

# **KYOGEN AND SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY: A COMPARISON**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kyogen and Shakespearean Comedy share similarities in their theatrical presentation and the environment in which the plays were presented. Early Shakespearean Comedies and Kyogen also share similarities in the depth of their themes, content and characterization. However, while Kyogen remained static in its style, Shakespeare's comedies became deeper, more concerned with the human condition and characters were more fully developed.

Key words: comedy, presentation, theme, similarities.

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Kyogen, developed in Japan during the Muromachi period from 1380-1466, is a form of comedy usually performed in conjunction with Noh drama. Shakespeare wrote his comedies during the period 1592-1611, and they comprised one type of drama that he actively wrote. One type was developed in the East and the other in the West, and therefore one might think that because the cultures and philosophies are so different, there are probably no similarities between them. However, drama encompasses the same themes no matter what the culture or region, that is, drama is about the human condition and nature. If true, might there not exist some similarities between these two regionally disparate comedy forms? This paper is an attempt to discover what possible commonalities might exist among them, both in their presentation and in their themes from a fairly broad context. No attempt is made here to analyze the plays themselves, but rather, to look for similar rationalizations for writing the plays.

Noh drama is concerned with the major mysteries of the soul, and is therefore dark, deep, sometimes ominous, spiritual, and heavy. The audience must use all of its imaginative and intellectual powers to grasp the symbolic meanings of the theme being present-

ed. This task can oftentimes be mentally and physically straining, and in the case of a long Noh drama, it may become boring. A need arises to help the audience reorient itself to the real world with all its human foibles, and that need is met by Kyogen.

Shakespeare wrote his comedies, particularly in the beginning of his career, to help alleviate the suffering of the people from their everyday struggle to survive. He wrote during the Elizabethan Age when survival was the greatest goal of all the people. This was a time when personal hygiene was non-existent and pestilence in the form of the plague ran rampant across the landscape. No one was exempt from the ravages of the time, and the lifespan of the populace was short and the death rate among children was extremely high. People sought relief from this savage life, and one way to achieve it was to visit the local theater and enjoy an afternoon of lighthearted entertainment of Elizabethan drama.

The comedy of Kyogen seeks to illustrate the sometimes mundane, funny, often ridiculous side of the human condition. Its purpose is opposite that of the Noh, i.e., it makes people laugh and recognize their human characteristics. It brings the audience back to earth by making them laugh at themselves. Where Noh is stately and ephemeral, Kyogen is down-to-earth, ribald, with a shoot-from-the-hip sort of dialog in the local 15th Century patois of the time. However, because these dramas are mainly presented to the highborn and intellectuals, it is rowdy without ever being vulgar. In that period, one could lose his head for the simplest offense, so care is needed in how and what one says, no matter what the setting.

Comedy in the Elizabethan Age was also raucous and ribald, often slipping into vulgarity. Both the highborn and lowborn attended the theater, but the atmosphere was probably rowdier than that in the Noh theater. When Shakespeare began writing in the 1590's Edward Spenser, a contemporary,

was lamenting the condition of the English comic drama; the stage had been made the means of cruel personal and party satire; 'seasoned wit,' and 'goodly pleasure' had disappeared from comedy; in place of these, 'scoffing scurrility,' and 'scornful folly' had possessed the stage.

(Dowden, pg. 358-359)

However, Shakespeare ran completely counter to the temper of the times, and it is at least worthy of note that Shakespeare abstained altogether from this abusing of the stage to unworthy purposes, and found objects of his mirth in fashions and follies of the time, not in the misfortunes or weaknesses of

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individuals.

(Dowden, pg. 359)

It appeared that, for Shakespeare, writing drama served a higher purpose than trying to clash swords with society's ills or carrying on a public scene with the intellectual wits of his time.

Themes used in both Kyogen and Shakespearean comedy were for the most part already familiar to the audience. Zeami, who most scholars consider the most influential developer of the Noh drama, wrote these words in the 14th Century,

The functions of kyogen actors: it is well known that their method of creating amusement for the audiences in the form of a comic interlude involves the use either of some impromptu materials chosen at the moment, or of some interesting incidents taken from old stories.

(Rimer and Masakazu, pg. 170)

Shakespeare got all of his dramatic and comedic ideas from either his Latin background or from historical events that were happening at the time or had occurred not long before. His genius was to be able to take well-known, oftentimes commonplace themes, and make them into the incredible drama that he has become recognized for. Edmund Bunden wrote,

Like many of his poetic contemporaries, he wrote plays as public entertainment, on subjects which were in vogue; that is the simple truth.

(pg. 29)

In both forms of comedy, the purpose was to demonstrate human frailty and foolishness through a vehicle that could be understood and appreciated easily by the audience.

Both types of comedy were performed only by a few male actors, on a stage where audience involvement was intimate, and few props were employed, requiring both types of audience to use their creativity and imagination to thoroughly enjoy themselves. As with all traditional Japanese drama,

the Kyogen uses only actors. Thus, all female parts are played by men. ....

Kyogen is always funny and Kyogen women are very funny.

(Richie, pg. 15)

Until the reign of Charles II, in 1660, all Elizabethan characters were played by members of the company. Therefore, all of Shakespeare's female parts were played by young males who were members of his drama company. Wells and Taylor state,

Most plays of the period, including Shakespeare's, have far fewer female

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than male roles, but some women's parts—such as Rosalind (in *As You Like It*) and Cleopatra—are long and important; Shakespeare must have had confidence in the boys who played them.

(pg. xxvi-xxvii)

Magill also reports,

There were no women on Shakespeare's stage; they made their appearance when Charles II returned to the throne in 1660. Young boys (eleven to fourteen years old) played the female parts, and Shakespeare manipulated this convention with considerable success in his comedies, where disguises created delightful complications and aided him in overcoming the problem of costuming.

(pg. 1695)

Here too, as with Kyogen, using males in the female roles added spice to the comedic intent of the characters.

The Noh and Kyogen stage, except for a roof, was open to the elements, and the main stage extended out into the audience which could sit and watch on three sides. Early Elizabethan theaters were also mostly open to the elements, and the stage protruded out into the audience, encouraging them to become active and participate in the action.

Most Kyogen plays utilized two maybe three, and at most four actors in a play. Elizabethan drama also used actors sparingly,

Since there were few actors and sometimes many parts, members of the company were required to double (and sometimes triple) their roles.

(Magill, pg.1695)

Thus, both groups of actors had to play multiple roles during the course of the play, and this juxtaposition of people oftentimes helped in providing comic relief for those watching developments unfold.

Props were used sparingly, for example, a fan in the Kyogen actor's hand which could represent whatever object the actor declared it to be. Other props included,

a sake gourd for traveling, a little stuffed badger, an umbrella, farm implements. The larger stage properties (*tsukurimono*) seen in Noh are rarely used in Kyogen, and space is manipulated mostly through the words and actions of the performers.

(Komparu, pg. 98)

On the other hand,

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Shakespeare's plays require few substantial properties. A 'state', or throne on a dais, is sometimes called for, as are tables and chairs and, occasionally, a bed, a pair of stocks (King Lear Sc. 2/2.2), a cauldron (Macbeth, 4.1), a rose brier (I Henry VI, 2.4), and a bush (Two Noble Kinsmen, 5.3) No doubt these and other objects were pushed on and off the stage by attendants in full view of the audience.

(Wells and Taylor, pg. xxix)

Interestingly, objects were pushed on and off stage in full public view by attendants dressed in black in Noh drama as well. Both Kyogen and traditional Elizabethan drama placed the burden of following, imagining, and understanding the action onto the audience, and

In Shakespeare's day the theater was an art of full anticipation ..... making the audience supply the visual background by imagination alone.

(Wain, pg. 2-3)

Two hundred and fifty-seven different Kyogen plays are performed today, and these can be classified into five categories as follows:

**Daimyo Kyogen** The hero is an arrogant or foolish feudal lord and the humor derives from his stupidity as he flaunts his ignorance and throws his authority around. The resistance of the common people to the inequity between position and ability is developed in these plays with sarcasm and irony. It is humor by ridicule.

**Taro Kaja Kyogen** Taro Kaja is the prototypical Kyogen hero, the servant of a feudal lord or similar character; he is of quite the same nature as Harlequin in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Taro is a common man's name for a first son, and Kaja (crowned person) means that Taro has undergone a coming-of-age ceremony, in which the master presents him with a kind of crown, gives him a name, and pronounces him an adult. This binds master and servant in a relationship nearly as intimate as that of parent and child. This first servant, often in league with second and sometimes third servants (called Jiro Kaja and Saburo Kaja), criticizes the master freely, tricks him out of sake, sugar, or chestnuts, and contrives to escape from hard work. In turn he is scolded, threatened, and chased off stage by an angry master at the end of the play.

**Kyogen about Bridegrooms or Women** These plays derive their humor from the social

blunders of the awkward new son-in-law or the cowardly conniving of a weak man with a fierce wife.

**Demon and Yamabushi Kyogen**     Frightening demons and powerful mountain priests turn out to be vulnerable, silly, and impotent, and from this surprise the humor derives. **Kyogen about Priests or Blind Men**     In plays about priests, seemingly innocent members of the clergy engage in a raucous sutra-chanting contest..... Blind men are cruelly teased....

**Miscellaneous Kyogen**     There are many outstanding plays in this catch-all category. (Komparu, 99-104)

Examples of plays for each category include: Hagi Daimyo (Bush Clover Daimyo) and Futari Daimyo (The Two Daimyo) in the first; Neongyoku (The Sleeping Singer), Suo-Otoshi (Dropped Suit), Boshibari (Tied to a Pole), and Busu in the second; Futari-Bakama (Two in One Pair of Trousers), Funawatashi Muko (The Ferryman's Son-in-Law), and Hanago in the third; Setsubun (The Eve of Spring), Kubihiki (Neck-Pulling), Kagyu (The Snail), and Kaki Yamabushi (The Yamabushi in the Persimmon Tree) in the fourth; Shuron (A Theological Dispute), Fuse Nai Kyo (Sutra of No Offering), Kiyomizu Zato, and Tsukimi Zato in the fifth; and, Buaku, Tsurigitsune (To Catch a Fox), and Tojin-zumo in the last category.

The main point to consider in all Kyogen plays is the characters are one-dimensional, and no attempt is made to add depth, individuality, or special characteristics to the principal actors. They are presented as types of people and not particular people in themselves. They are more like caricatures, and the moral of the story is more important than the people telling it. Kyogen plays are stylistic and superficial in their presentation of the actors. These plays rely principally on farce, satire, and a certain amount of buffoonery to achieve their comedic effects.

Including the romances and Two Noble Kinsmen, Shakespeare wrote seventeen comedies. Most critics have divided them into categories based on chronology and on Shakespeare's growth and progress in his development as a serious dramatist. They have divided his comedies into four or five classifications, in similar manner to Howard Cole who states,

Our art-life must then be constructed according to 'periods' determined by

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how the comedies treat the literary and dramatic conventions their sources appeal to, and something like the following pattern will appear: (1) Cautious Exploitations (to produce *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*); (2) Confident Parodies (yielding *Love's Labor's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*); (3) Creative Imitations (in which the conventions are idealized as well as undercut: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*); (4) Cynical Negations (of the source-plot's moral or 'meaning': *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*); and (5) Complete Transmutations (in which creativity proceeds beyond imitation to thorough transformations: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

(pg. 407)

He goes on to talk about the first classification saying,

We need not determine which piece came first, in other words, to see that Shakespeare began his career in comedy by starting off in three very different but equally popular directions, factoring out and then multiplying the essential ingredients of classical-situational comedy (for *Errors*), native farce (*Shrew*), and Continental romance (*Two Gentlemen*) before combining and intellectualizing all three ingredients to produce the first of his increasingly brilliant high comedies (*Love's Labor's Lost*).

(pg. 408)

Volume 9 of *Shakespearean Criticism* commenting on criticism of *The Taming of the Shrew* states,

He [E.K. Chambers] pointed out that the play's 'humorous and dispassionate' treatment of the battle between the sexes is typical of farce, as is the element of brutality in Kate and Petruchio's relationship.

(pg. 314)

A few years later, M. R. Ridley declared that the central action of *The Taming of the Shrew* is,

'in the main, high-spirited full-blooded farce,' with a crudity that was intentional but an apparent brutality that was not.

(pg. 314)

Magill states,

[The comedy of Errors] Considerable buffoonery and slapstick characterize the main action involving the twins-both named Antipholus-and their servants.

(pg. 1704)

He continues,

The characters are, however, largely interchangeable and lacking in individualizing traits. Types rather than full-blown human beings people the world of the play, thus underscoring the theme of supposing or masking.

(pg. 1704)

All of these elements described here can be used to describe all of the categories of the Kyogen plays mentioned earlier. There is a close similarity between Kyogen and the early comedies of Shakespeare.

As Shakespeare developed as a dramatist, he began to move away from the superficial caricatures of his early comedies to a fuller individualization of his characters and an interweaving of comedic and more serious dramatic elements, i.e.,

The traditions of the English drama had favoured the juxtaposition of the serious and comic; but it was reserved for Shakespeare to make each a part of the other; to interpenetrate tragedy with comedy, and comedy with tragic earnestness.

(Dowden, pg.343)

It is at this juncture, starting with Shakespeare's second period of comedy writing that we lose the close links with Kyogen.

Kyogen is an integral part of Noh, and as such, serves a specific purpose, providing the "day" for audiences to the Noh's "night." Noh presents us with the phantasmal, spiritual, tragic, unbearable aspects of human and godly actions, and Kyogen acts as the counterweight to lighten the burden of trying to comprehend it all. It brings the audience back to earth to share in a little humor and poke fun at ourselves. What this means, then, is that Kyogen is "frozen" and cannot "progress" onward to incorporate new dramatic elements into it as Shakespeare went on to do with his later comedies. Where Kyogen developed a fixed, static comedic style as comic relief to the serious, dramatic action of Noh, Shakespearean comedy was transformed from a simple superficial exploitation of themes and ideas to deep, allegorical, psychological and philosophical treatises on the human condition.

There are certain similarities between Shakespeare's early comedies and Kyogen. In



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addition, we have seen how early Elizabethan theater and Kyogen are similar in their theatrical presentations. This lends credence to the opening statement that drama shares certain traits irrespective of region or culture, because all drama deals with the same major theme of Man's foibles and how he fits into the natural scheme of things.

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