The Traditions of the Rise of the Prodigal Play in the English Renaissance

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Abstract:

Prodigal plays originated in the intellectual environment of the early European Renaissance and penetrated the whole stage of the English Renaissance. It takes the Prodigal fable in the Gospels as a carrier, integrates the content of the new Roman comedy, especially Terence's works, inherits some traditions of neoclassicism, at the same time, it focuses on the conflict between virtue and evil in the experience of the prodigal son, and inherits the tradition of the native morality play in a general sense. On the basis of inheriting the tradition, the prodigal drama highlights its own distinctive characteristics and shows great vitality by incorporating the elements of the times into the open prodigal fable.

Keywords: Prodigal fable, Terence, New comedy, Morality, Fusion.

Introduction

The Prodigal plays of the Renaissance were based on the Prodigal fable in Luke (15:11-32). The story of the prodigal son is a recurring archetypal plot in Renaissance comedy and the most common paradigm of Renaissance comedy in England. Plays incorporating the Prodigal-Son story were particularly popular in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and were common in England, becoming “one of the oldest, most prevalent, and most important species of English Renaissance drama” (Young, 1979). In fact, examples of prodigal comedies can be found from the earliest Renaissance plays to the last years. The formation of Prodigal plays is not only related to the Christian Terence movement, but also inherited the English tradition of morality plays. This essay intends to analyze the distinctive characteristics of the prodigal drama on the basis of tracing how it came into being.

The Prodigal Drama and Terrence's Christianization

Renewed interest in classical learning in England began gradually in the fifteenth century, but did not reach its peak until the sixteenth century. At that time, the new curriculum developed by Colette and others at St. Paul's School included classical drama in school education, which meant that studying, performing, and watching plays became a compulsory part of the school curriculum, greatly boosting the spread of classical drama. In the case of comedy, the works of Terence and Plautus were the most admired in England at the time, and it was common for Renaissance dramatists to learn how to write comedies by imitating Plautus and Terence. Nevertheless, “the virtues of Roman comedy were not always self-evident to authors of the period. The plays, after all, depicted some rather unsavory characters, and did not always lend themselves to demonstrating Christian truths” (Rowe, 1977). Taking Terrance for example,
“(while) out of Terence may also be gathered
many moral instructions amongst the rest of his
wanton discourses, yet the true Christian must
direct his steppes by the infallible rule of
Godswoord...” (Gascoigne, 1907). In fact,
Roman comedy, represented by Terence, has
little to do with moral judgment and spiritual
truth, because the so-called morality of the
former reflects the recognition of the generosity
of nature, namely the need to break away from
artificial laws and restrictions so as to act in
accordance with more “natural laws”, yet moral
judgments and truths of the latter constitute “the
infallible rule of Gods woor.”

Thus, even though Terence was highly praised
by humanists and beloved in schools in
Renaissance England for the purity of his
language and diction, for the vivid depiction of
his characters, and for the way he encouraged
rational thought, they were embarrassed by the
improper morality of his plot and
characterization. In an effort to preserve the
verve and vitality of these classical plays while at
the same time infusing them with the religious
sensities of the time, humanist writers and
school principals began to actively explore how
to combine Latin comedies with Christian
moralities to create new plays. In Europe at the
time, this process was known as "Christian Terence" in the continental Renaissance and
Reformation. It's not hard to imagine that
incorporating some of the techniques of classical
comedy into a Christian story would be an easy
and effective way to do so, and that adapting a
biblical story into a classical theatrical model
would be a natural choice. The Prodigal fable has
received the most attention of all biblical stories
for at least two reasons: One is that many of the
details in this parable - the son's rebellion, his
Bohemian life, the importance of reconciliation
- are similar to typical events in the new
comedies, so that the entire scenes of Plautus
and Terence could easily be dramatized as
allegorical. The second is that the fable again
deals with these events from a very different
angle than Roman comedy, and it provides a
perfect vehicle for writers and educators to
express their religious attitudes. Terence's plays
were particularly popular, the prodigal fable
particularly useful, and hybrid works that merged
the two met the needs of the times. As John
Dover Wilson put it:

*The parable of the Prodigal Son contained a moral
lesson which was admirably adapted for the
consideration of the youthful mind, and
incidentally admitted of an interpretation that gave
strong support to the Protestant doctrine of
justification by faith* (Wilson, 1909).

Obviously, the English prodigal plays can be
seen as part of the Christian Terence movement,
and the prodigal theme became the ideal vehicle
for combining the new comedy with Christian
morality, and it was on this basis that the theme
ran through almost all the English Renaissance
plays. Similarly, as Herford claims, it was in the
development of the comic theme of the prodigal
son that the entire Christian Terence movement
reached its peak (Herford, 1886).

**The inheritance of the prodigal plays to the
moralities**

Since all prodigal comedies focus on the conflict
between virtue and evil in the prodigal
experience, they are moral comedies in a general
sense. However, according to Young, A. R., the
Prodigal fable as a potential source of plays
seems to have been neglected in England before
the 16th century, and it can even be said that it
is surprising that the Prodigal allegory was not
used by the writers of early morality plays before
1500. Nevertheless, given that the pattern and
theme of the Prodigal fable were very close to
what they were intended to convey in the plays,
and that he found certain features of early
morality plays to be repeated to varying degrees
in the early Prodigal plays, he argued that, while
acknowledging that some early English prodigal
plays were strongly influenced by continental
plays, it is also necessary to consider the
influence of strong local theatrical traditions,
which played at least some part in determining
how English writers chose to adapt fables for
dramatic representation (Yong, 1970). Young, A.
R.'s statement makes sense because it is indeed
easy to discover the theatrical traditions of early
moral plays in the prodigal plays.
Firstly, both the prodigal plays and the moralities present a common theme: God’s mercy on the guilty and the ungrateful, and God’s mercy always outweighs the sins of a repentant sinner. The morality play is a dramatic form of preaching Christian moral precepts. It dramatizes simple stories and events in a way that reinforces Christian morality and doctrine. It was also a popular medieval ‘textbook’ designed to visually present the basic Christian doctrine to the audience through dramatic means. Although the Prodigal fable is about the disillusioned son being forgiven by his father, as Gowler et al have pointed out, in early Christian interpretations of the Prodigal fable, the father in the narrative was generally assumed to be God (Gowler, 2017). Thus, the Prodigal play essentially points to man’s return to God through repentance within himself. And, like morality plays, prodigal plays are also the products of catering to the moral needs of school education. In particular, the endings of both play types point to moral and educational significance: the path to reconciliation with God is always open.

Secondly, both prodigal plays and moralities, grounded in Christian theology and morality, assume that human character can and should be changed--and of great significance, as changes from one moral state to another will have permanent consequences. Morality plays usually begin by depicting human beings in a state of youth and innocence. Once entering society, the protagonist will be troubled by temptation, just like many image versions of this fable where the prodigal is lured into a tavern by prostitutes. Although both the “person” in the morality play and the “son” in the prodigal play are lured to a state of destruction, their souls are eventually purified. The earliest British prodigal comedies such as Interlude of Youth (1953-1929), Henry IV, and Eastward Ho were all like this.

Thirdly, both prodigal play and morality play adopt a basic structural model. In other words, an early morality play is a story that molds, systematizes, and allegorizes human experience along a “sinless-depravity-repentance-redemption” trajectory. The fall of “man” is the conflict of a play, which is generally presented in two ways: indulging in the prosperity of the world, forgetting his original sin, forgetting that his end must face death or his soul is seduced by evil, and even if virtue strives to save it, it still cannot withstand the temptation of worldly interests or desires to go astray. Although the way to fall is different, the end is the same: through repentance, mankind is forgiven by God and thus redeemed. Therefore, confession is the most important, and its process is also the climax of the play. A Prodigal play also follows the process of deprave-penitence-return (being forgiven), culminating in the “celebration” of the moment of return. The Interlude of Youth is a typical example of the combination of the prodigal fable and the morality play. Although it only loosely presents Lukan’s prodigal son fable, it is the first of more than a dozen dramatic works about the rise, fall, and transformation of young people who need to be properly educated in Protestant Christian values. The young man in the play declares himself the heir to all his father’s land, hoping to be able to squander it freely. The events that follow are placed in morality play mode, with two sets of moral characters, Charity and Humility, Riot and Pride, appearing - he had to choose the appropriate Christian path after being misled into the prodigal riot.

The characteristics of prodigal dramas

Although the rise of the Prodigal play is closely related to the Christian Terence movement and inherits some traditions of morality play, it is a play type of different nature and has its own distinct characteristics compared with the previous two. These features are highlighted in comparisons with the new Roman comedies and morality plays.

On the one hand, according to Ervin Beck’s research (Beck, 1973), it is fundamentally antithetical to the new comedy. In a new comedy, writers portray the young protagonists as new forces of society possessing qualities that are new elements of the emerging society. The triumph of the new over the old is in accordance with the law of social development, as Henry Ten Eyck Perry said, “Plautus and Terence...content them with the feeling that hope for a
better society in the future rest with the younger generation, which must always be considered right in its conflict with false old age and self parent authority” (Perry, 1939). Therefore, New comedy is a triumph of youth, and there is always a group of mature young men and women, full of ideas and ability, who finally exert their wills against the effeminate old class. Through their victories they can reanimate an ancient and dying society to ensure order and continuity (Rowe, 1977). Beck draws on Frye’s ideas for further insight. He sees the new comedy as an Aristotelian, while the Prodigal comedy is best seen as a Renaissance version of Dantec-Thomist commedia. Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Ethics describes people at different stages of life in terms of typical personality traits—the neoclassical doctrine of etiquette requires characters to only do and say things that are commensurate with their age and social status: pessimism, petty, selfishness, expense, dissonability, avaricious, calculating, and malice are considered characteristics of the elderly; on the contrary, young people are usually idealistic, respectable, prone to indulgence, inexperienced, naive, overconfident, and hopeful. This personality description was passed on to Menander through Aristotle's student Theophrastus, and influenced the creation of the new comedy (Robbins, 1951).

On the contrary, in a prodigal play, the playwright is based on an old and satisfactory society, in which the elderly are very important. They are the treasure trove of all truly valuable things, and their wisdom and knowledge are crucial. However, young people deviate from their traditions, incite chaos, violate natural rules, and must be changed to adapt to the existing society. As Beck said, “it begins with the desirable, aged society in control; experiments with a new, disorderly society initiated by the young hero; but finally returns and reforms around the original, stable society” (BECK: p.112). Therefore, in the plays of the prodigal son, the old man is the ultimate winner, and the young man must ultimately repent mentally after experiencing setbacks, return to the old man's side, and be reborn. He believes that the prodigal comedy is best regarded as the Renaissance version of Dantec-Thomist commedia. It is a redemptive comedy, which means it focuses on the resolution of internal contradictions and the correct integration of personality. From a religious perspective, it depicts the redemption of an individual's soul and the reconciliation and renewal of society, which is a natural result of the hero's true self emergence.

On the other hand, it is also different from moralities. Compared with moralities, the changes in prodigal plays are more complex. Although dozens of British Renaissance plays contain the prodigal paradigm, they are not completely homogeneous as implied by their prototype fable. The connotation of "prodigal" also changes according to the times and situations: runaways, economic unrestrained individuals, lascivious and promiscuous individuals, generous donors, and adventurers drifting abroad, among others. Even its plot may undergo significant changes, for example, it could be a winding love story: the male protagonist stubbornly pursues other girls in mischief, ultimately returning to his previous love to achieve spiritual rebirth, and the drama celebrates the end of the marriage. As Robert Turner put it, “That professional son drama features a young hero who abandons a wife or sweetheart for a harlot, undermines a traumatic experience, is converted, and returns to his first love” (Craig, 1955).

This emphasis on marriage is clearly far from the emphasis on stubbornness and filial piety in fables. The moral drama is more singular, its ending is only the protagonist's return to God through repentance, and the purification of the protagonist's personality is the only reason for the happy ending. It's impossible for it to have a love story, in fact, moral comedy is quite averse to women.

It can be seen that although a prodigal play combines certain characteristics of new comedy and moral drama, it has obvious differences from both types of comedies. In fact, because the fable of the prodigal son is concise and rich in various interpretive possibilities, prodigal plays are also a very inclusive type. As a product of the times, it has many connections with the
times and can be understood as a narrative of life, such as running away and returning, traveling and returning home, authority and rebellion, extravagance and poverty, famine and feasts, youth and old age, regret and forgiveness, and other life topics, all of which are related to it. It vividly illustrates how art originates from and transcends the concept of life. The dramatic and reassuring power of fable can evoke a spiritual resonance among humanity and inspire us to delve deeper into the contemporary topics it evokes.

Moreover, although the author of the playwright's play is essentially faithful to the basic elements of the fable—a young man deviates from some of his family’s values and eventually reaccepts them—it generally does not incorporate all the details of the playwright’s fable, nor does it intend to dramatize all the events in the fable. Therefore:

A prodigal-son comedy may begin with the young man’s request (Aull’s well that Ends Well, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Eastward Ho); it may begin with his riot (The London Prodigal); or it may begin with his attempted return (A Trick to Catch the old One) (Beck, 1973).

The role of prodigal son is also not fixed: The prodigal may be the elder brother rather than the younger; there may even be no brother; the father himself may be “prodigal” in some fashion; the restoration of the son to former values may be effected by an act of mercy or by the son’s own design.

Moreover, the identity of the prodigal son is not static and may vary: In the early play Nice Wanton, he was a student; In Shakespeare’s Henry IV Parts I and II (c. 1596-8), he is a prince; In the Eastward Ho of Chapman, Jonson and Marston (1605) he was an apprentice; In The Wise Woman of Hogsdon of Heywood (circa 1604?), he is a lover (Little, 2021).

It was the openness of the Prodigal play that led to its colorful plot, which was very popular in Renaissance England and was also loved by playwrights. The pattern of the Prodigal Son can be said to permeate Elizabethan plays (Craig, 1955).

Conclusion

The prodigal play, a blend of Roman and native theatrical traditions, has long been seen as an interesting hybrid in the history of British theatre. Ever since Continental humanist schoolmasters wrote the first prodigal comedy around 1510, in an attempt to replace Plautus and Terence’s so-called immoral comedies as a teaching material for language and rhetoric, this type has been beloved by playwrights. English audiences and playwrights alike expressed their love for this type of comedy, and this text, in line with Christian virtues and Terence’s elegant style, added a beautiful landscape to the plays of English Renaissance.

References

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