New Comedy and the Rise of the British Prodigal Play

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Abstract: *The Renaissance had a high regard for classical texts, and Terence's comedies were particularly popular. They provided long-lasting methods and structural models for comic writing, but while their style was admirable, the lack of Christian virtues was questioned. In order to adapt these plays to the needs of classroom professors, continental schoolmasters in the late 15th and early 16th centuries began a movement to Christianize Terence's work. Based on the fables of the Prodigal Son in the Gospels, they adapted Terence's play, and the Prodigal Son play appeared in Holland. Learning from Dutch plays to combine the theme of the Prodigal Son with the general framework and conventions of Roman comedy, the English Renaissance playwrights created a large number of prodigal plays that were both Christian and Trent elegant and local.*

Keywords: *Prodigal fable; Prodigal play; Terence; Dutch prodigal play; British prodigal play*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance's rediscovery of classical texts has long been understood to have contributed to or initiated secularization, but classical texts were deemed unsuitable for direct school use because of their inclusion of "inappropriate" content (such as pagan beliefs, especially a tendency to tolerate young people's bad behavior to some extent at the expense of parental authority). It is necessary to Christianize the classical dramas represented by Terence's works. After discovering the high similarities between the comedies of Terence and the fable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32), Dutch playwrights took the lead in successfully integrating the two creative practices, and the Prodigal son play was born. Whether as a "Christian Terence" academic play or as a popular morality play, the prodigal son play is very popular. Influenced by continental European (especially Dutch) prodigal plays, but also in the tradition of native morality plays, the English prodigal plays predate Shakespeare's plays, survived long after Shakespeare's death, and were a common literary and iconographic theme in Renaissance period of England. It is also "one of the oldest, most prevalent, and most important species of English Renaissance drama."[1].This paper aims to explore how Terence's plays contributed directly or indirectly to the rise of prodigal plays in England.

2. THE POPULARITY OF TERENCE COMEDY IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND BRITAIN

The humanistic movement during the Renaissance pushed secular intellectuals to turn their attention to ancient times, as ancient Greece and Rome were able to freely express various academic ideas and create a large number of brilliant literary and artistic works. They freed themselves from the constraints of medieval thought and expressed their cultural views through the revival of ancient Greek and Roman culture, which became their natural choice. Thus, valuing classics became a "fashion" at that time. Renewed interest in classical learning in England began in the fifteenth century and reached its peak in the sixteenth century. At that time, a new curriculum developed by Colette and others at St. Paul's School incorporated classical drama into the school's education. As in the rest of Europe, Roman playwrights such as Terence, Proteus and Seneca are most admired in Britain, while Greek playwrights receive less attention. Of course, not all Roman playwrights are valued. In terms of

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[1] Alan R. Young, *The English Prodigal Son Plays: A Theatrical Fashion of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature 89. Salzburg: Univ. of Salzburg, 1979. p. ix.

comedy, although there are countless Roman playwrights, only Titus Maccius Plautus and Publicus Terentius Afer have their works passed down to this day. Especially Terence's works, which provided a long-standing method and structural model for British comedy creation, continue his glory in the Middle Ages. He has always been a must-have writer in the curriculum of schools on the European continent, and it can be said that his comedy provided the first and most extensive theatrical research for students of the Renaissance period[2].

A 17th century principal named Charles Hoole pointed out the reasons for Terence's popularity[3]: firstly, his comedy not only showcases the essence of Latin, but also has many aspects suitable for expressing English style; Secondly, his works are full of moral and immoral qualities that are not only applicable to modern society, but also have many corresponding characters; Thirdly, these works tell us what constitutes appropriate language in our actions; Fourthly, these works are performed in appropriate forms in schools open to the public, promoting the elegance of the speaker and helping those who are not good at speaking but talented to eliminate shyness and timidity. In fact, as early as the 4th century AD, Donatus used his contemporary critical theory and common sense as a basis to explain and prove the positive characteristics of Terence's art, thus providing a central perspective for drama criticism[4].

In the 10th century, when Greek and Roman drama was largely abandoned, Terence retained all of his fame for his concise language, clear and complete style, and easy extraction of morality from his works, and became the only ancient playwright whose works were selected for textbooks in medieval schools. In the Middle Ages, Terence's works were an effective means of teaching rhetoric and spreading good moral values, serving as "an authority on human nature" and moral themes, and a source of "obtaining rhetorical art and personal charisma". [5]During the Renaissance, writers expanded Terence's importance by emphasizing his literary skills. For example, Erasmus Mundus assumed that Terence's language was "pure, concise, and close to everyday language" in terms of language use, and "the best example of wording." From the perspective of character shaping, he combines creativity and appropriateness to depict vivid characters. "No one is more diligent than Terence in adhering to the laws of character regarding conditions, age, social status, and role-playing."[6]. Donatus' research and commentary on Terence's plays have also been circulated in Terence's plays, and subsequent scholars have continuously added annotations to enrich them. These works and critiques together influenced the creation and research of comedy in the Renaissance period, especially by the mid-16th century, the classical model and commentary on Terence had a profound impact on British comedy creation[7].

However, as Rowe, JR, G. E. pointed out, "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"[8]

For example, Terence's works contain many descriptions of lewd and immoral love between young people, and even include examples that were considered extremely immoral during the Renaissance. For example, in The Eunuch, Chaerea recounts the scene where he raped Pamphila. This description of "immorality" has raised doubts as it may have a negative impact on youth education. Based on this, even though humanistic writers and school principals highly praised the eloquence and wisdom of Terence's texts, and consider his style admirable, it was not recommended to use it directly as a

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[2] Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558*, Licon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p.65.

[3] Howard B. Norland, Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558, Licon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p.103.

[4] Howard B. Norland, Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558, Licon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, P.70.

[5] Theiner, Paul. "The Medieval Terence." In *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Harvard English Studies 5,244-45. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974.

[6] Hilger, Michael J. "The Rhetoric of Comedy: Comic Theory in the Terentian Commentary of Aelius Donatus." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, I970. P28.

[7] Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558*, Licon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, Introduction.

[8] ROWE, JR, G. E. (1977). Prodigal Sons, New Comedy, and Middleton's Michaelmas Term. *English Literary Renaissance*, 7(1), 91-92.

reading material for students due to its considerable lack of Christian virtues. They attempted to find a way to combine the charm and vitality of classical drama with the religious emotions of the time, that is, to explore how to combine Latin comedy with Christian morality to create new plays.

In the continental Renaissance and Reformation at that time, this process was known as "Christian Terence" initiated by Dutch principals in the late 15th to early 16th centuries. Some writers have found a high similarity between Terence comedy and the fable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32), making it suitable as a carrier to achieve the integration of new comedy and Christian doctrine. Therefore, they started this kind of writing practice, and the Prodigal play was born in accordance with both Christian virtues and Trent's elegant style. The first prodigal comedies were written around 1510 by the Continental humanist schoolmasters, who sought to replace the supposedly immoral dramas of Plautus and Terence as textbooks for teaching language and rhetoric, so they dramatized the story of the prodigal son in the form of Roman comedy.

3. DUTCH PRODIGAL PLAYS THAT HAVE HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON BRITISH PRODIGAL PLAYS

British prodigal plays learned from Dutch plays the practice of combining the theme of "prodigal turning back" with the overall framework and conventions of Roman comedy, especially Macromedia's Asotus and William de Volder's Acolastus, which were widely popular and had a huge impact at the time.

Asotus is a prodigal play created by Dutch humanist scholar and principal Macromedia for elementary school students, written around 1510 and published in 1537. The play incorporates historical factors into the story of the prodigal son in the Bible and is clearly influenced by Roman comedies such as Plautus's Captives. The play is divided into five acts. In the first four acts, just like the bad habits in moral plays that lead young people into evil, Asotus is misled by the sponger Colax and other evil companions, and develops bad habits such as hunting, drinking, and prostitution. The entire plot follows a typical prodigal drama pattern: Asotus' corrupt behavior leads to a conflict with his father. After being rejected by his father and siblings for inheritance, he provocatively runs away from home and returns home to reunite with his father when he is in a state of poverty and has no way out. Its five-act structure is similar to Roman comedy.

A more direct and important model of the English prodigal drama is Acolastus, published in the Netherlands in 1529 and republished 47 times in 1587. The 1540 English translation of the play "consciously imitated Plautus and Terence in an attempt to give the students more Christian admonitions than the pagan playwrights could provide."[9]. In his translation and accompanying commentary, the translator Palsgrave emphasized that the work was an adaptation of Roman conventions for moral purposes, and in his opening remarks declared that the play was not intended to replace Plautus and Terence as great comic masters, but rather to complement their works. The play is rich in Roman elements, and characters such as spongers, pimps and prostitutes are common characters in Roman comedy; Drunkenness, sex, dice playing, father-son conflict, and the prodigal son falling into the hands of bad friends were also common in Roman plays, especially in rhetorical design, which, Greif notes, "parodies Terence, Plautus, Virgil, and Seneca, following Donatus and Renaissance humanists' commentary on Terence."[10]

The two characters are introduced from the morality play tradition and represent the two opposing faces of Wisdom: Eubolus, an old man who advises his father to let his son go and believe in God; The other was a young man who encouraged Acolastus to leave, supported his desire to travel, and displayed arrogant attitudes towards his father. The plot is highly consistent with the Prodigal Son fable: Acolastus left after receiving much advice from his father and with a Bible, but he soon threw away the Bible, was lured into brothels and casinos, spent all his money and had his clothes stolen, and in desperation he was taken in by a farmer to feed pigs, first bemoaning his situation and expressing his sorrow, then he turned from despair to hopeful confession. At last, he returned home, while prostrating himself at his father's feet, he uttered the words of the parable and was greatly welcomed. The ending has the character of a morality play: the prodigal son returns to his father and is forgiven, just as in Christian morality, grace is obtained through God's mercy and self-repentance.

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[9] Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1485-1558*, Licon and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p.151.
[10] Ibid.

The confession of Acolastus is very reminiscent of the ending of Everyone: asking everyone present to confess their sins in order to enjoy the same pleasure.

As can be seen from the above, although Acolastus, like other moral plays, is interested in repentance, it should not be seen as a simple preaching. It not only uses the fable of the prodigal son, but also expands the fable around character types and plot elements of Roman comedy: the tense relationship between father and son, as well as the promiscuous life, including drinking and playing with prostitutes. On the basis of imitating Roman comedy, the lesson of Christian behavior (moral lesson) was added, providing an effective cultural model for the combination of classical and Christian morality.

4. THE BIRTH OF BRITISH HOMELAND PRODIGAL PLAYS

The Dutch prodigal play's treatment of classical literature greatly influenced the creation of British domestic play, as it was highly in line with the demand for young people's education. At that time, religious manuals, educational works, autobiographies, and literary works often linked the image of young people with immorality, disobedience, impiety, rebellion, impulsiveness, lasciviousness, corruption, and susceptibility to crime. However, they were also described as symbols of hope, vitality, and joy, with enough plasticity to help them return to reason and become individuals with firm willpower through education. Therefore, the purpose of religion and education led to the emergence of the story of the prodigal son in the comedy of the English Renaissance (1500-1642), appearing as the main or secondary plot in nearly 40 plays[11].

The Interlude of Youth (approximately 1513), created by anonymous authors, is the earliest story of a young person who deviates from the values of their elders and leaves their family, and later returns to their side. The play is highly consistent with the fables in the Gospel of Luke and follows the traditional moral drama model. The plot is very ordinary and has not yet incorporated the main themes of other literary and theatrical genres, so the structure and plot still appear single and simple.

Another famous prodigal play is R West's Lusty Juventus (1547-1553) which tells the story of young Juventus who indulges in a decadent life of entertainment. After encountering Advice, he agrees to receive education, but after Hypocrisydisguises himself as a friend and introduces him to hedonism, gambling, cursing, and the way he lives with prostitutes, he becomes addicted to it until Advicepersuades him again before he repents. The play has a richer connotation than the Interlude of Youth, incorporating elements of religious reform. It differs significantly from early moral dramas, for example, bad habits play a relatively small role in the play, and redemption is more prominent than sin. In other words, it clearly emphasizes the secular function of the play: the protagonist's escape experience is equivalent to the process of education (redemption) towards maturity, which prompts the prodigal son to turn around. Moreover, a significant improvement of the play lies in incorporating "intergenerational conflicts" from Roman comedy into the plot, which means that "when the Reformation synonyms the values of the older generation with decaying old beliefs, the young protagonist may be encouraged by characters representing the Reformation voice to abandon the values of the older generation in order to conform to a new orthodoxy."12 The value of the play lies in "the convincing proof that the use of Terence's new comedy ridicules the uselessness of old values and alters the narrative prototype in moral fables."[12]

Of course, it should be emphasized that the fable of the prodigal son is fundamentally opposed to the new comedy represented by Terence's works. As Ervin Beck pointed out, "the protocol son parade contrasts strongly with the parade of youth that dominates the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence."[13]

From the perspective of the plot, the fable of the prodigal son tells the story of the youngest son leaving home with his own wealth that he demanded from his father, and after running out of wealth, he became a hungry pig shepherd. In repentance, he decided to go home and become a servant, but his father gave generous gifts, hosted a feast, and tried to use words to calm the grievances in his brother's

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[11] Ibid.p.107.

[12] Ibid

[13] Beck,Ervin. Terence improved: The paradigm of the prodigal son in English Renaissancecomedy. *Renaissance Drama* 6 (1973): p.110

heart. Although the plot of a new comedy is more complex, often combining two or more scripts from the same or different writers to create a new script, the typical plot is as follows: a young man falls in love with a girl but is obstructed (usually by his parents), and the young hero usually breaks through the obstruction with the help of cunning slaves, making marriage ultimately possible. Comparing the plot, it is not difficult to see that the new comedy represents the victory of young people and the failure of the elderly, while the prodigal drama represents the setbacks of young people and the victory of the elderly. The handling of characters in this way has a clear "writer's intention", as what Henry Ten Eyck Perry said, "P1autus and Terence…contented themselves with the feeling that hope for a better society in the future rests with the younger generation, which must always be considered right in its conflict with miserly old age and selfish parental authority." [14]Similarly, the author of the prodigal drama made the prodigal turn around based on the needs of religious reality. The opposition between the two types of comedy is also reflected in their vastly different social meanings. Frye points out that, "New Comedy Portraits a single movement from an old, effective society to a new one that forms around a young hero."[15]

The behavior of young protagonist represents the nature of an emerging society that has not yet formed, and the victory of young people ensures order and continuity by reactivating an ancient and dying society. The prodigal Comedy depicts an old, satisfying, ideal, and controlled elderly society. Although young heroes initiate new, disorderly society experiments to infuse vitality into the old order, they ultimately return to the stable society they used to be. Therefore, prodigal comedy is conservative in social sense, rather than revolutionary.[16]

5. CONCLUSION

Meeting the needs of the times, using the story of the prodigal son as a carrier and incorporating Roman comedic elements, the prodigal play supplements or modifies the comedic perspective, reflecting another step towards the professionalization and complexity of British drama. They were very popular in Renaissance England, and their popularity was not only due to providing children with more interesting, practical, and beneficial forms of "health" entertainment, but also due to the flexible use of the carrier of the fable of the prodigal son by playwrights. They do not rigidly use every detail of fables, but carefully choose according to the needs of the plot, sometimes even intentionally deviating from the mode of fables. However, the audience always has a familiar variation of the theme in the plot, which helps them predict traditional elements and thus increase the comedic effect.

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[14] Perry, Henry Ten Eyck. *Masters of dramatic comedy and their social themes*. Harvard University Press, 1939. p. xx.
[15] Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957; rpt. New York, 1968), pp. 163-186 et passim
[16] Beck,Ervin. Terence improved: The paradigm of the prodigal son in English Renaissancecomedy. *Renaissance Drama* 6 (1973): p.112.