

## Efficacious Potential of Tragic Relief in Shakespeare's Comedies

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### INTRODUCTION

This study is to ponder tragic relief<sup>1</sup> by examining the nature and the purpose in Shakespeare's comedies. Shakespeare developed tragic relief in seven plays written at the height of Shakespeare's comic career: *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Oftentimes, however, critics ignore the theme of tragic relief altogether or demonstrate that they markedly underestimate its role in comedies. Francis Fergusson, for instance stops short of addressing tragic relief by merely remarking that "in all of his [Shakespeare's] romantic comedies there are painful complications, which remind us of the guilt and folly behind the music and fun."<sup>2</sup> For audiences who watch talented actors with expressive faces and characteristic behaviors and who hear the words spoken, the characters become individuals enduring great pain, not just bloodless literary types. Our involvement with their intense emotional collision comes first; consideration of the comic solution comes second or perhaps not at all. Such human engagement, based on suffering and sorrow, distress and despair, breakdown and wretchedness, is a tragic engagement as a part of tragic relief.

First, Tragic relief can distract the audience's attention so that it helps the upcoming event be dramatically presented. Second, tragic relief can give the reality audiences might feel at any given point. Tragic relief can give the audience a short pause in enhancing too much merriment created by the dynamic plot. After tragic relief the audience's attention is refreshed so that their expectation of an event heightened. In short, the seriousness with tragic relief causes the audience's extended expectation and attention to enjoy comedy. I hope it can be seen how tragic relief may be a useful device for drama generally—comic and tragic—to control the audience's response. We will try to show why we have to be aware of where and why we need tragic relief, and how Shakespeare developed it. In addition, this research also will help us to understand his unique comical features. We will now explore the method of dramaturgical analysis via traffic relief as a practical guideline.

The main exploration of this subject begins with *Love's Labour's Lost*. By this time, Shakespeare had already written the comedies, *The Comedy of Errors* (1592), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593) and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594). These three plays all escape generic inclusion in notable, sometimes even distasteful ways. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Egeon's death sentence, issued in the play's first scene, hangs over the comedy until the end when the confusions are resolved. I do not wish to debate whether or to what degree these perhaps unseemly elements vitiate the comedies. I point to these examples to show that from the start Shakespeare leaned toward dark, non-farcical ingredients in his comedies. Central to the plot of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a blatant offer of a woman as a commodity. Proteus expresses deep remorse for betraying his friend but not explicitly for his attempted sexual crime. *The Taming of the*

*Shrew* risks charges of sexism even by the generous and politically insensitive standards of comedy, and the tone of Katherine's last speech, a long submission to her husband, seems neither romantic nor comic. If she truly has been won over, she has lost much of her energy, resilience, and individuality, and she has been wooed by means of verbal and physical bullying and mistreatment.

Yet these are not instances of tragic relief, and the picture may be sharpened by contrasting these experiments in genre with the experimentation in *Love's Labour's Lost*. In the earliest comedies, the threat of violence and death, the shifting or draining of comic energy, neither shockingly breaks the story nor functions as a kind of play within a play. Structurally speaking, these are not moments of tragic relief. Further, these scenes do not signal a significant catharsis or epiphany for the characters or audience. Affectively and intellectually, they do not exemplify tragic relief. None of these moments leads to any character development among the male figures. Not until *Love's Labor's Lost* does Shakespeare first present a scene that has the construction, catharsis, and developmental stakes of tragic relief.

## CHAPTER 1: Confrontations with Death Lead to Characters' Transformation

Examining a pattern of insight that follows an encounter with death is the particular focus of tragic relief.<sup>3</sup> In its simplest manifestation, it is the physical extinction of the body, a dissolution against which characters struggle. For example, in *Love's Labor's Lost*, directly following a message of death, the lords give up their ludicrous oath to abstain from ladies, food and sleep instead embarking on a year-long commitment to isolated meditation or community service.

Specifically, many of the comedies depict characters who are threatened with perdition but escape a terrible fate through their own actions. Groups or pairs of young bachelors confront death or mortality in various ways, and these confrontations lead to the moral transformation of characters involved. As a result, it draws the character to new heights, to the realization that human life offers something more than the mundane. Other authors who do attend to the presence of tragic relief in comedies broach the issue in making general comments. In *Shakespeare and his Comedies*, John Russell Brown, for example, points to the images of mortality found in many of the plays as proof of his conclusion that "there is not one [comedy] in which death or destruction is not imminent."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in her introduction to *Much Ado about Nothing*, Anne Barton notes, "Virtually all of Shakespeare's comedies involve some kind of confrontation with death before the characters are allowed to win through to the happiness of the final scene."<sup>5</sup> Patrick Swinden writes, "The comic action often teeters perilously on the brink of disaster... [There is something in the mood of the comedy which threatens to infect it, which throws mysterious shadows over what would otherwise be the intolerable uniformity of its brightness]."<sup>6</sup>

First, the knowledge of death can move characters to acquire insight in Shakespeare's comedies. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the Princess diagnoses the problems in Navarre's court and rebukes the young gentlemen sternly for their flaws immediately after Marcade proclaims the death of the King of France. Marjorie Garber reminds us what a forceful announcement this must be when the play is staged: "Visually, this scene must be extremely striking. The stage is crowded with brightly costumed figures: the 'worthies' in their togas and swords, the lords and ladies in elegant court dress. To them, in the stark blackness of mourning Marcade enters-and becomes, as he does so, a visible memento mori, a reminder of death."<sup>7</sup>

E.M.W. Tillyard provides perhaps the best commentary on how death can move the characters to action here. He notes that, at the beginning of the play, the lords mentioned fame, death and the formation of the Academe, but he asserts:

The reference to death was quite hollow, for real death was the last thing that Navarre had in his mind; and in the body of the play he and his fellows live in the moment, as regardless of the future as any young men have ever been. The irruption of real and present death into their mood of greatest frivolity shakes them to their depths; they will not be the same men after it.<sup>8</sup>

There is no guarantee that the men will respond as the Princess hopes, but as Tillyard has intimated, after the announcement of Marcade, admit the defects he and his companions have exhibited—wasting time and failing to keep their oaths (5.2.755–756). This self-indictment is the first demonstration of somberness he has shown since the beginning of the play; if Berowne can come to self-recognition, then the other men, who displayed their faults to a lesser degree, may also have the capacity for such insight. Whether or not such awareness will be long-lasting certainly is an open question. But Berowne's act of self-recognition and the Princess' willingness to give the men time to reform do leave open the possibility that the fruits of the suitors' labors have only temporarily, though not permanently, been lost.

A seed from *Love's Labour's Lost* grows in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the earlier play, the lords act under a kind of stress common to men, or literary representations of men. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare prepares painstakingly for the church scene which creates adversity for Claudio and Benedick. The companions and comrades-in-arms Claudio and Benedick must imagine the death of friends and lovers before they can become husbands. For the lords, the encounter with death comes at a remove via message, whereas Claudio kills Hero, temporarily, with his slander. Benedick also must consider himself a murderer. Tragic relief in this comedy threatens not only male-female relations but also men reveal their faith and comic conclusion, however, relations are renewed, the two men show their faith and commitment, and their maturation insures social succession in Messina. Therefore, Shakespeare's treatment points towards a worthy man who illustrates an important aspect of the experience of tragic relief. The two men are tested, crushed, or crossed in a way that the gentlemen in *Love's Labour's Lost* are not. The disastrous church scene is a more dire and profound confrontation than the Marcade scene. In *Much Ado about Nothing* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, Hero, another response to death's presence occurs regularly in the plays—the ability to react to another's death by examining one's own life and by learning from that reflection. Helena and their advisers circulate false news of the women's deaths to provoke Claudio and Bertram to repentance; the ladies' actions thus operate on the principle that the finality of the women's demise will prompt the erring lovers to reflection and reform.

Death is a more powerful presence in *Twelfth Night*, the play begins and ends with references to mortality, and Viola's and Feste's constant reminders of the inevitability of death are the primary means by which they effect change in many of those around them. A key moment in the drama occurs in the second scene when Viola washes ashore, thinking her twin brother has drowned:

Vio. What country, friends, is this?  
 Cap. This is Illyria, lady  
 Vio. And what should I do in Illyria?  
 My brother he is in Elysium.  
 Perchance he is not drown'd—what think you, sailors? (1.2.1-5)

This scene is just as important as Marcade's intrusion at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost*, for Viola's experience with death here—her own near drowning and the possible demise of her brother—appears to color her actions throughout the remainder of the drama. Just as the Princess' decision in *Love's Labor's Lost*, may lead to the reform of the King's court, so Viola's experience with death leads to dramatic changes in Illyria, her new society. Indeed, the very life of a community is at stake in this play, and Viola's brush with mortality is the first step toward untangling the complicated web of problems keeping the individual characters immersed in their own problems and the society as a whole in fragmentation: Olivia's childish refusal to admit that time will pass and death will come; the Duke's obsessive, romantic imagination; the ambiguities of Viola's own disguise.

The problem that plagues Illyria is Olivia's inability to admit that time's passage cannot be stopped and that it inevitably leads to death. There are, of course, many moments of darkness in this play that should brine the characters to an acknowledgment of death's power. In "*Twelfth Night: The Limits of Festivity*," Jenkins Logan notes that there are thirty-seven references to destruction and death" in this play.<sup>9</sup> In one of our first glimpses of Illyria, for example, hears the dark genealogy of Countess Olivia:

A virtuous maid, the daughter of a count  
 That died some twelvemonth since, then leaving her  
 In the protection of his son, her brother,  
 Who shortly also died, for whose dear love,  
 They say, she hath abjur'd the [company]  
 And [sight] of men. (1.2.36-41)

As the play progresses, threats of death proliferate. Sir Andrew and Cesario nearly duel; Sebastian gives Sir Andrew a bloody head; and Antonio notes that, if he is caught in Illyria, he shall "pay dear" for warring against Orsino's nephew. And characters often identify places, people and events by their relationships to the dead. Antonio, thinking that Sebastian has abandoned him in his hour of need, exclaims, "This youth that you see here I snatch'd one half out of the jaws of death" (3.4.359-60). The priest confirming that Olivia and Sebastian have married, oddly enough pinpoints the time of the nuptials by saying, "Since [the marriage] my watch hath told me, toward my grave I have travel'd but two hours" (5.1.162-3). Even in the recognition scene between the twins, Sebastian acknowledges his sister by calling her "drowned Viola" (5.1.241). Our last glimpse of Illyria is that of the solitary Feste narrating the stages of a man's life. He makes us aware of mortality by singing of childhood, early youth, mature adulthood, and old age, ending the song there; we know death is the final stage in the progression. Mortality is, then, always in the background of *Twelfth Night*.

Act 2 contains numerous examples of the Duke's blindness and of Viola's and Feste's actions on his

behalf. When asking Feste for a song, for instance, Orsino requests one that he heard the night before, one that is “old and plain. / The spinsters and the knitters in the sun, / And the free maids that weave their thread with bones, / Do use to chaunt it” (2.4.43-46). His very words, as Leah Scragg explains in *Discovering Shakespeare's Meaning*, are replete with references to death:

His reference to the “spinsters” (i.e., spinners) and “knitters” by whom the song is traditionally sung, together with his mention of “their thread” evokes an image of the Fates, spinning the thread of human life, and this suggestion is heightened by the use of the word “chant,” with its ritual connotations, and by the allusion to the lacemakers' bobbins as “bones.” Ideas of fate, transience and mortality thus underlie the surface meaning of the words, generating a wistfulness...<sup>10</sup>

Shakespeare may make this lesson clear through the most reliable character in the play, Viola, who after her shipwreck advises her new society that death will come for all and that, therefore, one must live wisely while there is time to do so. Viola possesses this wisdom early on, and, like the women in *Love's Labor's Lost*, spends much of her time schooling those in need of her instruction—Olivia and the Duke. And Shakespeare is able to concentrate on the inadequacy because in *Twelfth Night*, unlike in the previous comedies, courtship is the focus of comic activity. This comedy emphasizes the principal characters' psychological weaknesses rather than their capacity to love. When the play ends, the aristocratic lovers seem to get what they desire, when, in reality, what they find are surrogates for their original loves. The principal characters are not denied what they seek as in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

As these examples have demonstrated, the effort to survive an encounter with death thus throughout Shakespeare's comedies. Death lingers even in the landscape of Renaissance comedy. To establish learning from an experience with death is, indeed, fundamental to Shakespeare's comedies, which draw out and heighten this pattern of learning from an encounter with death. This is the very variation of his tragic relief. Having examined with care Shakespeare's comedies, This conception explains how particular comic form does, at least in part, vindicate comedy from its detractors.

Surprisingly, although death pervades the comedies and although it often serves as a catalyst to wisdom, critics are not unanimous in even acknowledging its presence in the comedies. James Calderwood's *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death* focuses on humankind's perennial desire for survival and outlines numerous methods which Shakespeare's characters employ to achieve “symbolic immortality” in the comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances.<sup>11</sup> Kirfay Farrell, in *Play, Death, and Heroism in Shakespeare*, begins with this statement from “The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else.”<sup>12</sup> Building upon Becker's assertion, Farrell examines instances in which Shakespearean characters simulate death, asserting that such a strategy allows one to “contain death” to measure it, locate it, invest it with meaning and some “Predictability.”<sup>13</sup> He assesses dramas from the histories and tragedies as well as the comedies, noting that “where comedy or tragicomedy prevails in the plays, fantasies of self-effacement usually lead to wish-fulfillment” or to the resolution of “conflicts with authority in a world where self-assertion may appear inherently rebellious.”<sup>14</sup> All of these analyses are thought-provoking and insightful, but they share one weakness: they do not take sufficient notice of the cognitive action that

occurs when characters encounter death. That is, Calderwood, Farrell and Carlin all fail to take into account the repeated pattern of Shakespeare's comedies, in which encounter with death often serve as an impetus to wisdom. One of the studies that comments upon death as a catalyst to wisdom in these comedies is Marjorie Garber's *Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death: Darker Purposes in Shakespearean Comedy*.<sup>15</sup> Garber begins her essay by noting, "It may seem strange to argue that Shakespearean comedy is really about death and dying, but that is nonetheless what I should like to propose. More precisely, Shakespearean comedy is about the initial avoidance or displacement of the idea of death, the cognition and recognition of one's own mortality—and then, crucially, the acceptance, even the affirmation, of that mortality."<sup>16</sup> Garber is correct in this observation; indeed, knowledge of death does move characters to new insights in the comedies.

## CHAPTER 2: Rejection Causes Sexual Depravity

Shakespeare's earlier comedies depict gynophobia of various kinds, including the widespread fear of cuckoldry, the men's specific fear in *Love's Labour's Lost* that letting women into the academy will rob the men's energy or spoil the club. *Much Ado About Nothing* reaches a kind of climax in one of the most destructive scenes, in which the wedding of Claudio and Hero is rent asunder. Claudio tragically vows "To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm" (4.1.107), a desperate impulse that runs contrary to the Platonic conception according to which the form of beauty is turned into thoughts of love. True love begins with the love of one person but reaches a higher level of development when the lover comes to love all that is beautiful. Ignorant of this connection between beauty and enlightenment, Claudio replaces love with harm. Likewise, Hero asks, "How am I beset! | What kind of catechizing call you this?" (4.1.77). Claudio slanders Hero to death. The latter murder is figurative, but the characters in the play, especially Hero's father Leonato, couch the loss that this aborted wedding represents in precisely these mortal terms. By the end of the scene, Leonato is emotionally overwhelmed—"I flow in grief" (4.1.249), he cries—and his lamentable call to be permanently put out of his misery—"Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?" (4.1.109)—echoes Gloucester if not Lear himself. This scene, then, runs directly counter to normal comic progress: in its dialogue and in the way it reverses the comic impulse towards marriage, it rises to the level of a tragedy within the larger comedy.

As for Shakespeare's middle comedies, the prevailing spirit is captured in one memorable line, the one uttered by a female. Rosalind in *As You Like It* conveys the representative openness to the pleasure of sexuality in comedies when she encourages Orlando to "Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday mood, and like enough to consent" (4.1.59–60).

None of these depictions or projections ultimately views sexuality with such contempt as *Measure for Measure* does. In this later comedy, two young Viennese lovers, Claudio and Juliet, are sworn "upon a true contract" (1.2.126) to marry, but the law stands as the blocking figure in their way. Even though the couple has apparently taken vows, the law does not recognize their marriage because they evidently have not announced their wedding publicly or undergone a proper, Church-mandated religious service (1.2.128–136). Worse, Juliet is pregnant and, according to local statutes, Claudio, as the father who lacks official status as the husband, is jailed and sentenced to death. This couple's mess is not just a private affair; it symbolizes the severely compromised condition of the law throughout Vienna. The Duke summarizes

the dismal state thus:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws,  
 The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds,  
 Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,  
 Even like an o'er-grown lion in a cave  
 That goes not out to prey ... Our decrees,  
 Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,  
 And Liberty plucks Justice by the nose,  
 The baby beats he nurse, and quite athwart  
 Goes all decorum. (1.3.20-32)

The legal and social issue is clear and momentous; the laws have not been enforced for fourteen years, and of course a society that does not enforce its law is anarchic. The three of these omitted subjects are the drama's destructive sexuality, its notorious marriages, and its male protagonists' moral stagnation. The marriages at the drama's conclusion, the exemplar of the happy ending in other comedies, do not lift the play's somber tone. And none of the males emerges in the end as a figure to lead or represent the new society. *Measure for Measure's* conclusion, sometimes complacently labeled comic, is so vastly challenging precisely because of the failure of these three preeminent characteristics of comedies. Before *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare treats sexuality as an occasion for celebration and a force of life. In *Measure for Measure*, however, Shakespeare places sexuality in a tragic register. It symbolizes the corruption of society. So, too, for Hamlet, whose view of the world—"Tis an unweeded garden | That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature | Possess it merely" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.135-137)—is connected directly to his disgust at his mother's rapid remarriage—"O most wicked speed, to post | With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (1.2.156-157). In these plays, sexuality is the grotesque, bestial, appetitive act that Lear makes it out to be:

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly  
 Does lecher in my sight.  
 Let copulation thrive;...To't luxury, pell-mell!  
 For I lack soldiers. Behold yon simpering dame,  
 Whose face between her forks presages snow;  
 That minces virtue, and does shake the head  
 To hear of pleasure's name;  
 The fitchew, nor the soiled horse, goes to't  
 With a more riotous appetite.  
 Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
 Though women all above  
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit.  
 Beneath is all the fiends; there's hell, there's darkness,  
 There's the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding

Stench, consumption! Fie, fie, fie! pah! pah! (*King Lear*, 4.6.110-126)

Except for its explicit, terrifying misogyny, this speech represents the world of sexuality in *Measure for Measure*. Intercourse in this Vienna is lecherous, riotous, and dark. It “minces virtue” indeed; it is a raunchy, unattractive source of disease, decay, and death. At the center of the ugly sexual nature of the play are a brothel and syphilis. The setting is not a court or a meadow or a forest, Shakespeare sets much of *Measure for Measure* in a dark, edgy urban setting—more specifically, a bordello, on the margins of society that are not fertile grounds for happy and productive romance, the stuff of socially acceptable marriages. The play’s three main young characters—Claudio, Isabella, and Angelo—all seem to be products of the corrupt Viennese environment, and they all hold what might be called anti-comedic attitudes towards sexuality. Claudio, restrained in handcuffs and lamenting his sexual abandon, invokes a disgusting image of human lust: “Our natures do pursue | like rats that ravin down their proper bane | A thirsty evil, and when we drink, we die” (1.2.120-122). He liken human beings to rodents or vermin that eagerly seek the poison that will kill them. According to Claudio’s analogy, we die from the sexual consummation that our bodies yearn for. In his mind, sexuality is completely self-destructive. Isabella’s view of sexuality is no more humane than her brother’s, for her rigorous abstinence would destroy others. As one of her novice’s worldly renouncements, her vow of chastity is understandable, even though, as Anatole France supposedly said, “Of all sexual aberrations, chastity is the strangest.” And in the early modern period, there might well have been debate on whether her abstinence should be regarded more properly as admirable or aberrant. Both her devotion to God and her faith in the afterlife lead her to value and protect her chastity even at the expense of her brother’s life. Yet whatever position one takes on this debate, a crucial part of the point of Isabella’s confrontation with Claudio is to show the unsustainable extremity of her position. She does not start out there; the two offer a balanced exchange of stands, condensed like dwarf stars. Claudio says, “Death’s a fearful thing”; Isabella replies, “And shamed life a hateful” (3.1.116-117). It is a great Shakespeare’s moment of perfect impasse. Viewed one way both parties are absolutely right; viewed another way, both parties are absolutely wrong. Yet as the argument between the siblings continues, in the face of Claudio’s mounting terror at the prospect of death, Isabella responds not with sympathy but with outrage and horror, denouncing him as a bastard:

Oh, you beast!

Oh faithless coward, oh dishonest wretch!  
 Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?  
 Is’t not a kind of incest to take life  
 From thine own sister’s shame? What should I think?  
 Heaven shield my mother played my father fair,  
 For such a warped slip of wilderness  
 Ne’er issued from his blood. Take my defiance,  
 Die, perish. Might but my bending down  
 Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.  
 I’ll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,  
 No word to save thee. (3.1.136-147).



This fearsome rejection can be analyzed on several levels, each increasingly removed from central Christian values, especially charity and *caritas*. Isabella renounces Claudio as a brother, claiming he could not be the son of their father, and accusing him of a kind of incest in wanting her to lose her virginity to save him. One does not need to think very hard to realize how such a charge warps the meaning of sexuality. At the same time, she no longer regards him as human. She calls him, descending a kind of great chain of being, a "faithless coward," "dishonest wretch," "beast," and "warped slip of wilderness." She denies their bonds not only as siblings but also as fellow human beings. In the end, she threatens to kill him—or at least that's one way to interpret a promise from a nun, who believes that God answers the appeals of the faithful, to "pray a thousand prayers" for someone's death. Particularly chilling is the reduplication of "pray" and "prayers" within the Christian framework of the scene and drama. She reacts inhumanely, savagely, violently when her chastity is endangered. To decline Claudio is one thing; to attack him. In this scene, at least, she becomes a monster, and we understand her to be so through the way she perverts sexuality. Angelo personifies a complementary case. Given responsibility for overseeing justice in Vienna while the Duke is gone, he uses his new political and judicial powers to seduce Isabella under gross pressure. Yet if he is a monster for insisting on her sacrifice, he is a self-aware one who examines himself harshly:

What's this? What's this? Is this her fault, or mine?  
 The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha?  
 Not she: nor doth she tempt: but it is I  
 That, lying by the violet in the sun,  
 Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,  
 Corrupt with virtuous season. Can it be  
 That modesty may more betray our sense  
 Than women's lightness? Having waste ground enough  
 Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary  
 And pitch our evils there? Oh fie, fie, fie  
 What doest thou or what art thou, Angelo?  
 Dost thou desire her foully for those things  
 That make her good? ... Most dangerous  
 Is that temptation that doth goad us on  
 To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet  
 With all her double vigour, art and nature,  
 Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid  
 Subdues me quite. Ever till now  
 When men were fond, I smiled, and wondered how. (2.2.167-191)

Angelo is surprised to find how powerful sexual temptation can be. He is smart enough to know that his temptation comes from himself, not from Isabella. He does not view her as an archetypal Eve. On the contrary, he is both infatuated with and repulsed by Isabella because she is his mirror image who remains steadfastly virtuous while he watches his own rigid virtue slip away. Neither does he blame cir-

cumstances or accidents of fate. His lust tells him something about who he is. He discovers that his appetite is a fundamental part of his personality, and that his lust moves towards desecration. He would rather violate a nun than use a strumpet for the purpose for which the strumpet earns a living. His realizations cause him to lose his sense of superiority over other men, whom he has previously dismissed as “fond.” Most significantly, he couches his new understanding in a grotesque image: whereas Isabella is a violet whose fragrance grows in the sun, he considers himself “carrion,” dead meat that rots in the sun. This revolting figure of speech combines with the language of Claudio and Isabella to form a picture of sexuality, lack of charity, corruption, and death. This loathsome, almost death-centered portrait is carried so thoroughly through the play that the comedy can not emerge to make the contrast of tragic relief possible.

### CHAPTER 3: Tragic Relief Reforms Characters

In *Twelfth Night*, an aspect of the societal self-absorption that plagues Illyria is Malvolio’s self-love, which causes him to disdain the other members of his household. Feste succeeded in correcting Malvolio’s self-love by referring to death during the steward’s imprisonment. Feste departs slightly from the technique he and Viola have used on all the others. Since Malvolio is flawed by self-love, by his habit of holding himself in high regard above others, Feste tries to remedy this defect by reminding the steward of his relationship to others—a relationship he may have forgotten:

- Clo. What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning  
wild-fowl?  
Mai. That the soul of our grandam might happily  
inhabit a bird.  
Clo. What think’st thou of his opinion?  
Mai. I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve  
his opinion.  
Clo. Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness.  
Thou shall hold th’ opinion of Pythagoras ere I will  
allow of thy wits, and fear to kill a woodcock lest thou  
dispossess the soul of thy grandam. Fare thee well. (4.2.50-60.)

At first glance this conversation merely appears part of an overall strategy to drive Malvolio mad, but upon further consideration the discussion seems to have an instructional purpose. Its purpose of this episode in Malvolio’s imprisonment, therefore, seems to teach him the common bonds he has with all things, whether they be stewards, clowns, or serving women. At this point, however, Malvolio refuses to learn his lesson; he remains both literally and symbolically in the dark because, unlike Viola, Olivia, and the Duke, he does not become wiser as a result of this lesson.

To understand how Feste tries to reform Malvolio, however, we must first understand the flaw that mars this complex character. In *Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths*, Camille Wells Slight provides a skillful study of why Malvolio is so distasteful: “The measure of Malvolio’s self-love is not his miserliness

or covetousness but his presumptuous belief that he lives in a sphere above and beyond ordinary human relationships." Indeed, a careful look at several scenes indicates that the play itself supports this diagnosis of the steward's character. In Act 1, Olivia herself establishes that Malvolio's high opinion of himself is a weakness. After the fool has catechized Olivia not to mourn so incessantly for her brother, Malvolio shows his immense disrespect for Feste by heaping insults upon the fool's head. Olivia responds by saying, "O, you are sick of self-love. Malvolio, and taste with a distemper'd appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take those things for bird-bolts that you deem cannon-bullets" (1.5.90-93). Maria, likewise, finds that Malvolio's defect is that "it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him" (2.3.151-152) and vows that her revenge on him will make use of this very defect of character.

Malvolio again emphasizes how far above the other servants he believes himself to be: "Go hang yourselves all! You are idle shallow things, I am not of your element. You shall know more hereafter" (3.4.123-125). In *Shakespearean Comedy*, H.B. Charlton accurately sums up Malvolio's condition by commenting, "Malvolio, sick of self-love, thanking God that he is not of the element of his associates, sees the rest of men merely as specimens of the genus 'homo'.... The springs of sympathy are dried up within him."<sup>18</sup> Olivia is right, therefore, to accuse Malvolio of self-love; as Alexander Leggatt aptly puts it, "Malvolio in his dark room is the play's most vivid image of the trapped, isolated self."<sup>19</sup> Just as Malvolio is shut up within himself, unwilling to be a part of his society, so too is he shut up within the darkness of the room and devoted himself to repentance.

#### **CHAPTER 4: Reconciliation and Regeneration through Self-sacrifice Follows Tragic Relief**

Characters in the comedies often seek regeneration at many levels; they work to ensure the physical perpetuation of themselves, their families, and their communities through marriage and procreation, or they take steps toward some other symbolic form of vitality. But a deeper look at Shakespeare's comedies that indicates that this movement toward regeneration often is preceded or accompanied by a character's confrontation with misfortune; frequently Shakespeare's comic characters, in facing the possibility of their own demise, recoil from the experience, concomitantly making strides toward the regenerative actions. It is the confrontation with, and recoiling from adversity, a response that often serves as a catalyst to both newfound vitality and wisdom.

When *As You Like It* opens, the world is in disarray, a state epitomized by numerous literal and figurative examples of throwing or overthrowing. Before the plot begins, Duke Ferdinand has usurped, or overthrown, Duke Senior. Oliver has thrown over his brother, Orlando, neglecting his familial duties and their father's wishes. Orlando in return wants to overthrow Oliver. The younger son confesses that he "begins to mutiny against this servitude" (1.1.21-22). In the language and action of overthrowing, Shakespeare paints a thoroughly distasteful picture of life at "the envious court" (2.1.4), characterized by kinship without kindness, and exposes the romance which cannot flourish there. Two sets of brothers are reconciled. Oliver and Orlando participate together in the group nuptials. Duke Frederick, at the last moment converted from his plan to have Duke Senior killed, restores his brother's lands and returns the entire band of Duke Senior's followers to their former fortunes and ranks (5.4.154-175). Rightfully returned, the crown will one day rightfully pass from Duke Senior to Orlando, his son-in-law. Political order is reinstated, and regeneration is assured.

Nowhere is this truer than in the scene of tragic relief between Oliver and Orlando. The two brothers must endure a potentially mortal confrontation with a snake and lioness.

Walking through the forest, Orlando comes upon Oliver, who lies sleeping as a green and gilded snake entwines itself around him. Seeing Orlando, the snake slithers into a bush, only to reveal a lioness waiting to pounce as soon as Oliver awakes. Orlando, recognizing his sleeping brother, faces a moral dilemma: to turn his back and let the lioness attack his brother, or to battle the lioness and save his brother. He rescues Oliver, but is wounded. Orlando's action converts Oliver: the man who once wanted his brother dead now binds his wounds and commits himself "unto my brother's love" (4.3.145). Orlando proves himself to be heroic and altruistic, and Oliver feels and understands the new and full weight of kindness, a term which in Shakespeare connotes both kinship and generosity. This scene affords the two brothers a chance to examine their relationship—not in a dispassionate, discursive manner but as it exists under the fire of a mortal threat from wild animals. When Orlando had left the court at the end of the first act, he had escaped the life of servitude and the recent death-bounty Oliver had imposed on him. Oliver "hates nothing more than" (1.1.154-155) his younger brother, while Orlando calls Oliver a "bloody brother" and the relationship "of a diverted blood" (2,3.38). This is the grim situation when the brothers meet in Arden. But by the time Oliver tells his story to the ladies, he is governed not by his former haughtiness and hatred but by a new sense of "shame" (4.3.96). "He surrenders so completely as to give up his inheritance for the love of a poor shepherdess—a shepherd who will turn out to be the daughter of a duke."<sup>20</sup> The deceitful serpent recalls Oliver's earlier duplicities. That it unlinks itself and slips away when it sees Orlando, the model of virtue, has equally unmistakable mythic value. But Shakespeare does not leave the action there. This moment is not meant simply to reinforce the distinction between the good and evil brothers. The snake and lioness are Christian symbols for the evil sin where both brothers overcome evil in this scene to reach a moral maturity. Orlando, tempted to leave his older brother to die, withholds retribution. He overcomes his natural anger towards his brother. Oliver, the wicked brother full of clear sins, is cured by a magical transformation, of which he is fully conscious as he comments, in allegorically slanted language reminiscent of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "From miserable slumber I awaked" (4.3.133). Oliver is expressing not simply his physical condition but his spiritual state before his transformation.

Moreover, as Louis Montrose contends, in this scene Shakespeare creates a resonance between the dramatic situation and the religious archetypes at the center of his culture. Specifically, this scene undoes or repeals the story of Cain and Abel. At the end of the play's first scene, Oliver's fratricidal intentions echo Cain's. But tragic relief lets Orlando shed his own blood for his elder brother, which becomes the sign of Oliver's conversion rather than the mark of his fratricidal guilt.

Oliver finds acceptance in the old Duke, who commits him to his brother's love. Shakespeare is creating a resonance between his romantic fiction and Biblical history, between the dramatic process of assuaging family conflict in the atonements of comedy and the exegetical process of redeeming the primal fratricide of Genesis.<sup>21</sup>

This is the lesson tragic relief provides to both brothers. Their brush with death causes their reconciliation. It makes possible the political, familial, and social regeneration at the conclusion of the com-

edy. Thanks to what they have learned during their banishment, Oliver and Orlando are now ready to return to court, to transform it with the help of the other characters. The two are now prepared to act as brothers, to behave kindly, towards each other. With new or restored bonds and moral senses, they are ready to marry their respective wives and begin a new generation of people. The value of this scene, this moment of tragic relief, is to remind us of the price of a comic resolution and thereby make it more credible and lasting.

The moment becomes especially apparent when it is contrasted with the sibling reunion of Sebastian and Viola in the last scene of *Twelfth Night*. Perhaps the first observation to make about the comic ending is how strange—how unromantic, how un-comic—both the familial and marital reunions are. Olivia gives voice to everyone with her simple, joyous outburst, “Most wonderful!” (5.1.219), tears are shed openly (234), and the loquacious dialogue continues “till each circumstance | Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump” (245-246). The dramatic custom of reunion conditions us to expect precisely this surge of energy in *Measure for Measure*, but instead we get in effect a reunion without a recognition. We will examine this later in chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 5: Tragic Relief Changes a Mood Immediately

Tragic relief not only relieves the festivity or merriment of potential monotony or fixity but also raises constriction by combining tragic and comic elements trying and promoting men. Releasing tension is similar to moderating tension. Its effect and purpose is the same, but releasing tension is stronger than Moderating tension. It provides big break by providing laughter to the audience while releasing previous a big tension so that the audience can focus on the issue again. And it also refreshes the audience's attention so that it prepares the audience for next problems. For instance, in the final moments of *Love's Labor's Lost*, Marcade's abrupt arrival with news that the King of France has died reverses the lightheartedness that has dominated the play. Prior to this moment, the drama has consisted of a rapid succession of jests, attempts at wooing, disguises, and wordplay. The merriment ends, however, with Marcade's entrance:

Marc. God save you, madam!

Prin. Welcome, Marcade,

But that thou interruptest our merriment.

Marc. I am sorry, madam, for the news I bring

Is heavy in my tongue. The King your father—

Prin. Dead, for my life!

Marc Even so, my tale is told.

Ber. Worthies, away! the scene begins to cloud. (5.2.716-20)

As the news of this death reaches Navarre, the mood immediately changes: the festive atmosphere instantly ceases, and the Princess and her entourage suddenly diagnose the deficiencies of excessive festivity and wordplay that have prevailed at the court. The Princess first explains that, because of the prolonged frivolity that has characterized the couples' exchanges, the women have not taken seriously the

men's professions of love:

We have receiv'd your letters full of love;  
 Your favors, ambassadors of love;  
 And in our maiden council rated them  
 At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,  
 As bombast and as lining to the time;  
 But more devout than this [in] our respects  
 Have we not been, and therefore met your loves  
 In their own fashion, like a merriment. (5.2.777-784)

And when the King then pleads the sincerity of their suit, the Princess firmly responds with a second criticism. Because the King and his followers have failed to keep their oaths before, the ladies cannot trust them to be true to their promises of love or to keep marriage vows, either:

King. Now at the latest minute of the hour,  
 Grant us your loves.  
 Prin. A time methinks too short  
 To make a world-without-end bargain in.  
 No, no. my lord, your Grace is peijur'd much,  
 Full of dear guiltiness, and therefore this:  
 If for my love (as there is no such cause)  
 You will do aught, this shall you do for me:  
 Your oath I will not trust, but go with speed  
 To some forlorn and naked hermitage,  
 Remote from ail the pleasures of the world:  
 There stay until the twelve celestial signs  
 Have brought about the annual reckoning. (5.2.788-798)

At the moment of tragic relief, the tone of the play and the attitude of the characters suddenly change at times. Characters' crudity, however, is not a permanent condition. For example, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the princess, even before the announcement, guesses correctly about her father's fate: "Dead, for my life" (5.2.715). She is merely using a common expression. But the poet, A.D. Nuttall notes, "standing behind the character, may hope to catch something more: the life of the young coming out of the old" (96). The princess, who was the object of romantic love, becomes the queen with political responsibilities. She is addressed as "your majesty" (5.2.720), she decides to return immediately to France, and she cannot understand the obscure, ornate, mannered words spoken to her (5.2.746). For the men, the transformation is realized in the juxtaposition of Berowne and Armado's reactions following Marcade's message. Berowne notes that "The scene begins to cloud" (5.2.716), focusing on the gloomy turn of atmosphere. Armado seizes the moment to recognize his errant ways and return to a more fitting life: "I breathe free breath. I have seen the day of wrong through the little hole of discretion and I will right

myself like a soldier" (5.2.717-719). His enlightenment and new moral commitment set the path for the rest of the men. Berowne admits that the men have "neglected time" (5.2.749), which is to say they have ignored their obligations as mortal human beings. With indispensable help from the ladies, the lords recognize that the "dabbling in intellectual and aesthetic forms of knowledge and courtship at the court of Navarre—courtship of fame through wisdom, of ladies through poetry—are ... self-indulgent pursuits cut off from the realities of society and nature."<sup>23</sup>

In Act 2, Scene 2 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander expects lying down beside Hermia but she rejects it. By defeating his expectation the merry moment can be created because of Lysander's odd behavior. He also explains about his opinion to prove his innocence, which can increase comic atmosphere. While Lysander's funny behavior can soften a joyous mood, Hermia's serious attitudes may also prepare for tragic relief. The city can be dangerous, so they are running away, and it can cause tensed feeling. This scene is very important because tragic relief makes the audience focus on Lysander and Hermia's story rather than other pre-stories.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, there are much more severe tests than those the men of Navarre undergo in *Love's Labour's Lost*. For Benedick and Claudio, a deep Freudian anxiety about women's inevitable infidelity or concupiscence, interferes with entering into a relationship with a woman. Benedick manifests this uneasiness as early as his conversation with Claudio in the first scene. When the confirmed bachelor learns of Claudio's romantic interest in Hero, he frantically asks, "But I hope you have no intent to turn husband—do you?" (1.1.182-183). Claudio discloses his reservations about women's capacity for fidelity at the masquerade. What Beatrice says of Benedick may be said of both men: "He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat: it ever changes with the next block" (1.1.70-72). For the younger couple, the psychological barrier is naive. Claudio's eagerness to seek advice about women from Benedick, of all men, and his willingness to let Don Pedro woo Hero are early, benign instances of his vulnerability. They anticipate serious failures of judgment to come. Claudio mistakenly believes Don Pedro turns against him and pursues Hero for himself. And Claudio's extreme reaction—"Let every eye negotiate for itself, | And trust no agent" (2.1.179-180)—embodies a fixed attitude that leaves him profoundly susceptible to Don John's machinations, which dupe him into believing he has ocular proof of Hero's infidelity. Ultimately, the marriage between Hero and Claudio depends on Claudio's change of attitude and blind faith in Hero. A similar change in attitude is also required of the more mature couple.

The romance between ingenue and hero, the sparks of dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick, the celebration of the masquerade, the matchmaking schemes, the clowning of the constabulary—all of these stand out above the threat of Don John. In fact, Dogberry and his cohorts, incompetent though they are in almost every respect, are the comedy's insurance policy despite themselves. Dogberry uncovers and reports the slanderous device by means of which Don John and his Henchman, Borachio, have sought to blacken the reputation of Hero. His actions enable her, after a confused interval, to marry Claudio as originally planned, and the play ends upon a suitably festive note. The constabulary serves as "the agent of revelation: their inadvertent discovery of the deception nearly as soon as it has occurred helps build a sense of comic providence."<sup>24</sup> The Dogberry subplot assures us that the play's most grave events will have no enduring serious consequence. The more an audience keeps this part of the plot in mind, the less the church scene will distress them.

## CHAPTER 6: The Final Scene with Tragic Relief Is a Critical Part of Characters' Development

By presenting unbalanced characters in some unstable situation, the audience can get interested in how the characters deal with the problem. It can involve the audience on upcoming events by promoting the audience's expectations. For example, in Act 1, Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the comparison of excited Theseus and Titania can provoke audiences' curiosity about Titania's cold behaviors; because the audience can see that something unpleasant is going on. Calling attention is needed to refresh or redirect the audience's attention to maintain interest. Different stories or unexpected stories keep continuing and coming out without releasing the previous tension. In other words, tragic relief can be a signal of the chaos for the audience. For example, in Act 3, Scene 2, four loves come out and start fighting over their love, since they misunderstand each other. The intermingled love relationship creates chaotic atmosphere so that it is crucial to put tragic relief between a series of merriment.

Act 5 seems separated from the previous story. But it is a highly needed scene, because it provides cooling-off time for the audience. I can borrow Richard Scheduler's viewpoint; "Too little study has been made of the luminal approaches and leaving of performance—how the audience gets to, and into, the performance, and how they go from that place; and in what ways this gathering or dispersing is related to the preparations for cooling-off aspects of the performers' work."<sup>25</sup> Even though there is small relief after all problems get fixed, the previous confusion and tension were too big to be released at once. Therefore, the audience needs some time to enjoy themselves without worrying about plot. When it comes to Act 5, it is fully focused on laughter itself except a bit of conflict between the wedding party and the clowns. But laughter does not have the various functions as it did beforehand.

The play's final effect lies in the way Shakespeare introduces tragic relief into the final scene to counterbalance and undercut these unbalanced characters in the closing songs. Despite the overwhelming comic artifice of the characters, plot, and language, the play's most striking scene is the one without the contrivances, the one that reverses the play's energies. It is tragically serious. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, one important point must be how the Princess and her entourage have endeavored to correct an excess of carnival and the unbalanced Lords. They must show that they are serious enough "to make a world-without-end bargain" (5.2.783) The last scene "can be regarded as a progressive and painful exorcism of the gentlemen's pretenses and pretentions."<sup>26</sup> Lords must prove themselves worthy of confidence to the skeptical women. These penances are a critical part of the males' development: as Greene says, "In the light of the lords' inadequacies before the fact of death, the penances set them by the ladies constitute a kind of final prodding toward maturation."<sup>27</sup> The tragic news about the Princess' father highlights the comic vision of the play. The men do not get the women in this play because they do not deserve them by the end.<sup>28</sup> But the men's new promise at last to lead severe and useful lives, a pact made on the heels of Marcade's message, looks forward to their transition from frivolity to responsibility. If they accomplish this, they can be rewarded with wives. If they put away their childish things and let go of their affectations, they can grow into the men who will marry and lead society. In achieving so much—in enlightening the foolish without destroying them—it accomplishes the purpose which comic drama is uniquely capable of bringing to pass.<sup>29</sup> This problem of what to do with the blocking figure casts an even longer and darker shadow over the ending of *Twelfth Night*. Besides posing the vexed question about Malvolio, the play juxtaposes the weddings with Feste's song of the wind and the rain.<sup>30</sup> Mortality, therefore,



enters Shakespeare's comedies in many ways, and its constant presence seems to indicate that, even in the merry world of his comedies, the unbalanced characters cannot and should not be ignored. Yet this knowledge does not negate these characters' happiness. With the Shakespeare's comic form, one can survive the encounter with adversity, even if only temporarily, and learn from the experience. Following a confrontation with death, characters correct societal flaws discern the value of life itself, appreciate what they formerly took for granted, or reform their own weakness. To understand Shakespeare's comedies, therefore, one must comprehend that tragic relief pervades the plays, though it manifests itself in various ways, and one must realize that contending with adversity appear in various combinations as tragic relief.

As we had an allusion in chapter 4, *Measure for Measure's* ending leaves the ethical development of its characters very much a mystery. The three main male figures are all put in positions where they can learn and develop, but the play either does not allow them to demonstrate any ethical evolution or it reveals that they have not changed. Enormous pressure is put on these characters, but that pressure is not relieved in the end. It's never refigured or reconstituted into something else. Taking a cue from Isabella's beautiful plea on his behalf (5.437-447), one might object that Angelo's thoughts or intentions did not manifest themselves in completed actions. At least one scholar Barbara Everett, has seen the issue this way: "Angelo, the unjust judge, has done nothing except to experience ordinary human desire, which frightens and horrifies him so much that he raises on it terrible fantasies of dying and killing."<sup>31</sup> But this judgment whitewashes his dismissal or duplicity towards Mariana, Isabella, and Claudio, to say nothing of the people from the lower social orders whom he walks out on at court (2.1.121). At a deep psychological level, he has done considerably more than "nothing." To defend him this way, therefore, is to be more charitable than he deserves. While tragic relief provides tests and rewards in the earlier or middle comedies under analysis, *Measure for Measure* is a different kind of play, a so-called problem comedy. It is analyzed that this drama is a limiting case for comedy. Tragic relief appears as a distinct mark of the other comedies compared with *Measure for Measure*, which has no such jolting scene. By the time Shakespeare writes this strikingly abnormal comedy, probably written about three years after *Twelfth Night*, he has left the comic behind or, perhaps more accurately, he has weighted down the comic elements so as to prevent them from rising. At the beginning of *Measure for Measure*, Claudio has been sentenced to death for begetting a child out wedlock, though the pregnant woman is actually his wife. As he begs Isabella to see him from his sentence, Claudio paints a stark picture of death that deserves to be recounted in its entirety:

To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;  
 This sensible warm motion to become  
 A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit  
 To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
 In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;  
 To be imprison'd in the viewless winds  
 And blown with restless violence round about  
 pendant world: or to be worse than worst  
 those that lawless and incertain thought  
 Imagine howling—'tis too horrible!

The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death. (3.1.117–131)

Of course, Claudio survives the danger that initially threatens him, and his sister gains a husband in the process. The gloomy and troubling depiction in this play makes the drama pervasively serious; Not even the marriages at the conclusion leaven or reverse the play's somber tone. Moreover, the heroes or protagonists undergo very different moral tests in *Measure for Measure* than they do in Shakespeare's earlier comedies—or at least the results of those tests are very different. The faint tragic relief in *Measure for Measure* helps us to understand its definite function in the middle comedies and to see the central problems in one of Shakespeare's most puzzling plays. Shakespeare in these dark moments seems to be defending comedy itself with its limitations.

These scenes are neither heavy-handed attempts to lecture nor subtle ways to sneak morality in the back door. They are striking representations, dramas within the comedies, of what is at stake in the structure of comedy—of what it means to confront and survive both threats and temptations from friends and from enemies including political powers, family members, and villains. Given *Measure for Measure*'s atmosphere and action, the play's resolution, especially its notorious marriages, feels appropriately and peculiar. The most salient facts of the last act are these. Isabella demands justice from the Duke. Lucio can not stop talking and maligns the Duke.<sup>32</sup> Angelo's transgressions are exposed. His immediate emotional reaction is guilt that he thought he could get away with his immoral actions (5.1.360–363); he then begs to be sentenced to death (365–367). The Duke sentences Angelo to marry Mariana and suffer execution on the same block where Claudio was supposedly beheaded. Mariana pleads for her husband's life, claiming, "I crave no other, nor no better man" (419). Isabella joins her, defending Angelo and switching her own desire for justice from the Duke to an appeal for mercy. Angelo again repents and asks for death. Claudio is brought in and revealed to everyone. The Duke proposes marriage to Isabella; she does not respond. The Duke pardons Angelo and enjoins him to love his wife. The Duke sentences Lucio to marry the prostitute "whom he begot with child" (504), and then to be "whipped and hanged" (506). Lucio says nothing about the corporeal punishments, but beseeches the Duke, "do not marry me to a whore" (507). The Duke forgives him and stays the whipping and execution, but not the marriage. The Duke again proposes marriage to Isabella; again she is silent. The final scene of this dark comedy may make us come to our sense to return to the real world.

## CHAPTER 7: Tragic Relief in Final Scenes Brings Us into a Natural, Adult, Real World

The last poetic dialogue in *Love's Labour's Lost* suggests both possibilities of witty discourse, its link to wooing, and matrimonial expectations on one hand and repudiation of wit, deflation of romance, and more somber assumptions about marriage and life on the other. Similarly, the play offers the prospect of multiple, standard comic marriages but does not enact them. To see this point clearly, contrast an abstract of *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Jack shall have Jill,

Naught shall go ill,  
The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well. (3.3.45-47)

—with a precis of *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Our wooing doth not end like an old play:  
Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy  
Might well have made our sport a comedy. (5.2.862-864)

The subjunctive mood of the last sentence implies that the play is not quite comic. Ultimately the marital expectations of the characters and the audience are left unrealized. We may all project comic fulfillment onto the play by assuming that the year away will simply be a temporary suspension of romance, with Jacks having Jills after the allotted time. It is pretty to think so, to borrow Hemingway's phrase, but the text refuses to confirm such expectations or assumptions. The play ends, incontestable without marriages.<sup>33</sup> Thus the play induces its characters and audience not only to enjoy comic conventions but also on top of this to consider the virtues of work, penance, and volunteerism as well as serious realities including adultery and mortality. In short, the scene of tragic relief brings us into the natural, adult world.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John is simply full of bile—humorless from the modern perspective. He does not reappear on stage in the play's last scene; a messenger reports that the villain has been captured. Benedick dismisses Don John until the next day, when punishments will be devised (5.4.28). His treatment is handled cursorily so as to maximize the celebration in final act.

But in *As You Like It*, unlike the others in Arden, Jaques decides not to join the marriage celebration or return to the court in the last scene but instead chooses to stay in the forest and visit with the newly religious Duke Frederick and his convertites (5.4.190). His voluntary exile marks the reform of a discontent. Under the moral, civilizing, and transformative influence of Arden, Jaques changes from an insensitive, fashionable cynic into a genuine intellectual melancholic fit for his contemplative life outside the renovated court. His vision is altered: "He has come to see the natures of the Arden inhabitants, including his own, and has replaced rancor with measure."<sup>34</sup>

*Twelfth Night* differs also from the other comedies under consideration in the dimension and attention it gives to its antagonist or blocking figure, Malvolio. In the very different setting of Illyria, the disgruntled Malvolio dissociates himself from his community not to pursue cerebral and religious pleasures but because he feels too bitter and humiliated to reenter the group after his gulling. In fact, Malvolio has always threatened to overshadow *Twelfth Night*. The most memorable aspect of the play was not the twins or the comic romance or Feste's songs or the drunken foolery of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew but the gulling of Malvolio as an instigator of tragic relief. When he degrades Feste by calling the clown a "barren rascal" (1.5.79), a witless fool "that has no more brain than a stone" (1.5.80), Olivia replies, "O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite" (1.5.85-86). Maria calls him "an affectioned ass ... the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him" (2.3.137-141). Sir Toby describes him as "an overweening rogue" (2.5.27). Fabian believes him to be "a rare turkeycock" (2.5.28), a bird which, as modern editors note in their glosses of this line, was proverbially associated with pride for the way it displayed its

tail-feathers. The stakes for the comedy, then, are not simply matters of class tensions, gender battles, or Freudian agonies. Malvotio stands accused of a common moral shortcoming but no less serious for its pervasiveness.

The marital unions and reunions at the conclusion of *Measure for Measure* are similarly barren of the delight and merriment expected in such a supposedly comic resolution. Only one of the four couples, Claudio and Juliet, fully wants to be together. At the beginning of the play, they resemble other young lovers in trouble. But in the end, when Claudio returns, figuratively from the dead, both of them are mute, and there is no sign of celebration for or by them. Mariana is happy to marry Angelo, for whatever inscrutable reason, but Angelo still appeals to the Duke to be killed after he returns from his wedding. The ceremony itself is significantly conducted offstage and completed in only twenty-five lines so that it feels as perfunctory as possible. Even though Angelo and Mariana had been scheduled to marry once before, their wedding seems as much punishment as romantic fulfillment. This is also true for the marriage of Lucio, who equates his matrimony to a prostitute to “pressing to death, whipping, and hanging.”<sup>35</sup> The marriage between Isabella and the Duke, assuming it takes place, promises an uneven life if the Duke continues to act towards her as he has done throughout the play, with behavior designed to cruelly, unnecessarily frighten and dishearten her for the alleged purpose of ultimately providing her relief and making her happy. Her silence in the last scene suggests that she is not happy, whether or not she accepts his hand. None of the marriages in this play therefore provides the ideal model for a new family and body politic. Rejoicing in marriage requires us to believe in the healthy possibilities of both social and sexual relationships. These couplings fail to heal the social and sexual ills in Vienna; rather, they promote the idea that the Duke’s government do not rehabilitate society.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, tragic relief would be the obverse of the nature of comedy. And each tragic relief is closely connected and effectively works together to make a dynamic plot. So analyzing tragic relief could help create or construct good comedies. It could be said tragic relief is a technical, dramaturgical device to produce a successful comedy. One of the best ways of understanding the basic structure of comedies may be in analyzing tragic relief. Careful use of tragic relief can be a good device to generate smooth communication which makes the audience actively engaged with full interest. Attention keeps being refreshed and redirected with tragic relief over revelry. Tension created through tragic relief gets heightened while following the complicatedly intermingled story. While one story is developed the other happening is developed. While they are crossing and mixing, the audiences’ expectations and excitement get enhanced.

Near the end of comedies, just when the main characters seem about to pair off in the last act, the revelry abruptly ends. The basic idea has to do with rupture, with the disruption of some comic order of acquisition, ripping it away, leaving behind nothing emotionally or economically. Rather than the expected and desired marriages of comedy, death puts all in doubt. The impending marriages are postponed a year, and are not enacted on stage. It shocks despite whatever hints the play provides that the scene is coming. Yet this claim goes too far. Granted, the play contains passing references to the tragic happenings, surely these vanishingly brief references do not weigh on our minds. Paradoxically the most important

moment in the final scene had seemed to function as *deus ex machina*. Such a sudden arrival of an entirely new character bearing important news within sight of the play's ending is very unusual, although it has similarities with the arrival of Jaques De Boys telling Duke Frederick's sudden conversion by "an old religious man" or with a sudden descent by one of the gods like Hymen's appearance in *As You Like It* (5.4.160).<sup>36</sup> Surely, it did not strike us that Duke Frederick's conversion exemplifies *deus ex machina* in its pejorative sense. Sudden Conversion is the easiest, neatest way to accomplish this necessity, no matter how out of place it feels. Theatrical expediency and generic gravity ultimately exert the strongest force at the last minute. The point of the scene is not to create tragedy but to remove an obstacle. The entrances of Jacques De Boys is not equivalent to Marcade's arrival, but they can lead us to understand the unconventional conclusion of *Love's Labour's Lost* as something other than a *deus ex machina*. These examples fail to meet the definitional criteria of *deus ex machina* in two ways: it neither occurs at the climax to a seemingly impossible conflict nor brings about the ending assured by the generic convention. On the contrary, it stands directly in the way of the promised comic resolution. It is not *deus ex machina* but tragic relief. If we see it only as worn theatrical practice, we blind ourselves to its power and therapeutic value.

Tragic relief is a dramatic, structural tool that adds gravitas to a genre often considered unworthy or even harmful. If, however, we base our judgment not on a premanufactured idea of genre but instead on how Shakespeare was experimenting with genre, then the play will surely be seen as more successful. It might be not going too far to say that Shakespeare can never write a comedy without using tragic relief, a scene which clarifies the maturational stakes of the resolution.

## [Notes]

- 1 The term "tragic relief" is not my coinage, but the only study I know that uses it deals not with seriousness in comedy, as I do, but with the pleasure we derive from tragic pain and suffering. See P.K. Guha. *Tragic Relief*. London: Oxford University Press, 1932.
- 2 Francis Fergusson. *Shakespeare: The Pattern in His Carpet*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1970, 119.
- 3 Patricia Carlin. *Shakespeare's Mortal Men: Overcoming Death in History, Comedy and Tragedy. Studies in Shakespeare* 1. Ed. Robert F. Wilson Jr. New York: Peter Lang, 1993.
- 4 John Russel Brown and Bernard Harris. *Early Shakespeare*. 1961. New York: Schocken Books, 1966, 19.
- 5 *Ibid*, 330.
- 6 Patrick Swinden. *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*. 1973. London: MacMillan, 1979, 2.
- 7 Marjorie Garber. "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death": Darker Purposes in Shakespearean Comedy. *New York Literary Forum* 5-6, 1980, 122.
- 8 E.M.W. Tillyard. *Shakespeare's Early Comedies*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965, 176.
- 9 Thad Jenkins Logan. "Twelfth Night: The Limits of Festivity." *Studies in English Literature* 22, 1982, 236.
- 10 Leah Scragg. *Discovering Shakespeare's Meaning*. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1988, 215-216.
- 11 James Calderwood. *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, 4.
- 12 Kirby Farrel. *Play, Death and Heroism in Shakespeare*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, 21.
- 13 *Ibid*, 6.

- 14 Ibid, 14.
- 15 Garber, 121
- 16 Ibid, 124.
- 17 Camilie Wells Slights. *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1993, 225-226.
- 18 H.B. Charlton. *Shakespearian Comedy*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Methuen, 1945, 290.
- 19 Alexander Leggatt. *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*. London: Methuen, 1974, 244.
- 20 Maura Kuhn. "Much Virtue in 'If.'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28.1, Winter 1971, 46.
- 21 Louis Montrose. "The Place of a Brother in *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32.1, Spring 1981, 40.
- 22 A.P. Rossiter. *Angels with Horns, and Other Shakespeare Lectures*. Ed. Graham Storey. New York: Theatre Arts, 1961, 281.
- 23 Louis Montrose. "Curious-Knotted Garden" *The Form, Themes, and Contexts of Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Englisch Sprache und Literature, Universität Salzburg, 1977, 87.
- 24 Claire McEachern, ed. *Much Ado About Nothing*. By William Shakespeare. Arden Third Series. London: Thomson, 2006, 23.
- 25 Richard Schechner. *Essays on peromance theory 1970-1976 / Richard Schechner*, New York Drama Book Specialists, 1977, 122.
- 26 Thomas Greene. "Love's Labour's Lost: The Grace of Socierty." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22, 1971, 322.
- 27 Ibid, 324.
- 28 The line of argument draws upon Barton, 174-178 and Woundhuysen, 42.
- 29 Cyrus Hoy. "Love's Labour's Lost and the Nature of Comedy." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.1, 1962, 31.
- 30 Katy Emck. "Female Transvestism and Male Self-Fashioning in *As You Like It* and *LaVida Es Suefio*." *Reading the Renaissance: Culture, Poetics, and Drama*. Ed. Jonathan Hart. New York: Garland, 1996, 84.
- 31 Barbara Everett. "A Dream of Passion." *London Review of Books*. 2 January 2003, 24.
- 32 "Technically, from the standpoint of common and ecclesiastical law, Lucio does not slander the Duke because (1) he accuses the Duke of wrongdoing before the Duke as Friar and his words are not repeated publically, and (2) he calls Isabella a whore after she has "confessed" to fornication. As J.H. Baker notes, "Since the basis of the action for words was the loss of credit or fame, and not the insult, it was always necessary to show a publication of the words. A man could not lose credit as a result of words which reached no one's ears or eyes but his own ... The one essential was that the words should have been understandable in a defamatory sense by the person to whom they were published" See *An Introduction to English Legal History*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Butterworths, 1990, p 504-505.
- 33 I diverge from the critics who believe the cuckoo song integrates or harmonizes disparate elements, such as Mary Beth Rose, who finds that the song is "celebrating summer and winter and suggesting the alliance among fruitful sexual love, the predictably recurring cycle of the seasons, and the ongoing life of society" See *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Drama*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press, 1988, p36.
- 34 Robert Bennett. "The Reform of a Malcontent: Jaques and the Meaning of *As You Like It*." *Shakespeare Studies* 9, 1976, 192.
- 35 Michael Goldman. *On Drama: Boundaries of Genre, Borders of Self*. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press, 2000, 177.
- 36 H.R. Woudhuysen, ed. *Love's Labour's Lost*. By William Shakespeare. Arden Third Series. Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998, 57.

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