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## Elements of Menippean Satire in B.S. Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*

### Abstract

Menippean satire is an ancient form of prose whose inclusiveness still prevents scholars from reaching an agreement on its one generic definition. While in its classical understanding the genre is regarded as long-extinct, some argue that its elements were carried on to the works of postmodern authors unafraid to experiment with new means of literary expression – B.S. Johnson being their prime example. At first, the author's outward hostility towards well-established conventions makes it highly unlikely for him to draw inspiration from ancient genres such as the Menippean satire. Is it then possible that while still being an uncompromised experimenter, he was also a worthy successor of classical parodists?

Echoing James E. Irby's (Borges's editor's) claim that that “all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes,” this paper aims to analyze affinities between Johnson's penultimate novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), and the features of the Menippean satire as specified by, among others, Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1984) and H. Rikonen in *Menippean Satire as a Literary Genre* (1987). While in its classical understanding this ancient form of prose is regarded long-extinct, these scholars argue that its elements can be found in the works of the more inventive modern authors. In fact, as Brian McHale suggests: “Postmodernist fiction is the heir of Menippean satire and its most recent historical avatar” (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, p. 172).

The paper is an attempt at presenting Johnson more in line with classical tradition, suggesting that it is possible to analyze his works in a broader critical spectrum and thus move them from the peripheral to the mainstream literary discourse. It also raises the question of the (im)possibility of an artistic creation in total isolation from any formerly known conventions.

**Keywords:** Menippean satire, B.S. Johnson, British experimentalism, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*.

## Introduction

Menippean satire is defined as “a form of intellectually humorous work characterized by miscellaneous contents, displays of curious erudition, and comical discussions on philosophical topics”.<sup>1</sup> One may argue that this description does not reflect the abundance of possibilities in which such a versatile genre may be realized. Yet, it is the most definite one possible. H. Riikonen concludes that “it is impossible to give any strict definition of [Menippean satire] or to define it on the basis of one or two characteristics”.<sup>2</sup> Having its roots in the cynical polemic of the ancient Greek philosopher Menippus, the original genre is considered to be long extinct, with only Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* and parts of Petronius’s *Satyricon* surviving to this day. Nonetheless, scholars believe that the satire has continued to live through the centuries and that its elements can be found in the works of writers such as Dostoyevsky<sup>3</sup>, Joyce or Kafka<sup>4</sup> who, often unconsciously, drew inspiration from its tradition. Some even argue that the genre went through quite a renaissance in the post-modern era.<sup>5</sup>

Survival of Menippean satire in the literary tradition does not mean, however, that novels such as *Crime and Punishment* or *The Trial* must contain any blatant references to antiquity. According to Riikonen, the changeable nature of Menippean satire and its resistance to strict categorization indicate that it should not be viewed as one definite genre, but rather as “a suitable term linking up a number of seemingly different works whose ‘deep structures’, so to speak, nevertheless display interesting similarities”.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this approach towards the menippea that I would like to employ in my analysis below.

This paper is an attempt to prove that B.S. Johnson’s *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*, a black comedy first published in 1973, is one of the novels displaying the traits of Menippean satire within a storyline which, upon first investigation, could not be any more distinct from the works of the classics. Grounding my study in the characteristics of Menippean satire which were first developed by Bakhtin for his analysis of Dostoyevsky’s works and further extended by Riikonen, I maintain that out of fifteen features pinpointed by these scholars, ten are applicable to *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*, thus making Johnson’s novel a post-modern incorporation of this genre.

<sup>1</sup> C. Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, New York 2001, pp. 151–152.

<sup>2</sup> H. Riikonen, *Menippean Satire as a Literary Genre*, Helsinki 1987, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson, Minneapolis 1984, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kristeva, *Séméiotike: Recherches pour un Sémanalyse*, Paris 1969, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> R.B. Branham, D. Kinney, *Introduction* [in:] Petronius, *Satyrica*, ed. and trans. R. Bracht Branham, Daniel Kinney, Berkley–Los Angeles 1997, pp. xi–xxx.

<sup>6</sup> H. Riikonen, op. cit., p. 51.

## Increased comicality

According to Bakhtin, “the comic element is generally increased in the menippea”.<sup>7</sup> Both him and Riikonen regard this element as crucial for every work categorized as Menippean satire. *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* is “a mixture of bizarre black comedy”<sup>8</sup> – Johnson’s darkest and, at the same time, most humorous novel. It tells a story of Christie Malry, a common clerk who, at one point, decides to balance out any wrongdoing in his life by keeping a double-entry account of things that happen to him. At first, such practice seems odd but to some extent justifiable. Soon, however, Christie’s calculations get out of control: he becomes a radical who in the name of his abstract idea sabotages London and kills more than twenty thousand of its citizens to even the score in his account. Yet, in contrast to the dreadful events it describes, the entire plot of the novel is kept in a light-hearted mood and makes it hard for the reader to regard Christie as a dangerous terrorist he most certainly is.

The comical effect is also heightened by the self-referring nature of the text. In an amusingly witty way, the novel’s characters keep reminding the reader that what she reads is fiction. One of the best examples of this remarkable strategy would be Christie’s mother who in her deathbed statement says that “for the purposes of this novel [she has] been [his] mother for the past eighteen years and five months”<sup>9</sup> and who on several occasions refers to the readers as *them* (e.g. “We have not always lived here. It is important for *them* to bear that in mind, Christie”<sup>10</sup>). Christie also seems to be aware that he is only a figment of the author’s imagination. When being asked by the Office Supervisor about his mother’s rushed funeral he explains that “[t]here wasn’t any more time [since] it’s a short novel”.<sup>11</sup> Such comical remarks can be found throughout the whole novel and, ultimately, render it a farce.

## Creative freedom

Bakhtin further argues that Menippean satire “is characterized by an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention”.<sup>12</sup> Johnson embraces this liberal approach towards conventions in the “illusion-breaking”<sup>13</sup> technique through which he maintains his presence as an author-narrator on the pages of *Christie Malry*. His “lively, comic and controlling authorial voice”<sup>14</sup> reveals itself in the narrative turns which switch the focus from the plot to the process of its creation.

<sup>7</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> N. Tredell, *Terrorist Accounting: Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry (1973)* [in:] *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson*, Turney’s Quay 2010, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, London 2011, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>12</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> N. Tredell, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 112.

By blurring the line between fiction and reality, Johnson places himself in an intermediate position which allows him to be, at the same time, an omniscient narrator and a character in his own novel. It is especially noticeable in his introduction of Christie's girlfriend, the Shrike. Not only does he talk about her as if she was standing right next to him, he also talks directly *to* her:

But Christie's girlfriend! I shall enjoy describing her! Come along, what's your name, let's have your name. It'll come along like everything else. Try. Where does she work? In a butcher's say. She could be called the Shrike, then. Which will be too obvious to some, to obscure to others. Ah!<sup>15</sup>.

### Philosophical issues

In the Menippean satire fundamental philosophical approaches are tested regarding their ethics and applicability<sup>16</sup>. Interestingly, the satire rejects an academic approach and challenge the constructs on more utilitarian level.<sup>17</sup>

The philosophy which informs Christie's actions resembles a twisted version of the Code of Hammurabi in which the "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" rule has been replaced with a vague estimation allowing Christie to attribute numerical values to certain deeds and, rather shockingly, to human life. Nowhere in the novel is it explained how or why he arrives at the numbers he puts in his entry. His extremism is based on subjectivity and bias caused by his disappointment with life. While investigating Christie's ideology, it is difficult not to get an impression that his riot is just for the sake of rioting and does not stem from any deeper understanding of social constructs. His rather childish attitude can be observed in the early entries when he feels the need to get revenge for some minor inconveniences, such as an awkward encounter with the Reverend during his mother's funeral<sup>18</sup> or a bugging letter from a bulb seller<sup>19</sup> which would be ignored by most of the adults. Even the very inspiration behind his "Great Idea" of starting the double-entry seems rather silly:

[Who made me walk this way? Who decided I should not be walking seven feet farther that side, or three points west nor-nor-east, to use the marine abbreviation. Anyone? No one? Someone must have decided. It was a conscious decision, as well. That is, they said (he said, she said). I will build here. But I think whoever it was did not also add, So Christie Malry shall walk here, but shall walk there. If he chooses. Ah! And there I have him/her/them!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's...*, p. 52. The formatting of this and the following quotations is intentional. Such gaps are commonly used by Johnson in his novels and can be interpreted as a typographical metaphor of his or his characters' thought processes.

<sup>16</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> H. Riikonen, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's...*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 23. In addition to the formatting explained earlier, Johnson decided to visibly differentiate between his (the author's) and Christie's internal monologues by italicizing the character's thoughts.

But Christie does not confront only trivialities. Even though his philosophy is flawed and rather absurd in its immaturity, it also addresses some pressing matters regarding social injustice. Echoing Johnson's own socialist ideas<sup>21</sup>, Christie sees the fact that he was born into poverty as a reason of his continuously underprivileged position which keeps him from following his true aspirations. Nonetheless, in the novel's first chapter starts with a sentence calling Christie "a simple person"<sup>22</sup> which is then repeated several times as if to caution the reader and make sure she understands that the character she is about to confront is not an intellectual whose actions are carefully thought through. Emphasizing Christie's uncomplicated nature also implies that the reader should focus primarily on the inequalities which bother Christie, not the questionable methods of his protest.

### Fantastic elements

Menippean satires also involve "a special type of experimental fantasticality," namely "an observation from some unusual point of view".<sup>23</sup> This feature may be once again applied to *Christy Malry's* self-referential nature. The fact that the author-narrator and his characters are able to communicate within the plot (e.g. Chapter XXI, in which the narrator and Christie discuss Christie's future and the content of the remaining chapters) undermines the realism of the novel and puts it in the realm where impossible can happen. Upon closer analysis, Christie's entire anti-social conspiracy can be seen as such an impossibility. Both the effortless with which he executes his plans, especially the cyanide attack during which all odds work in his favor, and the fact that he, a simple clerk, keeps outwitting Scotland Yard, one of the world's best police force, are hardly believable in the context of reality.

### Mental distortions

Challenging conventions in Menippean satire goes even further and finds realization in a "moral-psychological experimentation: a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man – insanity of all sorts (the theme of a maniac), split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness, suicides, and so forth".<sup>24</sup> Christie, the novel's central and most important character, is most certainly not a mentally stable individual. His moral compass proves to be utterly distorted when, in a vein strikingly resembling Raskolnikov's internal debate, he toys with the idea of being entitled to kill other people and, in conclusion, grants himself the right to do that.<sup>25</sup> The chilling

<sup>21</sup> J. Lanchester, *Foreword* [in:] *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, London 2011, p. v.

<sup>22</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's...*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's...*, pp. 115–116.

calmness in which he is later able to calculate the value of human life and observe the suffering he inflicts is a further display of his psychopathic personality.

### Contrasts and oxymorons

Bakhtin sees the Menippean range of characters as “full of sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations”.<sup>26</sup> In *Christie Malry*, this feature would be again reflected in the titular character and, also, his girlfriend – the Shrike. Christie appears to be a perfectly ordinary, rather silent young man who most certainly does not flaunt his anti-system sentiments. Neither does he show any signs of anger or any internal conflict which could possibly turn him into a mass murderer he becomes. In fact, he is thought to be an “Everyman”<sup>27</sup> – so familiar in his averageness that he wins the reader’s almost involuntary sympathy.

When it comes to the second half of the couple, the Shrike, the dissonance seems to lie in her profession and her delicate personality. Despite working as a butcher’s assistant – a line of work which has rather crude connotations and requires a thick skin – she is described as “kindly and warm”<sup>28</sup> with a great, sophisticated taste reflected in the way she decorates her room.<sup>29</sup> Duality of the Shrike’s nature is also implied by her name itself; Johnson alludes to that in her introduction when he states that the name “will be too obvious to some, to obscure to others”.<sup>30</sup> While this veiled remark may be initially overlooked by some readers, it is worth revisiting since a shrike is a small, innocently-looking bird who has a ghastly habit of impaling his prey on thorns, and even earned himself a title of “the butcher bird”.

### Elements of social utopia

Another characteristic of Menippean satire is “[an] utopian element (...) organically combined with the other elements of the genre”.<sup>31</sup> Christie is disillusioned by the system in which he finds himself living and working. Although he is mostly focused on his and the Shrike’s misfortune, he visibly strives for some new social order which would provide everyone with equal chances. In a similar vein, while he is not a supporter of any particular political party and even looks down on other revolutionaries, he does make a rather clear statement when he justifies poisoning the London’s water reservoir with a claim that “Socialism [was] never given a chance”.<sup>32</sup> He obsesses over being equal, even if it means lowering his morality to match the standards of the depraved majority. For that reason, his plan

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>27</sup> N. Tredell, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry’s...*, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>31</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>32</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry’s...*, p. 159.

of making it even with the world is doomed from the very moment he comes to a decision that can kill people simply because, in his opinion, the government sees them as worthless slaves of the economy. He is yet another blinded idealist who has lost his balance chasing the impossible.

### Presence of other genres

Another feature of Menippean satire which can be found in *Christie Malry* is “a wide use of inserted genres”<sup>33</sup> which gives “endless possibilities of the use of literary quotations”.<sup>34</sup> Johnson’s novel is full of such inserts, the most evident of them being the quotations from *Summa de Arithmetica, Geometria Proportioni et Proportionalità* a treatise on, among others, the double-entry bookkeeping method written by a 15<sup>th</sup> century monk, Fra Luca Bartolomeo Pacioli. It is this text which inspires Christie’s Great Idea of starting his twisted account. Fragments of Pacioli’s work are not embedded into the main chapters of the novel but presented separately, on pages preceding Christie’s records of debits and credits from a particular period. These, actually, are the second trans-genre addition to the novelistic core of *Christie Malry*. Being printed in a typical typewriter font with visible shortages of ink, and even featuring a seemingly handwritten note closing the last entry, the closely resemble photocopies from an actual double-entry book.

What Riikonen also recognizes “the use of different languages and form of speech”<sup>35</sup> as typical for the “multi-toned nature of the menippea”.<sup>36</sup> Within the chapters of *Christie Malry*, the reader may also find passages of Christie’s internal monologues within which the narrator loses his authorial power. They are marked in italics, filled with Johnson’s flagship thought gaps and altogether written in a much more stream-of-consciousness manner than the rest of the text (the sentences are less coherent and noticeably uneven in their length).

### Journalistic nature

Bakhtin also believes that a typical Menippean satire should be concerned with “acutely echoing the ideological issues of the day”.<sup>37</sup> Johnson used the “time of troubles”<sup>38</sup> in which *Christie Malry* was published as an inspiration and created a novel which “had a definite political viewpoint”.<sup>39</sup> While some scholars see *Christie Malry* “as a response to two historical events of the early 1970s: the unsuccessful trades union campaign to prevent the Heath government’s Industrial

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<sup>33</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> H. Riikonen, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>36</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> A. Marwick, *British Society Since 1945*, London 1982, p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> A. Burns, C. Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods*, New York 1981, p. 88.

Relations Bill from becoming law, and the successful prosecution of the small British anarchist group known as the Angry Brigade<sup>40</sup>, the others argue that it serves as a commentary on more general social phenomena such as a global raise of terrorism<sup>41</sup>, political murder<sup>42</sup> or widespread industrialization.<sup>43</sup> Regardless the interpretation, a plethora of social issues which Johnson decided to address with his text undoubtedly offers an illuminating insight into pressing matters of the turn of the decade and immerses the reader in an almost political reading.

### Motif of play

Last but not least, there is an element not mentioned by Bakhtin, but observed by Riikonen in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, which is also present in *Christie Malry*: the motif of play.<sup>44</sup> The way in which Christie runs his double-entry bears resemblance to keeping a score in a game. It is especially visible when he becomes almost obsessively careful not to exceed his deeds or let anyone outdo him in a way that would cause unbalance between the debits and credits he accounted for: "I have exacerbated, I am building up to great a Credit, if I am not careful I shall owe Tapper's a debt, I shall be overdrawn..."<sup>45</sup>

It becomes clear that Christie quickly loses himself in the execution of his plan. The goal of either challenging the political system or simply getting revenge on society is not truly relevant for him. While he may not be aware of that, Christie becomes a pawn in his own game. His actions are dictated by the entry he keeps and quite ironically, he turns himself into a victim of a restraint similar to the one he blames the society for.

### Conclusions

It is worth emphasizing here that B.S. Johnson gained his notoriety through his outward rejection of past conventions. In the words of his biographer, Johnson was "Britain's one man literary avant-garde of the 1960s"<sup>46</sup> whose evident brake up with the novelistic tradition manifested itself in his impressive oeuvre which includes six novels, poetry, short stories, theatrical plays and films – all of them being examples of extreme formal experimentalism. It is thus unlikely that the writer would deliberately incorporate an ancient satirical genre into any

<sup>40</sup> J. Jordan, *Introduction: Avant-Garde Possibilities – B.S. Johnson and the Sixties Generation* [in:] *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde*, eds. J. Jordan, M. Ryle, New York 2014, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> N. Tredell, *Terrorist Accounting: Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry (1973)* [in:] *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson*, Turney's Quay 2010, p. 116.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> P. Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960–1990*, New York 1995, p. 138.

<sup>44</sup> H. Riikonen, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's...*, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson*, London 2004, p. 3.



of his works. He did, however, admire Joyce whom he called “the Einstein of the novel”<sup>47</sup> and could, perhaps, absorb elements of the menippea from his texts. What also challenges Johnson’s total isolation from the past is the controversial question regarding the possibility of an entirely original, post-modern work. I support stance that “all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes”<sup>48</sup> and therefore argue that it would be impossible for Johnson to invent something entirely any formerly known convention.

The idiosyncratic nature of Menippean satire cannot be stressed enough, either. Rather than a stylistic boundary, it should be viewed as a “Proteus among other literary genre”<sup>49</sup> which changes its form and adapts to new practices accordingly. Therefore, the above analysis was not intended to undermine Johnson’s position as an exceptionally independent author. In my view, the menippea allows writers to build on its foundation creations which are exclusively their own and only enriches them with its centuries-long tradition.

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<sup>47</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Your to be Writing Your Own Memoirs?*, London 1973, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> J. Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion* [in:] *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London 1984, p. 73.

<sup>49</sup> H. Riikonen, op. cit., p. 31.

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