

# **Confetti Of Literary Thoughts**

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## **Witty Fools and Foolish Wits: Three Shades of Humour in *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night***

Dr. Rajani, R.

*It is better to be a witty fool than a foolish wit*

“It is better to be a witty fool than a foolish wit.” Comments Feste the motley fool of *Twelfth Night*. “The term humour designates the species of the comic that is any element of the work of literature whether a character event or utterance which is designated to amuse or excite mirth in the reader or audience.” (Abrams 343). Humour is the term that goes back to the ancient theory, that a particular mixture of human determine each type of personality and from the derivative applications of humorous to one of comically eccentric characters in the Elizabethan Comedy of Humours..

Shakespeare presents humour in his happy comedies in all these senses. For example, for him, it is an individual quality of a person's character by the presence of which the person in question. For him, it is a trait in the character of the person by which he is distinguished from other characters in the play,. Any oddity or peculiarity of a person's mind is his humour. So his whims, prejudices, mannerisms etc. which distinguishes a person from others are his humours. Thus we can say that Duke Frederick in *As You like It*, Claudio in *Much Ado about Nothing* and Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night* are humorous. This is because all these characters are eccentric, whimsical and disposed to peculiarities in their moods and tastes. Duke Orsino pines away in the love of Lady Olivia incessantly:

*O! When mine eyes did see Olivia first*

*Methought she purg'd the air of pestilence.*

*That instant was I turn'd into a hart,*

*And my desires like fell and cruel hounds,*

*E'er since pursue me.*

(*Twelfth Night* I 1, 18-22)

The Duke Frederick, the usurper duke the impulsive and capricious in his actions. His unsteady nature is evident when he allows his niece Roslind to stay in the palace even after the banishing of his brother to the forest. But when Rosalind falls in love to Orlando, the son of his enemy, Sir Rowland de Boys he banishes her .”Mistress, dispatch you with your safest haste, and get you from the court.”(**As you Like It I 3,41**) . Claudio of *Much Ado about Nothing* falls in for Lady Hero at the first sight, but instead of wooing her himself for he lacks the confidence for the same, he deposes, elderly and experienced Don Pedro for the duty.

The genre comedy by its own definition is a play which makes the fullest possible use of humour in majority of its figures and situations. Laughter and fun being its soul humour becomes its guiding force. Even if Shakespearean comedy was intended to please and make the audience leave the theatre pleased, he sometimes tries to be didactic, especially when his fools wearing motley and coxcomb laugh and make others laugh at the follies of the world. Touchstone, the Fool of *As You Like It* comments”Fools may not speak wisely what wise men do foolishly.”(**AYLI I,2,25**). Feste, the fool in *Twelfth Night* is sure that if Duke Orsino marries Lady Olivia, the marriage will be a disaster. “Many times a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.”(**I ,5,20**) and he Olivia that she is the real fool to mourn for her brother’s soul in heaven. The play, *Much Ado About Nothing* doesn’t have such a

fool, but Leonato and Don Pedro plays the same role when the former tells Benedick that he doesn't doubt his wife's virtue since Benedick was a child when his daughter was born. When Benedick is cynical about ladies in general and Hero Claudio love in particular Don Pedro warns him: "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke." (**Much Ado about Nothing, I, 1225**).

Shakespeare usually presents three shades of humour in his happy comedies. Shakespeare's comedies usually the heroines have a major role to play than the heroes. "Shakespeare had no heroes. He has only heroines." (**Ruskin 12**). Rosalind, Viola and Beatrice have more sunshine in them than all the other characters could afford to bring into exotic Illiria or the forest of Arden. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* also lessens the venom of Benedick's cynicism. All the three are marked of their springly humour. This is natural and healthy type of humour, which is spontaneous and unsophisticated. In all these characters, the sense of humour arises from their gay nature. Rosalind's tongue runs faster than to conceal the pressure of her heart" (**Hazlitt 24**). Beatrice is an Elizabethan lady polished and sophisticated in her manner. **Jameson 25**). Viola's sense of humour is obvious in the scene when she meets Orsino's mistress Lady Viola, disguised as Cesario. Olivia asks whether her face is well painted, he answers with the same disdain.

Viola "Excellently done if God did all.

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Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white

Natures ownsweet and cunning hands laid on

Lady you are the crulle'st she alive

If you lead these graces to the grave

And leave the world no copy.”(I 5, 227-32)

This quick wittedness is one of the qualities which endears him to Viola. She is left in the same condition as Duke Orsino.

Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* presents a sharp contrast to the misanthropic and cynical Benedick as Rosalind presents a contrast to Touch Stone.. Her witty comments do not hurt any one. It is a gift which once seizes the abnormal and the uncommon and they endeavour to see it right pointing to the absurdity. She attracts the mind of readers even if she crosses the limits sometimes in the case of Benedick.

“Benedick: What my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

Beatrice: Is it possible disdain should die while she hath meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.” (I 1: 100-103) “We forgive Beatrice all her scornful airs, all her biting jests. They amuse and delight us more.”(Jameson 43)

Rosalind, Viola and Beatrice desires to see in sense of proportion maintained in all that people say and do. Beatrice quarrels with Benedict. This is the basis of this humour in comedy and many of the comic statements they utter are true in this connotation. Laughter arises from the perception of the abnormal in speech or deed.

On the other hand , Touchstone, Feste. Benedick etc. present a sharp contrast to this lively comedy to Rosalind and Viola and to a greater extent Beatrice. Beatrice hurts only

Benedick that too in an attempt to gain proportion. Feste and Touchstone are professional fools. They are people who are appointed to amuse their masters by their wile jests, parodying and singing. They wear parti coloured dress and wear a fool's cap called coxcomb. They sometimes give witty comments about the foolish actions of their masters as Feste comments "It is easy to be a witty fool than a foolish wit." Duke Senior comments when Touchstone decides to marry: "He uses his folly like a stalking-horse and under the presentation shoots his wit."(V4,101-2).

In their effort there is no spontaneity. There is a visible effort for effect in all that they say. The studied response which they register in respect of those with whom they deal is plainly perceptible. Of course, the motive behind their witticisms is unmasking the folly and exposing of human absurdities. Previlaged as court fools they have no fear of offending anyone although there are limits of their prerogatives. Feste comments to his mistress Olivia:"The more fool Madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven."(I 5,68-9). Touchstone steps further when he sees love stuck Orlando carving love poems on tree barks he prepares parody for the lines:"If hart do lack a hind. Let him seek out Roslained"(III 2, 100-101).

In all that they say there is effect and scant regard for the truth or verisimilitude. They forcefully argue truth to falsehood and falsehood into truth. . Their perfectly sophisticated humour which contrasts fully with the natural and healthy humour of Rosalind, Beatrice and Viola is very much dry and hurting . We enjoy the quips and pranks of Touchstone and Feste but there is nothing human and touching about it. Their witticisms come like bolts from the blue. Their retorts are dramatic and unforeseen. They leave us confounded and dismayed . They are described as material fools. In *As You Like*

*It*, Jaques, the melancholy philosopher likes Touchstone's humour whereas in *Twelfth Night* Olivia and Malvolio hates Feste.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* a professional fool is absent. The role is filled at times by Benedick and Don Pedro. Benedick's opinion about Lady Hero whom his cousin is in love with: "Methinks she is too low for high praise, too brown for fair praise." (I 1, 148-9)

In most places, dry humour or morbid humour or black humour are the terms which can be applied to the humor of Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Jaques in *As You Like It* and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. These characters are fully imbued with what Jaques calls the humour of melancholy. The humour of these characters is in direct contrast with the lively humour of Beatrice, Rosalind and Viola. It is not healthy humour at all because it is the guarantee of sanity and good common sense and this humour takes them to the extremes. Jaques can suck melancholy out of a song like weasel sucks eggs. This is a perverted form of humour. Instead of keeping them happy, this humour makes the characters dissatisfied with life. Some of the observations are full of interesting points like Jaques "Seven stages of man". But their humour makes them pessimistic and cynical.

"All the world is a stage, All men and women are players, They have their exits and entrances." (II, 7 145-46)

In *Much Ado About Nothing* Benedick's mistrust towards women takes monstrous heights in this instance:

Don Pedro: I think this is your daughter

Leonato: Her mother hath many times told me so



Benedick: Were you in doubt sir, that you asked her?

Leonato: Signior Bendick, no; for then were you a child.”

(I, 1 87-90)

We may go of Jaques' confession when he describes his humour. He therein tells that it is a compound of many samples, like that of a scholar, a soldier, a lover, the lady and a poet and thus he has come to develop a multiple personality, as it were, none of which, however, tends to make him happy or contented. If none of these types of humour could make Jaques happy or contented. If none of these types of humour could make them happy and satisfied, we wonder whether they are curable at all, and therefore the audience pity their character for their lack of good humour.

In a word, their humour is the result of life wasted in dissipation and life has been to him a total failure. For this cruel fate Jaques wishes to take vengeance on the world by making it a place which is full only of fools and stupid persons, Malvolio, on the other hand, wants to put all the fools in stake, Benedick, wants to give a panacea to the foolish world by his cynical comments. Jaques' observation in the concluding scene of the play is quite revealing in character when three pairs of marriages are celebrated.. At a moment when everyone in the play is in his or her happiest moods, Jaques alone remains unaffected by the happy situation wherein the various lovers are brought together to be united in matrimony. And speaking of such happy consummation, Jaques characteristically says of these happy men and women: "There is sure, another flood forward, and these couples are

coming to then ark. Here comes a pair of very strange beasts which in all tongues are called fools.”

This is why Jaques is shunned by every other character in the play and no one sympathises with him. His humour thus become a very good example illustrating, the popular observation, namely”laugh and the whole world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone,” This is why Jaques remains at the conclusion of the play, single and solitary soul and what is characteristic of him is that he is not wishing for a change.

Malvolio on the other hand is ruled by self conceit. Since self conceit and humour are incompatible, it is not surprising that he does not have any humour. He also lacks sympathy towards others. In fact he has a positive ill will towards Sir Toby and his train. “He becomes comic but by accident. He is cold, austere, repelling; but dignified, consistent, and for what appears, rather of an overstretched morality.”(**Lamb 21**). He is arrogant. In spite of all these we feel bad for him when he is doomed in the end of the play. “The weakness of Malvolio’s character are not so much in abundance that we can criticize him, as they are to make him ripe for the trickery played upon him.”(**Herford, 123**). Malvolio’s malignance towards all the fun loving characters are evident in his comment that Feste will not mend till” the pangs of death shake him.”(**I,571**)

Benedick’s black humour becomes mild when he starts loving Beatrice. Even if he called all women unfaithful in the beginning of the play, his sympathies are with Lady Hero when she is rejected by Claudio and defamed in public in the church. May be he is affected positively by the lively humour of Beatrice. “ In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I ever see a bachelor of threescore

again.”(I 1,171-72). This statement can be contrasted directly with the parting statement of Benedick “A college of wit crackers cannot flout me out of my humour..... since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that thee world can say against it; for man is a giddy thing.”(V,4105-109).

Shakespeare uses law comedy or farce in all the three plays. In *As You Like It* Touchstone uses parodying of Orlando’s love poems. In *Twelfth Night* Sir Andrew Aguecheek’s name along with this misappropriations invokes laughter. His cowardice spices up things. When Toby asks him to accost Maria, he mistakes Accost to be Maria’s surname. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Dogberry tells Don Juan : “ O villian! Thou will be condemned into everlasting redemption.”(IV 2,50). This malapropism will evoke laughter from all classes of audience, especially from the groundlings.

The humour provides both the atmosphere and the life blood to Shakspearean comedies. All these plays are considered to be delightful. Shakespeare superbly takes the audience on a tour to the most exotic locales. All these three plays are full of sweetness and pleasantry. “They have satire, and no spleen, they aim at ludicrous rather than ridiculous. They make us laugh at the follies of mankind, not to despise them.”(Hazlitt 121)This is not surprising since Shakespeare aimed through his comedies to delight rather than correct. The wise fools, the love plot, the lively humour etc. make the audience leave the playhouse delighted.

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