

Laughter in Aristophanes' Frogs and Shakespeare's As You like It: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to highlight the importance and usefulness of laughter evoked by the comedy works in literature. This paper intends to explore how comedy has been the best tool to elicit laughter by presenting comparative study of Greek playwright Aristophanes' Frogs and Elizabethan playwright Shakespeare's As You Like It, focusing mainly on the comic diction, different techniques, humorous situations and events and role-playing by the memorable characters to provide pleasure and entertainment. By eliciting similarities and differences in the two plays, we have pointed out the role of literary texts in crossing time and spatial boundaries for amusing humanity through words and actions of their characters. After careful perusal of two comedies from different ages, this study has reflected that a literary artist has the power to heal and can teach humanity how to laugh in varied situations and contexts.

Key Words: Laughter, Wit, Humorous, Role-Playing, Pleasure, Entertainment, Humanity

Introduction

According to Maurice Charney, laughter creating through comedy offers the audience, spectators and readers the opportunity to get mental comfort in recreational atmosphere; to express their emotions through laughter caused by comic diction, inversion of the routine order of things, clowny actions and humorously embarrassing events; to defeat their inner sadness by enjoying the comedy works of great writers of the past like Aristophanes, the pioneer of Greek comedy plays and Shakespeare, the pre-eminent Elizabethan playwright. No doubt many writers of succeeding ages till now have benefited from this source (comedy providing laughter) for bringing changes in the serious hectic life of man; and above all to be optimistic to achieve positive results such as feeling oneself burden free for some time at least and also conveying other human beings the significance of comical literature (of past and present), comic T.V plays, comedy movies and comic theatrical performances bring cheerfulness in life. According to Mark Griffith, Aristophanes' *Frogs* like many other old comedies presents a voyage to Hades, a debate over the poetic merit of the two poets, weighty argumentation on the issue under discussion, serious stress on socio-political problems and the wise decision to bring back from the underworld to earth a great playwright to save the city, are the serious subjects but the play is, no doubt, a comedy which amused its audience then and delights its readers even today. Likewise Shakespeare's *As You Like It* though has universally acknowledged serious speeches yet has in its store Touchstone- the witty fool whose very presence is enough to make it one of the best comedies in the world of literature.

Thesis Statement

This study is to focus on the techniques used by Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It* for evoking laughter. Moreover, it will also explore how by arousing laughter the vices and follies of the age have been pointed out.

Research Questions

- How laughter has been created in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*?
- What is the function of laughter in both Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*?
- How through laughter both the playwrights depict vices and follies of their age?

Theoretical Framework

According to Herbert Spencer his Theory of humour, the relief theory is the view that humorous laughter is a manifestation of the release of nervous excitement or emotional tension. He cites that he has received influence by Bain by developing this theory as Bain claims that laughter is release from the serious and that life in general has tension, fear and negative emotion. He believes that contact with triviality or vulgarity gives moments of relief from the chronic strain, thereby causing pleasure. (468)

- While viewing Aristophanes' *Frogs* in the light of Herbert Spencer's theory of humour, the relief theory, it becomes obvious that the play provides pleasure right from the opening scene till the scenes of fully comic episodes involving the trading of clothes which cause the readers to feel relief by producing laughter. Even the less comic episodes provide relief from tensions as one wishes and waits throughout the reading or watching the play for something comic and new still to happen.
- While viewing Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in the light of Herbert Spencer's theory of humour, the relief theory it can be clearly noticed that Shakespeare provides relief with presence of all the requirements of comedy, i-e, enough amount of witty dialogue, love-affairs, singing, music, poetry and above all green atmosphere away from city which is a separate source of relief. The audience as well as the characters of the play including melancholy Jaques feel real relief with wit of Touchstone and the pastoral setting.

Literature Review

Frogs

Laughter is an expression of merriment or amusement especially mirth or derision. Laughter is aroused through mockery, inversion, disguise, deliberate clowny actions and humorously embarrassing events. Comedy which is the cause of laughter

is a play of light and humorous character with a cheerful ending. Laughter is produced as an action for which other human beings are essentially required. Just as one person is not enough to construct a story similarly laughter cannot be produced alone. Mark Griffith opines that laughter (or smiling) is a physical, observable act which is manifested by almost all human beings in very similar ways. But that does not mean according to him, that everyone laughs or smiles at the same things. He further opines that verbal jokes, visual and audible incongruities, unexpected outcomes or combining of events-all may arouse laughter in certain context, though the laughter may be more or less friendly. He gives examples of friendly laughter as joking, banter and self-depreciation. Mark Griffith also mentions hostile laughter with examples of taunting, mockery, satire and ridicule. He believes that by and large these sources of laughter can qualify as "comic" and almost any art form that employs any of these triggers for laughter can be regarded as a "comedy"

Thomas Mitchell while evaluating comedy work *Frogs* by Aristophanes gives his point of view while packing the whole plot and the idea behind the plot into a few lines that bringing the mighty dead before his countrymen, as the living offered no attractions for the purpose, to contrast past and present dramatic schools in the persons of Aeschylus and Euripides, and to settle in the minds of his countrymen that in such productions they might look not only for the soundest intellectual enjoyment but also before the best guides in political and religious knowledge. Thomas Mitchell explains that they were the primary objects which gave birth to the comedy known to us by the title of the "*Frogs*". He admires the characters, the sentiments, outer forms of diction, metre and music as presented in the dialogue and choral odes of the play.

Keith Sidwell about *Frogs* is of the view that comic poets were too powerful not to attract the attentions of political leaders. According to her the consequential laughter induced by on-stage caricature satire was surely hard to ignore in a society where personal honour was central. Keith Sidwell elsewhere points out that in the Aeacus scene; no doubt the old man who beats Xanthias and Dionysus with a whip and as Xanthias suggests the whip being 'bristle-whip' which is the criticism of rival comic practice involving slaves getting beaten.

Edith Hall and Amanda Wrigley appreciate Aristophanes by pointing out that he has been identified behind the birth of Western Literary Criticism, the Western notion of freedom of speech, the transformation of folktale into narrative fiction, platonic irony, Swift's satire, humorous journalism and the tradition of the political cartoon.

By thoroughly reviewing the works of all above-mentioned investigators on Aristophanes with special reference to *Frogs* and evaluating these individually it is to be remarked that Mark Griffith believes the laughter is manifested in very similar ways while close observation of humans discloses that the manner of laughing is quite different having individually; many people laugh without giving expression to it. In the valuable work of Thomas Mitchell the healing power of comedy writers is missing. Keith Sidwell gives importance to the comedy of Aristophanes with reference to its purely political background while the basic purpose of Aristophanes seems to provide perfect entertainment and its evidence is that he started it with disguise and mention of getting laugh as result of a joke. Edith Hall and Amanda

Wrigley in a scholarly way find influence of Aristophanes' comedy on later writers' works but only taking into view the critical perspective. Its primary purpose to entertain and amuse should be given importance on other issues and objectives.

As You Like It

As You Like It has been evaluated in research book edited by Brian Gibbons that whatever a director or reader decides about the meaning of the forest scenes, no production is going to succeed unless Arden is a place for fun, unless an exploration of political and moral knowledge, of metatheatricality and the inscriptions of gender on the body leaves space for wit and laughter, even if that laughter is the laughter of knowingness.

Lynne Magnusson gives logic-based views when opines that the pleasure of Touchstone's wit seems to take as moody a man as Jaques by surprise when he finds his "lungs" begin to crow like chanticleer, / That fools should be so deep-contemplative"(2.7. 30-31) A kind of bifurcation or complexity in the pleasure Jaque derives from Touchstone's humour is suggested by his double-edged effort at analysis: "And in his brain / Which is as dry as the remainder biscuit / After a voyage, he hath strange places cramm'd / with observation, the which he vents / in mingled forms". (2.7. 38-42)

In a research work edited by Michael Hattawayit has been recorded that from one perspective the 'forest' or at least that part of it inhabited by Rosalind and Orlando, offers a setting for the studied folly and inflated joyousness of 'holiday humour' of carnival and feasting. Rosalind's first moments in Arden call upon her not only to act weary but to engage in sprightly and sexy crosstalk with Touchstone; Orlando, having escaped from the lean fare that is his portion at Oliver's state, upon entering the forest stumbles upon a banquet for a Duke. Much of the action as we have seen, consists of feats of performance, 'sports', songs and seeming verbal improvisations. In the forest fools, shepherds and nobility disempowered patriarchs and cross-dressed youths, walk along paths of moral re-creation and explore self-through the playing-out of ritualized roles.

In the book edited by Brian Gibbons, a good analysis of the forest scenes has been given but 'knowingness' has not been explained. Lynne Magnusson presents her logic-based analysis of Touchstone's wit which is quite convincing because of the textual content beautifully utilized and evaluated.

In the book edited by Michael Hathaway it is needed to ponder on the point that it is not exploring of self only but deep exploring of companions has also been done which is the result of the pastoral atmosphere provided by the genius of William Shakespeare. Even a common medical practitioner advises his troubled and upset patients to enjoy outdoors especially greenery to get refreshed.

After detailed and thorough discussion on already done works it can be mentioned that others have done highly creditable research but my finding through this research prove that the great writers who have talent for the art of comedy have the power to heal. It is this power of artistic ability which forces people to laugh. If

tragedy heals through catharsis then comedy, a more difficult genre has its own unparalleled way to heal through laughter.

The path has been paved for the future researchers to focus their research on finding the ways through which the talented human beings, having a sense of wit but unconscious of it, should be positively forced to sit under the shelter of comedy and work for providing happiness to humanity.

Analysis

Frogs

Dionysus being the lead character of the *Frogs* Dionysus being the god of fertility, wine and drama Dionysus the god in whose honour the plays were performed, has been assigned by Aristophanes the task of travelling to Hades to bring back Euripides on earth. It is interesting to note that he is in disguise of Heracles and Xanthias, his servant is with him. It is again interesting to note that his slave Xanthias is on a donkey while the master who is a god also, is on foot. Aristophanes by presenting the inversion of roles between master and the slave, sets the tone of his play, preparing the audience and reader to face what is to come later. The very first sentence uttered by Xanthias expresses the desire to get "laughter". Xanthias wants to have "fun" and when is not allowed to crack a "joke" he complains about the load. At this Dionysus calls him rascal. As Heracles comes out of his house, he laughs at Dionysus for wearing a lion skin. Dionysus tells his desire to bring Euripides from underworld because he is hopeless and dissatisfied with the living poets who are "base" and he calls them "murderers of art". He wants to know the swiftest route to Hades as Heracles had already gone there to capture Cerberus. Heracles suggests that he can reach there quickly by hanging himself or by poisoning himself or by jumping off a tower. Dionysus rejects these and gets guideline for crossing Styx, the lake, to reach Hades. After passing through many hardships he arrives at the lake, is separated from Xanthias whom being slave the boatman disallows in the boat. Therefore, Xanthias walks around the lake. Dionysus is made to row the boat to the gate of Hades. Here starts the paradox where the chorus of frogs appears and their croaking noise irritates Dionysus. This chorus of frogs appears only once. It gives manifold significance of the title. The *Frogs'* irritating croaking can symbolize inferior poets of Athens whose works when presented practically could not appeal to the god of drama rather make him to call these bases. Another interpretation is that frogs' jumping out and them into the water is the quality taken into consideration by Aristophanes who makes Dionysus only here to use his godly qualities in order to reach underworld otherwise he has been awarded many human attributes to create fun and become a source of providing the audience with enough of amusement to laugh. This quality of Dionysus is to go/jump into the underworld and then come out along with one of the greatest Greek dramatists. After singing for some time and mentioning that Muses like their songs the chorus of frogs disappears.

On reaching the shore, Dionysus rejoins Xanthias. This is the part of the play where is witnessed the real comic show for the Athenian audience to enjoy by smiling and laughing and forgetting for some time whatever their social or political problems are. Losing war of Sparta has created what troubles for the civil society, is not to be considered during the stage performance of this very delightful and amusing part of

the play *Frogs*. There is going to be presented excessive use of slapstick in which Clowny actions by Dionysus and Xanthias are performed. There is enough of beating also which when is done on the stage in the very presence of a huge mob, due to human body's strange movements becomes a cause of lively loud laughter.

Incompatibility is depicted through the character of Dionysus who is otherwise a god but is shown to be more fearful, coward and tilted towards manly desires than Xanthias, his slave who is not only braver than him but is also smart enough to create fear of monster Empusa whom he changes through his sharp wit into one object then another and still another one. He starts from darkness and then talks about awful animals and to frighten Dionysus mentions Heracles' warnings to make his point forceful. At this Dionysus curses Heracles. Here is clearly presented inversion and incongruity when Xanthias takes the total charge of commanding authority whereas Dionysus plays the role of fearfully obedient fool. A highly enjoyable comedy drama is produced by Aristophanes where the slave is receiving inner satisfaction by reducing his master's stature making use of different tricks.

With mystic scent of torches and tune of flutes the chorus of Mystics enters continuing their singing. Dionysus consults this chorus to reach the house of the god of underworld. On reaching there he knocks at the door and Aeacus, the doorkeeper appears who mistakes Dionysus for Heracles (due to his attire) and the most humorous scenes follow that can arouse much laughter.

Aeacus who is still annoyed at Heracles for stealing Cerberus, the dog with three heads guarding the door of Hades, threatens to revenge on him by sending hell hounds and dangerous monsters to tear him and leaves to fetch them while all along using abusive language. After Aeacus' departure Dionysus collapses and refusing to get up claims to be faint, gets so much scared that begs for water and a sponge to press upon his heart. His slave calls him to be a coward claiming about himself that he never even thought of cowardice in this situation. Therefore Dionysus gets an opportunity to devise a plan, tries to give ironical remarks on Xanthias' claimed bravery, calls him to be a "dauntless soul" having a "hero complex" and orders him to put on the lion skin and to take the club resulting in "*You be me*" and proposes to carry the baggage himself. The role-playing starts with their change of clothes. The play starts with disguise and disguise is again taking place, this time there is inversion in the master-slave relationships. A maid comes and forces Heracles (now Xanthias) to join the feast being prepared by her mistress for Heracles where his best favourite foods will be served. Foods and drinks like music and singing are an essential part of a comedy. The maid then mentions the presence of the best dancing girls to accompany him and leaves. Now Xanthias feels happy. But the idea of the presence of girls discloses Dionysus' real character. He swiftly changes the clothes with now annoyed Xanthias, to enjoy the dances himself and becomes Heracles again. Much fun is created in the new situation because at once the landlady of the tavern with her associate Plathane comes and both of them identify Heracles who during his last visit ate their garlic, fish, bread, cheese, etc. so they go for bringing help to punish him and threatening to throw him into the pit of the dead man. In this funny and highly laughable situation Dionysus again implores Xanthias to change the clothes to which he agrees and now can be identified as Xanthias.

Aeacus re-appears threatening Heracles (now Xanthias) who very cleverly requests to torture his slave (now Dionysus) to find the truth about the theft of his dog. Heracles (Xanthias) tells a variety of torturing methods to Aeacus to apply for this purpose on the slave who (Dionysus) gets so much frightened that tells the truth about himself being a god. Heracles (Xanthias) suggests the whipping to check if a god can cry in pain. Aeacus whips them both and Dionysus' tears make his position doubtful. Aeacus decides to present their case to the king and queen of the Hades. Later the truth of Dionysus being the god is verified and finding Xanthias to be a slave Aeacus and Xantias talk complaining against their masters. This gives a clue towards slave-slave relationship.

During their conversation it is disclosed that in the hall of the palace a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides is to take place to decide who is the best tragedian to go back to Athens for helping them in their present critical social and political situation. Dionysus, the god of theatre is appointed the judge. During the contest (agon) Euripides arguments in favour of his realistic character portrayals while Aeschylus claims that his characters are heroic, virtuous and can be followed by people. To judge the stylistic methods of the both the words from their poetry are weighed in the scales; liberalism is rejected in favour of Aeschylus' deep trend towards traditional moral values. Dionysus gives the verdict that it is Aeschylus who is to go back to Athens for giving the best advice to the Athenians to save the city. Before their departure Aeschylus gives his decision that it is not Euripides but Sophocles who is to reign the Hades as the best playwright in his absence. Dual choral selection is sarcastic reference to the inferior poets who provide immature literature which is feared to spoil the magnificent image of Greek drama in the present crises period of Athens. Aristophanes having taste for old traditional styles presents the revolting ones as frogs whose poetry is as irritating and mere sounds as the croaking of the frogs is. Aristophanes ridicules the new trend in education introduced by the Sophists (he includes Euripides among them) for manipulating language to get advantage during a debate.

As You Like It

Inspiring poetry, lively characters, charming songs, universally appreciated full of wisdom speeches, romantic comedy and meaningful humorous remarks make *As You Like It* an all-time comedy paly to derive pleasure from. The plot has been constructed so masterfully that ultimately one place-the Forest of Arden- becomes the Centre of all activities involving eating, singing, romancing, sighing, helping, waiting, and even reconciliating.

In this joyous comedy, in the beginning Orlando, a noble young man complains to Adam, their loyal old servant, against his real elder brother Oliver's authoritarian and cruel behaviour towards him. Oliver, being Jealous of Orlando as he is popular among all, Oliver ill-treats him. Orlando has been deprived of receiving school education though he has natural talent for it. He declares not to tolerate such treatment further. Here Oliver enters and on Orlando's demand of his share of money left by his father, Oliver gets offended and both start fighting physically. Orlando proves his might by holding Oliver in his strong grip. Adam comes to the rescue. Now Oliver plans with Charles, the wrestler, to kill Orlando during wrestling. Charles

also brings the news that Duke Fredrick banished Duke Senior (his own brother) Rosalind's father, and himself got the dukedom. Rosalind, friend-cousin of Fredrick's daughter Celia, has been stopped from going with her father.

Rosalind is very sad when Touchstone, the fool, and Le Beau, an attendant bring the news about an interesting wrestling match between Orlando and dangerous Charles. But Rosalind and Celia go to watch the wrestling match where Orlando defeats Charles but is himself defeated by the beauty and gracefulness of Rosalind who gives him her necklace as an unforgettable reward over his victory. Rosalind is ordered by Duke Fredrick to banish within ten days. Celia decides to go with her. Both decide to disguise themselves to avoid evil intentions of the strangers. Celia puts umber on her face and Rosalind disguises as a man. With their disguise which is an ingredient of comedy the humour and wit are introduced.

The Forest of Arden is the Centre of action in the Act two. The banished Duke Senior has already got settled here. In the palace Duke Fredrick gets furious at the escape of the girls for which he holds Orlando also responsible. Adam is worried and informs Orlando about his assassination plan at the hands of Oliver and guides him to leave the place. Adam gives Orlando not only his saved money but also offers his services in this old age by accompanying him which Orlando accepts. In the forest Rosalind and Celia are found dead-tired while Touchstone (who has gone with them) is a support with his witty remarks now and then. They meet Corin and Silvius and there is much talk on food, love and shelter. Rosalind buys Corin's land and employees him to serve her. In the same forest in the presence of Duke Senior and Jaque, Amiens sings and as reaction of the song Jaque's melancholy nature is revealed. On the other side Orlando goes to bring food for tired old Adam. Somewhere else Jaque is delighted to meet Touchstone. Orlando with a drawn sword comes to get food from Duke Senior's dinner who shows, in return, civil attitude and sends him to bring Adam. Here Jaque delivers his universally famous speech "All the world's a stage". Orlando and Adam arrive and there is much eating and singing.

In the act three, Duke Fredrick threatens Oliver to snatch his lands if he fails to bring Orlando. In the forest Orlando the lover hangs romantic versus on the trees in praise of Rosalind. Now Rosalind (disguised as Ganymede) is in love with Orlando; Touchstone is in love with Andrey, a rustic girl, (their love-affair is vulgar and unromantic but a parody of Rosalind-Orlando affair. It is this couple which proves to be a cause of laughter in *As You Like It*. But the forest of Arden provides enough space with romantic, merry-making and fun-creating activities which produce laughter. In Silvius-Phebe affair, Silvius is in love, but Phebe is rather arrogant. Rosalind (Ganymede) tries to convince Phebe in favour of Silvius and the situation becomes highly humorous as Phebe gets attracted by Ganymede (Rosalind).

In the act four Rosalind proves her suffering and dignity while comparing maids and men. She claims that men are April when they woo. December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives. Oliver arrives in search of his brother and tells about ill-treatment of Duke Fredrick and also tells how Orlando has saved him from a lioness' attack.

In the act five Touchstone promises Andrey to marry her. Orlando and Oliver are united. Oliver and Celia fall in love. Jaque can see many marriages. Jaque brings the news to confirm the happy ending that Duke Fredrick's attempt with his army against Duke Senior has been a failure because at the hands of a hermit he has become a convert and has to give dukedom to Duke Senior. All decide to go back except Jaque who selects the company of Duke Fredrick to learn more about life.

The Forest of Arden becomes a symbol of pastoral tradition. Shakespeare deals with aristocratic and common people in his plays. The romantic elements take us into the delightful world having comic elements which maintain laughter and lighthearted mood. The title of the play also suggests that the play is to please all tastes *As You Like It* contains fantasy, wit and humour. In the epilogue Rosalind addresses the women and asks them to like the play as much as pleases them. She also appeals men to like the play.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Rosalind, Celia, Jaque, Orlando and above all Touchstone makes this comedy a great success. We find enough laughter in the sighs of romantic Rosalind, in the melancholy of Jaque, who is also a source of laughter in the witty remarks of Touchstone. There has been created a balance masterfully by Shakespeare in between seriousness and sadness and laughter. Shakespeare's seven songs, the jests of Touchstone, Jaque's melancholy and the laughter of Rosalind are enough to place this play among the best comedy plays in literature of all times.

Similarities

Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It* have many similarities: both are comedies and are meant to produce laughter. Both the playwrights use mockery to convey the serious messages in their plays. Mockery is to ridicule others for comedic effect. Both use comedy teams because a single person cannot produce comedy and both display disguise. Both show change of place. Dionysus' comedy team consists of Xanthias, Aeacus, the maid and frogs while Touchstone' comedy team consists of Andrey, Corin and Phebe. In Both the plays abusive language has been used. All the essentials of a comedy are available in both the plays. Both have mention of sex and vulgarity. Both have enough of food, singing and amusement. It is concluded that the difference of time-periods (i.e., the differences of centuries) cannot stand as a hindrance in man's thinking alike especially when their purpose is the same, to provide happiness and laughter to man.

Dissimilarities

Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It* have many dissimilarities as well. The playwrights belong to different eras. Aristophanes belongs to Greek period and Shakespeare to Elizabethan. *Frogs* displays simple disguise while *As You Like It* displays sexual disguise. *Frogs* has Old comedy structure while *As You Like It* has new comedy structure. Both have different and unique titles which serve their themes individually. Aristophanes' *Frogs* lacks the colour of female characters of *As You Like It* which are the soul of the body of Shakespeare's play. The main comic character in *Frogs* is a god while Touchstone in *As You Like It* is a man. In *Frogs* laughter is provided to the audience whereas in *As You Like It*, the fellow characters also get amused.

Conclusion

In this research paper a comparative study on laughter in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* has made it possible to find that different people living in different eras may have similarities and dissimilarities but literature especially comedy dramas provide so much pleasure to the audience that they express it by laughter. Both Aristophanes and Shakespeare are comedy writers; both are well-reputed, respected, excessively read, re-read and researched. The purpose to compare both of them is to bring to light how two prominent figures, with centuries' time-span between them can still write in the same genre and for the same objective, i.e., to make fun of vices and follies of the people to provide soothingness to sad and suffering humanity. After deep probing into the two plays and after textual analysis it has been found that a literary writer having natural artistic talent has the quality to heal. A literary artist can also teach humanity how to laugh.

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