

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# A Maidenhead Well Lost 1634

Thomas Heywood (1570-1641)

## OVERVIEW

### Antecedents

Scouring early British comedy, we come on a wide variety of comic perspectives, finally perhaps giving up on the search for a single type. And no wonder! The comedies we call Elizabethan or Jacobean have their roots in traditions which appear deeply different from them. And yet for all that appearance, the comic tradition suggests that a single if loose continuity binds together comedies from a vast historical period.

The historical background: Greece

The Greco Roman and the mediaeval traditions of comedy form a very bumpy continuity with each other. The Hellenic tradition, which comes down to a long but broken continuum, ranges from archaic rural rituals, grounded in earth and nature cults, and deriving from still older rites coequal with the Dorian invasion, the northern racial intrusion which took its impulses from the same stock from which the Homeric epics derived. This was only the beginning of the lusty and experimental Greek comic tradition, which reached a high point in the second half of the fifth century B.C., with Aristophanes. We are here, already, with a version of comedy which does not directly align with the modern sense of the comic. Aristophanes, and fellow Greek comedians—almost all of whose work is missing—drove for the social jugular, mocking corrupt politicians and social practices—like addiction to the law courts, or fancy empty pedagogical theories—or exposed the disastrous politics of war, always with a turn toward the mocked and grotesque. A century or more later than Aristophanes, in the Hellenistic culture which succeeded the great age of democracy, a playwright like Menander brought onto the Greek stage a new domesticity, bourgeois settings and tight sharp mimes which invited the ‘middle class’ to turn inward on itself, self-mocking but self-amusing.

The historical background: Rome

Plautus and Terence work the territory of Menander, slighting large themes, going for the domestic, or the personal-private. On the side of human nature, they tend to share our pathos and hopes, leaving the satiric comic to the hard biters, like Petronius, who in the *Satyricon* treats us as a special kind of beast, in no way morally directed, or driven by affection, let alone by love. With this kind of *saeva indignatio*, or comic anger, Petronius joins the Aristophanic bitter in a sharp revenge on the growth of the middle class into history. He also takes his place beside a fellow Roman sharp tooth, Juvenal, who equalled him in his comic fury at the imbecility of the human.

The historical background: mediaeval

Why this rapid tour of names from the history of western comedy? Simply to hint at a stage from which modernity can begin to formulate new modes of expression. Little more than the above notes will have sufficed to set a direction through the formative stages of the thought movement we are tracking. With the middle ages the comic spirit adopts many and new forms. Gargoyle art, to pick a familiar plastic example, steers us in the direction of the new spirit, the comic as the contentious, the wry and awry.

What could better simulate this twist than the mediaeval drinking song—think of the *Carmina Burana*—which joke destiny into its argument, or of those morality plays in which the comedy, as in the sense of Dante's *Commedia*, lay in the ‘happy ending’ of making your way to the door of paradise.

Approaching today's play: Heywood the ingenious Thomas Heywood is a small but prolific individual in the long flow of comic writers, whose common bond is that peculiar weave of scorn for the human and fascination for the unexpected which the comic figure can generate. A middle class country boy, Heywood took his privileged University education at Cambridge, then gravitated to the London stage, where, like Shakespeare, he plunged into the total life afforded by a bustling, amusement-loving commercial city. Heywood was a much sought after actor, and the author of more than one hundred plays, not to mention his work as feuilletonist, in which he wrote prolifically on most of the hot issues of the day, coming down firmly, whenever it was relevant, on freedom of expression.

## CHARACTERS

**Julia.** Daughter of the Duke of Milan, in love with the Prince of Parma, to whom she has surrendered her virginity. The play as a whole concerns her fidelity to Parma, to whom she reports, immediately she finds it out, that she is pregnant. She endures Parma's equally rapid decision, that he must break their engagement. Little does either Julia or Parma realize that the malcontent Stroza, secretary to the Duke of Milan has from the play's outset spread false information about both herself and Parma, whispering that they have both been untrue to one another. It takes but a word for this destructive news to spread through the community

**Parma.** Having been falsely accused of infidelity to Julia, the prince breaks off their engagement, but nonetheless remains close to the pregnant mother, and when Julia gives birth, Parma gives the infant to the Duke of Florence, reporting that Julia is no longer a Virgin, but that Florence—if he cares to guarantee his reputation-- should test Parma's claim. The test itself—a night bringing together Laretta and the Duke of Florence--leads to the dramatic finale of the play which includes a complete exoneration of Julia.

**Laretta.** Banished from Milan by Julia, this daughter of General Sforza is rescued, in her impoverished flight, by the Duke of Florence, with whom she falls in love and whom she ultimately weds. It is her sacrifice of Her virginity that enables Florence to realize that Julia is truly betrothed to Parma; the slander caused by Sforza has met its match. Laretta will go on to marry the Prince of Florence, in the play's second happy turn.

**Duke of Milan.** Julia's father, who reluctantly agrees to the banishment of Laretta and her mother. At the end he is delighted when Parma makes his daughter an honest woman.

**Stroza.** Frustrated in his military ambitions, he determines to take revenge on the General involved, and his daughter Laretta. After Julia's illegitimate baby is born, Stroza abandons the infant by the roadside. In the end, after having confessed his misbehavior, he is defeated in a duel, and forgiven by the Duke of Milan.

**Prince of Florence.** It is the Prince who finds Laretta wandering in the woods with her mother, and gives her shelter. Gradually he falls in love with Laretta. An anonymous letter from the Prince of Parma indicates that Julia has been deflowered, but the Prince of Florence refuses to believe this, and steps forward into the bed trick which will eventually exonerate Julia and prepare

## SYNOPSIS

The narratively and morally complex play before us turns around two axes. First there is the tale of the damages done by Stroza, secretary to the Duke of Milan, who comes on as a strong malcontent, bringing with him a baggage of hostility toward General Sforza and his daughter Laretta. He will satisfy his hostility by breaking up the intended marriage between Julia, the daughter of the Duke of Milan, and her beloved Prince of Parma, by spreading the false report that each of these lovers has been unfaithful to the other.

The trajectory of the play will involve clearing Julia's name, convincing Parma that Julia has been true to him, and getting Julia and Parma married, as had been their intention from the outset of the play. The

chief obstacle, to clearing Julia's name, is the slander made against her by the malcontent Sforza. How will it be possible to clear Julia's name? The answer is not simple, in this complex play. The trick will be to convince the Duke of Parma that Julia is a virgin—which she is-- a proper candidate for marriage to him, and an ingenious means is found, involving Lauretta, to justify Julia, to get her married to Parma, and to find an appropriate husband for Lauretta. The trick is to induce Lauretta to replace Julia, so that she can sleep with Florence, under the guise of Julia.

So it happens. Lauretta sleeps with Florence, who thinks he is sleeping with Julia, as a test of her virginity. At the conclusion of their night together, but before the light of sunrise, the Duke of Florence presents a ring and marriage documents to Lauretta. When Julia, who is falsely assumed to have slept that night with the Duke of Florence, is asked for the documents, the following day, she will be unable to produce them. She, after all, was not the one who slept with the Duke of Florence. She is not able to hand over these proofs, later in the day, when she is asked to present them to the Prince. The evil planning of Sforza is at once intuited, Julia's innocence is made apparent, and the ground is cleared for a clean and straightforward pair of marriages, between Julia and Parma—who had never broken fidelity with one another-- and Florence and Lauretta who had maintained their mutual trust. Out of a chaos of evil manoeuvring, a bundle of sleeping around, the virtues of chastity, fidelity, and marriage are sustained.

## SCENES

The first attention-enforcer is our awareness of the the vicious mind of Sforza. This permanent malcontent is determined to undermine the romance of Parma and Julia, who are engaged. He lets it be known, on all sides, that Julia and Parma have been unfaithful to one another. This is pure disinformation.

Julia writes to Parma with the news that she is pregnant. Parma assumes, incorrectly, that Julia has been unfaithful to him with another man. He descends into a deep depression, and breaks off his engagement. Julia decides that Lauretta is the one who slept with Parma, and has Lauretta and her mother banished from the country.

Lauretta and her mother flee to the woods, where she is rescued by the Duke of Florence, who puts up the two women in a hunting lodge. The Duke falls in love with Lauretta. However the Duke knows that he cannot marry Lauretta, because she is not of noble birth. Consequently he decides to follow his own father's desire, and to marry Julia. Parma, however, grows desperate at the idea that Julia should marry another—the love bond is unbreakable between Julia and Parma—and he informs Florence that Julia is not a virgin. At this Stroza and the Duke of Milan, eager to rescue Julia's reputation, work out a plan—discussed above under plot—by which the virginity of Julia can be confirmed, the mutual availability of Parma and Julia be assured, and the wedding of Julia to Parma at last be finalized.

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Reflections on the play.

The present play lies modestly along the long line of comedies which reaches us from such ancient geniuses as Aristophanes and Plautus. Each of these masters of comedy finds a way both to mock humanity, and the human condition, and to exalt it. (Not to crush it, for such a Puritanical devastation could do no good to the community, or to the individual soul, a truth borne in on the Jacobean citizenry in its recent past, by the Puritanical regimen of Cromwell). The exaltation in question, in the present drama. Is the part of comedy hardest to understand throughout the long comic tradition, the human survives and continues, and classically—as in the *Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*—becomes the residue of endurance in the most deeply grasped figure of the narration. It is in the present play, as in many more deep diving contemporary works, ultimately clear that true love, like that between Julia and Parma, will prevail, and that because of the tenacity of the individuals involved. An elaborate narrative invention, the trick of the bed, brings the whole tale to fruition, and enables the thwarted ones to realize their dreams.

