

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Roister Doister (1567 - posthumous publication)

Nicholas Udall (1504-1556)

OVERVIEW

The historical setting of the drama

The mediaeval mime, jongleur presentation, or religious morality play present us with a world in which the vibrant classical traditions of tragedy and comedy have lost their traditional roots in a whole culture's imagination. Udall's play, one of or the first proper English comedy, eschews the traditions of the mediaeval drama, though it too creaks and groans with stage conventions that seem hardly to have found their form. (The most fitting format, for a play like the one before us, may be the intimate drawing room setting watchable on the U Tube version of *Roister Doister*. There is endless to and fro in a limited space, with ample room for the endless whispering of secrets and the rapid cooking up of comic plots.)

The action of the drama

The sources of the working play are diverse, and in their diversity guarantee a jolt of attention. There are countryside characters of bizarre fancy— Mumblecrust, Merygreek, Tibet, Alyface, and of course Roister Doister himself—who, like the sub-Falstaffian figures in Shakespeare, feed into a rustic comic sardonic tone, almost as though they coincided into elements of language—and there are the characters drawn from other traditions, the mediaeval, which lies behind the money bags unscrupulous Old Jew, and the classical—Roister Doister himself, to cite the chief example, being a direct copy of the Miles gloriosus of Plautus (254-184 B.C.E.), the Braggart Military Man, who comes in for the same kind of pillorying, in the Miles Gloriosus, which awaits the mocked macho in Udall's play.

The language of the play

The play presents an inter tuning of rustic presence and rustic talk, at a still unformed stage of modern English, with the seasoned tradition of Latin drama—Plautus' play was itself an adaptation of an earlier Greek play (now lost) , itself structured around an archetypically universal set of themes. This literary genealogy provides training grounds for skillful adaptation, and for who knows how decisive a role in making Ralph Roister Doister a high success on the early English stage. That stage was, after all, itself susceptible to the kinds of slapstick and in you face comedy we know from many of Shakespeare's comedies.

Backgrounding this play

Fully to appreciate this play, as a step in literary history, is to review the conspicuous morality which marks comedy in western literature. It is of the traditional character of comedy that it pillories, from a position of traditional or superior morality, behaviors that travesty good sensr. Comedy is from the start critical and conservative, emerges from a disposition of looking down—and both Merrygreek and Roister Doister amply fill the bill of the looked down on, mocked. This general point about comedy can unfold a wide net to unfurl around the present play.

Comedy in the west arguably had its start with Homer. Often the comedic in that writer is bold—though it regularly springs from a 'down looking,' as we have remarked about the humor in *Roister Doister*. (Think of the 'joke' Odysseus plays on the Cyclops, when he identifies himself as 'no man.' Think of Thersites' 'painful-amusing' fall from a roof.) The humor in a situation is likely to stem from one character's comparatively low level of understanding of the humorous situation he finds himself in. Comedy, in literary practice, has from the earliest occasions involved pain at someone else's expense.

It might seem closer to probable if we spoke—we can stay with the Greeks for a moment—of tragedy, rather than comedy, as the proper realm of pain. Is it not true that in tragedy we suffer, in comedy we laugh? The reverse will seem to be true, if we look closely at what remains of ancient Greek literature. We have a handful of plays remaining to us from the three major tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In what we may call the most achieved of those tragedies—the Oresteia, Prometheus Bound, Ajax, Oedipus the King, Medea—the tremendous pain we are obliged to track aligns deeply with the exaltation we feel—at Prometheus' daring on humans' behalf, at Oedipus' daring unwrapping of his own guilt, at Medea's brutal assertion of individual dignity—an exaltation which far transcends any pleasure in mockery, for which comedy could ready us.

Who wrote Roister Doister?

Was it a man who had suffered rebuffs and scorn, and knew how to express disdain for his oppressors? And to indulge a jolly good laugh, at the world's expense?

Multiple spellings of the author's name reinforce the difficulty we have, in pinning down this individual to a single identity. Uvedale, Udall, Woodall—all these names give him a toehold on historical existence, and align with his variety of identities. Udall was educated at Winchester College and Corpus Christi, Oxford, and went on from Oxford to teach Latin in a London school, from 1534-1541, when he was found guilty of abusing certain of his pupils, and convicted under the Buggery Act, which carried the death penalty. Thanks to an impassioned letter, begging two friends in high places to intercede, Udall found himself facing a one year sentence, after which, remarkable to say, Udall found himself once more a respected teacher, in which role he lived into the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary 1 (1516-1528). At this point he was appointed Vicar of Braintree, and subsequently returned to teaching at the school where he was educated, Westminster. Through Udall's life, therefore, we see the passages from significant education through social infraction and back to respectability. Lodged in this *cursus vitae* nestled sufficient human experience to ballast an awareness of the follies, missteps, and outrages that go to making a comic-ready life.

CHARACTERS

Roister Doister, a braggadoccio blowhard, susceptible to the self-interested suggestions given him by Matthew Merrygreek. This Roister Doister figure will have been familiar, to a Latin educated audience, which will have recognized Doister as a squeeze off of the *Miles Gloriosus*, the Braggadoccio Soldier from the Latin playwright Plautus. Plautus helped establish that 'type' as part of the stock repertoire of later literature.

Dobinet Doughtie, Roister Doister's boy—one of the omnipresent slaves, maids, or servants who composed the dramatic background of Elizabethan drama—and society. It is he who carries Roister Doister's gifts to Lady Constance.

Lady Constance: a widow, the object of Roister Doister's affection, or more properly of his need for cash. She has given no sign of affection to Roister Doister, who has in fact just seen her on the street, fallen head over heels in love, and sent her both love gifts and a romantic letter. She is engaged to be married, and for that and many other reasons has no interest in Roister Doister's suit.

Madge Mumblecrust, Lady Constance's nurse. One of the little folk who constitute the background opinion—ridicule of Roister—of the play. Though at first impressed by Roister Doister, and willing to carry his love letter to Lady Constance, she becomes an aggressive ally of Constance, in her moves to rid herself of Roister Doister.

Tom Trupenie, servant to Lady Constance. Constance is a winner in this play, and Trupennie joins the chorus of supporters of Constance.

Merrygreek: a parasite, fashioned after the stock character of Roman or Hellenistic drama—s 'friend' of Roister Doister-- con man trickster, hanger on with Roister Doister, ultimately there to take advantage of Roister Doister who is in turn using him. Merrygreek is always out for number one, though his natural conviviality assures his readiness to play any social game. When he discovers that Roister Doister is close to dying of unrequited love, he performs a mock service for the dead, but when his master calms down, Merrygreek carefully reads his master's love letter to Lady Constance, playing mischievously on the sensibilities of both Constance and Roister. In the end, as Lady Constance and her maids assault Roister Doister, Merrygreek participates, slashing out merrily at both sides.

Gawyn Goodluck: a merchant, engaged to Lady Constance. He is just returning from a business trip, when confronted with the unwelcome suggestion that his wife might be having an affair. An upright fellow, outraged when he learns of Roister Doister's advances to Gawyn's fiancée, he is rapidly reassured, and delighted to be with his fiancée again. In the end he is social enough to join in a country dance and song reconciliation.

Tristram Trustie, friend to Gawyn

Sym Suresby, servant to Goodluck

Tibet Talkapace Constance's maiden, and ally in her combat against Roister Doister

Annot Alyface Constance's maiden and ally; a singer, she initiates the first of the songs that spread throughout the play

Harpax, scrivener, the writer of Roister Doister's love letter to Lady Constance.

THE PLOT

The plot itself is thin but direct. The setting, the action, the language of the play all speak to the same basic set of emotions that drive much that we call comedy: readiness to mock; a pompous front man, digging his own social grave with his bluster; a jovial or simply self-interested side kick, who is out to get his ten cents worth from the development of dubious affairs. Such well worn and beloved scenarios—Falstaff and those who mock him, Ralph in the Honeymooners, Abbott and Costello trading gaffes and prat falls, Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*—the cocktail mix is diverse, but the comic character, whose faults and follies construct the frame of a good comedy, is consistently at the center of Udall's amusement. He (for the best comic characters—pace Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, or Carole Burnett—are men, preferable for they are the more likely, of the two genders, to yield to puffy delusions and to setting themselves up as fools.) Given this narrative back-drop there remain few surprises for us in this play.

The moral goal of the present comedy is made clear from the outset. The playwright establishes the beneficial advantages of mirth:

For mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health...

The author offers a play which will ensure laughter with its health, and

Which against the vainglorious doth inveigh...

The narrator, Matthew Merrygreek, proceeds to tell us of his needs, of which food and money and a place to put his head at night are foremost. Fortunately for him he has friends all over town who will keep him off the streets, and invite him to supper; yet he feels that it is time, now, to turn to his 'friend' Roister Doister,

For truly of all men he is my chief banker

Both for meat and money...

And onwards goes the text, pointing out that Roister Doister always follows his own goal, usually associated with wooing a widow, that he plays the macho but is in fact far more apt at 'keeping the Queen's peace.'

With this introduction a play is launched on its mission of expectable, and hilarious, developments. Merrygreek will cozy up to Roister Doister, flatter him and propose lines of strategy for the old letch, and Roister Doister will target in on the Lady Constance, who means to him both money and much needed approbation from the female sex. The interplay which follows this rapid definition, of the quest of the drama, will involve the playing out of the twinned, but oh so different, drives of Merrygreek and Roister Doister, the scorn of Constance for her would be suitor, and the general merry making, of the buddies and jokesters, the sidekicks of Merrygreek, who form a chorus of mockery directed both at Roister Doister and at his deeply self-interested follower.

EVENTS

The prologue. A paean to the pleasures of mirth, which brings health and happiness. Udall is at pains to reject any of the scurrility that often accompanies mirth, and to stress modesty and good spirits. At the end we see that he has been true to his intention.

Confabulation joins Roister Doister and Merrygreek, leading to the former's plan to cadge much needed cash from Lady Constance. While the two men plot together, it is Merrygreek who is at the same time trying to undermine, and defraud, his co-conspirator, Roister Doister.

Rustics mutter out the local gossip, as they work busily at sowing and spinning in their master's house. Smart country repartee. A carefully interpolated background accompaniment to the main action.

Lady Constance becomes aware of Roister's suit, has no interest in him, and realizes he is a 'brainsick fool.' She of course is engaged to be married—to Gawyn Goodluck—and is awaiting her fiance's return.

Roister boasts that he will take his lady love by force, one way or the other. His bluster grows more unconvincing by the minute. We know that he is all talk. Merrygreek humors him.

A slapstick altercation ensues, in which Roister Doister is routed by Constance and her friends. Our hero is in fact just a cardboard colonel. Constance and her lady allies drive off Doister and Merrygreek.

Lady Constance's husband rejoins her, and they celebrate the defeat of Roister. A general triumph is declared.

Recovering from their conflict, the whole group—Roister Doister included-- sing a merry song in honor of the Queen. Udall is true to his promise, to bring merriment along with mirth; and in fact Roister Doister becomes ultimately a figure of fun, not of scorn; a kind of Falstaff figure, as we know him from the conclusion of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

THEMES

Greed Roister Doister is looking for money, and most of the play involves his search to win the favors of Lady Constance, whom he fancies as a cash cow. His greed for Constance's money is rivalled only by Merrygreek's need for Roister Doister's money. This tangled interrelation, between the two men, forms the most complex literary perspective of the play. In the end neither man is the richer.

Pride. Not only does Roister Doister represent greed, but he is also a perfect mediaeval example of vainglory. (Udall writes, in the prologue, that his play 'against the vainglorious doth inveigh,' choosing as his example of vainglory and pride the braggard soldier who is his main character. The mediaeval mindset revolved readily around archetypal figures, and Roister Doister is a model for two 'types;' the greed-driven and the vainglorious.

Self-delusion Roister Doister, a character based on the Braggard Soldier of Plautus, is comically self-deceptive. He has minimum self-awareness, even when others are making a fool of him. He is, therefore, easily mocked throughout the play. 'All the day long is he facing and craking/ Of his great acts in /fighting and fraymaking...' 'If any woman cast on him an eye/up is he to the hard ears in love by and bye...'

Exploitation Merrygreek thrives on the handouts he gets from Roister Doister and from many other friends around town; in return, Merrygreek is fulsome in his praise of such as Doister. Merrygreek seems to show no sign of shame at so boldly probing Roister Doister for food or shelter. Nor does he hide his contempt for this man, or his ability to manipulate Roister:

I can with a word make him fain or loath,
I can with as much make him pleased or wroth
I can when I will make him merry and glad
I can when me lust make him sorry and sad...

Scorn Lady Constance feels nothing but scorn for Roister Doister, who is a braggadocio fool. (We might say that Udall himself feels scorn for both Roister Doister and Merrygreek. But Lady Constance is the supreme purveyor of scorn, in the present instance.) She has received a marriage proposal from Roister Doister; she makes it clear that she had 'rather be torn in pieces and slain' than accept such a proposal. She gathers her lady allies, and prepares to batter the adversaries, Merrygreek and Roister Doister.

Intrigue The cast of rustics, who play constantly around the chief characters, form a thematic background to the play, pure country talk and gossip. These characters form the core of allies who band together in the end, to drive Roister Doister away from Lady Constance. What follows is slapstick, the Lady and her troops dispelling Roister Doister and Merrygreek. In slapstick the conventional rules of humor, verbal wit, innuendo, and the sardonic are abandoned in favor of overt blows—or other appropriate assaults—which reduce conflict to the simplest gestures of the body.

Reconciliation In the end Roister Doister and Merrygreek attempt to abduct Lady Constance, but fail, and are driven away. Congreve has no bitterness to spread, over the remains of the play. A rural festival of harmony, which includes Roister Doister, bathes the whole show in a warm final light. We are taken back to Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, at the conclusion of which even the trickster Falstaff, another old fool, is included in the rustic traditional ceremony that brings closure to the formerly conflictual forces opposed to him. No hard feelings, after all. At this point we seem to rejoin the ancient Greek Aristophanes who, at the end of his *The Peace*, celebrates the rustic and forgiving wonders of simple country life.