertheless, comedy itself has a set of conventions, which are less strict, than other genres. According to John Morreall(5)

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these are the main differences between tragedy and comedy: He claims and defends the high tolerance that comedy has with chaos, different endings, different types of heroes... He states that tragedies are, somehow, less interesting than comedies, because there is no point for ambiguity: everything is good or bad; all the events are solved with violence and death and characters tend to be more psychologically flat.(6)

### **1.3 - Features of the Shakespearean comedy.**

Traditionally, the plays of William Shakespeare have been grouped into three categories: tragedies, comedies, and histories. Some critics have argued for a fourth category, the romance. (7)

Shakespeare did not invent himself the comedy conventions. He maybe gave them a new breath, but he adapted these conventions from the Greek-Latin theatre. These conventions have been used by authors since then, and they have been repeated again and again in order to make people laugh.

Main Shakespearean comedies' conventions(8) are:

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(5) "Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion", Albany: State U of New York P, 1999.

(6) "Characteristics of Tragedy & Comedy", Philip Mitchell.

(7)[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespearean\\_comedies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespearean_comedies)

(8)"Types of Drama / Plays: Comedy", Dr. Eric W. Trumbull.

- A struggle of young lovers to overcome difficulty that is often presented by elders.
- Separation and unification (reconciliation and forgiveness).
- A clever servant.
- Mistaken identities.
- Heightened tensions, often within a family.
- Multiple, intertwining plots.
- Frequent use of puns.
- Suspension of natural laws.
- Contrast between social order and individual.
- Turning the basis of things upside down.
- The element of marriage.
- A “happy ending”.

It is also important to mention that it is assumed that Shakespeare learned how to organize a comedy plot from the readings of the Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus (they were much studied in Elizabethan schools). This five-act structure moves from:

1- Exposition: A situation with tension or implicit conflict; 2- Rising Action: Implicit conflict is developed; 3- Turning point: Conflict reaches height; frequently an impasse; 4- Falling Action: Things begin to clear up; 5- Conclusion: Problem is resolved, knots untied. As it can be observed, although the plots, the characters, the events... may change, the basis and the structure of a comedy play are always repeated. For example, most of Shakespearean comedies end with the concept of “Marriage” (which is a symbol of union). Marriage is also a symbol of the upcoming and the future; it is the total union of the purely personal element, sexual attraction and romantic love. Whereas tragedy’s focus on the individual makes death the central fact of life, comedy insists in the process of love, sex and birth as a metaphor of life continuity and procreation. Life goes on after the play ends, characters do not die and they share their lives together. (9)

(9)“Shakespeare’s Plays: Comedy/ English 339: Introduction to Shakespeare”, Debora B. Schwartz.

The plot is very important in Shakespeare's comedies. They are often very convoluted, twisted and confusing, and extremely hard to follow. Another characteristic of Shakespearean comedy is the themes of love and friendship, played within a courtly society. Songs often sung by a jester or a fool parallel the events of the plot. Also, foil and stock characters are often inserted into the plot. (10)

Furthermore, the major genre that Shakespeare developed throughout comedies is the romantic comedy; all Shakespeare's comedies are driven by love. Love is the most important thing in all his comedies; all the obstacles presented to love are overcome, conflicts are resolved and errors are forgiven, in a typical end of reconciliation and marital bliss at the play's close. As one of the most important characteristics of comedies is the concept of forgiveness, there is no matter how wrong the events were going along a play, because at the end, there must be a happy ending, in where reconciliation and union are the basic points.

Maybe, all those assumptions seem to be contradictory: On the one hand, comedies must be a progression of chaos, disorder, exaggeration... and, on the other hand, a comedy must follow a certain structure that is totally necessary to develop the play. Somehow, the important aspect, and the most interesting, one of a comedy is not the ending which is merely the same along all the plays, but the development of the play itself.