

A Comparative Study on Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's Comedy

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's comedy and Guan Hanqing's comedy represent the highest achievements in Western and Eastern comedy creation, respectively. Although the social soil and cultural genes are different, Shakespeare's comedy and Guan Hanqing's comedy not only demonstrate their uniqueness, but also astonishingly showcase similarities in ethical function, cultural function, aesthetic pursuit, and human care, etc. A comparative study of the comedies of Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing is of great significance.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; Guan Hanqing; Comedy; Comparative study

1 Introduction

Domestic academic research on Guan Hanqing's comedies initially focused on ethical criticism. For instance, Zheng Chuanyin (2018) notes that *Rescued by a Coquette* realizes a moral judgment on the "powerful and influential" class of the Yuan Dynasty through Zhao Pan'er's strategy of fighting evil with evil, and its comedic core is a dramatic expression of the Confucian ethic that good is rewarded with good. In recent years, the research perspective has shifted to cultural and institutional analysis. Huang Shizhong (2021) proposes that the physical discipline of women under the music household system (such as the dilemma of becoming a commoner in *Xie Tianxiang*) constitutes the hidden main thread of conflict in Guan Hanqing's comedies.

Regarding research on Shakespeare's comedies, Li Weimin (2020) asserts that the forest utopia in *As You Like It* is a spatial metaphor for the concept of individual freedom during the Renaissance, and the comedy achieves an aesthetic transcendence of feudal ethics through the narrative structure of transgression–forgiveness–rebirth. Chen Jianhua (2023) applies Bakhtin's carnival theory to analyze the linguistic deconstructiveness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, noting that the magic spells of Oberon, King of the Fairies, are essentially a parody of rational order through linguistic carnival, offering a new perspective for Shakespearean studies.

Liu Haiping (2022) constructs an analytical framework of cultural grammar, placing Guan Hanqing's misunderstanding-coincidence structure and Shakespeare's misrecognition-correction model within the coordinate system of ethics-oriented culture and individual-oriented culture to reveal their fundamental differences in conflict resolution mechanisms.

Western academic research on Guan Hanqing originated from the sinological tradition, focusing initially on text translation and introduction. Liu (2020) interprets the plot of fake performance turning real in *The Jade Mirror Stand* as the Yuan Dynasty literati's humorous response to the failure of the imperial examination, arguing that Guan Hanqing's comedies achieve a psychological reconstruction of social order through the pursuit of fame and official rank. In recent years, research has shifted toward theoretical dialogue. Chen (2021) applies Foucault's theory of power to analyze the redemption paradox in *The Golden Thread Pond*. In studies of Shakespeare's comedies, Bradley (2019) analyzes the twin misunderstanding mechanism in *The Comedy of Errors* from the perspective of cognitive psychology, proposing a comedic psychological model of cognitive bias – emotional outburst – rational recovery. Hodgdon (2022) approaches from a theatrical perspective, analyzing how the physical comedy in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* achieves a collective mockery of the Elizabethan gender order through the interactive ritual between audience and actors. Spivak's (2019) postcolonial research, though addressing the grassroots characters in Guan Hanqing's works (such as Mother Wang in *The Butterfly Dream*), overemphasizes muteness while neglecting the dimension of active resistance characterized by tit-for-tat in the plays.

Although existing research has yielded fruitful results in case analysis and theoretical application, yet there are still limitations. There is a lack of traceable analysis from dramatic ontology to cultural spirit regarding the formal differences between Guan Hanqing's single-role singing system and Shakespeare's multi-voice dialogue. It is needed to systematically sort out the metamorphosis of Confucian ethics in Yuan Dynasty comedies and the Christian ethical basis of Shakespeare's comedies.

This study intends to make a comparative study on Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's comedy so as to draw people's attention to the overlooked aspects of Shakespearean comedy research.

2 Comparisons Between Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's Comedy

2.1 Ethical Functions: Order Restoration and Moral Purification

Guan Hanqing's comedies take ordinary people at the bottom of society as protagonists, the core of which lies in the comedic realization and restoration of ethical justice, reconstructing social order through models such as honest officials adjudicating cases and scholarly fame and success.

The ethical core of Guan Hanqing's comedies is the Confucian thought of rule by ritual, emphasizing the individual's obligation and responsibility to social order. Although the imperial examination was abolished in the Yuan Dynasty, Confucian ethics remained the mainstream value, and themes such as filial piety (*Mother Chen Teaches Her Sons*) and righteousness (*Rescued by a Coquette*) in Guan's comedies all originated from this. The ritual order in Guan Hanqing's comedies is a concrete manifestation of Yuan literati's imagination of transforming Confucian ethics into a real moral order through comedy. The plot in *Pei Du Returns the Sash* where Pei Du gains good fortune for returning the sash (returning a jade belt) is a comedic interpretation of the Confucian distinction between righteousness and profit: Transforming righteousness into measurable good fortune, such as the fortune-teller's prediction that finding the jade belt will lead to a high official position, makes abstract ethics a utilitarian narrative tool; Pei Du's transformation from a poor scholar to Duke of Jin strengthens the inevitable connection between morality—official success—hierarchy, with comedy becoming a cultural ritual to maintain the ethics of "excellence in studies leading to officialdom; The image of Pei Du's wife as a virtuous woman who endures poverty is actually a symbolic presentation of the Confucian ethics of husband as the master of wife in comedy.

Another example is *The Scarlet Robe Dream*, where Li Qing'an eventually becomes a top scholar, both clearing his wrongful charges and conforming to the Yuan literati's imagination of salvation through the imperial examination. The ending of non-imperial-examination-type comedy, such as Zhao Pan'er rescuing Song Yinzhang in *Rescued by a Coquette*, returns to the traditional ethical system through the ritual of becoming a commoner's wife. This happy reunion embodies Confucian moderation actively intervening in and reconciling social contradictions.

Shakespeare's comedies focus on noble youths and emerging citizens, the core of which lies in purifying the morality of the audience through laughter in a form that combines teaching with delight.

Shakespeare's comedies are idealized attempts at striving to pursue individual dreams and ambitions. Yet it should be noted that this kind of pursuit is based on the traditional ethical and moral norms of Christianity.

In *Measure for Measure*, after Angelo's hypocrisy is exposed, the duke rebuilds moral order through forgiveness rather than punishment, and the teachings about forgiveness are an important part of the Bible.

Although the flesh-cutting contract plot in *The Merchant of Venice* involves serious legal issues, its exaggerated interpretation (such as Portia's judgment that "Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more But just a pound of flesh") allows the audience to derive comedic pleasure from tension. Meanwhile, from the ending of this drama, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of the teachings of love over hate in the Bible through subtle influence. Romans 12:14-20: "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

2.2 Cultural Functions: Realistic Intervention and Spiritual Catharsis

Guan Hanqing's comedies are collective psychological representations of Yuan literati, with a strong function of realistic intervention, reflecting their worldly engagement mentality even after the disillusionment of entering officialdom by excelling in studies.

In *The Riverside Pavilion*, Tan Jier's witty battle against powerful officials is essentially literati's spiritual resistance to irresistible power oppression in reality. Another example is the deterministic comedy in *Pei Du Returns the Sash*, which alleviates realistic anxiety through fantasy mechanisms. Pei Du becomes a top scholar because he returns a lost gold sash, realizing the ethical order of "good is rewarded with good", reflecting Yuan literati's strong longing for a normal Confucian ethical order. This kind of plot arrangement can alleviate literati's survival anxiety about uncertainty through the narrative loop of fortune-teller's prediction—moral practice—prediction fulfillment, and can integrate Buddhist karmic retribution with Confucian "heaven rewards diligence" to create a popular ethical comedy model suitable for marketplace audiences.

Shakespeare's comedies served as a conduit for social emotions during the Renaissance, and their cultural function is closer to Aristotle's catharsis theory, releasing social pressures through carnival-like plots.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff's two humiliations—being stuffed into a laundry basket and disguised as a witch—use physical comedy to deflate the dignity of the nobility. Furthermore, the physical comedy in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* achieves psychological integration of social groups through derogatory humor. Falstaff is twice thrown into the

River Thames in a laundry basket and whipped while disguised as a witch, with his obese body becoming the focus of comedic attacks. The repeated mockery of Falstaff's greasiness implicitly critiques the parasitic life of feudal nobles from the emerging bourgeoisie. The audience vents their dissatisfaction with the powerful through laughing at Falstaff, making comedy an "emotional safety valve" for maintaining social stability.

Another example is the carnival of misunderstandings in *The Comedy of Errors*, where misunderstandings, as symptoms of social order, are resolved comically. The ending restores order through the restoration of paternal authority (the father appearing to recognize his sons), implying that Shakespearean comedies fundamentally identify with the existing feudal social structure in England at that time.

2.3 Aesthetic Traits: Laughter of Wisdom and Relief and Poetry of Ideal Carnival

Guan Hanqing's comedies are a wise translation of real predicaments. They often contain tragic undercurrents; for example, the love entanglement between Du Ruiniang and Han Fuchen in *The Golden Thread Pond* seems like a comedy of misunderstandings on the surface, but in reality, it reveals the objectification of women under the music household system. This trait of hidden tragedy within comedy is related to the creative psychology of Yuan Dynasty literati who wrote tragedy through comedy. For instance, Ma Zhiyuan's *Autumn in the Han Palace* was adapted into the comedic *Emperor Yuan of Han Weeps for Zhaojun*, which eases the mournful tone of the original work through the absurd image of the Xiongnu king (in a Ming Dynasty selection of *zaju*). The intertwining of joy and sorrow in *The Scarlet Robe Dream* completes an aesthetic critique of distorted reality within comedy. Tragedy destroys what is valuable in life to show people, while comedy tears away the ugly to expose it. The love between Li Qing'an and Wang Runxiang is plunged into despair due to Pei Yan stealing money and killing someone, but is eventually vindicated through miscarriage of justice. Another example is *Xie Tianxiang*, an elegy for the music household system, which reveals the narrative of women being saved and gender oppression. *Xie Tianxiang*'s identity transformation from a courtesan to a county lady seems like a comedic ending but hides tragedy.

Shakespeare's comedies are a comedic transcendence of idealistic imagination. Their aesthetic trait is individual carnival as an escape from reality; for example, the magical world of Oberon and Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* transforms real conflicts into poetic fantasy narratives. Even *All's Well That Ends Well* has a plot design closer to romantic legend than realistic critique. The miracle comedy in *The Winter's Tale* creates aesthetic ecstasy beyond reality through miraculous forms. Hermione's statue coming to life is the climax of the play, with its comedy stemming from the collision between irrational miracle and rational cognition: The stage trick of the statue coming to life challenges the audience's cognitive boundary between reality and fiction, creating aesthetic surprise; The sixteen-year period of atonement is compressed into a ceremony, using artistic time to transcend physical time, reflecting comedy's absolute priority on happy endings; Antigonus' death is downplayed as being torn into pieces by a bear, with comedy achieving aesthetic suppression of tragedy through selective forgetting.

2.4 Comedy Roots: Cultural Genes and Dramatic Traditions

The cultural gene model of Chinese and Western comic concepts is a coordinate axis of ethical orientations. Guan Hanqing's comedies take Confucian ethics as the horizontal axis (emphasizing hierarchy, order, responsibility, and saving the world) and Confucian pragmatic engagement as the vertical axis (focusing on realistic solutions and interest calculation), forming a pragmatic comedy model. For example, the contract ethics in *Rescued by a Coquette* and elderly authority in *The Jade Mirror Stand* both lie in the first quadrant of this coordinate system. Shakespeare's comedies take humanistic individual liberation as the horizontal axis (emphasizing the individual, freedom, and rationality) and universal love as the vertical axis (focusing on forgiveness, redemption, and transcendence), forming an idealistic comedy model. For example, the natural ethics in *As You Like It* and forgiveness ethics in *Twelfth Night* are located in the second quadrant of this coordinate system. The intermingling of tragedy and comedy tradition in Chinese opera can be traced back to the Southern Drama of the Song and Yuan dynasties. For example, *The Story of the Lute* adopts a dual-line structure with the theme "Chao Zhennü, virtuous and steadfast; Cai Bojie, loyal and filial", featuring no pure tragedy or comedy but emphasizing the alternation of sorrow and joy, the balance of intensity, and a rhythmic ebb and flow. Guan Hanqing's comedies inherit this narrative strategy of embedding solemnity in humor.

In contrast, the Western dramatic tradition to which Shakespeare belongs has strictly distinguished between tragedy and comedy since Aristotle's *Poetics*. Shakespeare's comedies focus more on genre purity; for instance, *The Comedy of Errors* constructs its plot entirely through misunderstandings and coincidences, excluding tragic elements.

The unique social structure of the Yuan Dynasty (ethnic hierarchy, marginalization of literati) gave birth to Guan Hanqing's commoner comedies, whose creation was a rebound against real oppression. Shakespeare's England was in a rising phase of capitalism, where humanistic thought encouraged individuals to pursue freedom and happiness—a spirit vividly reflected in Viola's gender transgression in *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare's multi-voice dialogue and the polyphony of comedy embody diverse ethics through multiple voices. For example, the drunken trio of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste in *Twelfth Night* creates comedic tension through dialogue

among different voices: Toby's vulgarity, Andrew's foolishness and Feste's wit form a carnival of voices in the Renaissance; Though a clown, Feste controls the rhythm of dialogue with riddles, reflecting Shakespearean comedy's imagination of equal right to speak. For another example, from the debate between the merchant and the shepherd in *As You Like It*, readers can find the modernity of polyphonic structure: Different voices are not subordinate to each other.

Guan Hanqing's and Shakespeare's comedic creations differ profoundly: the former uses the Yuan marketplace as a canvas, depicting wisdom comedies with commoners' wit—Zhao Pan'er's strategies in the pleasure quarters and Tan Jier's identity transgression are essentially symbolic breakthroughs of the oppressed in a social cage, with their comedy rooted in the survival wisdom of repaying injustice with justice. The latter, set against the Renaissance, portrays the pursuit of freedom amid an era of institutional transition—Viola's gender performance and Hermia's escape from arranged marriage showcase the idealized subversion of traditional feudal order through individual rational awakening, with their comedy rooted in the optimistic belief in individual liberation. Guan Hanqing's comedies oscillate within the concentric circle of Confucian ethics; for example, the witty battle in *Rescued by a Coquette* relies on the official rank system to complete an ethical closure, embodying the cultural concept of restorative comedy. Shakespeare's comedies exhibit strong idealism, like unbridled wild horses, practicing individualist experiments in utopian spaces such as forests and beaches, yet what should be remembered is that Shakespeare's comedies are created with the core of subtly interpreting the moral and ethical principles advocated in the Christian Bible, as seen in the comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The comedic differences between Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare constitute the polyphonic resonance of human comedy—we see survival wisdom in Zhao Pan'er's cunning and courage in Viola's disguise. Laughter thus transcends region and era, becoming a spiritual torch illuminating humanity's shared predicaments.

3 Conclusion

Yuan Zaju represents the first golden age and peak of ancient Chinese drama. Guan Hanqing's comedies are a comedic reproduction of Confucian ethics. Shakespeare's comedies subtly reveal the relationship between personal pursuit and traditional ethics that should be achieved: As individuals, they can strive to pursue their own dreams and ambitions, yet, their pursuit should be based on the traditional ethical and moral norms of Christianity. That is to say, Christian ethics are the bottom line of personal behavior norms, and personal happiness is closely related to following Christian ethics and morality. Although Guan Hanqing's and Shakespeare's comedies were born from different cultural soils, they show astonishing similarities in dramatic functions, aesthetic pursuits, and care for human nature, while also exhibiting uniqueness rooted in cultural differences. This comparison of similarities and differences not only helps us more clearly recognize the excellence of Shakespeare's plays, but also provides a new perspective for understanding the outstanding artistic value of traditional Chinese drama.

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