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## «Unbewaffnetes Auge»: Benjamin's interpretation of comedy in Shakespeare and Molière

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**Abstract.** This essay examines two texts that Walter Benjamin wrote in 1918, during his period in Bern, on Shakespeare's comedy *As you like it* and on *Le malade imaginaire* by Molière. When these texts are considered together, a question arises. What is the role of the comic inside Benjamin's philosophy, in this period and also in the years to follow? Is the comic really only the other side of mourning, as Benjamin writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, or does it also have another significance, a significance of its own? Moreover, why should Shakespeare's comedy be the opposite of Molière's comedy, as Benjamin writes in the paper on Molière?

In order to answer, we are going to set a connection between Shakespeare's «unarmed eye» (*As you like it*) and the «innocence» (*Fate and Character*) that Molière's comedy indicates. This will also lead us to another text that was of much significance to Benjamin (GB, 02/02/1920 et al.), Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*. Here too, as in *As you like it*, there is an innocent protagonist trying to escape from the evil of a court. Yet Shakespeare's *As you like it* ends with the reconstruction of a court. What does Benjamin mean, then, when he states that in *As you like it* «everything ends in loneliness»? The answer will provide a point of convergence between Shakespeare's and Molière's comedy. Benjamin's idea of «Weltlichkeit» (ibid.), of which comedy is a necessary part, will prove to be an alternative to the «armed» character of the court.

**Keywords.** Benjamin, comedy, Molière, Shakespeare, Weltlichkeit.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay examines two texts that Benjamin wrote in 1918, one on Shakespeare's comedy *As you like it* and the other one on *Le malade imaginaire* by Molière (Benjamin [1918a], [1918b]). They are part of a group of three texts that Benjamin wrote on comedy in the same year. The third one is on a play by Bernard Shaw, *Frau Warren's Gewerbe* (Benjamin [1918c]). When these texts are considered together, a question arises. What is the role of the comic inside Benjamin's thought, in this period and also in the years to follow? Is the comic really only the other side of mourning, as Benjamin writes in the *Origin of German Trauerspiel* (Benjamin [1928b]: 123-4), or does

it have also another kind of significance, a significance of its own? It is known that Benjamin wanted to write about French comedy, just after he finished his *Trauerspielbuch* (Benjamin [1928]d: 78), yet why<sup>1</sup>?

Focusing on some documents from the period of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, it becomes clear that Benjamin was very interested not only in Shakespeare's tragic dramas and tragic characters, but also in his comedies<sup>2</sup>. In a letter he writes to Hofmannsthal in 1925, he deals with the *Tempest* and with the figure of Caliban, who is indeed a comic character (Benjamin [1928c]: 439; see Lupton [2000]).

In order to understand what role the comic plays inside Benjamin's thought, it is first necessary to examine the relationship between the paper on *As you like it* and that on Molière.

## 2. SHAKESPEARE AND MOLIÈRE

In his text on *The Imaginary Invalid*, Benjamin says something that is initially quite difficult to understand:

*Molière's dramas stem from a noble dramatic tradition that begins probably even before the Greeks but clearly arises for the first time, from a historical point of view, only with the Greeks themselves. This tradition goes on in the Latin comedies of Plautus and Terentius and leads, more or less, first to the Middle Ages of Hroswitha of Gandersheim and finally to Molière. It is not clear whether Molière has any followers in this tradition, i.e. the drama of the mask [...] The mask is involved in all greatest problems*

<sup>1</sup> The question of the comic inside Benjamin's thought is scarcely considered in the critical literature. Two exceptions are Bontea (2006) and Braider (2012). For the theme of «cheerfulness», «play» and «laugh» in Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of its technical Reproducibility* see Desideri (2019).

<sup>2</sup> In order to understand Benjamin's relationship with Shakespeare, it is important to consider his friendship with Florens Christian Rang. See on this Benjamin (1928c): 447-8 and 403-17. See also Rang (1954). On Rang's personality and writings see Desideri (2008).

*of drama and of the classical spirit of drama, whose opposite is represented by the romantic Shakespeare. (Benjamin [1918b]: 612; my trans.)*

Molière's comedy, as Benjamin states in this passage, is very near to the ancient Greek and Roman comedy. On the other hand, Shakespeare's comedy is the opposite of Molière's and also of the ancient comedy. Why? The answer lies in the way Benjamin describes the two types of comedy in the two papers.

Beginning from Molière, the first question to ask is why, in the quoted passage, Benjamin writes that *Le malade imaginaire*, and Molière's comedy in general, is a comedy of the mask. This is not something which is immediately clear, in fact Molière's characters have no masks.

What does it mean then to have a mask and why is this type of comedy important, for Benjamin? Perhaps an answer can be found in the paper on *Fate and character* that Benjamin writes in the following year, 1919<sup>3</sup>. In the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* Benjamin quite often refers to the essay on *Fate and Character*, but only to the part on ancient tragedy. The essay on Molière refers to the other part of *Fate and Character*, that on ancient comedy:

*[...] a great comic playwright—for example, Molière—does not seek to define his creations by the multiplicity of their character traits. On the contrary, he excludes psychological analysis from his work. It has nothing to do with the concerns of psychology if, in *L'avare* and *Le malade imaginaire*, miserliness and hypochondria are hypostatized as the foundation of all action. About hypochondria and miserliness these dramas teach nothing; far from making these traits comprehensible, they depict them with an intensifying crassness. If the object of psychology is the inner life of man understood empirically, Molière's characters are of no use to it even as means of demonstration. Character develops in them like a*

<sup>3</sup> On Benjamin's interpretation of comedy in this essay see Benjamin (2013): 87-90; Friedlander (2012): 120-21. On the part on ancient tragedy see Birnbaum (2009). On Benjamin's Bern years, from 1917 to 1919, see Tagliacozzo (2018).

*sun, in the brilliance of its single trait, which allows no other to remain visible in its proximity. The sublimity of character comedy rests on this anonymity of man and his morality, alongside the utmost development of individuality through its exclusive character trait. While fate brings to light the immense complexity of the guilty person, the complications and bonds of his guilt, character gives this mystical enslavement of the person to the guilt context the answer of genius. (Benjamin [1919]: 205)*

What Benjamin states here is that the protagonists of Molière's plays don't have many features, but they have just one «single trait» that always remains the same. This is their mask. This «single trait» is important, because it allows them to show their innocence against the «complications» of fate.

The imaginary invalid has a mask then, as Benjamin writes in the paper on Molière. He has «the mask of a man who thinks himself to be ill» (Benjamin [1918b]: 612). This is also something that the actor who plays this role must not forget: he should not move with too much agility through the scene, as Benjamin remarks (ivi: 613). In fact, in Molière's comedy there is a very funny passage in which Argan, the imaginary invalid, starts to walk without his walking stick and his housemaid, Toinette, suddenly reminds him that he can not: «Tenez, Monsieur, vous ne songez pas que vous ne sauriez marcher sans baton». «Tu as raison» («Here, sir; you forget that you can not get about without a stick». «Oh, yeah, you are right»»). (Molière [1673]: III, 2; my trans.)

Having examined Benjamin's interpretation of Molière's comedy, it is now possible to return to the first question: why is Shakespeare's comedy the opposite of that of Molière and of the comedy of the mask in general? An answer lies in Benjamin's paper on *As you like it*. Here Benjamin says that in Shakespeare's comedies, and in *As you like it* in particular, the reader can see Shakespeare's capacity of letting everything «dissolve» [«sich auflösen»] into the infinite, like «clouds on a summer's day» (Benjamin [1918a]: 610-11; my trans.). This

is a romantic feature indeed<sup>4</sup>, but it is also something more radical in Shakespeare than in the romantics, as demonstrated further on.

It is first necessary to briefly consider the plot of *As you like it*. In this comedy there is a duke who is usurped by his younger brother and has to escape with his court. He arrives to a forest, the forest of Arden, where he decides to live. The duke reassembles his court in the forest. It is a different court, without all the injustice and the violence of the previous one. People here live in harmony, dancing and falling in love with each other. However, this will not last for a long time – and that is the first element of *Auflösung*, of the dissolution of things. The duke and his court will have to return to reality beyond the forest, at the end of the play.

Moreover, and this is a second element of *Auflösung*, some of the protagonists will not remain unchanged at the end of the play. The most obvious case is that of Rosalind: she is a beautiful girl who is disguised like a boy when she arrives in the forest, where she then plays a sort of theatre where she, as a boy, pretends to be a girl. This causes a lot of confusion. Yet, at the end of the play, Rosalind loses her disguise and her true identity is revealed again.

It is easy to see the contrast with the comedy of the mask, with the imaginary invalid, who should never forget his walking stick and mask.

This, however, raises an important question: if the two types of comedy – Molière's comedy and Shakespeare's comedy – are opposite, how can they have something in common, how can they have a common meaning?

### 3. THE CLIFF THAT IS NOT A CLIFF

A possible answer can be found in another passage of Shakespeare that was very important for Benjamin. Benjamin writes about it much later, in 1931, when he is discussing with Brecht about the epic theater (Benjamin [1931]: 483), but

<sup>4</sup> On Benjamin and Romanticism see at least Brüggemann, Oesterle (2009); Hanssen, Benjamin (2002).

he says that it was important to him for a long time. It is a passage from *King Lear*, the famous passage of «the cliff that is not a cliff» (ivi).

In this episode of Shakespeare's drama, the count of Gloucester has become blind, because his enemies gouged out his eyes, and he wants to reach a very high cliff by the sea from which to throw himself and die. His son Edgar is asked to guide him to the cliff, but Gloucester doesn't know that Edgar is Edgar, because he is blind and also because Edgar is pretending to be someone else, a madman called Tom. Yet what is important in this context is that Edgar makes Gloucester believe that he is climbing a cliff, but he is not. He also makes him believe that he is throwing himself off the cliff, even though he is not. Gloucester throws himself forward and falls on the floor. It is also interesting what Edgar says to the public before he jumps: «Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ is done to cure it» (Shakespeare [1605-6]: IV, 6, 33-4). In fact Gloucester thinks, when he falls down, that he fell off the cliff and survived, and decides for this reason that from that moment on he will bear his affliction «till it do cry out itself/ «enough, enough», and die [...]» (ivi, 76-7).

When Benjamin writes about this passage, in 1931, he says that for the first time it gave him an idea of the fact that «there were other possibilities for theater» than those indicated in a famous work by Gustav Freytag, *Die Technik des Dramas* (Freytag [1863]). What does that mean? Of course in this passage from *King Lear* there is a clear connection with Benjamin's meditation on the epic theater of Brecht: the identification with Gloucester is broken through the fact that the cliff is not a cliff. This makes him an «untragic hero» (Benjamin [1939]: 304)<sup>5</sup>.

Firstly, it is necessary to notice that this is already true for the baroque dramas. When Benjamin writes the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, he already criticizes the classic idea – which is also found in Freytag ([1863]: cap. 2, par.2) and comes from a very common interpretation of Aristotle

– of the dramatic process as a series of five successive moments: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement (what has been called later “Freytag's pyramid”)<sup>6</sup>. It is not by chance that already in this passage of *King Lear* the «denouement» is combined with the «climax». Moreover, the comic and the dramatic moment meet and there is no definite border between them: this is something very important in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (see for ex. Benjamin [1928c]: 182-5). Yet there may also be something else in this passage, which concerns the question of the comic more directly.

In a paragraph of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* Benjamin states that Greek ancient tragedies ended with a «non liquet», something that was not solved – tragedy was not a definite solution to injustice and to violence – and it is for this reason that it was necessary to place the comic element of the satiric play after the tragedy: «only the élan of the comic can prepare for or react to the non liquet of the process presented» (Benjamin [1928b]: 113). Comedy, then, is something that helps generate new beginnings, just like in the passage of *King Lear*. Does this mean that comedy is only a sort of consolation to pain and to injustice<sup>7</sup>? Maybe not, it is definitely something more.

#### 4. THE COURT

To identify the full significance of the comedic element, it is useful to consider the beginning of *As you like it*. This comedy begins with another pair of brothers, not the duke and his brother, but two young noblemen, Orlando and Oliver. Oliver, the

<sup>5</sup> On Benjamin and Brecht see Wizisla (2004) and Wizisla (2017).

<sup>6</sup> See Freytag ([1863]: cap. 2, par. 2): «Durch die beiden Hälften der Handlung, welche in einem Punkt zusammenschließen, erhält das Drama, — wenn man die Anordnung durch Linien verbildlicht, — einen pyramidalen Bau. Es steigt von der Einleitung mit dem Zutritt des erregenden Moments bis zu dem Höhenpunkt, und fällt von da bis zur Katastrophe. Zwischen diesen drei Theilen liegen die Theile der Steigerung und des Falles».

<sup>7</sup> On pain inside Benjamin's thought see Ferber (2014).

eldest brother, hates Orlando, who for this reason has to escape into the forest. In this context, the most interesting thing is the reason why he hates his brother:

*Now will I stir this gamester: I hope I shall see  
an end of him; for my soul, yet I know not why,  
hates nothing more than he. Yet he's gentle, never  
schooled and yet learned, full of noble device, of  
all sorts enchantingly beloved, and indeed so much  
in the heart of the world, and especially of my own  
people, who best know him, that I am altogether  
misprired: but it shall not be so long; this  
wrestler shall clear all: nothing remains but that  
I kindle the boy thither; which now I'll go about.  
(Shakespeare [1599]: I,1)*

Orlando has no instruction, then, but he is «learned» and «gentle». His virtue and his beauty are something natural. This recalls, in some way, what Jago says of Cassio in the Othello: «He hath a daily beauty in his life» (Shakespeare [1603]: V, 1). Moreover, it recalls another work that was very important for Benjamin, which belongs to another historical context but has nevertheless an important connection to the issue at hand, i.e. *The Charterhouse of Parma* by Stendhal (Stendhal [1838]; see Benjamin [1919-24]: 73, 76 and Id. [1931-34]: 86, 89)<sup>8</sup>.

In this book, as in *As you like it*, there is a protagonist, Fabrizio, who is trying to escape from the evil and the complications of a court, the court of Parma, and a courtesan, who is one of Benjamin's favorite characters, the count Mosca. Mosca is the counselor of the prince; he is a real counselor in the sense of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Benjamin [1928b]: 123-5): he is an extraordinary comic figure as well.

In the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* the court is a very important subject (Benjamin

[1928b]: 82, 88), it is the symbol of the arbitrium [Willkür] of our thought and of our language (ivi: 201, 257-8). It is interesting to know, then, that Benjamin liked this book by Stendhal so much and even that his favorite character was Mosca.

In fact, Mosca regrets that he can not be like Fabrizio: he can not escape from the court and from its lies. Yet on the other hand he knows that it is not really possible to escape: Fabrizio will find some peace for only a few moments, on a rock by the lake and inside an old churchtower (Stendhal [1838]: 161 ff.) – here too there is a flight into nature – but at the end he will die inside the charterhouse of the title. Mosca, on the other hand, does not meet such an unfortunate end, as the last few lines of the book inform us:

*The prisons of Parma were empty, the Conte  
immensely rich, Ernesto V adored by his subjects,  
who compared his rule to that of the Grand Dukes of  
Tuscany.*

*TO THE HAPPY FEW. (Stendhal [1838]: 510)*

What is the solution to the evil and the complications of the court, then? This is a very important issue not only in the Nineteenth Century, but already in the baroque culture, as Benjamin shows in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. It is also to be found in an extraordinary way in *Le malade imaginaire*. Here too there is a court: a court of doctors, who give – as Argan's brother, Beraldo, says – «words for arguments and promises for results»:

*Argan: «Mais toujours faut-il demeurer d'accord, que  
sur cette matière les médecins en savent plus que les  
autres».*

*Béralde: «Ils savent, mon frère, ce que je vous ai dit,  
qui ne guérit pas de grand-chose, et toute l'excellence  
de leur art consiste en un pompeux galimatias, en  
un spécieux babil, qui vous donne des mots pour des  
raisons, et des promesses pour des effets».* (Molière  
[1673]: III, 3)

It is also interesting what Beraldo suggests against this. Talking about Monsieur Pourgon, the doctor, he tells his brother: «Songez que les princi-

<sup>8</sup> In 1920 Benjamin writes: «In den letzten zwei Wochen habe ich eines der herrlichsten Bücher gelesen: die *Chartreuse de Parme* von Stendhal» (Benjamin [1919-24]: 73). And in 1932: «Ich lese zum zweiten Mal die *Chartreuse de Parme* [...] Es gibt kaum Schöneres» (Benjamin [1931-34]: 86).

pes de votre vie sont en vous-même» («remember that the principle of your life is in yourself») (ivi: III, 6).

In the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* Benjamin says that when thought and language diverge from life, in order to dominate it, they kill themselves (Benjamin [1928c]: 294). How is it then possible to avoid this?

### 5. WELTLICHKEIT

In his paper on *As you like it* Benjamin states that in this comedy «everything ends in loneliness» (ivi; 611; my trans.). This is not immediately understandable, because *As you like it* concludes with the reconstruction of a court. Couples get married and leave to build another court outside the forest. There is an important aspect of Benjamin's paper, however, that is yet to be considered. It is a passage in which Benjamin states that Shakespeare is more radical than the romantics in his dissolution of things, because he does not try to «keep anything». There is no «Sehnsucht» in him, and this is the basis of his «Weltlichkeit»: his “wordly” or “terrestrial” character (ibidem).

What is the *Weltlichkeit* of Shakespeare, the *Weltlichkeit* Benjamin is talking about? It is of course not the *Weltlichkeit* of the courtesan, the *Weltlichkeit* of Mosca, and not even that of Monsieur Pourgon...

One last passage of Benjamin's paper on *As you like it* offers a potential solution. At the very end of the text, Benjamin writes that Shakespeare, among all great English poets, is the only one who has an «unarmed eye» (ibidem). The comparison is with Sterne, who has the microscope, and with Swift, who has the telescope. The adjective «unarmed», however, is probably not by chance. It brings to mind the question of violence, which is central to this comedy: there is no violence inside the forest, except the famous episode of the killing of a deer (Shakespeare [1599]: II,1). Furthermore, it also brings to mind the «innocence» of the comic character in Molière, as Benjamin describes it in *Fate and Character* (Benjamin [1919]: 205). This

innocence – as the quoted passage of *Fate and Character* shows – is the capacity of being “just that”. This is the «loneliness» to which Benjamin is referring. Something can be “just that” in two ways: by remaining “just that” all the time (and this is Molière: the imaginary invalid who remains unaltered with his mask); or something can be “just that” by losing its more complicated appearance (and this is *As you like it*, when Rosalind loses her disguise).

It is here that Shakespeare's and Molière's comedies meet. The comic, in all its different forms, happens through an unarmed eye; and it brings us back to the world, to the *Weltlichkeit*, in order to play with it and to play with ourselves. Just like Argan does, at the end of the play, when he dances with a group of fake doctors, in order to be proclaimed a doctor himself (Molière [1673]: III, 14).

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