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Teaching notes

Jerusalem: modernity and tradition

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When exploring dramatic comedy, a familiar approach is to make significant distinctions between 'then' and 'now', between the traditional forms and concerns of classical and Shakespearean comedy and the radical reinterpretations of the genre offered by modern plays. Sara Jan's article, however, shows how 'then' and 'now' connect: modern plays such as *Jerusalem* have their roots far back in the history of comedy.

Genre

At the same time, the contemporary nature of *Jerusalem* illustrates another important element of dramatic comedy. Like all genres, comedy modifies and adapts itself over time. Genres are built on a tacit agreement between writer and audience: a set of expectations that relate to storyline, character, setting and outcome. These expectations may, however, never be fulfilled, and a debate about the nature of the individual play may emerge. In addition, the genre of dramatic comedy in particular is re-inventive, and constantly draws attention to its own artifice.

Elements of dramatic comedy

Jan focuses on a series of ways in which *Jerusalem* connects with the genre and traditions of dramatic comedy.

Settings in place and time

Northrop Frye has argued that the 'green world' of comedy operates as a place of freedom, but also at times of confusion and even discord. For Johnny Byron, his woodland kingdom represents liberty and release from the restrictions of an inhibited 'old world'. Jan points out the many significant references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Jerusalem*; the existence of a green world is one example.

Intertextuality

This sort of relationship between one text and another is often referred to as intertextuality. Post-structuralist theory sees texts as tending to refer to other texts (or even to themselves as texts) rather than to a clearly represented external reality. Dramatic comedy in particular seems to operate in this way. For example, Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* is closely based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Although the shape of the two comic plots is broadly similar, there are significant differences between the objects of their satire. Brecht's target is more general — bourgeois society as a whole — whereas Gay's critique is of a specific historical administration.

Are there any ways in which your play makes reference to another text or texts?

Subversion

As illustrated by these two plays, dramatic comedy is often subversive. Jan shows how Johnny Byron's words and actions in *Jerusalem* underline 'the subversive, anti-authoritarian impulses traditionally present in comedy'. The question of whether dramatic comedy is subversive rather than ultimately conservative is an important one. It might be argued, for instance, that while women in *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing* seem to be empowered, by the end of each play conventional patriarchal values are reasserted.

Is the same return to 'traditional' values evident at the end of the play you are studying?

The trickster

The figure of the trickster is important here. Jan indicates how within dramatic comedy it is often through the trickster that the rules that govern society are reversed. Johnny Byron clearly demonstrates the archetypal qualities of such a character, both through his words and his actions. The trickster, however, is often an uncomfortable character for an audience to relate to. Shakespearean tricksters such as Feste and Puck at times reveal a rather cruel enjoyment of the misfortunes of others. While we may temporarily delight in the antics of such characters as Johnny Byron and Francis (from the play *One Man, Two Guvvners*), it is debatable how far a typical educated, middle-class theatre audience would welcome such personalities into their own 'real' world.

Nevertheless, Johnny Byron's embrace of the life force and his resolve to cross boundaries are often engaging and reflected in his determined physicality. This physicality is a central quality of many comic clowns, Trinculo and Stephano in *The Tempest* being a pair of unsophisticated examples.

Can you identify a character who fulfils the role of trickster in your play?

Pairs

Pairs operate frequently in dramatic comedy, at times as a sort of double act. In *Jerusalem* this is represented by the relationship between Johnny and Ginger. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon's interaction is at the heart of the play, even when the distinctions between their personalities seem to blur. *Godot* is often a very dark dramatic comedy, as is *Jerusalem*, but there is an argument that it ultimately affirms life over death, whatever the odds. To whatever degree the central characters experience humiliation they also experience a kind of transitory triumph. As Estragon says, 'We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression we exist?'

The same kind of desperate defiance activates Johnny Byron at the end of *Jerusalem*: 'Grab your fill... Don't listen to no one and nothing beyond what your own heart bids. Lie. Cheat. Steal. Fight to the death. Don't give up.'

Further reading

As well as using the articles available from THE ENGLISH REVIEW Online Archive to extend your reading, you might like to look at:

Bevis, M. *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP)

Leggatt, A. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* (CUP)

Useful sites

The official site contains clips of the production, starring Mark Rylance, as well as links to a range of reviews: <http://www.jerusalemtheplay.com/>

This podcast features an interview with Jez Butterworth and the director, Ian Rickson:
<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/news/podcasts/jerusalem/>

A range of other items on the play can be accessed through the main Royal Court site:
<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/jerusalem>