

## A Study on Tragic Relief in Shakespeare's Middle Comedies

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### INTRODUCTION

Comedy can contain a potential tragedy within it. It is tragic relief in comedy, a literary term in opposition to comic relief. According to the standard definition, comic relief refers to scenes or moments of relaxation in otherwise serious, tense, or painful works, as in the famous examples of the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* and the drunken porter scene in *Macbeth*, as well as the clown's linguistic and physical antics in *King Lear*. It produces or foregrounds intellectual clarification on serious matters.

In a way, tragic relief is the obverse of comic relief, providing moments or scenes of seriousness or pain in comedy. These occurrences are ruptures or jolts that temporarily darken the mood or direction of the comedy. They do not necessarily prevent a conventional happy ending, with its promise of new life, human regeneration, and social rejuvenescence. But they do take readers and audiences out of the comic framework, and, at their most serious, they drive the characters on stage as well as readers and spectators to confront mortality. They could be understood as a group of dramaturgical premises that are governed by paradoxical or para-logical rather than by logical rules. Shakespeare in particular is an expert in creating original insults that regularly amuse the audience. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, for instance, the messenger Marcade brings news of death just as the courtly couples are about to pair off together in a harmonious comic ending. *Much Ado About Nothing* reaches a kind of climax in one of the most dramatic scenes in all of Shakespeare's comedies, in which the wedding of Claudio and Hero is rent asunder. In *As You Like It*, the two brothers must endure a potentially mortal confrontation with a snake and lioness. And in *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is tormented—bound and notoriously abused—in the dark-house scene.

Yet even as comic and tragic relief appear to push dramas in different directions, they share an intellectual function. They operate similarly in that they underscore the struggles of main characters and they comment on the play's literary universe. Tragic relief points out the serious and meaningful business behind the happy ending. When a comedy's plot might otherwise feel too fantastic or too romantic or too simply concluded, tragic relief can remind an audience of the problems and complexities of re-establishing a society or body politic with newly joined young couples. The scenes seem to ask whether the men in these couples are ready to take on paternal or authoritative positions in the restructured community. The young lords of Navarre are asked to understand commitment as something other than an immature and impossible oath to be academic recluses. Claudio and Benedick's psychological trial concerns whether they can have faith in their romantic partners. Orlando and Oliver must repair their ripped fraternity before they can return to the court. Finally, Malvolio's mistreatment tests whether he can change his haughty attitude and re-enter the social circle, and what obligations the community has to him if he cannot. Tragic relief can clarify a personal, social, or moral attitude or behavior that needs to be overcome,

abandoned, or otherwise adjusted so that the matrimonial and political bonds necessary to comedy can be established and maintained.

This study develops the idea by examining the nature and purpose of tragic relief in five plays written at the height of Shakespeare's comic career : *Love's Labor's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*.

I will first review several theories of comedy, from Aristotle's troublesome and tantalizing fragment on the subject in the *Poetics* to Bakhtin's modern social conception of the literary species. These theories establish basic parameters which Shakespeare sometimes moved within, sometimes moved beyond. Secondly I will explain four theories on laughter. I will then examine tragic relief in each case discussing at length the central ideas and the rules. It is not the purpose of this study to analyze and evaluate these representative samples but to show that they attempt to fill a void at the center of comic theory.

A fusion of these two respective theoretical apparatuses offers an extensive, highly detailed framework of ways in which laughter may occur—and thus it adds a great deal of much needed tension to relief. This study aims to show the applicability of such a synthesis, which I will refer to as the tragic relief that arises out socially restricted feelings in everyday life of the represented conversational exchanges of comedy. I believe that this analysis will demonstrate that the theoretical framework of tragic theory is of value to the study of comedy in several respects.

## CHAPTER ONE ; Role of Comedy

Aristotle furnishes an important place to start investigating comedy, even though his ideas on comedy are not fully extant.<sup>1</sup> We may draw inferences from his general theory of drama as expressed in the *Poetics*. So we can begin to extrapolate an Aristotelian definition of comedy.

Aristotle clearly means comedy and tragedy to be in opposition. The evidence comes in what remains today of his theory of comedy, contained in a short passage in the *Poetics*.

Comedy is as we said, an imitation of relatively worthless characters ; not, however, covering the full range of villainy, but merely the ugly and unseemly, one branch of which is the laughable. Namely, the laughable is some mistake or piece of ugliness ; which is not painful or destructive to life ; thus, as for example, to go no farther, the laughable comic mask is one that is ugly and distorted but does not cause pain.<sup>2</sup> (1449a32-37 ; Else 183)

The “worthless characters” of comedy are juxtaposed against the noble figures of tragedy. Tragedies depict, in pitiable and terrifying actions, the undeserved misfortune of a noble person; comedies show, in laughable but painless scenes, the unjustified good fortune of an ignoble character. Tragedies turn on painful and destructive hamartia, a term that encompasses mistakes made in ignorance or without sound judgment and moral errors that do not stem from wickedness.<sup>3</sup> Comedies hang on laughter, which Gerald Else's exegesis glosses as ugliness or comic error,<sup>4</sup> a misstep by one of the characters, which threatens but does not cause pain or damage to him or somebody else.<sup>5</sup>

The *Poetics* unmistakably maintains that pity and terror are at the heart of tragedy. But the answers to correspondent or oppositional emotions constitute the core of comedy. Perhaps Aristotle could not

have specified any particular emotions worthy of mention to balance pity and fear, but would only have discussed the laughable. Others, notably Richard Janko, maintain that laughter itself is an emotion to be purged in comedy.<sup>6</sup> This is puzzling: laughter is central in Aristotle's short discussion, but it is a psychological reaction rather than an emotion. It could therefore be an element or aim of comedy, but not properly its defining passion. Still other arguments find support in alternative Aristotelian works. Lane Cooper opposes the tragic passions of pity and fear to the comic emotions of anger and envy.<sup>7</sup> But this seems counterintuitive: anger and envy are not the main conscious emotions audiences feel while watching a good comedy. When we laugh at a clown's antics or at a servant being beaten, we do not feel angry or envious at all. Leon Golden, rooting his interpretation in Aristotle's treatment of emotions argues that indignation is the opposite of pity and fear and is therefore the proper controlling emotion for comedy.<sup>8</sup> Peggy Garvey, embedding her discussion in Aristotle's social and ethical sense of laughter, argues for "desire and affirmation."<sup>9</sup> One might add to this list "ruthlessness" and "peace, calm, or tranquility," since they are the most natural antonyms of pity and fear in English. These views are not exhaustive, but they suggest the range of interpretation on this unresolved central issue. Lane Cooper advances several hypotheses, among them: (1) comedy purges anger and envy allopathically with laughter; (2) it purges these emotions homeopathically by exaggerating on stage the numberless, oppressive proportions of daily life, real or imagined; (3) comedy simply provides temporary relief or recreation, a necessary break from the liberal play of the mind in the highest life of contemplation and learning.<sup>10</sup> He is prepared to entertain a broader interpretation by which laughter becomes an instrument of social order. He investigates whether comedy could minimize or eliminate the impulses to defy convention by involving the imaginary suspension of many of those restraints and restrictions that make civilized life possible. So we could define laughter as intellectual clarification of the indignation we feel about those incidents of unjustified good fortune and those examples of inappropriate behavior in human existence which do not cause pain.

## CHAPTER TWO ; About Clarification

Clarification is the release comedies provide and dramatize by reaffirming a heightened relation between man and nature, carried out in two ways: by celebrating human relationships and merrymaking, and by mocking what is considered unnatural, baiting killjoys such as Malvolio and Shylock who disregard the feast or dance or who show a perverse aversion to happiness. Shakespeare expanded them, flouted them, combined them in varied ways. His middle comedies include not only the rather common potential for tragedy but also contain an actual tragedy. Yet if a true dialectic between comedy and tragedy exists in Shakespeare's plays, then we should be able to discuss not only comic relief in the tragedies but also tragic relief in the comedies. Tragic relief with a dark pattern runs through his middle comedies by which the comic art is somehow broken: his middle comedies include moments or scenes of great seriousness or pain.

For the sake of argument, I will suppose that Golden's emphasis on clarification of educative nature and value is well-placed.<sup>11</sup> Golden argues that the essential pleasure and goal of mimesis is a learning experience, and that drama receives its ultimate justification from the enhanced insight it provides into reality itself. In comedy, according to this interpretation, clarification is not purgation or purification but intellec-

tual realization. Golden's view runs against an enduring, dominant legacy of interpretation that defines realization in terms more emotional than intellectual. As Donald Keeseey points out, however, "the implications and overtones of the word 'clarification' are consistent not only with Aristotle's formalist emphasis but also with Aristotle's generally intellectualist approach. The pleasure derived from mimesis is the pleasure of perceiving ... of learning, and the translation of realization as 'clarification' fits much better than the other alternatives with the widely held opinion that Aristotle's famous definition does seem to say that catharsis is the end or goal of tragic art."<sup>12</sup> As the characters and audience work through the drama's conflict emotionally and intellectually, the text moves towards equilibrium. Cooper has tragedy in mind, primarily, but his idea applies to Shakespeare's middle comedies as well, particularly his views of enlightenment and equilibrium. Discovering an enlightenment that returns a character to homeostasis is what the comic figure struggles with during tragic relief.

The festival at the end of comedy, represented on the stage as a marriage, a dance, or a feast, generally includes all the characters. The blocking characters who impede the progress of the action towards its desired end, and are the butt of comic ridicule are more often converted and reconciled rather than simply rejected. Comedy raises sympathy and ridicule only to pass beyond them into the birth of a new society and a renewed sense of social integration witnessed by the audience. The festive laughter at the end of a comedy then is not simply an assertion of superiority on the part of those watching the play but an acknowledgement of participation in the complex process of social renewal and reconciliation.

### **CHAPTER THREE ; Four Theories on Laughter**

In order to understand how tragic relief functions specifically in comedy, one first might naturally seek help from the four main theories that historically have been put forth addressing the phenomenon of comedy in general : the intellectual theory, the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1. The intellectual theory**

Since Aristotle, many philosophers and scholars have been trying to explain why people laugh. There are major interesting theories explaining laughter ; intellectual theories, superiority theories, and incongruity theories. Arthur Schopenhauer provides the 'intellectual theory,' the comedy can be understood by intellectual people who can recognize the subtle contradiction between two premises. He says that all humor can be traced to a syllogism in the first figure with an undisputed major and an unexpected minor, which is only sophistically valid.<sup>14</sup>

#### **2. The superiority theory**

The superiority theory is one of the major theories to explain why people laugh. Thomas Hobbes is one of the well-known scholars about the superiority theory. He says, "Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."<sup>15</sup> D.H. Monro explains that glory is used in the sense of excessive elation, pride, or 'self-esteem.'<sup>16</sup> It means one can feel pleased by looking down other people's inferior behaviors. Laughter in theater is different from general laughter. As Susan Langer points

out, "Laughter springs from its very structure. Playwrights technically have used laughter while developing structure of tragic relief. In good comedies, tragic relief is skillfully set up to guide the audience to such a direction where playwrights or directors want to end up. In short, comedy is a rhythmically structured organic unit supported by positioned laughter."<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle, on the other hand, divides the object of imitation into superior action and inferior action. And comedy imitates inferior action. According to superiority theory, the laugher looks down on something or someone that is laughed at. That is why the laugher can laugh with superior feeling by regarding the laughable object as inferior. The superiority theory is most often attributed to Hobbes; however, it began to surface during the Italian Renaissance, with the renewed scholarly focus at that time on classical thought. Perhaps most influential in its development were brief passages related to the subject of comedy in the works of Plato and Aristotle. It is important, however, to note that neither of these philosophers—at least in their extant works—attempts to put forth a comprehensive theory of comedy. Plato and Aristotle each specifically speak of a certain kind of comedy, the "idiculous," and its relation to Greek comedy. In Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates describes the ridiculous as a human disposition that stems from a lack of self-knowledge, in particular, knowledge about one's health, physique, and virtue. Moreover, he argues that the pleasure that we experience in watching a comedy is a form of malice, for it stems from our enjoyment of such lack of self-knowledge in others.<sup>18</sup> In the *Poetics*, Aristotle tells us that comedy is an imitation of those who are inferior but not altogether vicious. And the ridiculous, he suggests, is a mistake or a lapse from perfection which causes no pain or serious harm to others. As evidence, he points to the comic mask, describing it as something "distorted and imperfect."

What eventually became known as the superiority theory emerged out of a misprision of this classical discourse. It takes the position that all laughter—not just what arises with the perception of the ridiculous—stems from the sudden occurrence of a feeling of superiority to others or to our past selves. As Thomas Hobbes articulates it in *Human Nature* :

[...] the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly : for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor [...]<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, John Morreall observes that the superiority theory served to accomplish three things. It explained the preponderance of "physically, mentally and morally inferior characters" that one finds throughout comedy; it generated moral criticism against comedy for promoting a disdainful attitude towards others; and, at the same time, it provided a defense against moral arguments that had been made about the supposedly harmful influence of viewing all of those "inferior" characters who populate the genre. After all, if laughter is explained by the audience's feelings of superiority, the audience is unlikely to want to emulate what it sees.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The incongruity theory

The incongruity theory in its general form — that laughter is triggered by the unexpected — gradually replaced the superiority theory as the dominant view, and it remains the most widely held general account

of humor today. It offers an explanation for many more instances of laughter than can be explained by the superiority theory, which is limited to situations that involve a clear object of ridicule. And, while one might argue that the superiority theory is necessary for explaining laughter that arises from the specific case of the ridiculous, what is ridiculous is inherently something that is incongruous with our abstract understanding of the way things are in the world, and thus the incongruity theory is always operative, to some extent, with the laughter of ridicule.

The incongruity theory developed in response to the recognition of weaknesses in the superiority theory, in particular its inability to explain the many occasions when laughter arises when ridicule is absent. The central argument that holds together several views that fall within the rubric of the incongruity theory is the idea of the unexpected which is a necessary component in the mechanics. Kant, to whom the incongruity theory often is attributed, would describe the laughter at this joke as being the result of the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.<sup>21</sup> The listener anticipates hearing something other than that which is obvious—and all of a sudden this expectation is rendered void by a punch line that does not fulfill it. And laughter then occurs from this change in the listener's mental state. Kant focuses primarily upon what happens in our minds when we laugh, and does not concern himself a great deal with what initially triggers our response. However, he does make the observation that: "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd"—which by definition includes what is incongruous.<sup>22</sup> Others traditionally associated with Incongruity Theory offer their own views about what that stimulus is. Francis Hutcheson contends that "the cause of laughter" is the bringing together of contrasting ideas.<sup>23</sup> In other words, we do not expect to be confronted with such ideas as grandeur, dignity, sanctity, and perfection in close juxtaposition with ideas of meanness, baseness, and profanity.<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, in an effort to improve upon the supposed Aristotelian view, also stresses the importance of incompatible ideas, arguing that the comical exists wherever there is painless contradiction.<sup>25</sup> Schopenhauer's theory, however, is perhaps the most subtle. He contends that laughter results from a sudden perception of incongruity between our abstract knowledge and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation in other words, from a discrepancy between how we think things should be based on our understanding of the world, and how they actually appear in reality.<sup>26</sup> And one might argue that the absurd—which Kant claims is necessary for a good laugh—resides in just such a clash. We expect our experience of reality to match the abstract understanding of it that we have acquired. When this doesn't happen, the thwarting of this expectation can result in laughter.

#### **4. The relief theory**

The incongruity theory in its general form—that laughter is triggered by the unexpected—gradually replaced the superiority theory as the dominant view, and it remains the most widely held general account of humor today. It offers an explanation for many more instances of laughter than can be explained by the superiority theory, which is limited to situations that involve a clear object of ridicule. And, while one might argue that the superiority theory is necessary for explaining the humor that arises from the specific case of the ridiculous, what is ridiculous is inherently something that is incongruous with our abstract understanding of the way things are in the world, and thus the incongruity theory is always operative, to some extent, with the laughter of ridicule.

The incongruity theory is central to the full comprehensibility of such disparate and highly influential

theories of laughter as those put forth in the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Freud's theory is called "the relief theory." To briefly summarize his rather complex ideas on the subject, he argues that when we laugh, it is the result of the sudden liberation of superfluous "psychic" energy that we have called upon, believing that it will be necessary in order to repress forbidden thoughts or feelings, or for having an appropriate emotional response, or for performing a mental operation of some kind—depending upon the particular situation. When we realize that the energy that we have stored is unnecessary, it is released in an eruption of laughter. There is an incongruity experienced, then, between what is required of us in the situation, and what actually transpires.<sup>27</sup> In Bergson's view, laughter is a form of social corrective that occurs when we observe some form of inflexibility in others to be clashing with the inner suppleness of life, or, as he often describes this state: the mechanical encrusted upon the living.<sup>28</sup>

While Incongruity Theory may be the most viable global theory of comedy that has been put forth, it is far too amorphous to be very useful on its own for understanding how laughter functions in the dialogue of comedy. Freud would tell us that we laugh because of a sudden release of stored psychic energy of one kind or another, but beyond suggesting differences in the character of that energy, he would have the same explanation for the mechanics of all the other lines of the play that make us laugh. Even if we follow his psychological explanation of the physical response of laughter, it still would not get us much closer to understanding the different ways to produce that response. Bergson's theory that laughter occurs with the sudden perception of unnatural human inflexibility may apply to those instances in which a character exhibits an unexpected, mechanical rigidity of speech in the repetition of discourse.<sup>29</sup>

#### **CHAPTER FOUR ; The Socially Restricted Feelings Need to Be Released**

Comedy is a dramatic form that intends to cause us to experience relief. While it clearly has political or social motives as well, its primary distinction as a genre, what sets it apart from tragedy, is that it hopes to make us laugh—or at least to amuse us. In this case, "release" refers to the clear-cut gesture toward liberty of loosening social controls during the holidays, when the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibitions is freed for celebration. As William E. Gruber emphasizes, theatrical laughter also differs from everyday laughter because it is restricted to the audience.<sup>30</sup> The restriction to the audience exposes another characteristic that makes theatrical laughter distinct and exceptional. In everyday life where all parties involved in a potentially laughable situation are allowed to laugh, and some of them, as Helmuth Plessner argues, even use laughter to conceal their embarrassment or despair.<sup>31</sup> When we laugh at someone's witticism, mistake, stupidity, brilliance or clumsiness, we do not expect any additional satisfaction ; and if we do not laugh at all, no one is to blame.

In an even more famous and widely anthologized account of comic structure, Northrop Frye begins with same assumption. Frye posited an anthropologically and biologically based account of what he called "the comic rhythm." Comedy, dramatizes these fundamental biological patterns of persistence and growth, and celebrates this rhythm of animal existence. This conception of comedy is an image of life triumphing over chance. The essence of the form is that it embodies our sense of happiness in symbolic form. This theory of comedy's principal focus or point of reference is society, particularly social order as manifested in fulfillment. Disorder reigns at the beginning of a comedy, especially because marriage is

being inhibited. But in the end, marriage, restores order and opens the way to regenerating the species. The celebration of comedy is rooted in, and symbolically records, the rebirth that represents this wondrous triumph over all impediments. For Frye, our lives follow a fundamentally comic design that proceeds from chaos to order. And he sees in comedy a spirit of regeneration in sympathy with the natural rhythm of the seasons. Disorder is the given condition when the curtain rises on a comedy, but in the end, marriage restores order and opens the way to regenerating our species. Rebirth is an especial cause for glorification because it miraculously defies reason. We can see that death is the inevitable result of birth, but life is not the inevitable result of death. It is hoped for, even expected, but at its core, it is something “unpredictable and mysterious.”<sup>32</sup> For Frye, comedy celebrates this mysterious and glorious victory in nature.

Reconciliatory theories of laughter have been challenged by Mikhail Bakhtin, who proposes a notion of laughter that is strongly oppositional and subversive. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin locates laughter and its forms in the culture of the marketplace, in rituals and festivals which flourished all over Europe during the middle ages and the Renaissance. Carnival was characterized by festive merriment and indulgence in bodily pleasures. The period of festivity was marked by a suspension of all norms of orderly social behavior. The effect of laughter is that all those within the sphere of carnival in a sense “die and are revived and renewed.”<sup>33</sup>

The focus on the festive pattern of an alternation from carnival to the everyday has been fruitful. It is, however, important not only that we experience a potentially funny moment in public, but also that we are able to share it with others. One of the most obvious and elaborate mechanisms for intensifying laughing density is the theater. The audience can, at last, laugh at those similar incident on the stage that they could not laugh at in their everyday life. Thus, the theater consciously adapts all the techniques that are known to instigate laughter in “everyday life” for its own use.<sup>34</sup> The universality of laughter in the theater is to a great extent precipitated by the spectators’ perception of the theatrical performance as what is inherently related to everyday life. It is caused by the fact that laughter is anchored in our experience in both everyday life in the theater. Daniel Cottom claims that literary laughter is generated by the discrepancy between the experience world of the reader and the experience world of the fictional figures.<sup>35</sup>

Laughter in comedy is not to be indulged in for its own sake but has an expressly social function. This view of laughter as a social and ethical corrective was reiterated and elaborated by Henri Bergson. In his essay, “laughter” which he describes as a social gesture against unsociability is an individual or a group. According to him, human life is characterized by qualities of flexibility and gracefulness. Comedy expresses a special lack of adaptability to society. Laughter in comedy is a form of “social ragging” aimed to “break-in” or “socialize” the deviant into the ways of a social group. It punishes in order to correct and thereby plays a significant role in the maintenance of order.

The strongest articulation of this view has come from Thomas Hobbes, who describes laughter as “nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”<sup>36</sup> Hobbes’s view was echoed by Freud who also perceived laughter as a form of aggression. In his analysis in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, he saw jokes as strategies for an open and free expression of hostile impulses. By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.<sup>37</sup> Theatrical experience, therefore, is a flexible phenomenon that at the same time depends on social



psychological, ideological, religious and other characteristics of the audience, and can still be controlled by the employment of certain dramaturgical strategies. Bergson argued that laughter is addressed to reason.<sup>38</sup>

One of several important and common external elements to affect laughter is its indigenous social dimension.<sup>39</sup> It not only indicates something more than just the movement of facial muscles, but also it appears in the context of a society. It does not primarily belong to the human being, but to society as a whole. What matters is that laughers seek company, seek a group of people to identify with. "By laughing together," Holland says, we "let each other know that we held certain values in common."<sup>40</sup>

Whereas Hobbes saw laughter as morally reprehensible and as a sign of individual deficiency, Freud read in this aggression a personal need for liberation from social restraint. According to him, the process of civilization has restricted and repressed human's natural drives for appetite and aggression by making rules of social behavior which forbid their uninhibited expression. Comedy provides necessary and effective vehicles for the release of these repressed instincts.

A more conciliatory notion of laughter is introduced by Northrop Frye in his analysis of comic laughter.<sup>41</sup> Frye characterizes comedy by its spirit of reconciliation, which makes the resolution possible. His tendency of society in comedy is "to include rather than exclude."<sup>42</sup> The links which comedy has with primitive ritual and with folk festivals has been pointed out by many scholars. Festive misrule drowns the normal, everyday world in its laughter and brings about a reversal of normal standards, establishing "a dream world which we create out of our own desires."<sup>43</sup>

Constant conflict can keep the audience's attention. But constant high extreme tension can make the audience exhausted, and that tension sometimes needs to be released. Otherwise the audience is too tensed to enjoy the comedy. Laughter can give the audience a short pause by releasing the tension created by comic crisis mainly through complicated relationships among characters. Therefore, after the short break, the audience's attention is refreshed so that their expectation of an upcoming event heightened. Laughter is needed after relief. So analyzing laughing points just after tragic relief can help creating or constructing a good comedy. Each laughing point is closely connected and effectively works together to make a dynamic plot. In summary, the laughing point is a technical, dramaturgical device to produce successful comedy. Therefore, it is an important process to figure out tragic relief in a play for the discrete and purposeful use of laughter. It may be useful to explore the method of dramaturgical analysis via laughing points after tragic relief. Laughing points' analysis is also an important and useful method for understanding the basic structure of Shakespeare's middle comedies. While laughter, as a phenomenon, and comic poetry, as an art form, are viewed as potentially dangerous activities from the perspective of the political/educational program outlined by Socrates in the Republic, Plato's broader depiction and use of laughter and comedy reveals a more nuanced relationship between the practice of philosophy and the disparate concepts that we might group under the heading of the comic.

Recently, laughter in relation to comedy has been discussed from a number of perspectives by authors as diverse as Susan K. Langer who studies it in connection with the rhythms of life.<sup>44</sup> Strategies inscribed in dramatic texts, or as one may call them "dramaturgical strategies," are only a part of the overall mechanism for provoking laughter.

## CHAPTER FIVE ; Tragic Relief Could Make the Audience Attracted

Tragic relief is one significant part of Shakespeare's general generic practice, but it also works in its own particular way. Combining tragic and comic elements produces tense and release, but in addition when a harrowing or tense scene interrupts the comic flow, the mind readjusts itself. Tragic relief gives the form some of the dignity by presenting suffering or distress, and takes us to the edge of comedy because comedies need tragic relief to keep the audience attracted. In a comedy, people understandably do not want to be reminded of death or adultery or a victim of physical abuse as a wedding approaches or takes place ; however, this is what occasionally happens, especially in Shakespeare's middle comedies. Yet scholars seem to have missed or ignored the importance of this contribution. Recognizing his achievement also allows us to see tragic relief as a step in Shakespeare's professional evolution that led him from disruptive dark moments in these plays to an inter-woven fabric of the tragic and comic in *Measure for Measure* and other later plays. Thus Shakespeare's middle comedies offer more than opportunities to lust after young lovers, representations of damnable characters and actions, appeals to primitive drives.

Shakespeare in these dark moments seems to be defending comedy itself and standing on its limitations. These scenes are neither heavy-handed attempts to lecture or sermonize, nor subtle or extraneous 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 come—of what it means to confront and survive both threats and temptations from friends and from enemies including political powers, family members, and villains. Thus tragic relief becomes more than just a convenient term in opposition to comic relief. The device not only relieves the comedies of potential monotony or generic fixity but also raises them out of their embeddedness in trifles and festivity by trying and promoting men.

## CHAPTER SIX ; How Tragic Relief Functions in Shakespeare's Middle Comedies

In Shakespeare's middle comedies, the moments of tragic relief present heroes with dangerous opportunities to go too far, or the scenes compel the men to pull back just before the fatal brink. While these comic heroes may not be reaching above others, they are moving away from the public. They risk separating themselves from society and their most important human bonds. The moments of tragic relief dramatize whether the separation will be complete and permanent.

### 1. *Love's Labour's Lost*

*Love's Labour's Lost* is a small step from death in the pastoral to tragic relief in Shakespeare's middle comedies. Some of the scenes that acknowledge death within the fairest genre, whether it would be death in the form of a literal confrontation with mortality, include a wedding turned upside down that could symbolize the end of a family or a community. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Marcade's stunning announcement alerts the courtiers to the tragic potential of their academic quest. They have withdrawn from the human world and must be reminded of their mortality, and of their biological and communal responsibilities. These scenes work in an opposite fashion to comic relief. In tragedies, the comic scenes work to clarify the tragic occasion, pointing to continuity despite the catastrophic moment that is heroic death, and

also sometimes to indicate a transcendent beyond. In comedies, the heroic action is set within comic parameters that assure social, even biological continuity. Comedy contains tragedy without being overcome. For the comic hero, this tragic experience has a strong element of the sublime sense that it is extreme but still below a threshold or limit.

The conflicting feelings generated by this masculine paradox are arguably more intense in his tragedies than in any other body of drama, but this does not exclude these emotions from the comedies. The young lords in *Love's Labour's Lost*, for instance, pursue to excess their endeavor to make the court of Navarre "a little academe" (1.1.13-14), and arms come into play only in the pageant of the worthies, in which great martial figures—Pompey, Alexander, and Hercules—are ridiculed; yet when the lords realize their excesses, Armado promises to correct himself "like a soldier" (5.2.719). More precisely, tragic relief offers these men the chance to glimpse something more than their immature or unfulfilled lives, confirmed bachelors, or antagonistic brothers. As the occasion for thinking about their humanity, especially their identities as men in relation to women and the community, tragic relief is a nexus between masculine maturity, intellectual clarification, and comic continuity.

## 2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Provoking interest can mean generating tension. By presenting characters' unbalanced situation or problem, the tension can be generated. As the result, the audience can get interested in how the characters deal with the problem. In short, it can involve the audience on upcoming events by promoting the audience's expectations. For example, in Act 1, scene 1, the comparison of excited bridegroom Theseus and cold bride Titania can not only create laughter, but also provoke audiences' curiosity about the couple's odd behaviors; because the audience can see that something unpleasant is going on.

Moderating tension is needed when it comes to heavy or serious problems. It can't provide big laughter, but it gives the audience small positive notice to prevent intense tension caused by fatal conflict. If a character can cause fatal result, the audience can feel offensive so that they can't enjoy the comedy. Therefore controlling the threatening level is crucial process. For example, in Act 1, scene 1, although Hermia has three options, such as marriage, becoming a nun, and death, after she rejects her forced marriage, Hermia clarifies her opinion to not die but become a nun. Death is a somewhat heavy threatening tool in comedy so that her declaration to become a nun functions moderating the serious level while maintaining certain level of tension.

After the wooing, after the carnival, all is not well in the restored society. Though the comedies give men control over the women, they also make them dependent on women indirectly and covertly for the validation of their manhood. Paradoxically, their power over women also makes them vulnerable to women. The familial and political complexities and anxieties that remain at this comedy's ends give the lie to facile diatribes which represent the genre as trifling and peripheral. Shakespeare's transcendence of these weaknesses, of which tragic relief is a decisive part, is a signature of his legacy.

Slowly Decreased attention should keep being refreshed and redirected with laughter over tragic relief. So the tension gets heightened again while following the complicatedly intermingled story. Act 4 scene 2 provides cooling-off time for the audience. Even though there is small relief after all problems get fixed, the previous confusion and tension were too big to be resolved 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.

### 3. *Much Ado About Nothing*

*Much Ado About Nothing* begins as a conventional comedy—or, rather, as two conventional comedies woven together. The first scene introduces two strongly contrasting love plots. The first concerns Hero and Claudio, one-dimensional, externally controlled, nearly silent walking clichés of young lovers. The second plot involves Beatrice and Benedick, a prideful, psychologically complex, unorthodox, supremely witty couple. They have the distinction of being perhaps the only lovers in Shakespeare's comedies who both spurn each other.

If *Love's Labour's Lost* presents tragic relief in embryonic form, *Much Ado About Nothing* stages a paradigmatic example of tragic relief in the church scene. In the former scenes, Marcade's appearance turns the play's tone and makes a normal comic denouement impossible. His message is deeply chilling and leads to an ending that asserts an archetypal or seasonal shift. But whereas this tragic relief is presented as a jolting and transformative moment in the play, Shakespeare develops the device into an entire, climactic scene in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The church scene in this comedy does not surprise in the way Marcade's presentation shocks, for audiences are prepared for a fraught wedding between Claudio and Hero, since Claudio has already decreed that on witnessing Hero's betrayal, "in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her" (3.2.112–113). Nevertheless, the broken rite is shocking and tragic in the extent to which it rips apart the fabric of Messinese society. Romances, friendships, and families are destroyed at this ceremony. The real plot of this comedy is not how the last two acts spoil the play but how the episode of tragic relief ultimately tests Claudio and Benedick and brings the two central couples together on a firmer foundation than they had been previously.

Yet if the pairings are clear from the start, so too are the impediments. Unlike some of the other comedies in which the obstacle to love comes in the external form of a law or uncooperative parents, the barriers in *Much Ado About Nothing* are psychological. For Benedick and Claudio as well as for other early modern men, a deep Freudian anxiety about women's inevitable infidelity or concupiscence interferes with entering into a relationship with a woman. Shakespeare's depiction of faith's recovery takes us from the light and conventional to the dark and unconventional. Restoration in this comedy requires Claudio and Benedick to think of themselves as murderers—and not just of anyone but of people dear to them. Claudio is made to believe he has killed his beloved Hero, and Benedick is driven to declare he will kill his close companion Claudio. These are much more severe tests than those the men of Navarre undergo in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The crucial scene for the development of Claudio and Benedick is the ruined nuptial, the scene of tragic relief in the comedy.

Considering the church scene in the context of the whole comedy, one might be tempted to minimize its tragic bearing. Until this scene, the comic elements dominate the serious matters. The destroyed nuptials are a tragedy of apprehension. As the plot works out, Dogberry's constabulary apprehension of Borachio goes beyond logic as surely as Claudio's emotional apprehension of Hero goes beyond ocular proof. But we have not reached that point yet. In this scene, Claudio and the princes are still erroneously under Don John's influence. As the wedding becomes an extended accusation of Hero's wantonness, Don John's plan and power are made manifest and they face the comic crisis. The language of the wrecked wedding strikes an ominous new tone; the mode turns decidedly tragic. Claudio calls up the

worst in human behavior and the limits of human knowledge: "O, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do, not knowing what they do!" (4.1.19-20). Such themes belong less typically to comedy than to tragedy, the formula for which might be expressed as courage plus ignorance equals disaster.

The devastated wedding in *Much Ado About Nothing* puts Claudio and Benedick in their own predicament. In the wake of this scene, both men are forced to imagine themselves as murderers, Claudio as the killer of his bride, Benedick as the slayer of his best friend. Before the comedy can conclude, they must replace this monstrous identity with the more natural role of husband and conventional part of public leader.

Anxieties remain, however, Jack and Jill are not together at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio regains Hero, but, considering all the couple has suffered, their union might not feel entirely festive. Benedick wins Beatrice, but his final advice to Don Pedro is ambiguous. He exhorts the Prince to get a wife, but then offers this bittersweet assessment of marriage: "there is no staff more reverend than the one tipped with horn" (5.41.23-124). Marriage dominated by the male staff is honorable but also subject to betrayal, the horns of cuckoldry. Moreover, the final line of the play looks forward not to the extended happiness of the newlyweds but to the next day's somber duty of Don John.

#### 4. *As You Like It*

In the most spectacular action of the first act, Orlando overthrows Charles the wrestler. Duke Ferdinand throws Rosalind out of the court. Celia would overthrow her father's wishes by joining Rosalind in exile (1.2.15-20). When Orlando and Celia fall in love at first sight following the wrestling match, they each describe themselves explicitly as having been thrown. Orlando says in an aside: "My better parts | Are all thrown down" (1.1.233-234). And a few lines later he says to himself: "O, poor Orlando. Thou art overthrown" (1.2.244). Rosalind, more boldly and directly, says to him: "Sir you have wrestled well, and overthrown | More than your enemies" (1.2.238-239). Surely this is a skewed understanding of unfair burden on. Such assumptions, however, foreclose the possibility of comedy to turn life upside down and shake it around, and to idealize.

The path from disorder to order, the course of true love, does not run smoothly in Arden. Indeed, several moments or scenes there might qualify as tragic relief, among them Adam's near-starvation (2.6-2.7) and the hunting of the stag which Jacques weeps over and moralizes "into a thousand similes" (2.1.45). The most fitting and significant example is the story Oliver tells to Rosalind and Celia about his encounter with Orlando, a lioness, and a snake (4.3). Like the moments of tragic relief in the other plays, this tale breaks the comic rhythm of the play, interrupting the progress towards the romantic couplings. Before Oliver enters, Orlando and Rosalind undertake a mock wedding (4.1); after the scene, Touchstone wins Audrey's hand by defeating the rhetorically lame William in a short wooing war(5.1). This comedy is viewed primarily as a comedy with a happy ending, but its conclusion is bought at the price of a possible tragedy. The comedy's scene of tragic relief—Orlando and Oliver's confrontation in the forest—is the prerequisite for tragic relief and the cost of the comic finish.

#### 5. *Twelfth Night*

*Twelfth Night* has no comparable group or pair of male protagonists who undergo a crucial test, but it includes tragic relief nonetheless, the dark-house scene (4.2) in which Malvolio is interrogated and shown

his ignorance and failings. Tragic relief causes a detour from the comic road to social concord, occurring as it does between two scenes that bring Sebastian and Olivia together romantically. It is an “interlude” (5.1.363), as Feste calls it when he looks back on the scene in the finale—a play within the play that diverts our attention from the main plot’s drive towards resolution. And like the examples in previous chapters, this scene has sober stakes: Toby and Feste abuse Malvolio past the point of safety; they try to drive him to madness by confining him to a small, dark place. The setting functions as a stage on which a supremely flawed male character undergoes a moral test, the outcome of which will determine whether he is ultimately included in or excluded from society. For all the features that the dark-house scene shares with earlier occurrences of tragic relief, however, there is an obvious difference between them.

Unlike the gentlemen, Claudio, Benedick, Oliver, and Orlando in the earlier comedies, Malvolio does not change under tragic pressure. Clinging to prudish views and vowing revenge on his captors, he is excluded from the play’s final comic gathering. We might usefully think of the distinction this way: whereas tragic relief functions positively, inducing moral recognition and growth, it operates negatively in *Twelfth Night* hardening Malvolio’s antisocial attitude and rancor. Malvolio’s dark-house scene in *Twelfth Night* ostensibly tests his sanity, which is another way of saying his connection to the rest of Illyrian society. A stake here is social continuity and indeed survival, as well as the terms in which this is imagined dramatically. Tragic relief forces the tragic imperative on immature males, provoking their maturation as individuals, which is necessary for communal continuity or progress. Tragic relief dramatizes a particular crisis, but it does not explore the subsequent feeling of irreversibility. It offers its subjects a second chance, a chance to learn, to return to the human community from which in some way they have been estranged — a kind of redemption not usually granted to the tragic hero.

## CONCLUSION

This study does not include how to make a play funny, but tries to understand why we laugh when we do, and what the author intends from that laughter. I defined the most important laughing as the one caused by socially restricted feelings which represent tragic relief. The laughing point is a technical, dramaturgical device to convey writer’s idea effectively. I assume that Shakespeare’s comedies have its own laughing points created by tragic relief.

Tragic relief points out the serious and meaningful business behind the happy ending. When a comedy’s plot might otherwise feel too fantastic or too romantic or too simply concluded, tragic relief can remind an audience of the problems and complexities of re-establishing a society or body politic with newly joined young couples. Tragic relief can also give us an opportunity to clarify a personal, social, or moral attitude or behavior that needs to be overcome, abandoned, or otherwise adjusted so that the matrimonial and political bonds necessary to comedy can be established and maintained. Shakespeare has successfully imitated classical models, as he begins to develop his own brand of comedies, he experiments with putting tragic ingredients into his comic mix. Tragic relief has become more and more integral to his comedies. The knowledge or experience of death in these middle comedies functions as a salutary and necessary balance to the idea of regeneration, symbolized by the spring season and the wedding ceremony. Tragic relief — encountered as the mortal chill of Marcade’s message, the aborted wedding between Claudio and Hero, the sweet adversity of Arden, or the darkness of Malvolio’s cell—is also an

intellectual proposition, a scene of clarification. In these scenes, the comic heroes—some protagonists, some antagonists—come to understand their place in and responsibilities towards the community. The new societies that emerge at the ends of the comedies, with their leaders and their outcasts having undergone examinations, promise to be a more benevolent and productive than it was. The spectator's recognition of one or more components of tragic relief on its theoretical framework provides a prepared trigger for the creation of laughter. We have seen that tragic relief is constituted of such specific things.

Aside from its providing an understanding of the functioning of laughter in comedy, the benefit of tragic relief is that it should help us to view our realistic life at definite points, and give us insight into the playwright's aesthetics. Being able to reasonably posit laughter as a trace of tragic relief in this way has enabled us to recognize instances of his craftsmanship on Shakespeare's middle comedies. Moreover, recourse to tragic relief framework has revealed a general aesthetic affinity among many chronologically separated and culturally diverse playwrights.

Finally, some thoughts remain on further research with regard to these ways in which tragic relief has proven to be beneficial to the study of comedy. With regard to the framework of Shakespeare's middle comedies, it is important to note that comedy contains many examples of the manipulation of the rules that have been quoted as tragic relief from Shakespeare's middle comedies.

## Notes

- 1 Aristotle almost surely wrote a second book of the *Poetics*, now extinct, which considered comedy. For the evidence, see Richard Janko. *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*. Berkeley : U California P. 1984, 63-66. For interpretations and full-scale reconstructions and adaptations, see Leon Golden, "Aristotle on Comedy." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42. 1984, 283-290. For a more imaginative recreation, see Lane Cooper. *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, with an Adaptation of the Poetics and a Translation of the "Tractatus Coislinianus."* New York : Harcourt, Brace, 1922, 468.
- 2 Gerald Else. *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*. Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1957, 183.
- 3 Stephen Halliwell construes the scope of hamartia this way : "Rather, in any case, than a precise formula for a quintessential tragic causality, hamartia can best be understood as designating a whole area of possibilities, an area unified by a pattern of the causal yet unintended implication of tragedy's characters in the pitiable and terrible 'transformation' of their own lives. Hamartia, in short, embraces all the ways in which human vulnerability, at its extremes, exposes itself not through sheer, arbitrary misfortune (something inconsistent with the intelligible plot structure which Aristotle requires of a good play), but through the erring involvement of tragic figures in their own sufferings," See *Aristotle's Poetics*. London : Duckworth, 1986.
- 4 Ibid, 189.
- 5 Ibid, 189.
- 6 Janko, 143.
- 7 Cooper, 66.
- 8 Golden, 286.
- 9 Peggy Garvey. "A New Context for Constructing Aristotelian Comic Catharsis." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17, 2002, 6.
- 10 Cooper, 65-70.
- 11 Leon Golden. "Katharsis as Clarification : An objection answered." *Classical Quarterly* 23, 1973, 45-46.
- 12 Donald Keeseey. "On Some Recent Interpretations of Catharsis." *Classical World* 72, Dec. 1978-Jan. 1979,

- 203.
- 13 I have been aided in general in the following discussion of these two theories by John Morreall's essay on the history of comedy in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, New York : Oxford UP, 1998, 401-405.
- 14 Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York : Courier Dover Publications, 1966, 92.
- 15 Thomas Hobbes, John Aubrey, and J.C.A. Gaskin. *The Elements of Law. Natural and Politic, part I, Human Nature*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999, Chapter. 9, No.13.
- 16 D.H. Monro. *Argument of Laughter*. Notre Dame : U Notre Dame P, 1963, 83.
- 17 Susan Langer. "The Comic Rhythm," in *Comedy, meaning and form*, ed. Robert W Cnrriran. New York : Harper & Row, 1981, 136.
- 18 Plato. *Philebus*, trans. Dorothea Frede. Indianapolis, Cambridge : Hackett, 1993, 56-60.
- 19 Thomas Hobbes. *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*. Bristol : Thoemmes P, 1994, 46.
- 20 Morreall, 402.
- 21 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard. Amherst, NY : Prometheus Books, 2000, 223.
- 22 Ibid, 224.
- 23 Francis Hutcheson. "Thoughts of Laughter." *Thoughts of Laughter and Observations on The Fable of the Bee's in Six Letters*. Bristol : Thoemmes Antiquarian Book, 1989, 24.
- 24 Ibid, 26.
- 25 Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translators David F. Swenson and Walter Lowe. Princeton : Princeton UP, 1941, 466 ; 458-466.
- 26 Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York : Courier Dover Publications, 1966, 59.
- 27 Freud presents the theory of humor in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. See Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1987, 111 ; and Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1983, 26-37.
- 28 Bergson, 89-92.
- 29 Bergson himself talks of the common comic device of repetition as an instance of mechanical rigidity. Bergson, 107-110.
- 30 William E. Gruber. *Comic Theaters : Studies in Performance and Audience Response*. Athens and London : U Georgia P, 1.
- 31 Helmuth Plessner. *Laughing and Crying. A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*. Trans. James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene. Evanston : Northwestern UP, 107-111.
- 32 Northrop Fry. *A Natural Perspective : The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*. New York Columbia UP, 1965, 122.
- 33 M.M. Bakhtin. *Rablais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge : M.I.T. Press, 1968, 131.
- 34 Eric Bentley. *The Life of Drama*. London : Mithuen, 1986, 211.
- 35 Daniel Cottom. "The Enchantment of Interpretation." *Critical Inquiry* 11. 1985, 573.
- 36 Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1968, 125-26.
- 37 Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York : Norton, 1961, 103.
- 38 Henri Bergson. "Laughter," *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins UP, 1986, 17.
- 39 Bert O. States. *Irony and Drama*. Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1987, 175.
- 40 Norman Holland. *Laughing : A Psychology of Humor*. Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1982, 188.
- 41 Northrop Fry. *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton, 1971, 163-86.
- 42 Ibid, 166.
- 43 Ibid, 183.



- 44 Susan K. Langer. *Feeling and Form : A theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, 158-162.

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