

RALPH ROISTER DOISTER:

The First Regular English Comedy

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This paper, which was presented at the meeting on 23 October 2004, offers an analytical and historical introduction to the play *Ralph Roister Doister*, in preparation for the rehearsed reading that was scheduled for the following week. *Ralph Roister Doister* was written by the English playwright, Nicholas Udall, probably between 1551 and 1553. This paper provides an outline of English theatre in the sixteenth-century, an analysis of the influences of Roman theatre and humanism on sixteenth century theatre and an introduction to the author and the play.

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Drama in the sixteenth-century

It is very easy to see the drama which developed in the age of Elizabeth I as coming out of nowhere and the dramatists who wrote in this period, particularly Shakespeare and Marlowe, as having adapted extraordinarily from the combination of the limited religious drama of the medieval period and a re-awakened humanist interest in the Roman classical drama. But as Norland argues, the development of British drama, which saw its flowering in the age of Elizabeth, had a far longer gestation: "*When Henry VII became King of England drama extended to all corners of the Commonwealth and to every level of society. It would have been as difficult for a citizen of late fifteenth century Britain to escape drama as for a late twentieth century European or North American to avoid television.*" Drama was available in many forms. "*In a single community one could attend a saints play at the local parish church, a Corpus Christi pageant in the local market square, a morality play or interlude at the guildhall and a folk play on the village green.*" (Norland, 1995, p xvii) The King was regularly entertained with masques, pageants and plays in the court. He also personally supported drama through his patronage of both adult and children's groups.

From his accession in 1509 Henry VIII was also a patron of the Gentleman and Children of the Royal Chapel and all of his wives at some time provided patronage to companies of players. Edward VI and his sister Mary were both royal protectors of theatre as were many other nobles at the time. (Norland 1995, xviii)

At the beginning of the Tudor period the only restraints to dramatic activity came from the local authorities, who were concerned about drunkenness and immorality among crowds attending Corpus Christi plays or gatherings for Robin Hood. (Norland, 1995, xix) The purpose of the performances was changing. While many of the plays were to increase faith and devotion, increasingly they were also for the "*commonwealth and prosperity of the city and there was considerable commercial profit*". Because amateurs acted saints' and biblical plays they provided an opportunity for local citizens to be involved in the drama. As well, professional groups of travelling actors were increasingly supported by aristocratic patrons. These players were pressured to meet the moral standards of town councillors so the plays seem to have been a compromise between didactic instruction and popular entertainment. (Norland, 1995, xx)

The reformation changed the nature of the theatre with saints' plays being less acceptable and an increase in morality plays and interludes. Morality plays were intended to teach, but their message wasn't tied to the static theology of the scriptures but included "*the personal views of the author towards political, religious or moral matters incorporated into a set of conventions*" (Richardson and Johnston, 1991, 97). The Morality play was a much more flexible form than the earlier Mystery play. *Everyman* is the most widely known of the Morality plays. Richardson and Johnston note that the term Morality play would not have been found in the period under discussion, when the term "interlude" was used (1991, 97). The Interlude (and we know that *Ralph Roister Doister* is described as an interlude in the prologue) "includes dramatic entertainments of many diverse forms and could be applied to plays with or without a moral theme" (Richardson and Johnston, 1991, 97). Interludes were invariably played in halls, rather than in the outdoor theatres we have come to associate with late medieval theatre and outdoor theatres like the Globe. They provided an "interlude" entertainment, often during a celebratory banquet.

Humanism

The drama was also considerably influenced by humanism, a movement that brought from the continent a renewed interest in classical languages and learning. Chief among these scholars was Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) often described as the “father of humanism”. Erasmus was a Dutch writer and scholar, initially ordained as a priest, but later living as a secular scholar. He was a stringent critic of corrupt church practices and a proponent of study of the Greek and Roman classics, works erstwhile seen as pagan and inferior by the Church. He travelled to England on four occasions influencing the teaching of the classics in schools and universities. Erasmus was a great admirer of the Roman playwright Terence and an advocate for the teaching of drama in Schools.

Terence in Education

Drama became a major means for the teaching of Latin in schools in Britain. The comedies of Terence provided the first and probably the most extensive study of drama for the Renaissance schoolboy. Terence was studied in the lower forms in the early sixteenth century, and later shifted to the higher forms when Cicero became more important. Terence was also studied in the Universities. Records from a leading University bookseller of 1520 show more copies of Terence and Cicero were sold than any other author. A Professorship in Terence was established by Frederick the Wise, Duke of Saxony, at the University of Wittenberg. More than five hundred editions of his plays were published between 1470-1600 (1995, Norland, 65). Terence was to the Tudor age what Shakespeare is today. Copies of Terence's plays included commentaries and essays by the grammarian Donatus. Terence was seen in the late medieval age as an “authority to be cited on the subject of human nature and mores of men as well as a source of rhetorical and personal ornament” (Theiner cited in Norland, 1995, 67). Scholars emphasised his literary craftsmanship and his special appeal to youth. Erasmus said

“The style of his comedy is wonderfully pure, choice and elegant. ... You will be able to learn from him if from anyone and the ancient writers of Latin actually spoke.. and no other author can teach us better the purity of Roman speech nor is any pleasanter to read or more suited to young minds” (Norland, 1995, 84).

Terence was taught in a series of steps outlined in contemporary schoolboy editions as follows: brief appreciation of writer, comments on his circumstances, talent and elegance of language, analysis of nature of comedy, its origins, the number of types of comedy and its laws, a “gist of the plot”, identification of metre, a consideration of aspects of style, archaisms, figures of speech and finally the moral implication of the plays (Norland, 1995, 67).

Initially the commentators treated the plays as purely academic texts but as the sixteenth century moved on, the plays began to be performed in schools and universities. This was assisted by the development of residential colleges in the universities. There are recorded productions of Terence in 1510 and 1516 at King's Hall Cambridge and Plautus in 1519. Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* was produced in Cambridge about 1522. In 1545 St John's and Queen's College Cambridge mandated two plays per year and in 1560 Trinity College ordered the performance of five plays per year. In Christ Church Oxford it was established that Christmas festivities would include two comedies and two tragedies each year. It is likely that the schools followed suit, particularly given they were the training ground for privileged young men moving on to University which they did at around the age of fourteen. (Boas, 1914 16-17)

Theories about comedy as a means of instruction were drawn from Aristotle. It is clear in the commentaries that comedy is chiefly a pattern of civil life. It is an imitation or a representation of domestic life. Comedy is distinguished from tragedy by means of persons and manners in that it is an imitation of humbler persons and leaner fortunes. It is clear that comedy is not just subject to any vices but needs jokes, witticisms and the ridiculous, for the ridiculous is a kind of fault but this ugliness is without pain, harm or misfortune. (Willichius quoted in Norland, 1995, 72)

Donatus, an editorial commentator on the works of Terence, focuses on plot in his commentaries with the central factor being error, which creates the complications, and when error is exposed and the truth revealed then the resolution occurs. He divided the plot into *protasis*, the first action in which part of the plot is made known and part concealed so the audience is held in suspense, *epitasis* the complication of the plot, by which refinement the plot is woven together and *catastrophe*, the resolution of the play. These divisions roughly concur with Aristotle's beginning, middle and end. Donatus also preserved the five-act structure where the act ends when the stage is vacated by all the characters so the chorus or music can be performed. (Norland, 1995, 75)

The other feature of Terence's work was Terence's use of decorum and his preservation of the laws of character by creating traditional comic types of fathers, sons, slaves and prostitutes but he individualised his types to ensure verisimilitude in a fictional plot. He also included manners appropriate to the genre. (Norland, 1995, 77) Perhaps even more important was the moral perceived in comedy “one learns what is useful in life and what, on the contrary, ought to be avoided” so we might know how to fashion “good” character for ourselves. (Norland, 1995, 79) Erasmus defends a critique of Terence's comedies which describes them as lewd and containing lechery and immoral love making by suggesting:

“These fools fail to perceive how much moral goodness exists in Terence's plays, how much implicit exhortation to shape one's life. Nor do they understand this kind of literature is entirely suited – nay was invented - for the purpose of showing up men's vices. For what are comedies but the artful slave, the love-crazed youth, the suave and wanton harlot, the cross-grained peevish avaricious old man, These characters are depicted for us in plays just as in painting so that we may first see what is seemly or unseemly in human behaviour and then

distribute affection or rebuke accordingly. "
(Norland, 1995, 85)

Erasmus suggested that it was the responsibility of the schoolmaster to bring out the moral implications of Terence's plays and he recommended that classical drama be given a prominent place within the school curriculum. Erasmus's influence on the development of dramatists was really significant and one commentator argues that without Erasmus there would have been no Shakespeare.

The writing of Ralph Roister Doister

So let's turn now to the play *Ralph Roister Doister* and its author Nicholas Udall. Given the influence of Terence, this play is very different from the morality plays and interludes that represented commercial or folk drama. It is part of an elite theatre that was developing particularly in schools and universities where structure and characterisation were more influenced by classical models than by the popular theatre. On the other hand this emerging theatre drew from the popular theatre in its use of vernacular and an intention to instruct. The movement towards a youth oriented morality drama, which, after the Reformation, developed into a distinct dramatic type in which education of the adolescent became the central focus, also influenced *Ralph Roister Doister*. Many of these plays were written in and performed in schools, initially on the continent. They were thought to correct or supplement the perspective of Roman comedy by balancing Terentian techniques with the morality form.

There is one extant copy of *Ralph Roister Doister* without a frontispiece. The play is ascribed to Nicholas Udall on the authority of Sir Nicholas Wilson, one of Udall's scholars who includes Roister Doister's mispunctuated letter in his *Rule of Reason* as an example of ambiguity "an example of such doubtful writing which by reason of pointing maie have double sense and contraie meaning taken out of an interlude by Nicholas Udall". (Farmer (ed), Udall, 1906, 143) This inclusion also tends to date the play to somewhere between 1551 and 1553.

Nicholas Udall

Nicholas Udall was a man of many parts: public scholar, university man, heretic, recanter, Latin versifier, dictionary maker, potential monk, schoolmaster, suspect Marshalsea man, theological translator and author, playwright and Director of the Revels.

Udall was born in 1505 and educated at Winchester. At 14 he proceeded to Oxford to Corpus Christi College. Udall took his bachelor's degree in 1524 but 10 years elapsed before he took his Masters. When he went to Oxford the influence of Erasmus was on the increase through his writings. Udall was also very influenced by the revolutionary writings of Luther. The influence of Luther, then under papal ban, was so considerable that there were complaints against the "heretical perversities" of the Oxford men. Udall was subsequently arrested six years later for carrying a copy of the tracts by Luther and Tyndale's translation, a protestant version of the New Testament (1525). He saved his life by public recantation. When Mary came to the throne and there was a catholic revival he managed to stay in favour. He may have considered a monastic life but this did not eventuate. In 1534 he published a Latin phrase book, *Flowers for Latin Speaking* (extracts from Terence), which included a dedication to his own pupils at the Augustinian monastery in London.

In 1534 Udall became Headmaster at Eton and remained there until 1541 when he left under a cloud associated with the theft of College Chapel silver plate. He was imprisoned for a time but was soon released through court influences and given all his back pay. In 1542 he completed his part translation of Erasmus's *Apothegms*. And after, he was engaged with Princess Mary as collaborator on the English translation of Erasmus's *Paraphrase of the New Testament*. At this time, from 1537 he was vicar at Braintree until he resigned from the post in 1544. He remained in favour at the court of King Edward VI, who gave him several preferments. When Princess Mary came to the throne he was in high esteem and was appointed as Director of the Court Revels in 1553-4. In 1555 he succeeded Norwell as Master of Westminster School, a post he lost in 1556 and a month later he died.

(This biography is adapted from notes in Farmer (ed), Udall, 1906, 151-156.)

Ralph Roister Doister

Evidence for the dating of the play to between 1551-1553 is primarily the re-printing of the infamous letter which Merrygreek purposely reads against its real meaning in Thomas Wilson's 3rd edition of the *Rule of Reason* in 1553 as an example of ambiguity. The letter is a love letter intended to convince Dame Custance of Ralph Roister Doister's affections and good intentions towards her. Merrygreek's reading aloud, which ignores the punctuation, communicates the reverse of what is intended. He reads (in part):

'Sweet mistress, whereas I love you nothing at all,
Regarding your substance and riches chief of all,
For your personage, beauty, demeanour and wit
I commend me to you never a whit.
Sorry to hear report of your good welfare.
For (as I hear say) such your conditions are
That ye be worthy favour of no living man;
To be abhorred of no living man;

To be taken for a woman inclined to vice;
Nothing at all to virtue giving her due price.'

The actual intention of the piece is as follows:

'Sweet mistress, whereas I love you – nothing at all
Regarding your riches and substance, chief of all
For you personage, beauty, demeanour and wit-
I commend me unto you. Never a whit
Sorry to hear report of your good welfare;
For (as I hear say) such your conditions are
That ye be worthy favour; of no living man
To be abhorred; of every honest man
To be taken for a woman inclined to vice
Nothing at all; to virtue giving her due price.

The timing of the first production is also a matter for historical disagreement with some historians arguing it was first performed in 1552 to young Edward VI and others suggesting it was performed for Queen Mary at the instance of her marriage to Philip of Spain in the fall of 1553. The play appears to have been written when Udall was schoolmaster in the house of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester. Evidence it was performed by choristers relates to the inclusion of the five songs and the mock-requiem in the play. The boys there may have first created the characters of Roister Doister and Merrygreek. (Norland, 1995, 268)

The subject and intention of the play is clearly set out in the prologue, which is a defence of mirth and comedy because they lift spirits and promote good fellowship, and also there is a moral aim in the prologue and a reference to the classicists.

What creature is in health, either young or old,
But some mirth with modesty will be glad to use –
As we in this interlude shall now unfold?
Wherein all scurrility we utterly refuse,
Avoiding such mirth wherein is abuse;
Knowing nothing more commendable for a man's recreation
Than mirth which is used in an honest fashion.
For mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health
Mirth recreates our spirits, and voideth pensiveness,
Mirth increases amity, not hindering our wealth;
Mirth is to be used both more or less,
Being mixed with virtue in decent comeliness-
As we trust good nature can gainsay the same.
Which mirth we intend to use, avoiding all blame.
The wise poets long time heretofore,
Under merry comedies secrets did declare,
Wherein was contained very virtuous lore,
With mysteries and forewarnings very rare.
Such to write neither Plautus nor Terence did spare,
Which among the learned at this day bears the bell:
These with such other therein did excel

In this Prologue Udall the schoolteacher is evident with his humanist interests and his didactic intentions.

The plot is simple. The artful sycophant and parasite Matthew Merrygreek convinces the foolish and vain Ralph Roister Doister to woo Dame Custance. She is affianced to Gawyn Goodluck and rejects Ralph's advances. Dame Custance's constancy is questioned as Goodluck misconstrues the situation after hearing about it from his servant. Ralph, spurned by Custance, decides to march upon Custance's house and do battle, whereupon he is beaten by her women. In the end Custance's virtue is proven and there is a reconciliation between the parties.

The play is written in five acts with the classical three-part structure described by Donatus and alluded to above. Acts 1 and 2 introduce the principal characters, Ralph Roister Doister a foolish braggart, and his "friend" Matthew Merrygreek and the key narrative, the wooing of Dame Christian Custance, a widow, in accordance with the *protasis*. Act 3 begins the *epitasis* or the business of the play as Ralph's suit to Custance and her responses are dramatically portrayed. Acts 3 and 4 are divided with the complication that her fidelity might be misperceived and Act 4 ends with Ralph's ludicrous attempt to get revenge because Custance has spurned him. Act 5 is the *resolution* with Custance's virtue resolved and reconciliation for the opposing parties. The play is carefully structured in the classical model, which is used as a guide. Clearly the native dramatic instinct was too strong to be content with just revivals of Terence or Plautus so this work is written in the vernacular and its use of a Tudor setting represents an early

mediation between the classical and the local. (Norland, 1995, 270)

The characters in the play seem to have been drawn from classical models but they are very home grown in style, following Terence where character must fit models but still be differentiated for the sake of verisimilitude. Ralph Roister Doister certainly suggests the character was based on the protagonist in *Miles Gloriosus* (Plautus) but the character of the cowardly braggart soldier was a very well known type, which became merged with the swaggering heroes of folk drama in England and on the continent and a stock character (the Captain) in the *Commedia del Arte*. In many of these plays the braggart who is boastful both in terms of his abilities in the field of war and in love, is cast as a wooer. Roister Doister's image is also that of the mock-hero of chivalric romances who is compared to folk heroes from Arthurian legends as well as to classical and biblical heroes. This is how Ralph is portrayed throughout the play as Merrygreek gulls him by flattering him throughout the play in a very transparent manner and in the mock battle scene with Dame Custance's women servants where he proves to be exceptionally silly, vain and ridiculous. Norland suggests that he is also a parody of the sonneteers who had rediscovered Petrarch's love poems (1995, 272).

The other central character is Matthew Merrygreek who is traditionally linked to the parasite characters in Roman plays. He identifies himself as such in the opening soliloquy and tells us all the cronies that he lives off. But despite this model Merrygreek is not really as despicable a character as is the traditional parasite and he resembles more the witty slave of Roman comedy. As Norland suggests, his energy and propensity for mischief suggest the vice of the morality but he lacks the sinister intent (1995, 272). His motivation is sport and he promotes laughter at the expense of fools. Ralph Roister Doister is such a likely gull (a bit like Malvolio) that we can appreciate the role. When his games begin to have adverse effects in that Dame Custance's loyalty is brought under suspicion, Merrygreek develops a plot with her to bring Roister Doister into further disrepute and teach him a lesson.

Norland also suggests that in the style of comedy, the comic exaggeration of Aristophanes prevails over the intrigue of Terence, even though there is error and misapprehension when Custance is suspected of disloyalty (1995, 273). The key to the play is the gulling and the high action comedy that develops out of it and moves into the burlesque mode, particularly with the mock funeral, which satirises the lover, whose metaphor of dying for love is acted out literally.

The letter, discussed above as offering an example of ambiguity, also satirises the tradition of the love letter and can be seen as a precedent both for the love letter in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* and for the mispronunciation of the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Dame Custance is prepared for the burlesque battle by Merrygreek who sets it all up and she joins with him in his final exposure of Ralph Roister Doister. This scene shows Roister Doister's true colours as he dons his kitchen pail as a helmet. It reduces the battle of the sexes to absurdity and recalls and prefigures a series of similar mock battles including the battle in *Lysistrata*, the final drubbing of Falstaff in *Merry Wives* and even, much later, the battle between the belles and the beaux in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. Like Falstaff, the chastened but not changed Roister Doister seeks to salvage his honour by pleading courtesy rather than instinct as the source of his cowardice.

The gender politics in the play are of considerable interest and it lends weight to the argument that Udall had Princess Mary in mind when composing the piece, not only in terms of the many suitors who no doubt approached her but also as a piece in praise of women, both their virtue and their courage. The final prayer for the Queen might indicate the presence of the Queen at the end of the performance.

Udall's adoption of the burlesque model in his integration of native elements with classical models anticipated the major traditions of Elizabethan comedy, as evidenced through the romantic comedies of Shakespeare and the citizen comedies of Shakespeare and Johnson. The play is a more innovative experiment in comic form than its description as the "first regular English comedy" suggests.

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