

An Analysis of Prodigal Plays in the English Renaissance

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Abstract

Review Article

The fable of the prodigal son was widely dramatized during the English Renaissance, and the prodigal pattern permeated the entire theater of the that time. This article provides an overview of the prodigal plays, exploring the reasons for the popularity of prodigal plays during the Renaissance and the characteristics of its development at different stages during that period.

Keywords: The fable of the prodigal son, Prodigal plays, Christian Terence, Prosperity, Reasons, Characteristics.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of the Prodigal Son is the most common story in English Renaissance comedy (1500-1642), and echoes in various ways in literature during this period and beyond. As Hardin Craig Craig says, "the pattern of the Prodigal Son can be said to have permeated Elizabethan drama." [1]. Ervin Beck agrees, "among the many archetypal plots that recur in Renaissance comedy, the most appealing for such a study is the story of the prodigal son." [2]. He continued, "the entire tradition of prodigal-son comedy is properly emphasized as one of the earliest, most persistent, and most important strains in drama of the English Renaissance." [3]. The story derives from the familiar parable in Luke 15:11-32 which is often referred to as the "Evangelium in Evangelio" ("the Gospel within the Gospel"). In the Biblical fable, three main characters are involved: the younger of the two sons asks his father for his inheritance, so the father divided it between his two sons. Then, the younger son took his share to a distant land where he spends all his money on prostitutes and debauchery, and ends up as a starving swineherd. In dire need of help, he changes his mind, makes plans to return home with repentance, and asks for a position as his father's servant. However, his father runs to greet him, embraces him, gives him the

best robes, rings, and shoes, prepares a feast to celebrate his son's return and invites him to eat a fattened calf. The eldest son, who has been working in the field, hears the news of the gathering and refuses to join. He expresses frustration and jealousy towards his younger brother's treatment. In his opinion, he has never received a similar reward for hard work, kindness and obedience, so his younger brother should not be rewarded. The father assured him of his current situation, but claims that a party must be held because his brother "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32, *Geneva Bible*). This parable was well incorporated into the theatrical tradition, and examples of the prodigal comedy can be found from the earliest to the last years of Renaissance theater. In fact, "the story of the prodigal son seems to be the most pervasive paradigm in English Renaissance comedy." [4]. This article will give an overall concept of the use of this fable in English Renaissance plays, introduce its development in different stages and analyze the reasons for its popularity.

1. The Prosperity of Prodigal Plays in the English Renaissance

Continental prodigal-son plays dates back to 1510, consisting of *Asotus* by Hacropedius and *de filio*

¹ Beck, Ervin. "Terence improved: The paradigm of the prodigal son in English Renaissance comedy." *Renaissance Drama* 6 (1973): 108.

² Beck Jr, Ervin. *Prodigal Son Comedy: The Continuity of a Paradigm in English Drama, 1500-1642*. Indiana University, 1973: p.3.

³ Beck, Ervin. "Terence improved: The paradigm of the prodigal son in English Renaissance comedy." *Renaissance Drama* 6 (1973): p. 121.

⁴ Ibid.

prodigo, a dialogue by Ravisius Textor. Later in the tradition of the European continent, outstanding plays include Burchard Waldis's *De Parabell Vamvorlorn Szohn* (1527); *Acolastus* (1528) by Gulielmus Gnapheus; *Rebelle* (1535) and *Petriscus* (1536) by Macromedia; and *Studentes* (1549) by Stymmelius. Among them, *Acolastus* is widely regarded as the greatest achievement. In the UK, even before adaptations of prodigal son dramas became commonplace, the theme flourished in visual art--church windows, wall decorations, household textiles, and carvings. The fable of the prodigal son was proven to be a popular source of preaching, morality tales, and iconography since well before the sixteenth century. Although fables are popular in visual art, their development in British drama is independent of this trend, originating from the "Christian Terrence" tradition that began with *Astrotus*.

The tradition of "Christian Terrence" originated from Dutch schoolmasters in the late 15th to early 16th centuries, who believed that teaching Terence style comedy in classrooms, despite its admirable style, lacked Christian virtues and was therefore not suitable as a reading material for students. These writers include Macromedia, Gnapheus (also known as Fulonius), Christophorus Stymmelius, and Crucius. Based on this, they combined Terence's comedies with the fable plot of Luke 15:11-32 to create a text that conforms to both Christian virtues and Terence's elegant style.

Gnapheus's *Acolastus*, particularly popular in the UK, is one of the most successful examples of this fusion. An English translation of it in 1540 increased its popularity which was a campus drama that had a far greater impact than classrooms, entering universities and commercial theaters and many English adaptations of the fables of the prodigal son were also written in the same spirit. By the time "*The Famous Victory of Henry V*" was published, British prodigal dramas had almost abandoned their European roots and started a life entirely of their own. Of course, this fable has long appeared in non-dramatic works. Taking Chaucer's "Parsons' Tale" as an example, it depicts a joyful feast held by the father, where his son is lost and then returns to repent. As an image of unnecessary despair and God's willingness to forgive in His mercy. However, during the Elizabethan era, this fable became particularly common in literature and even "ubiquitous" in comedy at the time.

The stage history of prodigal dramas on the British stage can be traced back to around 1513. The story of the prodigal son appeared as the main or secondary plot in nearly forty plays, sprouting in anonymous *Interlude of Youth* (c. 1513), and finally appearing in the subplot of Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* (1635). Although the former is only a loose representation of the theme of the Gospel, it marks the first of more than a dozen theatrical works, which tell the rise, fall, and transformation of a young person who

needs to receive appropriate education on Protestant Christian values. This is the beginning of the tradition of prodigal dramas in the early Tudor and Stuart dynasties. A incomplete list of fable adaptations in the 16th century in England may include the following: *Interlude of Youth* (1513), *Hick Scornor* (1515-16), *Pater, Filius & Uxor* (1530-4), *Lusty Juventus* (1547-53), *Nice Wanton* (1547-53), *Jack Juggler* (1553), *Jacob and Esau* (1557-68), *The Content between Liberality and Prodigacy* (1560-70), *The Disobedient Child* (1559-70), *Sir Clyomon and Sir Clamides* (1570), *The Glass of Government* (1575), *Common Conditions* (1576), *Misogonus* (1570-7), *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1583-8), *The Scottish History of James IV* (1598), and the tradition extends further and wider including the works of Shakespeare in the late Elizabethan era such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Proteus), *The Taming of the Shrew* (Lucentio), *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* (Prince Hal), *All's Well that Ends Well* (Bertram), and *The Tempest* (Caliban) and so on. After entering Jacobin era, British prodigal dramas were fully integrated into urban comedy, focusing mainly on the wisdom of prodigals, chaste wives (and lascivious mistresses), and evading debtors.

2. The Characteristics of Prodigal Sons in Two Different Stages

Although critics have focused on different aspects of the 16th century prodigal tradition, they collectively demonstrate that this fable is a key meta narrative for writers of this period. Overall, the dramatization of fables during this period showed a trend from moral preaching to secularization.

First of all, the early Prodigal plays contain obvious moral preaching. Since Charles H. Herford's *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century*, literary historians have studied the prodigal son tradition in English theatre, focusing on early 16th century plays such as *Acolastus*, *Lusty Juventus*, *Nice Wanton*, *The Disobedient Child*, *Misogonus* and *The Glass of Government*. Through comparison, we can find that the early prodigal dramas are very concerned about the conflict between virtue and evil in the prodigal experience. The purification of the character of the protagonist is seen as an important factor driving the plot, and as such, they are morality plays in a general sense, with a goal similar to that of the Christian doctrine in the *Everyman*, which ends with a call to repentance. However, they incorporate the traditions of Roman comedy--expanding on the prodigal allegory based on character types and plot elements of Roman comedy: the tension between father and son, and self-indulgent life, including drinking and having fun with prostitutes. Moreover, they fit in well with the Prodigal Son's fables, and the plot is often a direct play on the fables: the main plot or important subplot usually involves a conflict between a young man and his father. Judged by the standards of the state of moral, social, and economic responsibility, this young man is just coming

of age. He left home on his own with an inheritance from his father and suffered a humiliating failure. Such setbacks make him change his mind and eventually return to his parents' home and adopt their values. In short, the early prodigal plays are based on the basic plot of the prodigal allegory, combining the local morality play with the tradition of Roman comedy. Taken as a whole, they are highly didactic, for the most part poorly structured, and far removed from the best comedies of the Renaissance; nevertheless, they succeeded in inheriting the prodigal paradigm and laying the groundwork for the emergence of good, secularized theater in the middle and late Renaissance.

Secondly, the later prodigal dramas became more secularized, with some completely detached from moral preaching. During this period, there were some changes in the use of fables, and the role of the prodigal son expanded to a very wide range, including not only "sons", but also students, apprentices, princes, and lovers. Even as Peter Milward said, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the use of fables was reversed, with the king appearing as a prodigal son/parent, returning to welcome his parents/child Cordelia. Moreover, the fable about the youngest son losing his inheritance in a dissolute life provides a dramatic opportunity to present a ultimately harmful counterculture world. In this world, the rebellion of young people against the advice of older fathers rather than their ultimate "turning back" often becomes the focus. For most critics, it is the theme of rebellion that defines the use of fables during this period. As Hergesen said, that Elizabethan people were interested in the rebelliousness of the prodigal son rather than the kindness of the father's forgiveness in the prodigal son fables [5]. It is also worth mentioning that the image of the "extravagant prodigal" in the fable has also been changed, with a clear positive evaluation of extravagance, which is seen not only as attractive but also as useful. As Alison M. Jack commented:

'Prodigal' is an adjective with a chequered past. Its Latin root is prodigus, which denotes a lavishness which is morally neutral. In general English usage, strongly negative connotations attend its sense of wasteful squandering. However, more recently, 'prodigal' has cut loose from such negativity to take on a much more positive understanding which includes waywardness, perhaps, but more strongly still, a willingness to seek out adventure, even self-fulfillment, and a certain generosity of spirit [6].

⁵ Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabeth Prodigals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978: p.3

⁶ Jack, A. M. *The Prodigal Son in English and American Literature Five Hundred Years of Literary Homecomings*, Oxford University Press. 2019: p.1.

Leonor Lieblein described this Change Using Part one of Henry IV as an Example:

Shakespeare of course in Part One of Henry IV explores most fully the vitality of prodigality and its eventual contribution to the personal maturity of Prince Hal. In so doing he goes beyond more formal expressions of the paradigm since the play-wright retains sympathy for his youthful hero while he is sowing his proverbial oats. In contrast, antecedent plays insist that an audience behold and judge the prodigal but, like the loving parent and sternly caring society, withhold its acceptance and reconciliation until penitence has been fully experienced and articulated. [7].

3. Reasons for the Popularity of Prodigal Plays in the English Renaissance

Plays based on the Prodigal fables were widely popular in Europe in the 16th century. English literary critics often mentioned the popularity of such works in Britain. The reasons for its popularity were summarized from the following aspects:

First of all, it can be seen from the above that in the English Renaissance, the theme of the prodigal son was not only used to create didactic and didactic plays in the religious drama tradition, but also used in plays with many comedic and popular elements, which is the characteristic of secular drama, and it is this compound function that has become the most fundamental reason for its popularity. Numerous studies have found it to be highly flexible in exploring both theological questions and particular contemporary issues such as education, the proper use of wealth, and the responsibilities of princes [8]. For religion, the parable of the prodigal son contains a moral lesson that is well suited to the mind of the young, and also happens to have an interpretation, supported strongly the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith; For education, there was a fruitful link between the traditional theme of the prodigal son and the ethical concerns of society at the time, especially in the dynamic metropolitan environment of London. The story of the complex social role that may have been played in the thriving commercial economy of early modern England. In addition, Shakespeare's *Henry IV* links this story to Prince Hal.

Secondly, the works of classical writers, especially comedies, were widely read and performed in Renaissance schools. What bothers people, however, is that these texts are not Christian and often not particularly moral. English teachers, for example, loved Terence's -- and even Plautus's -- beautiful Latin diction, but they were embarrassed by the moral improprieties of

⁷ Leonore Lieblein. "Thomas Middleton's Prodigal Play", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1976), p. 54.

⁸ John Dover Wilson, "Euphues and the Prodigal Son", *The Library* 10 (1909): pp. 338-61, pp. 338-9.

the plot and characterization. In response, scholars (especially educators) began to explore ways to integrate classical drama with the religious sentiments of the time. The result of the exploration found that the prodigal allegory is particularly suitable to assume this function and using it as the plot basis, it can well integrate Latin comedy and Christian moral principles, and create a new drama that not only has the charm and vitality of classical drama but also reflects the Christian value. Among the playwrights who most successfully combined classical comedy and biblical themes, we can find the Dutch schoolmaster Wilhelm de Wold (1493-1568), who published his Latin edition of *Arcolastus* in Hacropediis in Antwerp in 1529, which not only had some 60 editions in the 16th century, but also widely translated.

Third, the story of the prodigal son fits both the Civic Humanism and the romance of the court. Civic Humanism emphasizes active participation in public and society affairs, inspiring patriotic passion, yearning for the republic, and defending the independence and freedom of the motherland. Court romance often follows a pattern: a young nobleman falls in love with a married lady who is superior to him and is infatuated with her, but the lady is superior and indifferent to her pain, and eventually the young man wins the heart of the beautiful woman through many trials. Lastly, the two develop a spiritual love (of course, it may develop into a physical relationship). There is an ongoing conflict between these two Renaissance traditions: the former representing the expectations of the father and the latter the rebellious desires of the son.

Fourthly, the universal theme, simple plot and characterization, and the open structure of the text leave a huge space for interpretation. The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the longest and richest allegories in the *Gospels* which “was a fruitful emblem, capable of many meanings and countless interpretations, the artists

of each period and country often recasting the story to match their own particular interests.” [9]. It deals with universal themes of family, home, rebellion, return, and forgiveness, with the main characters involving only three father and son, while the scene focuses primarily on the dialogue between the father and his young son, a clear structure that is easy to change and allows for the exploration of issues in contrasting pairs. It can be seen that the Prodigal Son fable allows different times and different writers to present their own views on the basic contours of the story, to reconstruct the story and to choose the focus of interpretation according to the needs. The popularity of Prodigal plays in Renaissance England was a choice made in response to the needs of The Times.

CONCLUSION

The character of the prodigal son and his story have attracted Christian missionaries, biblical critics and theologians, novelists, poets, and playwrights. As The Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown asserts, “I’m telling you this as a writer of stories: there’s no story I know of so perfectly shaped and phrased as The Prodigal Son.” [10]. As a fable in the Bible, It’s not difficult to understand that prodigal son reveals a lot about Jesus’ ministry and early church teachings. Yet this fable is interpreted as a literary paradigm rather than theology or historical documents, new possibilities are opened up, and the prodigal becomes a prototype with its own metaphorical imprints in various literary contexts. This article discusses the prominent position of the theme of the prodigal son in Elizabeth literature, as well as the reasons, development and representative works. For centuries, people have had various interpretations of this fable, whether emphasis of the prodigal’s return home, rebellion or else, it demonstrates the universality of this story. From above, we can see the potential of this story. With the changes of the times, new interpretations that cater to the needs of the times will definitely emerge.

⁹ Tappin D. “Shakespeare and the Prodigal Son Tradition”. *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 1988. p.58

¹⁰ George Mackay Brown, ‘The Tarn and the Rosary’, in Hawkfall (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974; repr. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), pp. 160–92, p. 189.